

Shakespeare Club of Stratford-upon-Avon

The 909th meeting of the Shakespeare Club took place on Tuesday 11 April 2017. Tim Raistrick, Chairman of the Friends of the Guild Chapel gave a talk entitled “A right goodly Chapel”. The Guild Chapel, its Wall Paintings and the Shakespeare Connection”, chaired by Jean Lawrance.

The Guild Chapel is an extraordinary building, with connections with Shakespeare and some of the most significant medieval wall paintings in Europe. Positioned in the heart of Stratford-upon-Avon, Mr Raistrick pointed out that one of the last sounds Shakespeare would have heard was the chapel bell, just yards from his house, New Place. Yet it is still overlooked.

Mr Raistrick began with a history of the Guild Chapel and its related buildings including the Guildhall, School and Almshouses. The Guild of the Holy Cross was founded in the thirteenth century as a religious fraternity, and a dedicated chapel was soon built, probably occupying the same plot as the current chancel with a hospital where the nave now is, a conjecture confirmed by examining the structure of the chapel’s walls. It was enlarged around 1411 when the other buildings were erected. At the same time the Chapel was granted the right to celebrate mass, giving townspeople the choice of where to receive it but this resulted in bitter rivalry between the Guild Chapel and Holy Trinity Church, and in 1432 the Pope himself had to issue a papal bull commanding that the Guild were “not to entice the parishioners from their church”.

Today’s Chapel was rebuilt in 1496 by one of the town’s greatest benefactors, Sir Hugh Clopton. Inside, the most striking impact would have been made by the wall paintings, recently conserved, and the rest of Mr Raistrick’s talk consisted of detailed illustrations and descriptions of them, including some that are not normally visible. He described the conservation work and some of the challenges of allowing these fragile paintings to be seen by the public.

The government’s post-Reformation directive that church paintings should be covered over was carried out between 1563 and 1565 when John Shakespeare was Chamberlain. Later references to the paintings suggest they were not all immediately obliterated – did young Shakespeare know them?

Mr Raistrick ended by explaining the role of the Friends of the Guild Chapel and calling for volunteers to help keep the Chapel open for visitors.

After lively questions and comments the meeting closed at 9pm.