

SHAKESPEARE IN OXFORD

A Guide and Brief Trail



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Illustrations

Front cover: William Shakespeare, probably by John Taylor, circa 1600 - 1610: the only portrait of Shakespeare that has a good claim to being painted from life. It was once in the possession of Sir William Davenant and was the first portrait to be acquired by the National Portrait Gallery when it was founded in 1856.

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Back cover: Sir William Davenant by William Faithorne, after John Greenhill, 1672.

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Although William Shakespeare is probably the world's best-known writer, little is known about his life. This is a brief guide introducing people to Shakespeare and Oxford. It was commissioned by the Oxford Preservation Trust to mark the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death, and to introduce readers to two sites in Oxford significantly associated with Shakespeare. The leaflet can either be read on its own, or whilst walking on a trail of roughly 500 metres, starting at Carfax and ending at the King's Arms.

Many actors all over the world regularly perform Shakespeare's plays. Even more students, the whole world over, and of all ages, study his plays, and argue over their interpretation. In few places do they do this more than Oxford, where the University English Faculty forms an unrivalled centre of Shakespearean studies. Shakespeare liked literature and made his living from it. But there is even more evidence that he enjoyed and valued life, the people around him, and the environment in which they lived. Shakespeare's plays are frequently performed in Oxford: to see if any are being performed visit www.experienceoxfordshire.org. But, more than anything, savour this unique city and the extraordinary personal, cultural and architectural opportunities it provides for visitors from all over the world, treading not only in the steps of Shakespeare, but of many leading figures in world history over centuries.

Enjoy your visit!

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

Shakespeare was probably born on 23 April 1564 and died on 23 April 1616. He was born in Stratford-upon-Avon, about 50 miles north-west of Oxford. His father, a glove-maker, served on the town council. John Shakespeare signed his name with a cross, so it is possible that he could not read or write. At times prominent within local society, he fell from local popularity for reasons which are not fully known.

Shakespeare was educated at the local grammar school, in a schoolroom which still remains. Here he underwent a conventional Elizabethan education, chiefly involving instruction in Latin. Like his brother Edmund, Shakespeare became, after a time, an actor. What happened previously is not known precisely: legend has it that he may have been apprehended as a poacher, and certainly in 1582 he married Anne Hathaway, the daughter of a Stratford yeoman farmer. As an actor Shakespeare came to specialise in cameo roles, often playing older men, usually from an older world whose values were becoming outmoded. These parts include the ghost in *Hamlet*, and Adam in *As You Like It*.

Posterity obviously knows Shakespeare best as a poet and a writer of plays (technically, a poetic dramatist). Shakespeare's poems date from his early life: they include *Venus and Adonis*, *The Rape of Lucrece* and his mysterious but magnificent collection of Sonnets, not published until 1609. He wrote plays from around the late 1580s into the second decade of the 17th century. There are almost 40 of these, though some of them may have been written in collaboration with other writers.

Shakespeare's fellow actors divided his plays into three types. Shakespeare's tragedies are the plays most studied in schools. They often focus on difficulties in loving, and difficulties in ruling, within distinctive societies. They include the early *Romeo and Juliet*, *Julius Caesar*, and a series of much performed tragedies from the early 1600s: *Hamlet* (a man who has difficulty acting); *Othello* (a man who has difficulty loving); *Macbeth* (a man who has difficulty serving); and *King Lear* (a man who has difficulty growing old).

Shakespeare's history plays cover mainly the period of civil war known as The War of the Roses: the deposition of Richard II; the troubled reign of his successor, Henry IV; the military campaigns of Henry V; the prolonged civil conflicts marring the rule of the young boy king, Henry VI (to which Shakespeare devotes three plays); and the murderous regime of Richard III, ending with the triumph of Henry VII at the Battle of Bosworth, and the ushering in of the Tudor dynasty.

The famous critic Dr Johnson once remarked that Shakespeare’s “natural port was for the comic.” Certainly, comedy was a genre consistently fascinating to Shakespeare. Crudely speaking, the comedies, as well as providing greater lightheartedness in tone, sometimes offer marginally greater prominence to female characters, and document a transition from urban to rural environment, and progress from discord to greater unity, symbolised in a final marriage or marriages. *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (written between 1590 and 1597) is the comedy most frequently studied in school; *The Tempest* is probably Shakespeare’s last solo play.

Although Shakespeare made his money principally in London, he never moved his family residence from Stratford, to which he probably retired several years before his death, and where he lies buried. There were two available routes between London and Stratford, the second taking Shakespeare to London via High Wycombe, with Oxford as roughly its midpoint. Oxford, a city of national significance and import, was therefore a city which Shakespeare visited several times.

OXFORD

Oxford has its origins as a late-Saxon planned town. Our trail starts at a distinctive feature of such places, the central crossroads, Carfax, whose name derives from the French word for a cross-road, *carrefour*.

In Shakespeare’s time, as now, Oxford was a city of learning. Two aspects of its learning, renaissance humanism and theology, may have been of particular significance to Shakespeare.

Renaissance humanism was a response to the more narrow scholasticism of the Middle Ages. Broadly speaking, it sought to create a new society, more socially mobile and less religiously narrow, whose members would be able to speak and write clearly, shaping their communities and inspiring virtuous actions. Study of the so-called humanities (grammar, rhetoric, history, poetry, and moral philosophy) would encourage this. Oxford, as one of the country’s only two universities, played a key national part in this new knowledge economy.

Shakespeare’s lifetime embraced an era of religious controversy. Elizabeth I, a Protestant, had come to the throne in 1558, replacing her sister Mary, a Catholic, whose husband Philip of Spain would 30 years later launch his Spanish Armada. Henry VIII, father of Mary and Elizabeth (as well as of their brother, the short-

lived Edward VI) had, during his lifetime, carried out a Reformation of the church, creating a Church of England answerable to the monarch rather than to the Pope, and requiring a set of new beliefs. Although it is possible that Shakespeare's father was a Catholic, explaining his fall from favour, Shakespeare's own religious sympathies remain unknown, though scholars agree they are likely to have been broad. Oxford, with its many ecclesiastical scholars, remained the country's leading centre of religious opinion and religious judgement. It was here that the most prominent martyrs, both Catholic and Protestant, were tried and burned.

Oxford was not, however, only a university city, a fact of which Shakespeare must have been fully conscious. It was also a county town, with a bustling and crowded life of its own, where students had to jostle for space with townspeople, not always harmoniously. Unlike many of his literary contemporaries (for example his exact contemporary and great early rival, Christopher Marlowe), Shakespeare had not been to university, and must have been conscious of it. Even one of his friends, Ben Jonson, also a non-graduate, referred to Shakespeare as having "small Latin and less Greek." As we shall see, such evidence as we have links Shakespeare with town rather than gown. In a double sense, Shakespeare less entered a university than he entered life.

STARTING THE TRAIL

Stand near the middle of Carfax to get your bearings. Look down the High Street, the road which would have taken Shakespeare onwards to London. To your right, a road called St Aldate's runs down to the bridge which crosses the River Thames. On the left down St Aldate's rises the massive gateway of Christ Church, which houses not only one of the University's largest colleges, but also the city's cathedral. This college was originally founded as Cardinal College by an Oxford graduate, Cardinal Wolsey, before he fell from the favour of Henry VIII – who re-founded the college, on even more magnificent lines, in 1532. Shakespeare's late history play *Henry VIII* (written in collaboration with John Fletcher) covers Wolsey's fall from favour.

Oxford's current demographic and cultural distributions are different from those of Shakespeare's time. Behind you, Queen Street slopes down to the Castle, then an important centre of county life. Much of the ground between Christ Church and the Castle was occupied by two huge friaries, the Dominican Blackfriars and the Franciscan Greyfriars, which have now disappeared from view. Still however, one gets a good sense at this point of the characteristic Oxford mix of town and gown: straight ahead, and to the right, the view is dominated by university buildings

often unique in style; behind and to the left the view suggests the commercial centre of a town much like any other.

An informative panorama of Oxford can be obtained by climbing Carfax Tower, all that remains of the former town Church of St Martin's. The Tower is open most days for those who want to climb it.

Otherwise, turn left and walk 20 metres down Cornmarket Street.

THE GOLDEN CROSS INN AND YARD

On your right is a small opening to the Golden Cross Inn. The buildings, which largely date from the 16th century, and now serve as shops and restaurants, are of interest in their own architectural right, but there are also significant connections with Shakespeare.

Shakespeare almost certainly stayed in this complex of buildings, and given how few still-existing buildings we can associate with Shakespeare, this makes this site rather exciting. The Golden Cross was an inn for travellers. It was right next to The Tavern (later The Crown). It was one of only three places in the city licensed to serve wine. Its rooms were well appointed. In 1927 an elaborate wall painting was discovered in one of these, now looked after by the Oxford Preservation Trust, leading to speculation that it may have been in this very room that Shakespeare stayed, or in one of the Tavern's back rooms along the south side of the Golden Cross yard. The Painted Room is occasionally open to visiting parties: see www.oxfordpreservation.org.uk for details. Other painted rooms in the former inn are now part of the Pizza Express restaurant.

The innkeeper of the Golden Cross from around 1600 was John Davenant, a London vintner, who had moved to Oxford. He was an educated man, keen on plays and their authors. His local reputation finally led to his election as Mayor of Oxford in 1621, and Davenant Road in North Oxford is named after him. Davenant is described by the diarist John Aubrey as "a very grave and discreet citizen," whereas his wife Jane was "a very beautiful woman, and of a very good wit, and of conversation extremely agreeable".

There is a tradition that Shakespeare had an affair with Jane Davenant, fathered a child by her – the poet and dramatist William Davenant, subsequently Poet Laureate – and acted as godfather to Davenant, giving him the Christian name of William, in Carfax Church. Local gossip certainly surrounded Shakespeare

and Jane, but the only authority for William's illegitimacy was the poet himself who, as a highly significant theatrical manager, an adapter of Shakespeare's plays and a relentless self-publicist, had a vested interest in claiming the connection.

The Golden Cross additionally provides a magnificently preserved example of the kind of inn in which travelling players would have performed. In Shakespeare's time, public theatres were a recent phenomenon. The earliest, *The Theatre* and *The Curtain*, opened in 1576 and 1577 respectively; Shakespeare's *Globe* did not open until 1599. Plays were performed in the halls of private houses or in the open air, especially in the courtyards of inns. Shakespeare made a significant part of his income not from performances in permanent public theatres, which were subject to frequent closure on grounds of puritan objection or health risks such as the plague, but from performances undertaken whilst travelling away from London. Actors took with them on a cart a limited number of costumes and props: inns, which afforded enclosed spaces and enhanced visibility from upper stories, provided ideal venues. There is no evidence that Shakespeare performed in the yard of the Golden Cross, though it does not seem impossible. What one can certainly sense here, however, is the kind of heightened atmosphere which must have been engendered by a Shakespeare play on the road in an environment of such intimacy.

CORNMARKET AND THE BROAD

On leaving the yard of the Golden Cross you may notice another inn yard, with fewer associations and less architectural appeal, directly opposite. Turn right, heading north along Cornmarket. On your right are two fine historic buildings which must have taken Shakespeare's eye: the former New Inn (1385) on the corner with Ship Street, and the Church of St Michael at the Northgate.

The tower of this church dates from around 1050, and is one of the earliest structures still surviving in Oxford. From an adjacent prison cell, Protestant martyrs, including Thomas Cranmer, left for their deaths: the door is still on display in the church tower. The church also contains the font from St Martin's, so that if Shakespeare did indeed stand as godfather to William Davenant, this is the font he would have stood beside.

As you come to a crossroads the road north stretches ahead, broadening after it passes St Mary Magdalen church (where John Aubrey is buried) into St Giles. This was the thoroughfare by which Shakespeare would have approached the city. Turn right, and you will soon enter Broad Street, or The Broad. Make for the

middle of the road immediately it becomes a pedestrian precinct, and look for a configuration of cobbled brick, containing a cross, set into the road, and marking the site of the execution of three Protestant bishops, Latimer, Ridley and Cranmer (the latter of whom also appears in *Henry VIII*).

Continue along The Broad, whose spaciousness results from its occupation of land just to the north of the old city wall. Pass on the left Balliol and Trinity Colleges, and on the right Exeter College, the History of Science Museum, and Wren's magnificent Sheldonian Theatre. Then pass on the left Blackwell's bookshop and the entrance to the Weston Library (which hosts exhibitions free of charge). Stand on the steps of the Clarendon Building, the classically inspired structure on the south side of the road built by Nicholas Hawksmoor between 1711 and 1715. Diagonally to your right, on the corner with Holywell Street, is the final stop of this tour.

THE KING'S ARMS

The King's Arms was named after James I, apparently in honour of his close relationship with Wadham College, founded in 1610 on the site of an Augustinian priory. The inn opened in 1607 and contained lodging rooms, a large stable and a back courtyard. Today's stuccoed Georgian front conceals the earlier building, glimpses of which, with the courtyard, can be seen from Wadham College.

In 1933, the scholar Geoffrey Tillotson discovered contemporary correspondence mentioning the performance by Shakespeare's company of three plays in Oxford. One was Shakespeare's *Othello*. At this time, little was known about touring performances by Shakespeare's company and the real excitement was an eyewitness description of how moving a performance could be accomplished by a boy player, in this case in the part of *Othello*'s wife, Desdemona. Although the letter does not identify where this performance took place, there are three possible venues.

Players were forbidden to play within the Guildhall, on the site of the current Town Hall, and there is only one known instance of this being waived. It is unlikely that a college hall would have been used as the University Proctors banned players from performing in Oxford. One possibility is in front of us. The King's Arms was already being used by players in the early 17th century and after 1610 a stage had been erected in the yard there. Therefore, it seems to have been a favoured venue and in 1610 would have the happy attraction for Shakespeare's company of being a novel one.

COMPLETION

To return to the start of the walk, Carfax, walk along Catte Street, passing the Bodleian Library on your right. Its magnificent courtyard is well worth visiting. On the left is Hertford College's Bridge of Sighs. Then enter Radcliffe Square, described by the architectural historian Nicholas Pevsner as "unique in the world" in the quality of its architecture. In the centre is the circular Radcliffe Camera (built 1737-49) by James Gibbs; on the right the back of Exeter College, and the front of Brasenose College; on the left, the west facade of All Souls College (built 1716-34) by Nicholas Hawksmoor; and straight ahead the University Church where Cranmer and other martyrs were tried. Underneath your feet are some of the 12 million printed items owned by the Bodleian – including many valuable editions of Shakespeare, as well as one of the 233 known surviving copies of the First Folio, the compilation of Shakespeare's plays made by his fellow players as a tribute after his death. On the other side of the University Church is the High Street. To your left, just out of sight, is the Tower of Magdalen College. When Shakespeare or any of his characters learnt Latin, they did so from a book, Lily's Grammar, developed in the School belonging to this College. Turn right, and you will see Carfax Tower straight ahead. After 200 metres, pass the former City Church, now the library of Lincoln College and not open to the public: there is a monument to John Davenant and his family inside.

To see the other possible sites of Shakespeare performances, turn left into St Aldate's. The crypt of the Town Hall is all that remains of another medieval tavern (The Falcon).

THE PAINTED ROOM AND OPT'S INVOLVEMENT

The Elizabethan wall paintings were discovered in 1927 by Mr E W Attwood when work was being carried out on a caretaker's flat at 3 Cornmarket. Realising their importance, he contacted the V&A Museum experts and most of the paintings were saved, protected behind panelling which was put on rollers. A back range of the building was demolished but the wall paintings in those rooms were removed to the Ashmolean, and later placed on the wall in the Oxford Museum in the Town Hall (currently closed). In the 1930s OPT had its first offices in the Painted Room, including as the office of John Betjeman, who was secretary to the Trust in the 1940s. OPT left the offices in the early 1970s to move to the row of cottages in St Ebbe's, which the Trust had saved. The Painted Rooms ended up in the possession of the City Council, all but lost from public view, their history and their conservation assets largely forgotten.

With the continuing support of the Eyre Estate, the William Delafield Trust and CPRE Oxfordshire Buildings Preservation Trust, OPT has signed a 10-year lease to formalise access. With a lease in place, OPT can move forward, seeking funding to open the rooms to the public, conserve the wall paintings and secure them forever.

In Autumn 2017, wall painting expert Madeleine Katkov carried out emergency repairs to the wall paintings to stabilise them and returned in March 2018 to finish this initial emergency work. Following advice, OPT has removed the rolled panelling, which has been in situ since 1927, and these panels are being carefully fitted to an upstairs room.

Become a member of Oxford Preservation Trust and visit the Painted Room during OPT's monthly members-only tours.

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