

A small corner that is forever Shakespeare

Whilst reading through the Shakespeare archives recently I was startled to discover that, in 1971, with the move to the new central library only a few years away, no plan was in place for keeping the Shakespeare Memorial Room! Whilst the 40,000 books and manuscripts making up the collection were to be transferred to the new central library, the city council had decided that the room would look out of place in a modern setting. They were hoping that someone would be willing to come along and take the room's fittings and fitments to avoid it being broken up.

Designed by Birmingham architect John Henry Chamberlain, the room remains a fine example of Victorian joinery and marquetry. Admired by the many visitors who come to view it in its most recent home in the Library of Birmingham it is hard to imagine that it very nearly didn't survive. But, in the early seventies, with the demise of the Victorian building imminent, its destruction seemed a distinct possibility. The Birmingham group of the Victorian Society was aghast at the thought. 'We would even prefer that all this was sold to America, rather than see it destroyed', declared the group's chairman. Perhaps the Americans would buy it, in a London bridge-style operation?

Fortunately, by the end of 1971, the council had decided to make provision in its 1972-73 estimates for the cost of dismantling and storing the room but how it might be re-used was not clear. Some councillors believed that it should simply be put up for auction, but a proposal that it be re-erected at the Avoncroft Museum of historic buildings at Stoke Prior near Bromsgrove seemed a sensible proposal. Bromsgrove Rural Council's Planning Committee duly granted outline planning permission. There was however, the small matter of raising £30,000 for the re-erection of the room and provision of a suitable building to house it. This was a financial obstacle that couldn't be overcome and the plan failed.



Meanwhile, in June 1973, one of the largest library removals in Britain had begun with the gradual transfer of eighteen miles of shelves of stock to the new 'Madin' building. In May

1974, Anthony Crosland, the Environment Secretary, formally gave Birmingham permission to demolish the old central library and ordered that the Shakespeare Memorial Room be dismantled and rebuilt on another site. However, on discovering that no site had been prepared or money allocated for its re-erection, conservationists threatened to occupy the room to prevent its being dismantled. 'We may meet force with force' declared a belligerent spokesman for a group representing the local section of the Victorian Society, the Birmingham Archaeological Society and the Avoncroft Museum. No such drastic action was taken and dismantling began in July 1974 with the hundreds of pieces being stored in boxes at the council's Sheepcote Street depot. There they remained for a decade whilst proposals for its resurrection were discussed. These included locating it at the University of Birmingham's Shakespeare Institute or in the old gas hall in Edmund Street.

In 1985, and despite the council's original view that it would be out of place in a modern building, it was eventually re-erected inside the concrete walls of the new Paradise arts complex built between the Central Library and the School of Music. Theoretically its ground floor location, only metres away from the library and the museum and art gallery, should have made it accessible to the public, but in fact it would remain there as one of Birmingham's best kept secrets for twenty-seven years until its move to the new library in Centenary Square – the largest regional library and public cultural space in Europe - where it proudly sits under the golden dome admired by its many visitors.

Notes

Library of Birmingham, Shakespeare Collection, S993.2, *Memoirs of the Shakespeare Memorial Library*.

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Unlocking the world's first great people's Shakespeare Library for all

