

## Exploring the archives of Birmingham's Shakespeare Library



Researching the history of Birmingham's great, but somewhat forgotten, Shakespeare Library, housed in the Library of Birmingham has provided me with a fascinating insight into the early history of this valuable collection.

It was begun in the early 1860s at the instigation of the Birmingham-based Nonconformist minister and lecturer George Dawson to mark the Tercentenary of Shakespeare's birth. A group of Shakespeare enthusiasts formed a committee of subscribers and by 1864 had procured, by gift or purchase, an initial collection of more than a thousand volumes which was formally presented to the Corporation to be housed in its own room in the central reference library opened in 1866.

The archives reveal some of the challenges faced by those early pioneering bibliophiles as they sought to build up their collection of Shakespeareana.

One challenge (and a perennial one) was finding enough money to buy some of the more valuable and rarer items. There never seemed to be enough cash! 'Many thanks for your offer of Shakespeare's Poems (1640)' wrote Samuel Timmins, in reply to an offer from one bookseller, 'but I fear we cannot afford such a luxury'.



It was Dawson's great friend, the Birmingham hardware manufacturer and keen Shakespeare scholar, Samuel Timmins who was responsible for much of the groundwork in building the collection during his many years as Honorary Secretary to the subscribers' committee. In 1868-69 he wrote at least ninety letters to prospective donors and booksellers, both at home and abroad. Many of the responses were addressed to him, some of them helpful, others less so. One prospective Brummie donor, William Bragge, who owned a large private library,

teasingly replied: 'Have I any Shakespeare books? I really don't know, you had better come over and see.'

Generous donations, gifts and bequests came from all over the world and were gratefully received. Some came from the United States courtesy of Shakespeare collectors such as the Philadelphia-based lawyer, Joseph Parker Norris, a great bibliophile, whom Dawson met on his tour of America in 1874. Both Parker Norris and the Ohio-based collector, Joseph Crosby were recruited by Timmins to procure books for the library.

However, the enthusiasm of American collectors for all things Shakespeare was believed to have inflated the value of the book market. The archives record a few comments about American buyers for whom money appeared to be no object! Whilst trying to buy an item at one London sale, C. E. Mathews, Timmins' successor as Secretary, reported that 'there was such a run on it by Americans that it was almost impossible to obtain it'.

By 1878, the collection had grown to 6,794 volumes and was already, according one local newspaper, 'the most complete Shakespearean library in the world.'

Steve Hewett, E2E Heritage Ambassador Lead and doctoral student, University of Birmingham



Using Birmingham's forgotten past to inspire our future:  
Unlocking the world's first great people's Shakespeare Library for all.



COLLEGE OF  
ARTS AND LAW

