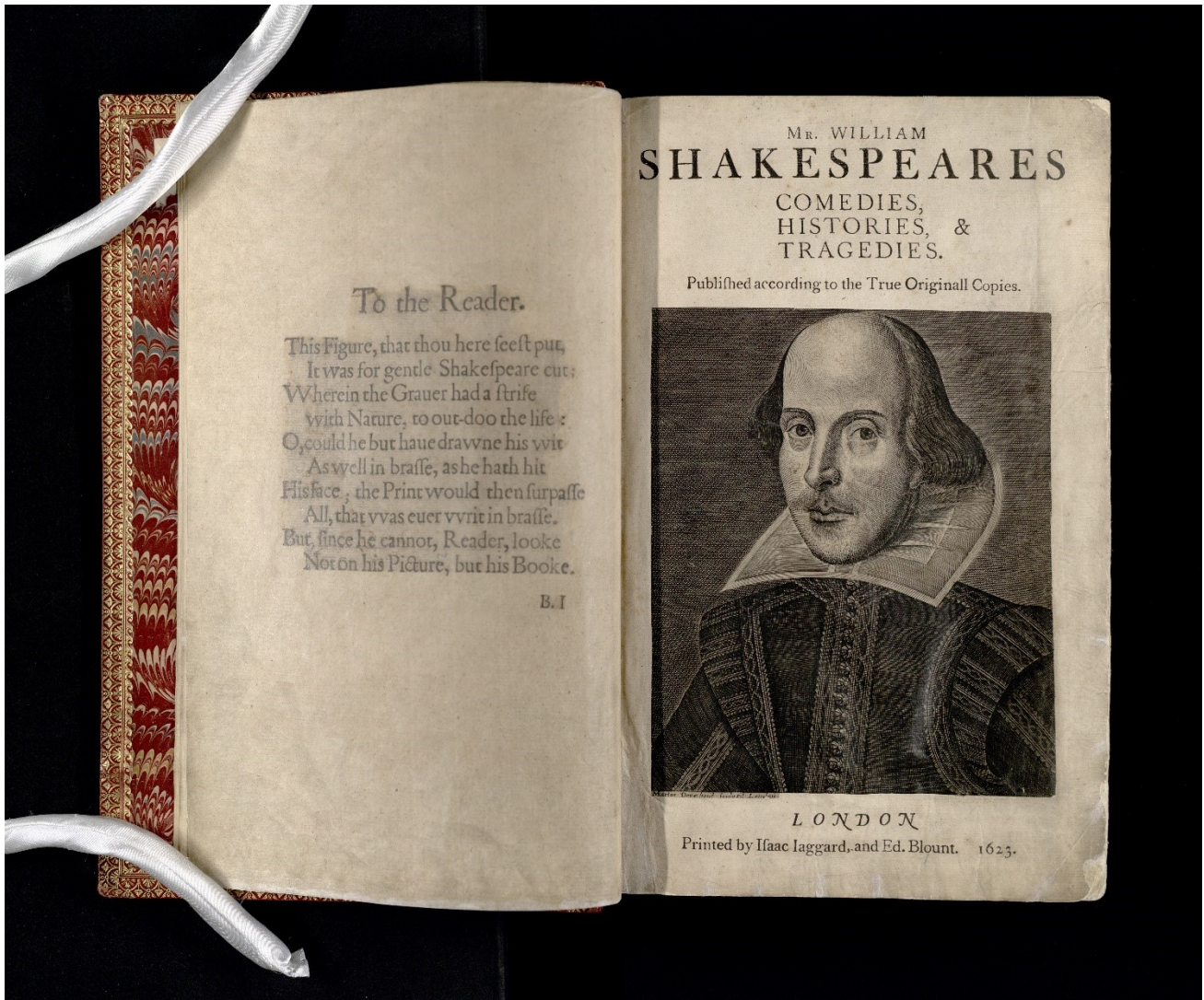


Introduction to the Shakespeare Collection



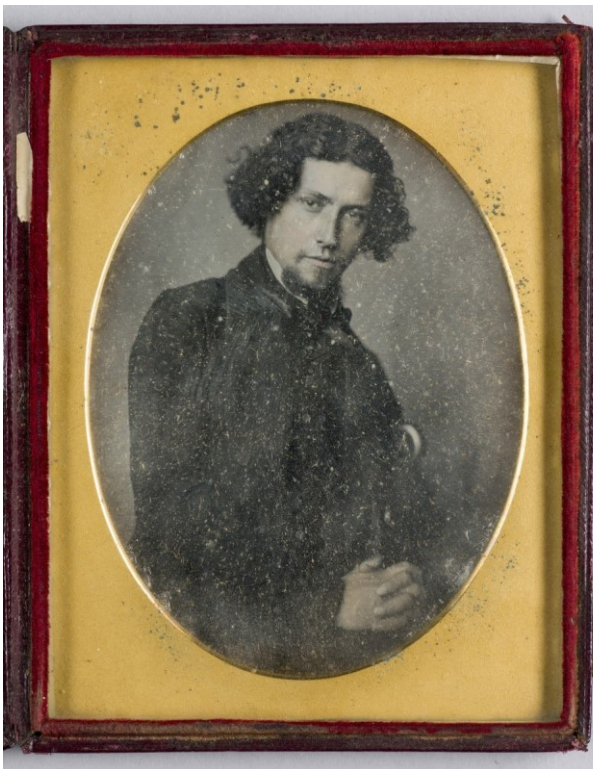
Shakespeare's First Folio or Mr William Shakespeare's Comedies, histories and tragedies, published according to the true original copies (1623)

Introduction

The Shakespeare Collection (formerly known as the Shakespeare Memorial Library) is the first Shakespeare library in the world and one of the biggest centres for Shakespeare studies in the UK. With more than 100,000 items, including books, production posters and photographs, scrapbooks and illustrations, it is one of the Library of Birmingham's most important cultural treasures and, in effect, belongs to the people of Birmingham. But how did this collection come into being? Why in Birmingham? And how can visitors to the Library of Birmingham see these items?

George Dawson and the 'Our Shakespeare Club'

Birmingham in the early 19th century was a rapidly growing town. Its population rose from 15,000 to 74,000 in 18th century and, by the 1830s, it had nearly doubled to 147,000 citizens. The development of the manufacturing sector, particularly metalwork and jewellery making, meant challenges for the city's existing infrastructure and services. The housing and education provision at that time was simply not adequate for the growing population.



George Dawson, Non-Conformist preacher, lecturer, and activist, came to Birmingham in 1844 and soon gained a reputation as a passionate defender of the rights of working people. He was influential in helping develop the ideas behind the Civic Gospel, which emphasised municipal activism and improvement. Calling upon his congregation to help the struggle 'to improve conditions in the town and the quality of life enjoyed by its citizens', he advocated the intellectual, as well as social, wellbeing of Birmingham's citizens and was a leading figure in the movement for free education and free public libraries in the city.

Daguerreotype of George Dawson, MS 3334

Dawson also lectured on English literature at the Birmingham and Midland Institute, where he formed a friendship with a local industrialist and Shakespeare enthusiast Samuel Timmins. Together, they formed the 'Our Shakespeare Club' as a place to discuss all things Shakespeare. Other members included the architect Henry Chamberlain, newspaper editor J. T. Bunce and the Liberal politician William Harris.

In 1864, the 'Our Shakespeare Club' was instrumental in proposing a Shakespeare library in the city to celebrate the 300th anniversary of Shakespeare's birth. Rather than commissioning a statue or portrait of Shakespeare, the Club decided that a living celebration such as a library would better encourage educational and cultural progress in Birmingham.



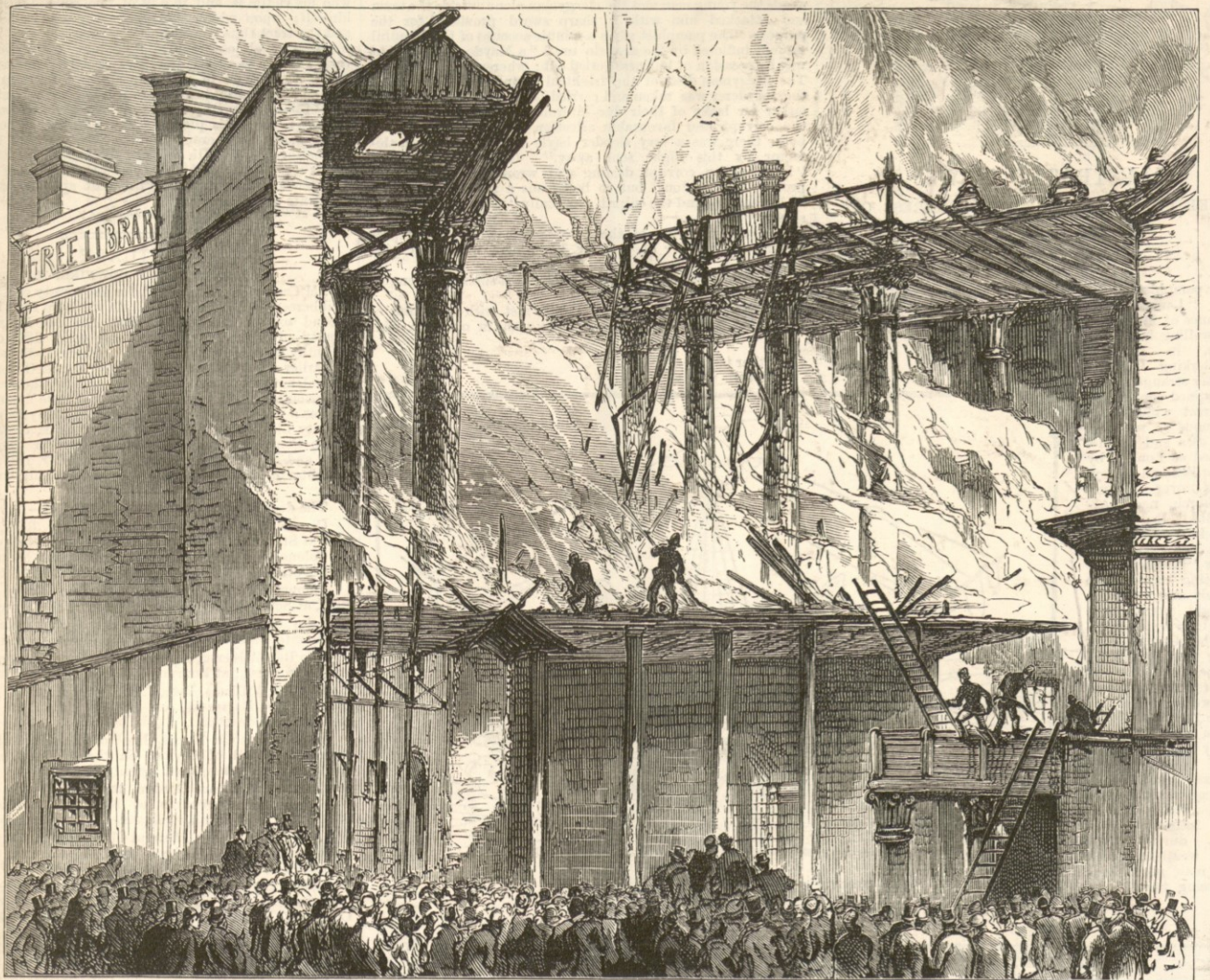
Caricature of Sam Timmins, *The Dart*, 27 April 1883

Building the Collection

The Committee of the 'Our Shakespeare Club' organised an extensive subscription campaign and appealed for book donations for their proposed library. Prominent Birmingham citizens pledged money towards building the library and books were sent from all over the country and abroad. Four years later, in 1868, the Shakespeare Memorial Library opened as part of Birmingham's first Free Central Library in Ratcliffe Place (now Chamberlain Square).



However, just over ten years later, in January 1879, disaster struck! During some routine maintenance work in the building a fire broke out, which destroyed 6,500 volumes out of the 7,000 that formed the Collection at that time. Even the town Mayor, Jesse Collings, was reported to have ran into the burning building to try and save some of the books.



BURNING OF THE FREE LIBRARY AT BIRMINGHAM.

While devastating, the fire triggered a renewed interest in the Shakespeare Library, which by that time had built a reputation beyond the city as an important educational resource. International donations and money pledges were matched by 'penny subscriptions' by local factory workers. By the time the new public library opened in 1882, the Shakespeare Memorial Library had 4,000 volumes, including copies of the First and the Third Folios.

During the 20th century, efforts to build a comprehensive Shakespeare collection continued with increased focus on different editions, literary criticism, scrapbooks, and memorabilia. Later, the collection developed even further to include foreign translations of Shakespeare's works, along with production material, including playbills, posters, photographs, and illustrations.

The Shakespeare Memorial Room

The Shakespeare Memorial Room (on Floor 9 of the Library of Birmingham) was designed by John H. Chamberlain, a local architect and committed supporter of George Dawson's Civic Gospel.

The Room was first opened to the public in 1882. Its striking style features Chamberlain's trademark use of flowers, foliage, and birds in carved wood, plaster, and metalwork. This style of decoration was meant to reflect the natural vitality of Shakespeare's work.

A new, bigger Central Library opened in 1974 but the building was unable to accommodate the Memorial Room which was dismantled and kept in storage. It was later rebuilt as part of the Conservatoire complex, adjacent to the Central Library, and opened in 1986. The current location is in the Library of Birmingham, which opened in 2013, the Memorial Room situated at the very top of the building encased by the golden rotunda. It is important to say that the Shakespeare Collection is no longer kept in this Room as it cannot provide the appropriate climate protection that is required for such items.

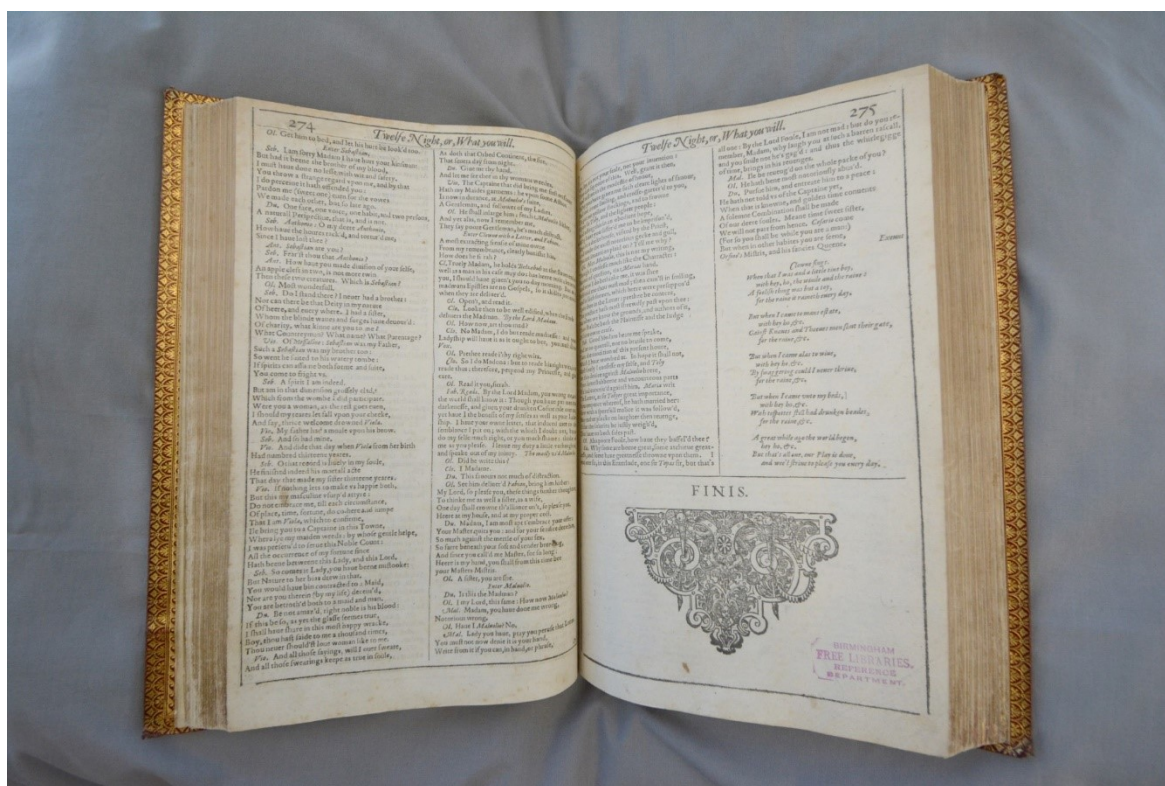


Treasures of the Collection

Shakespeare's First Folio

Amongst many outstanding items in the Shakespeare Collection is the First Folio, the first collected edition of his plays, which was published in 1623. After Shakespeare's death in 1616, two of his closest friend and colleagues, John Heminge and Henry Condell, set out to print an accurate version of the plays. Using handwritten scripts and company promptbooks, they published 36 plays in one volume, dividing them into Comedies, Histories and Tragedies.

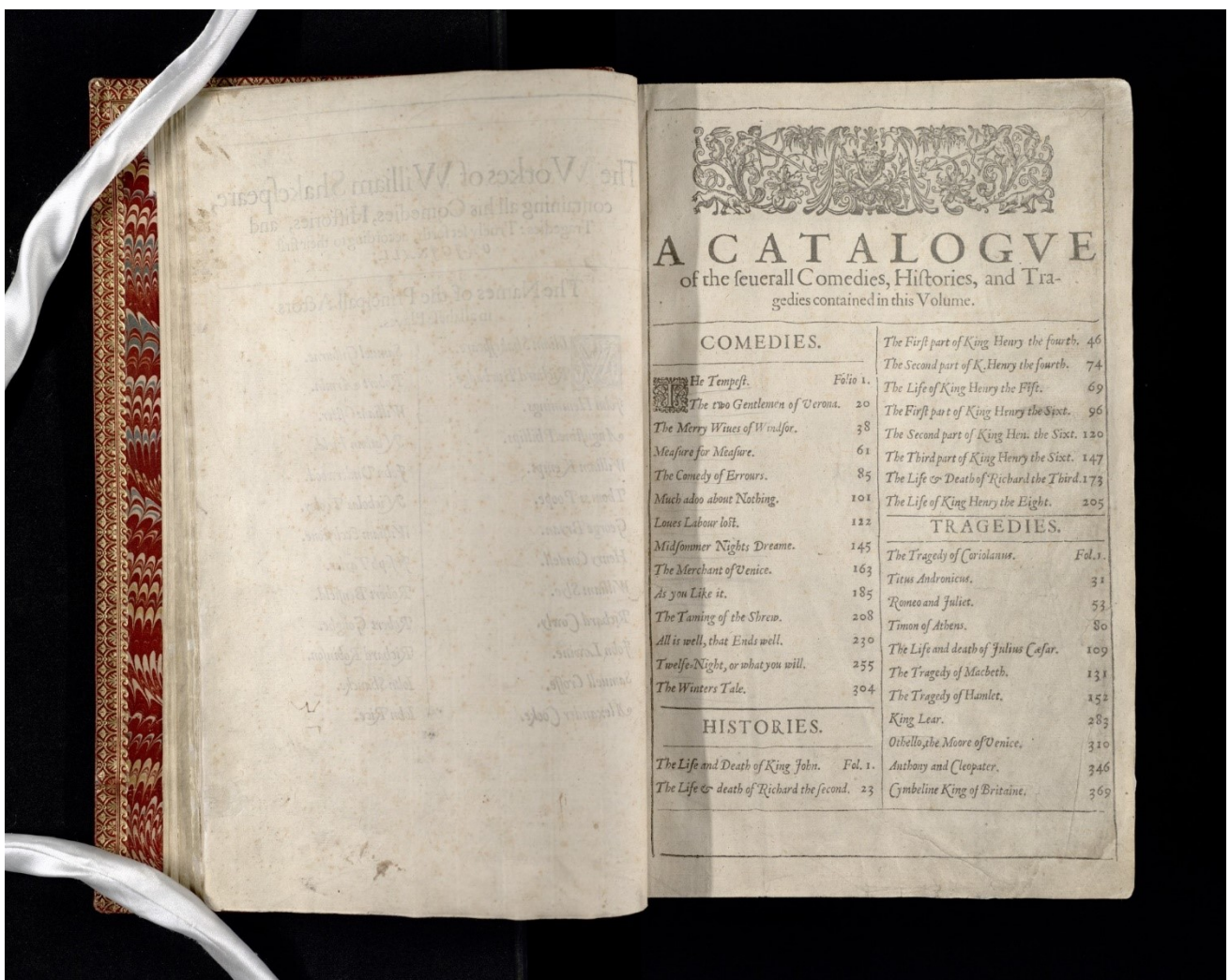
A proposal to acquire a copy of the First Folio for Birmingham was initially made in April 1870. Some money was collected but thankfully a decision was made not to buy at this time, thus potentially saving it from the 1879 fire. Eventually, the library bought a copy of the First Folio in 1881 from a London antiquarian bookseller. Out of 750 copies that were printed, only a third are still in existence and Birmingham's Folio is one of very few in public hands. Birmingham's copy of the First Folio is also unique because it is the only one bought as part of a dedicated programme for improving people's lives through culture and education, purchased for all the people of Birmingham – no matter what their background, wealth or occupation.



Shakespeare's First Folio or Mr William Shakespeare's Comedies, histories and tragedies, published according to the true original copies (1623). S 162.3 F

The Shakespeare Collection also holds copies of three further Folios, printed in 1632, 1664, and 1685. The Third Folio of 1664 is particularly rare as many of these editions were destroyed in the Great Fire of London of 1666.

Due to its age and value, the First Folio is not generally accessible for visitors to see when they visit the Library of Birmingham. A key role of an archive and library is to preserve documents for future generations to enjoy and unfortunately this means very rare and valuable volumes of global cultural significance can only be viewed under exceptional circumstances. However, the Birmingham First Folio has been digitised and can be viewed online at First Folios Compared, www.firstfolios.com.



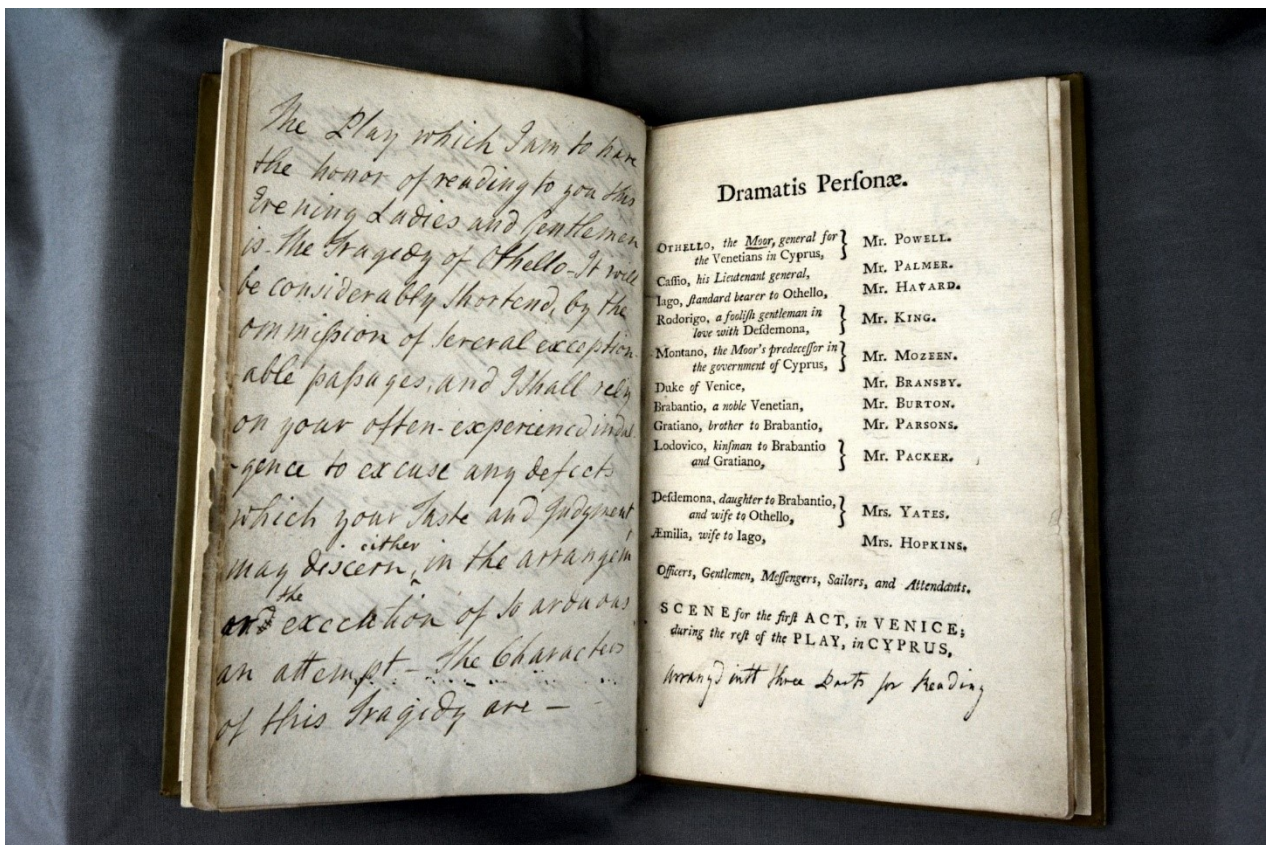
Shakespeare's First Folio or Mr William Shakespeare's Comedies, histories and tragedies, published according to the true original copies (1623). S 162.3 F

Early Unauthorised Quarto Editions

Before the Folios were printed, there were so called Pavier Quartos or 'False Folios', dated 1619. These were a result of the collaboration between the London publishers Thomas Pavier and William Jaggard. There are four of these in the library: *The Merchant of Venice*; *Henry V*, *The Whole Contention*, *Henry VI parts 2 and 3*, and *The Whole Contention, Henry VI part 2*.

Playbills

Shakespeare's plays have been performed for over 400 years. The Shakespeare Collection reflects this in a wonderful mixture of performance playbills, posters, and photographs, as well as examples of costume and stage design. There are over 10,000 late 18th and 19th century playbills, advertising famous plays and performers such as Ellen Terry (1847-1928), Sarah Siddons (1755-1831) and Sarah Bernhardt (1844-1923). Sarah Siddons' own annotated copy of *Othello* is also in the collection.



Sarah Siddons' annotated copy of *Othello*

Scrapbooks

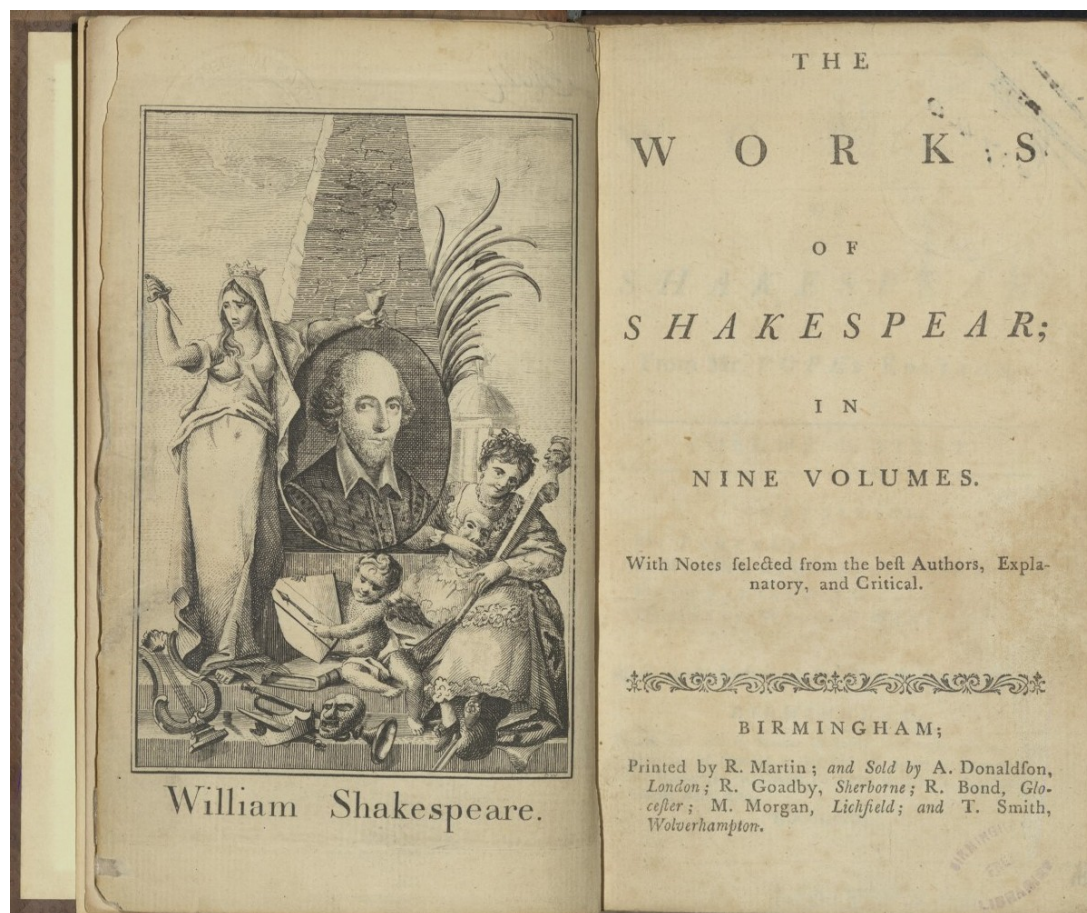
There are more than 200 scrapbooks in the library, created over the centuries by dedicated fans of Shakespeare. There are examples not just from the UK but also further afield, including Germany, France, Russia, and Denmark. Scrapbook ephemera gives us a highly unique and personal account of people's relationship with Shakespeare and often contains a range of unusual items, from photographs and illustrations to theatre programmes and newspaper reviews. A rare example of this is the Alexander Pope scrapbook. While the original owner of this scrapbook remains unknown, we do know that they used a rare and valuable 1725 edition of the *Complete Works of Shakespeare* edited by Pope to collect news cuttings about events that they found interesting a century later. The largest collection of scrapbooks (76 volumes) can be found in the H. R. Forrest collection. This contains copies of illustrations depicting the works of Shakespeare that have been hand-coloured by Mr Forrest and his children.



Scrapbook based on the Alexander Pope Shakespeare edition (1725) S 699.9 Q

Shakespeare and Birmingham

Some of the most interesting items in the Shakespeare Collection are from the 18th century, including the Birmingham edition of the *Works of Shakespeare*, printed by R. Martin in 1768 in Baskerville typeface. This edition was destined for sale at Shakespeare's Jubilee celebrations in Stratford-upon-Avon the following year.



The Works of Shakespeare, Birmingham (1768) S.176.8

Private Press and Fine Printed Editions

The Shakespeare Collection contains many interesting illustrated and fine printed items. They include private press editions from Doves, Golden Cockerel, Grabhorn and Circle Press; *King Lear* with lithographs by Oscar Kokoschka, 1963; *As You Like It*, with designs by Salvador Dali for Luciano Visconti's production of the play; Cranach Press's *Hamlet*, illustrated by Gordon Craig, 1930; The Gehenna Press *Othello*, illustrated by Leonard Baskin, 1972 and the Aragon-Picasso *Shakespeare—Hamlet et nous*, 1965. There is also a copy of a Birmingham School of Printing illustrated edition of *The Tragedy of Hamlet* from 1940, with woodcuts by Robert Bird.

Act I. Scene 5



Must render up myself.

Ham. Alas, poor ghost!

Ghost Pity me not, but lend thy serious hearing
To what I shall unfold.

Ham. Speak; I am bound to hear.

Ghost So art thou to revenge, when thou shalt hear.

Ham. What?

Ghost I am thy father's spirit;
Doom'd for a certain term to walk the night,
And for the day confined to fast in fires,

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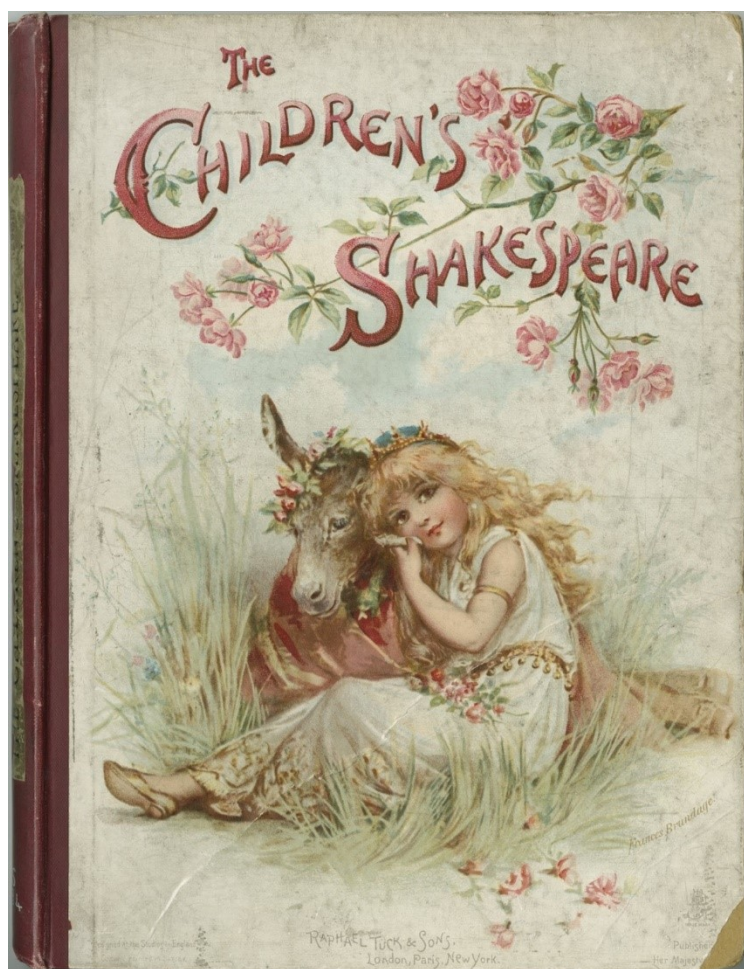
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Stage and Costume Design

Other specialist items include materials for stage and costume design, most notably Jean Cocteau's translation of *Romeo and Juliet* with designs by Jean Hugo, grandson of the novelist Victor Hugo, for the staging of the play in Paris in 1926. Another example is the publication containing Oliver Messel's stage designs for the Hollywood 1936 film of the same play.

Children's and Family Editions

Shakespeare's popularity increased during the 19th century and some 800 editions of the Complete Works were published. The Shakespeare Collection holds children's and family editions such as the first Charles and Mary Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare* (1807) and Thomas Bowdler's *Family Shakespeare* (1818), both of which were subsequently re-published many times in the 19th and 20th centuries. Thomas Bowdler is famous for 'cleaning up' Shakespeare, removing profanity and indecency as stated on the title page of his book: 'Nothing is added to the original text, but those words and expressions are omitted which cannot with propriety be read aloud in a family'.



The Children's Shakespeare, Edith Nesbit (1895) S 294.131696

Bookbinding

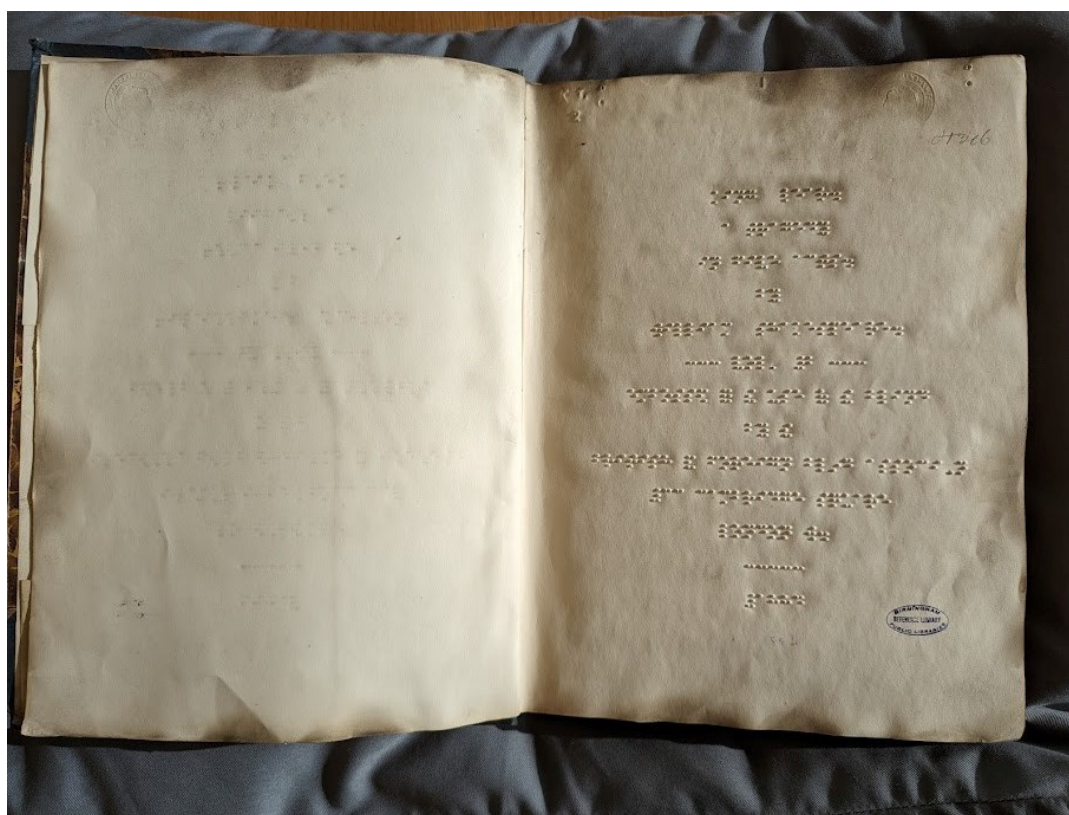
A fine example in the Shakespeare Collection of bookbinding craftsmanship is Henry Noel Humphrey's *Sentiment and Similes of William Shakespeare* from 1857. The binding is made of papier-mâché and decorated with a cameo portrait of Shakespeare. Another example is a copy of *The Poems of William Shakespeare* published by the Kelmscott Press in 1893.

Music

There are around 2,000 examples of music scores in the collection, ranging from incidental music to songs from the plays to opera. The oldest is a 1676 copy of a score by Robert Johnson which was written in 1613.

Braille Editions

There are two editions of Shakespeare's plays in Braille in the Collection, published in 1880 and 1916. The 1916 Braille version was published by the Institute for the Blind. In addition to Braille, there is a copy in embossed plain text and one in Moon type, a writing system that is similar to Braille.



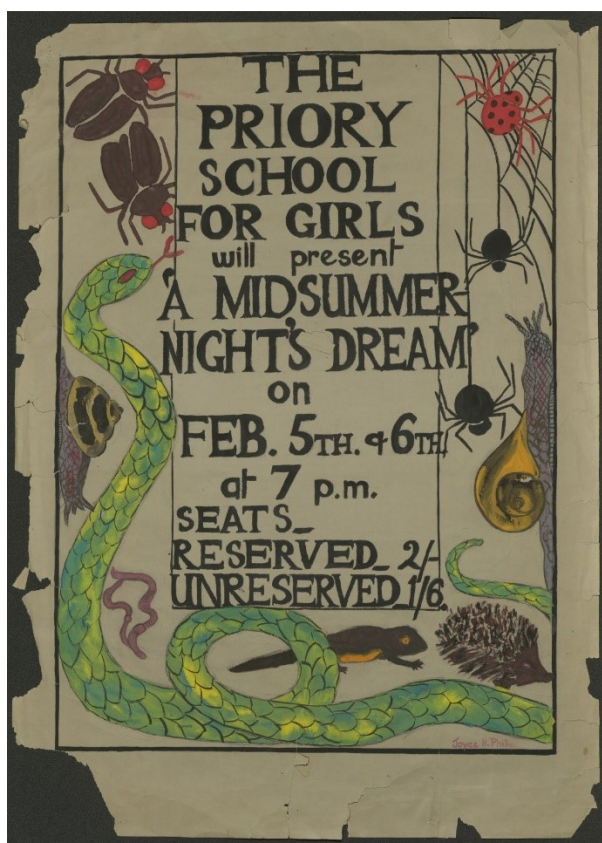
Shakespeare in Braille (1886) S. 344.189 F Braille

Production material

Since the early 1930s, the Shakespeare Collection has also included production material. There are examples from Britain and abroad, professional and amateur stage productions, and school productions, alongside photographs of stage, TV and film productions, as well as ballet, opera, and puppetry.

News cuttings have also been collected regularly since the 1920s. They are an invaluable source for anybody exploring the history of staging Shakespeare. The main ones are the Griffiths collection (1834-1924) and the Library's own run starting from 1927 onwards. The news cuttings collections also cover book, film and opera reviews, Shakespeare controversies, biographies and more generally Shakespeare-related activities in Stratford-upon-Avon.

The Collection also includes various promptbooks, many from the Birmingham Theatre Royal. The Gordon Crosse notebooks from 1890-1953 record most professional British productions during the period.



The Priory School for Girls present *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1930s) S 699.138

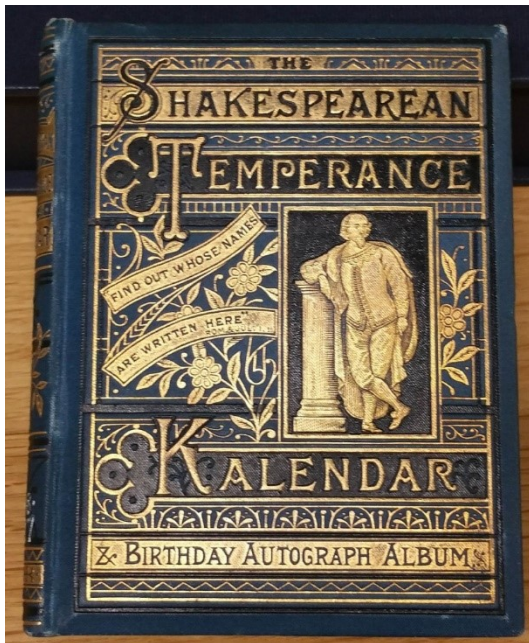
Adaptations

These publications often took creative liberties with the text, adding new elements to the story or changing the setting to make it more relevant to the audience. There are four adaptations in the Shakespeare Collection from the Birmingham Theatre Royal that illustrate the popularity of Shakespeare's plays as mass entertainment. Other early 18th and 19th century adaptations provide a reflection of the changing attitudes towards theatre and Shakespeare.

Commercial Interest

Shakespeare's 300th anniversary in 1864 saw his work developing into an industry and many publishers attached his name to a wide range of topics and causes in order to sell more books. One example is the Temperance Calendar complete with Shakespeare quotations. The Temperance movement was very active in 19th century Birmingham and attempted to discourage the population from drinking alcohol – although the young George Dawson spoke to the Temperance Society in favour of drinking!

The construction of Shakespeare as a national poet meant he was often employed for propaganda purposes during both the First and Second World Wars. An example of this is the Shakespearean War Calendar published in 1916. Other interesting items include a set of playing cards with images of Shakespeare's characters.



The Temperance Kalendar (1897) S 308.1897

How to see items from the Collection

Anyone who is interested in Shakespeare is welcome to view items from the Shakespeare Collection. Due to the size and value of the collection it is essential to decide what you would like to see in advance by searching our catalogues.

This can be found by visiting our website:

www.birmingham.gov.uk/ShakespeareCollection

Selected further reading

The items in this list come from the Shakespeare Collection and other parts of the wider Archives and Collections held at the Library of Birmingham, further information can be found in the catalogue. Additional items can also be found by searching in the catalogue.

George Dawson and 'Our Shakespeare Club'

George Dawson Collection. MS 3085

'Our Shakespeare Club' Scrapbook, 1864 – 1896. S 994.26

Records of 'Our Shakespeare Club', 1901-1906. MS 1661

The speeches of George Dawson on Shakespeare, 2nd Edition, 1978. MS 2737/4/2/3

Dale, R.W., *George Dawson: politician, lecturer and preacher*, 1877. LS 11/1/42/1

Harris, W, *The history of our Shakespeare club*, 1903. S 994.26

Wright Wilson, *The Life of George Dawson*, 1905. BCOL: 78.1 DAW

The History and development of the Birmingham Shakespeare Collection and Library

Beck, Catriona, *The Birmingham Shakespeare Library, 1864-1974: a study submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Librarianship*, University of Librarianship, University of Sheffield, 1974. S 993.2 Q

Epps, Tom and Fernie, E (eds.), *Forgotten treasures: The World's First Great Shakespeare Library*, History West Midlands, 2022. S 993.2

Langford, J. A., *The Birmingham Free libraries, the Shakespeare Memorial Library and the Art Gallery* 1871. S 993.2

Rathbone, Niky, *The Birmingham Shakespeare Library*, 1984. S 993.2 pF

Shakespeare Exhibition: to celebrate the four hundredth anniversary of his birth and the centenary of the library, 1964. S 992.1964

Materials for a History of the Shakespeare Memorial Library, 1871-1964. Scrapbooks in 3 vol. S 993.2

Opening of the Shakespeare Memorial Library Newspaper Cuttings. S 991.462 F

The 'Bradshaw' of Shakespeare. In praise of the new Catalogue of the Birmingham Shakespeare Memorial Library, 1904. AX/292/413031

From 2020-2023, the University of Birmingham and Birmingham City Council collaborated on a £1.7 million plan to revive the city's almost-forgotten Birmingham Shakespeare Memorial Library, housed in the iconic Library of Birmingham – the first great Shakespeare library in the world and one which, from the very beginning, has belonged to all the people of the city.

The Everything to Everybody Project united this Shakespeare archive with the George Dawson Collection, also held at LoB. This neglected treasure-trove documents the career of the radical preacher, lecturer and activist, who founded the Shakespeare Library as part of a pioneering 'Civic Gospel' in 19th century Birmingham.

The National Lottery Heritage Fund awarded the Everything to Everybody Project funding to open access to the collections and deliver an exciting programme of engaging events for people and communities across the city. The project was also generously supported by History West Midlands.



