THE SHAKESPEARE CLUB OF STRATFORD-UPON-AVON

The 868th meeting of the Shakespeare Club took place at Mason Croft on Tuesday 14 February 2012. The meeting was chaired by Roger Pringle who introduced Dr Robert Bearman, formerly Head of Archives and Local Studies at the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust. His most recent book, published in 2011, was an edition of the Minutes and Accounts of the Stratford-upon-Avon Corporation, 1599-1609, and it was on this research that his talk, 'Murder, Riot and 'Gaming at tables': New Light on Shakespeare's Stratford', was based.

Dr Bearman explained that the Stratford order books and financial accounts for this period were remarkably complete for a place its size and covered a crucial period for the corporation after a period of disasters including disease, fire and the influx of migrant poor. Shakespeare and his family were not prominent in the decade though it was a time when the playwright was building up his Stratford estates. As context Dr Bearman provided a brief history of the governance of Stratford since the Middle Ages , including the suppression of the Gild and College in the Reformation, the foundation of the Corporation in 1553 and the ongoing power struggles between the Corporation and the Lords of the Manor.

The Corporation was a self-perpetuating oligarchy of local tradesmen which sought to control the economic life of the town by licensing fairs and markets, restricting the access of external tradesmen to the town. The records of these transactions provided fascinating stories of the ordinary people of Stratford and offered a model for Dogberry and the watch in *Much Ado about Nothing*. Shakespeare, Dr Bearman, argued, knew Stratford well though he was not resident there. But there was a growing divide between him and the Corporation as his own status and that of his friends and business colleagues, the Greenes, Combes and Nashes, were defined by land and not trade in the town. After questions from the audience the meeting finished at 9.10pm.