

THE SHAKESPEARE CLUB OF STRATFORD-UPON-AVON

The 869th meeting of the Shakespeare Club took place at Mason Croft on Tuesday 13 March 2012. The meeting was chaired by Margaret Cunnington who introduced Peter Jolly, Director of Drama at Dulwich College, who spoke about 'Edward Alleyn and Shakespeare: Comparing 'The Evidences'.

Mr Jolly's declared objective for the evening was to use selected items from the Elizabethan Theatre archive at Dulwich College as a mirror in which to reflect Shakespeare. He began with the foundation of the College in 1619 by Edward Alleyn using a large fortune amassed as an actor and theatrical producer. As well as endowing places for three poor scholars between 6 and 18 from three parishes in London in which he had an interest – mainly those where the theatres were located-- Alleyn bequeathed the College his business papers and those of his father in law Philip Henslowe, as well as his picture collection. In the spirit of the Dickens' anniversary, Mr Jolly recounted the unsuccessful efforts in 1856 of the novelist and the great and good of the Victorian theatre to turn the College, grown rich on the profits of the railways which passed through its estates, into a school for the children of actors.

However the College was re-established ensuring the preservation of the most important archive of Elizabethan theatrical life to survive to the present, much of which has now been digitised.¹ The archive contained, as Mr Jolly illustrated, the 'evidences' of every kind of document need to put on a play: from the contracts for the building of the Rose and Fortune theatres, scripts, actors' parts, printed play texts, costume lists, 'plats', and lists of titles in the repertoire.

Where does Shakespeare come in? The connection between the two men is circumstantial and contrasting: in the plague year of 1594 Shakespeare's company the Chamberlain's men joined briefly with the Admiral's Men, led by Alleyn. But the only written reference in the archive is a note on the back of an envelope to a book of Shakespeare's Sonnets valued at 5d. Shakespeare's life is a mystery, Alleyn's is fully documented; Ben Jonson wrote poems about them both. Jolly proposed them as the Castor and Pollux of the Elizabethan stage together forming a shining constellation. Alleyn he concluded provided a lens for if not the mirror image of Shakespeare's world.

After questions from the audience the meeting finished at 9.10pm.

¹ Available at www.henslowe-alleyn.org.uk.