

Shakespeare Club of Stratford-upon-Avon

The 896th meeting of the Shakespeare Club took place at Mason Croft on Tuesday 13 October 2015. Sylvia Morris took the chair and introduced Julian Bowsher, one of the senior archaeologists at MOLA (the Museum of London Archaeology), whose subject was Shakespeare's London Theatreland.

Mr Bowsher began by pointing out that the recent excavations at New Place were the only archaeological explorations relating to Shakespeare which were not theatres. He presented an illustrated chronological tour of the London theatres from 1567 to 1613 and their archaeological evidence : from The Red Lion in Newington Butts (now the Elephant and Castle) to The Hope in Southwark. Archaeology had exploded the myth that the Globe with its polygonal shape was the paradigm for all early London playhouses. Elizabethan builders were pragmatic, reusing existing timbers and foundations, positioning entrances wherever it was convenient on a particular site. Having touched on the history of The Theatre in Shoreditch and the nearby Curtain, Bowsher moved south of the river where, in 1585, Philip Henslowe acquired a building in Southwark which became The Rose, where two of Shakespeare's early plays were put on: *Henry VI* and *Titus Andronicus*. The theatre was the first to be excavated by modern archaeological methods in 1989. It was altered in 1592 when the northern half was rebuilt to make the stage wider and is the only site where a stage has been found. The layers of sand in front of the stage might have been placed to stabilise the front of the courtyard broken down by Tudor moshing by the audience. Finds demonstrate stage practice such as a cannon ball used for sound effects, hundreds of money boxes, coins and tokens and pins from costumes.

Other theatres like The Swan, known from the so-called De Witt drawing of 1596, are beyond excavation, having been destroyed by invasive modern construction or occupied by later buildings of historical and architectural significance. Bowsher considered the Globe dismissing the story that the Burbages moved the Theatre physically to Southward when the lease on the Theatre expired but conceded that the Globe was likely to include timber from the earlier building. Only a small portion had been excavated to date which showed it was a polygon but whether it was 16 or 18 sided couldn't be established. The stair tower, a means of access to the galleries, may have been found. The Globe burned down in 1613 during a performance of Shakespeare's *Henry VIII* and within a year was rebuilt, archaeology shows, on the same foundations. Bowsher thought that Shakespeare's Globe was not remotely like the original, but Wanamaker's project at least brought scholars and archaeologists together to collaborate in research.

Bowsher concluded with later theatres with rectangular layouts like the Boar's Head, an inn adapted as a playhouse in 1598, and the Fortune built by Henslowe and Edward Alleyn in 1600 in Cripplegate, touching briefly on the indoor theatres as they were all were built on the first floor often in existing buildings like the Blackfriars so

archaeology isn't possible. However there was much still to do. Further excavations of The Curtain playhouse, begun in 2011, were planned, hoping to find the stage and to establish whether the building was square or polygonal. For those whose appetite for theatrical archaeology had been whetted there would be public open days when the site could be visited.

After questions the meeting closed at 9.15 though Mr Bowsher continued to answer questions for some time afterwards.