

The Shakespeare Club of Stratford-upon-Avon

The 943rd meeting of the Shakespeare Club of Stratford-upon-Avon was a virtual meeting on Tuesday 14 December 2021.

Dr Kirsten Tambling, Research Associate for Shakespeare in the Royal Collection, Kings College London, presented a beautifully-illustrated talk entitled *Wives and Widows: Herne's Oak, Anne Page and the British Royal Family*.

She began by considering David Scott's 1840 painting *Queen Elizabeth Viewing the Performance of the Merry Wives of Windsor at the Globe Theatre*. The entirely imaginary subject invited the comparison between the Elizabethan, heroic, period of national history, and the Victorian. It also united two national institutions: Shakespeare and the Royal Family.

This relationship is the subject of a research project which has resulted in a searchable database, now freely available online, and an online exhibition *Making History: Shakespeare and the Royal Family*.

The Merry Wives of Windsor has a special place in the story of royalty's relationship with Shakespeare. This is a result of the play's geographical setting, of its mentions of the Order of the Garter, and its origins in a mythical Merrie England. She focused on two elements of the play: Herne's Oak, and the depiction of Anne Page whose wooing forms the play's romantic subplot.

When the oak tree in Windsor's Great Park blew down in 1863, Queen Victoria herself planted a replacement sapling. The legend of Herne the Hunter, invented by Shakespeare, seems to have been accepted as genuine as early as 1742. Interest in the tree fits in with that of another, cut down in the 1750s, Shakespeare's Mulberry in Stratford's New Place Garden. Like the mulberry, Herne's Oak provided the raw material for many carved objects some of which are in the Royal Collection. One book is bound in the wood of the tree itself.

Other items provide a connection between Anne Page, in *Merry Wives*, and the Royal Family. A painting of Anne was a gift at the 1893 wedding of Prince George, Duke of York. The image of Anne conformed with the nineteenth century concept of femininity and royalty: domestic, dutiful, modest and English. This ideal that Victoria and Albert had worked to establish was far from the actual history of the Royal Family.

When George became king in 1917 he formally announced that the Royal Family was to adopt the indisputably English name of Windsor. Shakespeare's Merrie English comedy helped, and still helps, royalty to maintain its legitimacy.

Shakespeare in the Royal Collection may be accessed here: <https://sharc.kcl.ac.uk/>

The meeting was viewed 118 times.