

Shakespeare
&

THE

Painted

ROOM, OXFORD



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THE OXFORD RESEARCH CENTRE IN THE HUMANITIES

THE *Painted* ROOM

Oxford Preservation Trust is working to find a secure and sustainable future for this valuable part of the City's heritage. It is imperative to care for the fabric of the building give greater public access and share knowledge of the history of the place, the wall paintings and links to Shakespeare.

Oxford Preservation Trust owns and cares for land and buildings to conserve and enhance Oxford. We work to share and encourage an interest in its history and create public access.

THE PAINTED ROOM, 3 CORNMARKE

Behind an 18th Century façade above a Bookmakers in a busy Oxford shopping street lies one of the city's most extraordinary hidden gems with tantalising links to William Shakespeare. The '**Painted Room**' was part of a tavern, and its extensive well-preserved 16th wall paintings were found behind later wooden panelling during an early 20th development project.

No. 3 Cornmarket is a rare surviving example of a medieval timber-framed house in Oxford (Grade II* listed). For much of its history, it was a tavern next to the historic inn now the Golden Cross. The tavern was for a time called Tattleton's, after John Tattleton, a tailor and local dignitary, who lived there from 1564 to 1581. It is during this period that the wall paintings may have been completed, as what are thought to be his initials 'IT', were found on the walls in one of the rooms to the south, later demolished. It was later run by John Davenant a London vintner and friend of Shakespeare.

Passed to Oxford City Council in 1921 the Painted Room was the office of Oxford Preservation Trust until 1968, who remain committed to ensuring that the history and significance of the Painted Room are not forgotten.

A Conservation Statement was produced by Oxford Archaeology funded by English Heritage in 2014.





THE LANGUAGE *of* FLOWERS

THE WALL PAINTINGS - WHAT DO THEY MEAN?

The bright, bold decoration painted around the walls may seem extraordinarily striking and dominating to modern eyes, but to the original inhabitants in the latter part of the 16th century, it would be seen as a fashionable norm. For, highly decorative schemes, sometimes figurative, sometimes containing texts and often just simply ornamental patterns were very common at this time. However, this is not mere decoration. Many of these paintings contain important messages about the lives of ordinary people in this period, information which we cannot access in any other way.

So what are we looking at? We have a frieze at the top with a moralising text, reminding the occupants to be good Protestants:

[First of thi risyng] / And last of thi rest be thou /
God's servante for that hold I best / In the morning
earlye / Serve god Devoutlie / Fear god above
allthyng / honour the Kyng

Then we have a main panel with an ancient design of strapwork containing a stylized flower in each

compartment. This is based on textile patterns originating in the Middle East. Although highly decorative, the flowers might have some hidden meaning. We know the Elizabethans were very fond of communicating in complex ways through symbolism and things often had multiple meanings. Flowers, in particular, were assigned specific attributes, and there was a widely understood language of flowers. So there may well be some other layers of meaning to unravel here.

Above the fireplace the sacred IHS symbol (Jesus), strongly associated with Catholicism, can be seen. This belongs to a previous scheme of decoration, possibly done when Mary was on the throne, when people were required to revert to the old religion, ie Catholicism.

The colours used are limited: black, white, yellow ochre, red ochre and an orange red. These were the colours that ordinary building craftsmen were generally allowed to use, without encroaching on the work of the higher status painter stainers. This suggests, then, that the work is not undertaken by an artist or painter, rather by local building craftsmen, maybe a plasterer, maybe a joiner.

Dr Kathryn Davies (Kellogg College, Oxford)





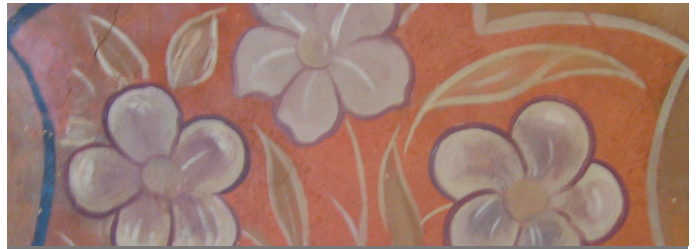
SHAKESPEARE AND THE PAINTED ROOM

The first association of Shakespeare with Oxford and with the tavern at No. 3 Cornmarket was recorded by the antiquary Anthony Wood (1632-1695), some decades after Shakespeare's death. Wood's friend John Aubrey (1626-1697) added to the story, telling how William Davenant, son of the vintner and innkeeper John Davenant (Lord Mayor of Oxford in 1621/2), was a favourite of William Shakespeare (apparently his namesake), who may have stayed at the Davenants' tavern in Oxford on his journeys between London and Stratford-upon-Avon. William Davenant 'seemed contented enough to be thought his son', though whether this was in a literary or a literal sense is not quite clear; however, Davenant was also a playwright, and it was evidently in his interest to be associated with Shakespeare's fame and talent.

There was a resurgence of interest in finding sources of evidence for Shakespeare in Oxford on the rediscovery of the Painted Room in the twentieth century.

Dr Emma Smith (Hertford College, Oxford)

THE *Birthday* CELEBRATION

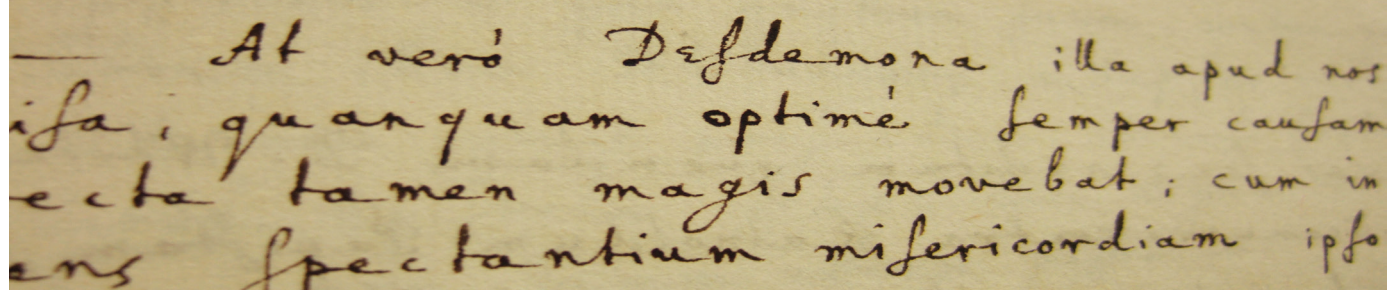


Commemorations of Shakespeare's birthday (traditionally celebrated on 23 April) began in the Painted Room in 1938. These offered Oxford's civic dignitaries a chance to wear their finery and to capitalize on a famous visitor whose connections with the city were 'town' rather than 'gown'. It was also an opportunity to imitate what had become a successful birthday pageant tradition in Stratford. The procession of city and university bigwigs across from the Lord Mayor's Parlour in the Town Hall to Commarket rapidly became too big for the Painted Room, and convened instead in other venues around the city, where sack, the favourite tippale of Shakespeare's Falstaff, was drunk and a speech on Shakespeare delivered. The tradition seems to have died out in the 1960s, but was revived in 2013 as an opportunity for local school children to connect with Shakespeare in Oxford.

Evidence is lacking for many of the claims that have been made over the years; it may or may not be provable that Shakespeare lodged in the Painted Room, or that William Davenant was his son, but our history of celebrating Shakespeare is revealing in itself. **This is a tradition with a life of its own and one which is still evolving.** How and why have we chosen to investigate the life of 'The Bard' in the past (was he a Catholic, for instance, or was he politically radical?) and how will we celebrate him in the years to come?

Dr Emma Smith & Elizabeth Sandis





At verò Desdemona illa apud nos ifa, quanquam optime semper causam ecta tamen magis movebat; cum in ens spectantium misericordiam ipso

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Shakespeare's Plays

WHAT DID OXFORD PEOPLE THINK?

Two important documents describe the plays performed in Oxford by Shakespeare's company of actors (the King's Men) in 1610, who paid for them, and who went to watch them. The municipal accounts for this year are still in the City Archives; they record the payment handled by the then Lord Mayor of Oxford, Thomas Harris, 'for the king(es) players'. Whilst the City authorities were investing in such entertainments (probably staged at the Guildhall, now the Town Hall rebuilt on the same site), it was University policy to ban its members from attending productions by professional theatre companies. This accounts for the rueful admission ('*pudet dicere*', 'it is shameful to say it') by one Henry Jackson, a theology fellow at Corpus Christi College, that he and other clergymen-in-training 'gathered together most eagerly' to watch the plays ('*avidissime confluebant*').

This evidence comes to us from a letter written by Jackson dated 'Sept. 1610' preserved in the College library. The letter contains fascinating descriptions of

the plays performed on that occasion, which included Jonson's *The Alchemist* and Shakespeare's *Othello*. Jonson's comedy deeply shocked some of the scholars in the audience (on religious grounds), but the tragedies evoked genuine sympathy and even tears. In particular, the (male) actor playing Desdemona in *Othello* won the pity of the spectators ('*spectantium misericordiam*') as you can see from the manuscript above.

Jackson lingers on the detail of the death scene, recalling Desdemona ('murdered by her husband [Othello] right in front of us') lying stretched out on the bed in her bedchamber; this symbolic tableau captures the affecting qualities of a play which focuses on the domestic tragedy of hearth and home more than it does the politics of state. The 1610 production of *Othello* provided by Shakespeare's company illustrates an occasion when 'town' and 'gown' (traditional rivals for power and influence) intermingled for the experience of a theatrical entertainment, City and University men sharing the space as one Oxford audience.

Elizabeth Sandis (Merton College, Oxford)

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