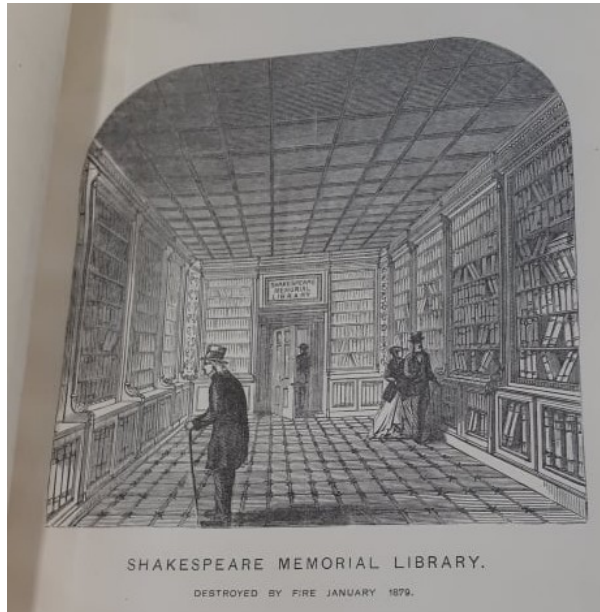


## Sold, Stored or Saved? The Peculiar History of the Shakespeare Room

In 1863, the Birmingham 'Shakespeare Club' hatched plans for a world-renowned collection. This would be an 'art-monument to the immortal poet', commemorating Shakespeare through his literature, housed in a beautiful Memorial Room. Architect John Henry Chamberlain designed the entire room – a solid oak structure with floral tiles, stained glass windows and a carved plaster ceiling.



Interior view of the first Shakespeare Memorial Library that was destroyed by fire in 1879

Opening in 1878, people adored the room as a refuge for Shakespearian scholarship. It even managed to survive a vicious fire in 1879, being re-erected on a grander scale. However, in the 1960s it faced its biggest challenge yet: the dawn of a huge new brutalist library, designed by John Madin. The tale of what happened next is one that can be reported through quirky newspaper headings of the time...

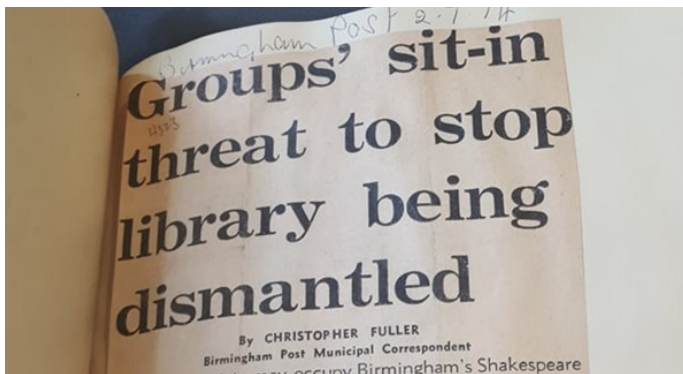
### **Anyone Want 6 Spiral Staircases? (Birmingham Post, 1971)**

As plans for John Madin's post-war, ziggurat-shaped central library took shape, there came with it the tragic news that the Shakespeare Room would not fit the style of this new building. The Birmingham Victorian Society spoke out against its destruction, arguing that 'future generations will want reminders of the city that led the world in a municipal enterprise a century ago'.



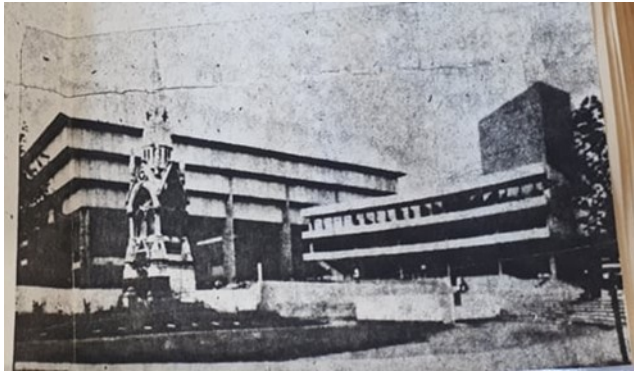
Rumours spread about the future of the room. Some said it should be sold to America, others that it would be moved to the University of Birmingham. Some resorted simply to a free-for-all: *the Birmingham Post* announced ‘if you think you can give any of these [materials] a good home, Birmingham city library would be interested to hear from you’.

**Is This a Gas Pipe I See Before Me? (Birmingham Evening Mail, 1978)**



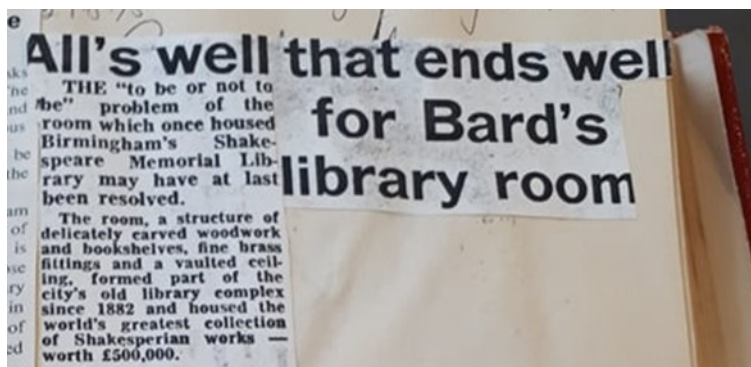
Following the threat of a sit-in from conservationists, the Shakespeare room was dismantled piece by piece and tucked away in the stores of the City Council. It was now truly out of sight and out of mind, which the *Birmingham Evening Mail* officially heralded ‘a let-down’.

Meanwhile, the John Madin brutalist library was attracting mixed reviews. *Stage and TV Today* described the new set-up as a ‘windy, concrete wilderness’, complete with an ‘ugly hole’ where the original library once stood. In a more positive review, another paper deemed it ‘the largest and most modern establishment of its kind in Europe, as befits a leading industrial city’. What a shame, therefore, that this ‘leading industrial city’ had no physical space for Shakespeare.



### **All's Well That Ends Well for Bard's Library Room (Sunday Mercury, 1985)**

This tale has a happy ending, as the Shakespeare Memorial Room was re-erected for the public, initially as part of the new Paradise Arts Complex. In 2013, the Birmingham City Council won their battle against brutalist-sympathising protestors, and John Madin's building was demolished to make way for the new (and current) Library of Birmingham, designed by Francine Houben. The Shakespeare Room was once again given pride of place, this time in a glittering gold cylinder at the top of the building.



Like a Shakespearian comedy, this tale may have been wrapped up in a neat little bow, but there is an important lesson here. Original architect J H Chamberlain believed that buildings should be respected and not easily destroyed – a principle largely ignored during both the rise and fall of the brutalist library. Perhaps, we should treat Birmingham's prominent 'Forward' motto with due caution, and protect the buildings we have here and now?

Francesca Rhodes

'Everything to Everybody' Heritage Ambassador

All images and documents courtesy of Library of Birmingham Archives and Collections

# EVERYTHING TO EVERYBODY

Using Birmingham's forgotten past to inspire our future  
Unlocking the world's first great people's Shakespeare Library for all

