

Researching the Birmingham Shakespeare Library

Situated under the golden dome on top of the Library of Birmingham in Centenary Square lies the Shakespeare Memorial Room. Designed by architect and Shakespeare lover, John Henry Chamberlain, this beautiful room, in a striking Elizabethan Revival style, once housed one of the UK's most important cultural assets - the Shakespeare Memorial Library.

Opened in 1868, Birmingham's Shakespeare Library is one of the largest collections of Shakespeareana in a public library anywhere in the world. Today the collection consists of approximately 100,000 items, filling fourteen kilometres of environmentally controlled shelving. It is a treasure trove of books and non-book material making it an invaluable resource for students of Shakespeare, drama students, theatre historians and the public.

I first came across the Library in the 1990s when the Memorial Room was located in the now demolished Paradise arts complex situated between the Central Library and the School of Music. Despite its location and apparent accessibility only metres away from the central library and the museum and art gallery, it was one of Birmingham's best kept secrets, as was the Shakespeare collection itself! I only came to recognise its significance as a cultural treasure house of international importance when I began researching the history of the public library movement in Birmingham for my PhD.

The idea for a Shakespeare collection was first mooted by hardware manufacturer and bibliophile, Samuel Timmins, in 1858. However, it was, as Timmins later stated, 'my friend Dawson who developed my dormant proposal in a practical form'. Celebrated lecturer, heterodox preacher and political activist, George Dawson laid out his plan in a letter to *Aris's Birmingham Gazette* in 1863 suggesting that, to celebrate the Tercentenary, rather than erect a public monument, they should bring Shakespeare to Birmingham in the form of a Shakespeare library, for it to be as comprehensive as possible, and to have it housed in the central reference library under the care of the Corporation for the use of everybody.

A group of Shakespeare enthusiasts formed a committee of subscribers and set about procuring, by gift or purchase, an initial collection of 1,239 volumes which was formally presented to the Corporation and later housed in its own room in the reference library. It opened to the public in 1868.

Exploring the archives of the Birmingham Shakespeare Library throws up fascinating insights into the triumphs and tribulations faced by the many individuals who, over the years, involved themselves with the project of creating what would eventually become a significant cultural resource for the people of Birmingham. Some of these individuals are well known – George Dawson and Samuel Timmins in particular. Who were the others whose names appear in lists of the library’s subscribers? What were their familial and religious connections? How many of them were members of Dawson’s congregation at the Church of the Saviour in Edward Street? Making connections is important in historical research and more research into the backgrounds of the early subscribers is needed. Even less is known of the people who came to use the collection. The annual statistics suggest the collection was well used but unfortunately there seems to be no record of names and places. It would be interesting to know how many ordinary Brummies made use of ‘their’ Shakespeare Library!

The work of the subscribers’ committee itself is however, well documented in the minutes of their annual committee meetings and reported in detail in the local newspapers, particularly regarding new acquisitions. One ongoing challenge they faced was finding enough money to buy some of the more valuable and rarer items for the library. There never seemed to be enough cash! ‘Many thanks for your offer of Shakespeare’s Poems (1640)’ wrote Honorary Secretary Samuel Timmins, in reply to an offer from one bookseller, ‘but I fear we cannot afford such a luxury’. This alas was all too often the response!

Amongst its treasures there are also large holdings of non-book material in the form of theatrical ephemera, playbills, illustrations, production photographs, television, radio, and film scripts – all amounting to a comprehensive record of nineteenth and especially twentieth century theatrical productions. The story of Birmingham’s own relationship to Shakespeare in performance lies within this still largely unexplored collection which the Everything to Everybody project is starting to bring to light.

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EVERYTHING TO EVERYBODY

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

