

## Timber tests to give a picture of the past in Stratford

[Simon Woodings](#)

12 May 2022

**HOW Stratford looked in Shakespeare's time and how it might have looked today had three major fires not ravaged the town centre will form part of a four-year investigation.**



New Place, which fortunately was spared a devastating fire in 1595

A £40,000 grant from Historic England will fund new research, led by the Stratford Society, into historic buildings in Stratford town centre.

Using tree ring dating – dendrochronology – the project will investigate timber-framed buildings that were rebuilt following fires in 1594, 1595 and 1614.

Historian Dr Robert Bearman, a leading authority on the history of the town, proposed the project, which will give insight into how the town would look today had areas not been destroyed by the flames.

The initial focus will be on High Street and Chapel Street, following permission from building owners, but the investigation may be extended to include Wood Street, Ely Street and Sheep Street.

The research will include expert examination of the structures and analysis of the wooden beams. A team of volunteers will also gather documentary evidence from the archives held by the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust.

Nick Molyneux, historic buildings inspector from Historic England told the Herald he was genuinely excited by what the project might reveal.

“In those days the vast percentage of buildings were thatched and were quite vulnerable if a building caught fire and a strong wind dropped sparks on other buildings nearby. Once we get into the buildings and take samples, we will be able to see smoke damage and traces of soot and see how the structure was rebuilt.

“I think we’ll find some other buildings behind the brick facades that exist now and the interesting thing is, oak burns slowly and green oak was used in the buildings in Stratford, so using tree-ring dating we can tell when the tree was felled and sometimes what season of the year it was.”

He added: “This is an exciting opportunity to research the history of and to discover more about the place which nurtured one of England’s greatest literary figures.”

Dr Lindsay MacDonald, chairman of the Stratford Society, pictured, said: “This is a brilliant opportunity for us to learn more about this important phase of the town’s development. We are very fortunate that so much of the historical fabric of the architecture has been preserved.”



Professor Lindsay MacDonald. Photo: Mark Williamson

Cathy Tyers, dendrochronologist in the National Specialist Services Department of Historic England, said: “We are delighted to be collaborating with the Stratford Society. The opportunity to understand more about the extent of these devastating fires and the subsequent rebuilding should prove fascinating and will hopefully only add to the appeal of such an important historic town.”

Nadhim Zahawi, Stratford MP added: “I’m delighted by Historic England’s award. This funding will support research about our community and could generate further knowledge about Stratford-upon-Avon’s remarkable past. I look forward to the project getting under way.”

The first tree-ring dating took place in this country in the 1960s and since then several thousand buildings have been tested, but this is the first concentrated project of its kind in Stratford. Dendrochronology is the scientific method of dating the growth rings of a tree to the exact years they were formed.

### **Three fires that shaped Stratford**

IN May 1594 a great fire burned more than 100 houses and barns in the centre of Stratford. At the time blacksmiths, bakers, cobblers, tallow chandlers, maltsters and brewers all needed fire in their work. The danger this posed was made worse by the need to stockpile fuel, wood and furze.

According to accounts in the archive, the strength of the wind that day whipped up a large blaze amongst buildings of timber and thatch, leading a witness to report that “the flame and smoake thereof is soe greate, and violent that noe man is able to come neere those howses or to stand in the wynd to defend the fayer tyled howses”.

Another fire, in July 1595, destroyed a further 20 houses. Fortunately, the flames did not reach the great house at New Place which Shakespeare purchased in 1597.

In 1612, a by-law was introduced that forbade thatched roofs in the town centre and required that buildings used for brewing, baking, dressing meat and drink or washing should have fires lit only in chimneys ‘sufficiently walled with stone or brick’.

However, this did not prevent a third fire breaking out in 1614, the year that Shakespeare retired to his hometown. The Bard may well have watched the flames as they ripped through 54 houses as well as many barns and outbuildings