StratFire Project - Heritage Open Day at Nash's House: 16 September 2026

On 16 September, Helen Elliott attended the 2026 StratFire Heritage Open Day, which was held at Nash's House, courtesy of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust. There were three talks and a tour of parts of the property, as well as a look at some of the buildings featured in the project. Here she tells us about the day.

Dr. Nat Alcock of the University of Warwick (who specialises in vernacular architecture and social history) is an advisor with Historic England for the StratFire project. He shared information about the technical aspects of the project, in particular the use of tree ring dating (dendrochronology) to establish the age of the old buildings in the town. There were three major fires, in 1594, 1595 and 1614, the first two of which have been the main focus of the project. The project aims to find out whether buildings were constructed before or after the fires and roughly when. Buildings contained both oak and elm, and the latter is more difficult to date using dendrochronology due to the way the trees grow. Elm trees are less affected by the weather than oak.

Dr. Robert Bearman gave a talk on the documentary sources that were used not only to corroborate the results of the technical work but also to study the effect of the fires in a more general context. A team of voluntary researchers assembled a database, content from which will be worked into the final report concerning the extent of the fires and the methods used to meet the costs of rebuilding. It transpired that some of the people sent out to request funds claimed quite substantial expenses! Bob later led a tour around some of the relevant buildings in the town.

Dr. Lindsay MacDonald and Margaret Cund gave the third presentation, concentrating on the wood used in construction, oak or elm? They also busted some myths that had long been believed about the trees' characteristics and value as building materials. The presentation ended with an explanation of a new way of assessing age using oxygen isotope dating techniques, which could help with the problems presented by elm. Margaret Cund also gave us a delightful rendition of an old poem (see below) that explained the characteristics and properties of various different trees.

Nat Alcock then led us around Nash's House on a tour and explained how the house had been altered over the years. He also showed us some dendrochronology drill holes (which were very discreet). The house has undergone some very significant alterations and extensions.

THE FIREWOOD POEM

Beechwood fires are bright and clear
If the logs are kept a year,
Chestnut's only good they say,
If for logs 'tis laid away.
Make a fire of Elder tree,
Death within your house will be;
But ash new or ash old,
Is fit for a queen with crown of gold.
Birch and fir logs burn too fast
Blaze up bright and do not last,
it is by the Irish said
Hawthorn bakes the sweetest bread.
Elm wood burns like churchyard mould,
E'en the very flames are cold
But ash green or ash brown
Is fit for a queen with golden crown
Poplar gives a bitter smoke,
Fills your eyes and makes you choke,
Apple wood will scent your room
Pear wood smells like flowers in bloom
Oaken logs, if dry and old
keep away the winter's cold
But ash wet or ash dry
a king shall warm his slippers by.

The poem is by Lady Celia Congreve, and is believed to have been first published in *The Times*, in 1930.