

Grant awarded to uncover stories behind misfortune that struck Shakespeare's hometown

- Historic England gives a £40,000 grant towards research into how Stratford-upon-Avon rebuilt timber buildings following the great fires of 1594 and 1595.
- Research will also look at the devastation of the 1614 fire that Shakespeare may have witnessed.
- The project could potentially yield new information on the people and places that populated Shakespeare's hometown during this tumultuous time.



Historic England has awarded a grant of £40,000 towards new research into historic buildings in Stratford Upon Avon's town centre led by the Stratford Society.

The four-year project will investigate how the timber-framed buildings were rebuilt following the disastrous fires of 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.

Following consultation with building owners, the initial focus will be on houses in High Street and Chapel Street, but the investigation may be extended to include Wood Street, Ely Street and Sheep Street.

The research will include expert examination of the structures of the buildings, and sampling of the wooden beams for analysis by dendrochronology*.

A team of volunteers will gather documentary evidence from the town archives held by the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust.

In May 1594 a great fire occurred, which burned more than 100 houses and barns in the centre of the town. At the time blacksmiths, bakers, cobblers, tallow chandlers,

maltsters and brewers all needed fire in their normal operations. The danger this posed was made worse by the need to stockpile fuel, wood and furze.

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 fires 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.

Nick Molyneux, Historic Buildings Inspector from Historic England, said: “This is an exciting opportunity to research the history of Stratford-upon-Avon, and to discover more about the place which nurtured one of England’s greatest literary figures.

“Using all the available evidence, including the buildings which he knew, it will provide a detailed understanding of how the people of the town recovered from the devastating fires they suffered. We will have a much better idea as to what the town would have looked like at the time.”

Dr Lindsay MacDonald, Chairman of the Stratford Society, 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.”

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, MP for Stratford-upon-Avon said: “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 underway.”

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Notes to Editors

***Dendrochronology**

Dendrochronology is the scientific method of dating the growth rings of a tree to the exact years they were formed. The word is derived from Ancient Greek dendron (δένδρον), meaning "tree", khronos (χρόνος), "time", and -logia (-λογία), "the study of". The method is useful for determining the precise period over which the trees that the timbers were derived from were growing and when these trees were felled. It is used on wood found on archaeological sites and in historic buildings or in works of art, such as old panel paintings, or other portable artefacts, such as furniture. Uncertainty of the precise date of felling may arise due to the absence of the rings nearest the outside of the tree, immediately under the bark. These outermost rings may be lost during conversion of the tree into the timber element, or object, and in such instances a felling date estimate can be provided. The time elapsed between felling the tree and using the timber for construction is generally insignificant with usage commonly occurring within a year or two at most of felling.

Historic England

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The Stratford Society

The Stratford Society is the civic society for Stratford-upon-Avon, which takes an active interest in the development of the town and its environment and seeks to preserve the heritage of the past. Information on the Society's activities may be found at: www.stratfordsociety.co.uk