

460 Years Ago, Shakespeare Was Born Here. Or Somewhere.

Every year, millions flock to Stratford-upon-Avon, England, to visit the house known as Shakespeare's Birthplace. But was he really born there? A whole industry depends on it.



The building thought to be Shakespeare's birthplace before it was bought and renovated in the late 1800s. One British magazine called it a "shabby sausage-shop" at the time of the sale.

Credit...
Chronicle/Alamy

By Elizabeth Winkler

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Sometime in the late 18th century, a sign appeared outside a shambly butcher's hut in the English town of Stratford-upon-Avon: "The Immortal Shakspeare was born in this house," it announced, using a then common spelling of his name. Devotees began making pilgrimages — dropping to their knees, weeping, singing odes: "Untouched and sacred be thy shrine, Avonian Willy, bard Divine!"

A tradesman grew rich selling carvings from a local mulberry tree, like pieces of the true cross. Some skeptics suspected that the sign was part of a scheme to bring visitors to Stratford; others wondered if it had been hung by the property's occupant. A local antiquarian criticized the whole scene as "a design to extort pecuniary gratuities from the credulous and unwary."

Pilgrims flocked to the house, and it became a site so hallowed that one visitor warned that the veneration of Shakespeare threatened to eclipse that of God:

Yet steals a sigh, as reason weighs/ The fame to Shakespeare given,/ That thousands, worshippers of him,/ Forget to worship Heaven!

About 250 years after its break from the Catholic Church, England had its own Bethlehem and manger.

The problem: No one really knows where Shakespeare was born.

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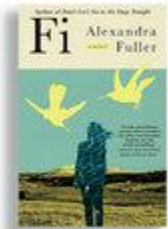
Mock Tudors and magic wands

[Stratford-upon-Avon](#) lies two hours northwest of London in the Midlands, more or less the heart of England. Today, it is one of Britain's most popular tourist destinations, drawing up to three million visitors a year. The Birthplace is its main attraction, followed by the cottage reputed to be the place where Anne Hathaway, Shakespeare's wife, grew up.

Stratford exudes Elizabethan kitsch, with souvenir shops and half-timbered buildings. In the 19th century, the Victorians tried to make Stratford look more "authentic," which has left it teeming with mock Tudors.

It's a town whose economy and identity revolve around Shakespearean fervor, which peaks every year on April 23, the date celebrated as Shakespeare's birthday. It is also, conveniently, [St. George's Day](#), honoring the patron saint of England.

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Image



Businesses with Shakespeare-themed names, like this one linked to Anne Hathaway, his wife, line the streets of Stratford-upon-Avon.

Credit...

Andy Haslam for The New York Times

On my first visit in June 2021, I passed the Hathaway Tea Rooms and a cafe called the Food of Love, a cutesy name taken from “Twelfth Night” (“If music be the food of love, play on”). Confusingly, there were also several Harry Potter-themed shops. Stratford and Hogwarts, quills and wands, poems and spells. Then again, maybe the conflation was apt: Wasn’t Shakespeare a sort of boy wizard, magically endowed with inexplicable powers?

On Henley Street, I arrived at the Birthplace, a half-timbered house yellowed with age. Today, it looks like a single detached building, but it was originally a row of tenements. John Shakespeare bought one tenement on the street in 1556, though he also bought property on nearby Greenhill Street, which could just as easily have been the site of his son’s birth. He bought the property thought to be the Birthplace in 1575, 11 years after his son was born.

Those who believe in the Birthplace point to a record from 1552 showing that a John Shakespeare was fined for keeping a dung heap somewhere on Henley Street. It doesn’t specify the location, but that dung heap has fueled a theory that he must have been living there at the time of his son’s birth, perhaps as a renter.

Similarly, the claim for the authenticity of [Anne Hathaway's Cottage](#) rests on a record that a John Hathaway leased the 90-acre farm on which the building stood 13 years before Anne was born in about 1556. The cottage may well be linked to the Hathaways, but there is no proof that Anne actually grew up in it, just as there is none that Shakespeare was born in the house on Henley Street.

Together, these traditions have sustained Stratford's tourist industry, worth about \$315 million in 2019, before the pandemic. But they have not convinced many skeptics over the years.

"Stratford permits — indeed encourages — one of the biggest frauds in England to rage unchecked," the journalist [Bernard Levin](#) railed in The Daily Mail in 1965. "I mean those two monumental frauds, 'Shakespeare's Birthplace and Anne Hathaway's Cottage.'" It didn't help that hucksters have found ways to make the story profitable. In the early 19th century, a tenant of the Birthplace named Mrs. Hornby ran a lucrative hustle showing and selling Shakespeare's "relics" to gullible visitors. The relics were eventually exposed in an 1848 article in [Bentley's Miscellany](#), which observed that four different chairs, each purporting to be "Shakespeare's chair," had been sold over the years, each made by a well-known local craftsman.

Image



Extensive renovations in the late 1800s turned the property on Henley Street into the home of a prosperous Elizabethan family, or what people at the time imagined that to be.

Credit...

Andy Haslam for The New York Times

I entered through the Shakespeare Centre, a strange museum that acts as an antechamber to the Birthplace. There were no books owned by Shakespeare or letters in Shakespeare's hand, because none are known to exist. Instead, a glass case displayed eight Shakespeare busts dating from 1844 to 2000. Another case featured a Shakespeare beer mug (1933), Shakespeare playing cards (1974) and a Shakespeare action figure made in China (2003).

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Inside the Birthplace, I went from room to room with the other visitors. Guides regaled us with tales of Shakespeare's childhood — how he played and ate and dreamed in these rooms. Of course, his childhood is actually a yawning blank: From his baptism in 1564 to his marriage in 1582, there are no records of him. In one room, a table displayed books, quills and ink, indicating a family of learning — but his parents signed documents with a mark, like many illiterate people in Tudor England.

The other visitors murmured to one another in reverent museum whispers and nodded at the guides. I thought of how, in the late 19th century, a Birthplace custodian named Joseph Skipsey resigned his post after a few months, explaining that “not a single one of the many so-called relics on exhibition could be proved to be Shakspeare's” and that “the Birthplace itself is a matter of grave doubt.”

Image



Stratford-upon-Avon abounds with Elizabethan kitsch, like a Shakespeare bust in the window of one liquor store and a “Hamlet”-inspired sign for an ice cream seller.

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Andy Haslam for The New York Times

The power of popular faith

Efforts to preserve the property as the official Birthplace began in 1847, when it was put up for sale. In response to fears that [P.T. Barnum was going to buy it](#) and make it part of a show, a committee was formed to “save” the house for the nation, and the group began to solicit donations.

Not everyone was convinced. “The extraordinary sensation caused by the purchase of this shabby sausage-shop deserves a prominent place amongst popular delusions,” declared the 1848 Bentley’s Miscellany article. A writer for another British periodical mocked the gullibility of a nation pouring forth funds to buy a “rubbishing mass of lath and plaster in which the Poet was no more born than was the Man in the Moon himself.”

But the belief had already become an article of faith, strengthened by its own repetition. The Birthplace was a better shrine for the very absence of evidence — for the faith it required of its visitors — the publisher [Charles Knight](#) wrote at the time. That same year, the committee secured the Birthplace at auction for 3,000 pounds, [worth about \\$323,000 today](#).

Image



Henley Street, one place in Stratford-upon-Avon where Shakespeare's father owned property. The Birthplace, which now looks like a single detached home, was a row of tenements in the mid-1500s.

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Andy Haslam for The New York Times

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The “shabby sausage-shop” made an uninspiring temple. So the adjoining premises were demolished, walls moved, floorboards replaced, new doorways and staircases created. Its new stewards transformed it into the large, comfortable home of a prosperous Elizabethan family, leaving the cellar as “the only portion which remains as it was,” as the scholar [Sidney Lee](#) wrote in 1901. What emerged was less a Tudor dwelling than a Victorian imagination of one.

The committee became the [Shakespeare Birthplace Trust](#), the group that still runs the site, and maintains its authenticity. “We know that, to the best of our current understanding, the building includes the surviving fabric of a property that is traditionally and intimately associated with Shakespeare and his family,” said a spokesman for the trust.

The trust went on to acquire more properties, including Anne Hathaway's Cottage, a thatched farmhouse where visitors are invited to "relive Shakespeare's love story."

Image



The property known as Anne Hathaway's Cottage, where visitors can "relive Shakespeare's love story." Records link the cottage to the Hathaways, but there is no proof that Anne grew up there.

Credit...

Andy Haslam for The New York Times

A temple to baby Shakespeare

"This is the room where we believe William Shakespeare was born in April 1564," read a sign in the Birthroom. Next to the bed stood a cradle laid out with blankets and a tiny pillow, encouraging visitors to imagine the baby genius mewling by his parents' side. For the Victorians, the Birthroom offered the mystical possibility of contact with the poet. Visitors recorded melodramatic accounts of what they felt on entering the room: They burst into tears. They fell down. They kissed the floor. Those desiring a more extended communion spent the night.

Others were unimpressed. "If I were to allude to Stratford, it would not be in connection with the fact that Shakespeare came into the world there," wrote the novelist [Henry James](#) after visiting. "It would be rather to speak of a delightful old house near the Avon which struck me as the ideal home for a Shakespearean scholar."

But the fantasy is resilient. In a 2023 PBS documentary, “[Making Shakespeare: The First Folio](#),” the scholar Michael Dobson, director of the Shakespeare Institute, stood in the Birthplace, gushing over “the very room in which Shakespeare was born.”

I shuffled around the cradle with the other visitors, unsure of what to do. Were we supposed to genuflect? Kiss it? After an appropriate amount of staring, we moved on.

Image



Refrigerator magnets for sale in Stratford-upon-Avon. In 2019, before the pandemic, tourism was worth about \$315 million to the town.

Credit...

Andy Haslam for The New York Times

To exit, I had to pass through the gift shop, where any lingering sense of piety dissipated in a tidal wave of consumerism. Visitors were loading up on Shakespeare T-shirts, breakfast teas and tea towels. Shakespeare rubber ducks and windup toys. Shakespeare Christmas ornaments, baby onesies, tote bags and luxury chocolates. Belief is good business.

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When I returned to Stratford last February, little had changed since my first visit. The Shakespeare Centre was now showing modern artists' interpretations of the poet, including a [Surrealist painting](#) of a masked figure that suggested the mystery surrounding him. The trinket stands were still hawking their modern versions of those 18th-century mulberry tree carvings. Faith in the traditions is bound up with desire — the need to believe.

Where was “the Immortal Shakspeare” really born? Stories are usually more seductive than the truth.