

Holy Trinity and the Shakespeare Birthday Celebrations

The Garrick Jubilee 1769

It was during David Garrick's ill-fated Jubilee Celebrations, 6 to 8 September, 1769, that Shakespeare's monument and grave were decorated with wreaths and flowers for the very first time, though the planned extravagant pageant and most of the rest of the event was a literal wash-out, with illustrious guests trying to flee home in carriages on water-logged highways.

By contrast, on the first morning, the floral tribute at Holy Trinity was a great and enduring success: 'they found his monumental Bust decorated with laurels, a wreath encircling his brows, and festoons suspended from the pillars: and at the head of his gravestone some pious hand had placed a garland of flowers, evergreens', all said to be the work of Mrs. Garrick and other ladies. (SCLA ER1/82, fol.37)

The Shakespeare Club of Stratford-upon-Avon, Founded 1824

By 1834, the Club had around four hundred members, including the majority of the respectable residents of Stratford and the surrounding area.

At its 10th anniversary dinner, the speakers issued a challenge to their fellow members to take action to preserve the town's Shakespeare relics, particularly the Holy Trinity memorials, thus defending the Bard's memory. Mr. T.S. Serle, speaking first, claimed that: 'Thus too would the Shakespearean Club acquire a still higher title to esteem by exhibiting a religious care for the remains of him who, born in their town, and brought up among their forefathers, became the wonder of the world'.

Dr. John Connolly then addressed the company, exhorting it to take on the responsibility of repairing the damage to, and preventing further deterioration of, Stratford's Shakespearean buildings. In response, The Shakespearean Monumental Committee was set up, with Connolly as its Chairman, in co-operation with a London committee, founded by antiquarian John Britton, who had long taken an interest in the Holy Trinity Shakespeare Mausoleum.

The aim was to raise money for improvements to Holy Trinity church; the Vicar, Rev. Dr. James Davenport, and other town worthies served on the Stratford committee, which also included Shakespeare Club members. During the 1836 Birthday celebrations, Britton displayed designs by the architect, Harvey Eginton, to the whole Club in the old theatre on Chapel Lane, but the work wasn't completed on schedule in time for the following Birthday. Nevertheless, Club members formally processed to the church in April 1837 to inspect the improvements in progress, and the project was deemed a great success. Britton's final verdict was that 'the preservation of the Shakespeare Mausoleum was not only secured, but it has been rendered beautiful to the eye'. (See engraving p.2)



Chancel of the Parish Church of Stratford upon Avon
(The Mausoleum of Shakespeare)

Shewing the New Timber Roof Designed by Harvey Eginton, Architect, & executed under the direction of the Committee of the Royal Shakespeare Club, To whom this Engraving is dedicated by THE ARCHITECT

London, Published by J Britton, Burton Street, Nov. 1, 1837

The Shakespeare Birthday Procession

In the Shakespeare Club's early years the Birthday processions it organised were elaborate and magnificent, with the route encompassing most of the town, including Old Town; in 1827 for example, the event took 3 hours to complete, passing Holy Trinity, but at that stage a pilgrimage to the grave wasn't on its itinerary.

By the 1850s the Club's energies and limited finances were focused on attempting to address the run-down condition of the Birthplace, which had been purchased in 1847 by the joint Stratford and London Committees set up for the purpose. The organisation of the Birthday celebrations was thus devolved to local residents and shopkeepers, but by 1853 the town's neglect of this obligation was painfully evident.

In 1853, this regrettable state of affairs prompted a large contingent of Bardolators from Birmingham to make a 20-mile pilgrimage in a fleet of omnibuses to celebrate the Birthday. They were ignored by the Shakespeare Club and antagonised Stratfordians by delivering an oration in front of the Birthplace, 'properly rebuking the apathy of the townspeople'. At Holy Trinity, they were refused admission *en-masse* and complained that they had to pay to visit the grave; they proceeded to fill the rest of their day with concerts and a celebratory dinner. To Stratford's chagrin, the Birmingham invasion made national headlines in the *Illustrated London News*.

In 1904, the decoration of Shakespeare's grave in the chancel was adopted by the Club as part of the procession, following the recent custom of the Stratford schools to walk through the town to lay flowers there. Many hundreds took up the Club's invitation to join the procession, the *Birmingham Daily Post* (25 April, 1904) reporting that the crowds consisted of 'all sorts and conditions of men and women'. They were rewarded by being entertained in the afternoon by the Bidford Morris Dancers.



SHAKESPEARE'S BIRTHDAY
1904.

**DECORATION
OF SHAKESPEARE'S TOMB.**

It is requested that all Visitors and Townspeople wishing to attend this Ceremony on Saturday morning next should meet at the Corn Exchange and join the Members of the Shakespeare Club who will leave the Town Hall at 11.45. The Procession will not be re-formed after the Ceremony.

All attending are requested to **BRING FLOWERS.**

The **TOWN BAND** will play in New Place Gardens at 2.30 p.m., and at intervals during the afternoon. Admission free.

A TROUPE OF
MORRIS DANCERS
will perform throughout the day, as follows:-

Hosley Street	10 a.m.	Market Cross	2 p.m.
Town Hall	11 a.m.	Booths Market	3.00 p.m.
Old Town	12.30 p.m.	Redapost	6.30 p.m.

G. R. BIRD, President Shakespeare Club

Images courtesy of Susan Brock & Sylvia Morris: *The Story of the Shakespeare Club of Stratford-upon-Avon*, 2016

For the first time in 1907, the Birthday Procession started from the Birthplace in Henley Street, instead of the Town Hall, following the cradle-to-grave route to Holy Trinity that it continued to take until 2016.

The Shakespeare Club Wreath

In 1956, one of the Club's Vice Presidents provided a permanent laurel wreath, to be placed on Shakespeare's Grave on behalf of the Club. Despite vigorous protests, from 1961 onwards, the Club's wreath has been removed after the Birthday celebrations, along with all the other floral tributes from around the world. Nevertheless, each year the Club's wreath has been carried to the church in the procession and placed among all the others.



Floral tributes on Shakespeare's grave and monument

(With thanks for information about the history of the Shakespeare Club to Susan Brock & Sylvia Morris: *The Story of the Shakespeare Club of Stratford-upon-Avon, 1824-2016* (Stratford: The Shakespeare Club of Stratford-upon-Avon, 2016)