

## Shakespeare and Holy Trinity Church

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### The Avenue

The principal path from the Old Town gate to the North Porth is lined with lime trees, twelve on the left (river side) representing the twelve tribes of Israel and twelve on the right representing the twelve apostles. One of the trees on the right is set back to represent the casting out of Judas. There is a constant precipitation of fine twigs from the trees onto the paths and lawns.

Comb down his hair;  
Look, look! it stands upright  
Like lime-twigs set to catch my wingèd soul!

– *Henry VI Part 2* III.iii.16

Shakespeare's cousin, Thomas Greene, and his family lived with Anne Shakespeare in New Place until 1611 when Shakespeare returned from London to live full-time in Stratford. Greene then moved to St. Mary's House, by the entrance to the churchyard.



*STRATFORD-ON-AVON – THE CHURCH AVENUE.*

*Entrance gates and avenue to North Porth. The entrance to St. Mary's House was on the left (Richard Tyler, photographer, postcard posted in 1908).*

## Churchyard

The churchyard covers an area of about 2 acres. In Shakespeare's time it was actively used for burials, and would have been very busy at times when the plague was active. Somewhere are the graves of Hamnet and Judith, Shakespeare's twins, but their records in the burial registers are missing.

Thither come,  
And let my grave-stone be your oracle.

– *Timon of Athens* V.i.222

There are numerous yew trees growing throughout the churchyard, some of them ancient. Several there now may well have been there also in Shakespeare's time. Yews are traditionally associated with death and with purification of graveyards. They were also encouraged after the Conquest to provide a source of wood for making bows and were grown in enclosed churchyards because they were poisonous to cattle.

Thy very beadsmen learn to bend their bows  
Of double-fatal yew against thy state;

– *Richard the Second* III.ii.117



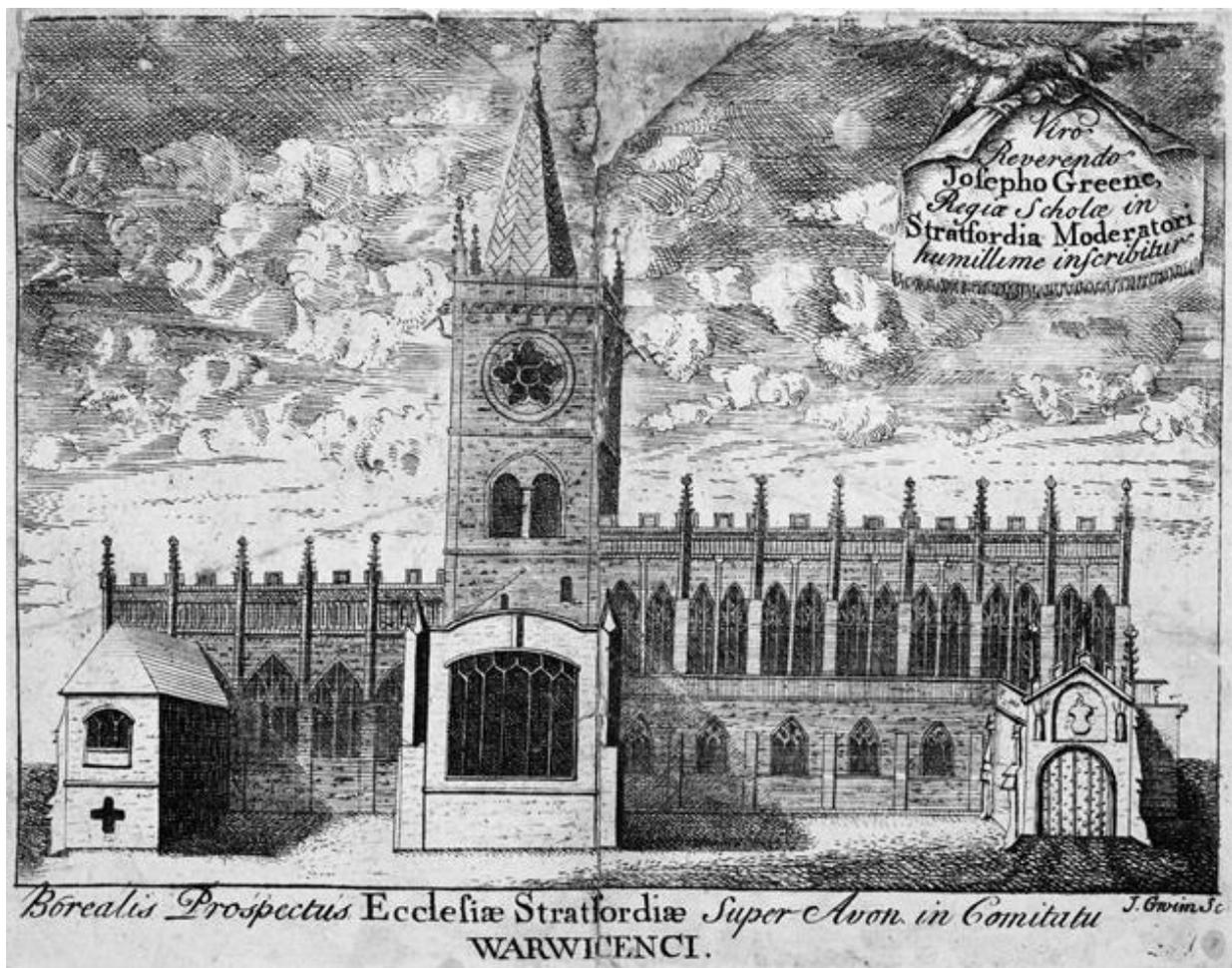
*Yews to the north of the church. The 18<sup>th</sup> Century gravestone against the tree on the left can be imagined as the door into a fairy house.*

## Charnel House

To the north of the chancel in Shakespeare's time was an ancient building, believed to be the last remnant of the earlier Norman church on the same site, perhaps the Chapter House. The upper room was used as the vicar's study, and the lower chamber was a 'bone house' for the storage of bones removed from graves when they were re-used. It was demolished in 1799.

Or shut me nightly in a charnel house,  
O'ercovered quite with dead men's rattling bones,  
With reeky shanks and yellow chapless skulls;

– *Romeo and Juliet* IV.i.77



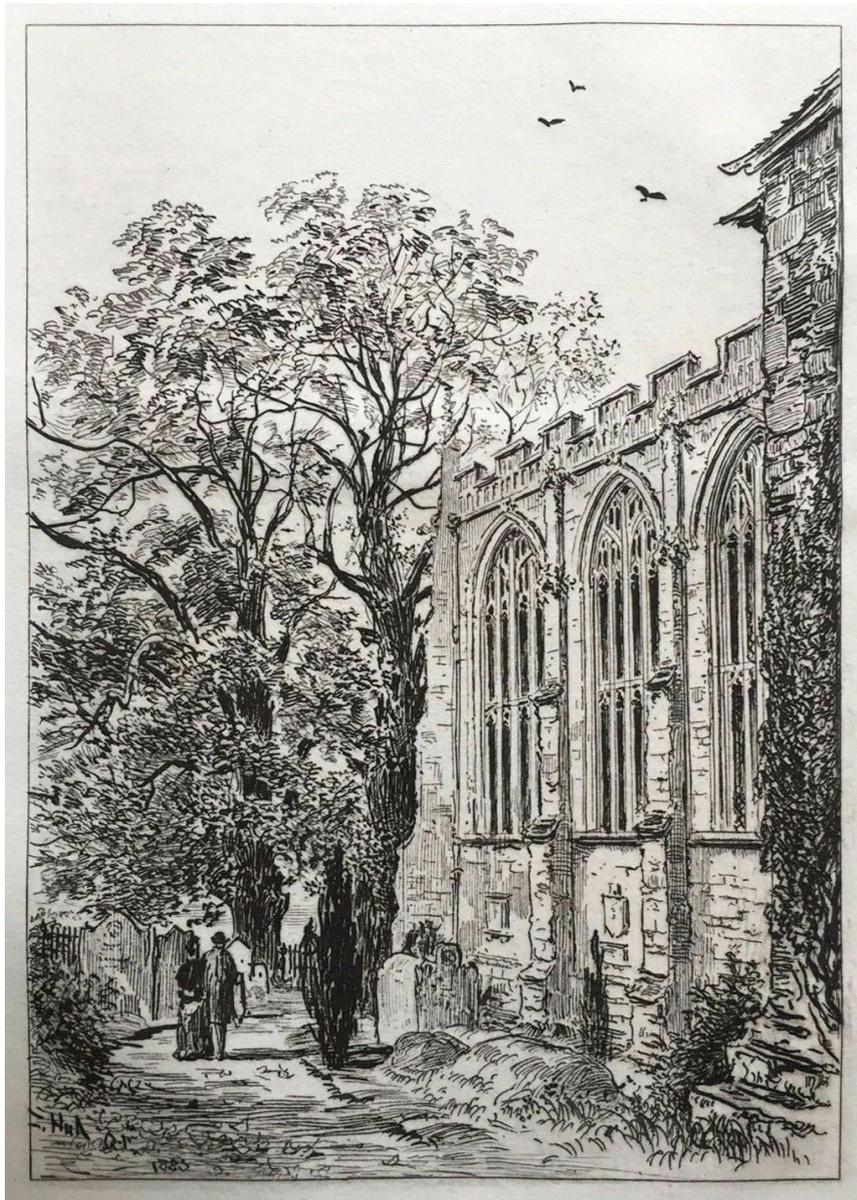
Engraving of northern view of Holy Trinity Church c.1750 by Joseph Greene, showing the charnel house jutting out from the chancel. Also shown is the original squat spire, a wooden framework with lead tiles, replaced in 1763.

## Pathways

A network of paths runs through the churchyard and around the building, connecting all four gates. During the day there are fine views through the foliage to the river and the church, but evening gathers and transforms the shadows and gravestones and dark shapes of the yews to create a ghostly effect.

Now it is the time of night  
That the graves, all gaping wide,  
Every one lets forth its sprite,  
In the churchway paths to glide.

– *A Midsummer Night's Dream* V.ii.9

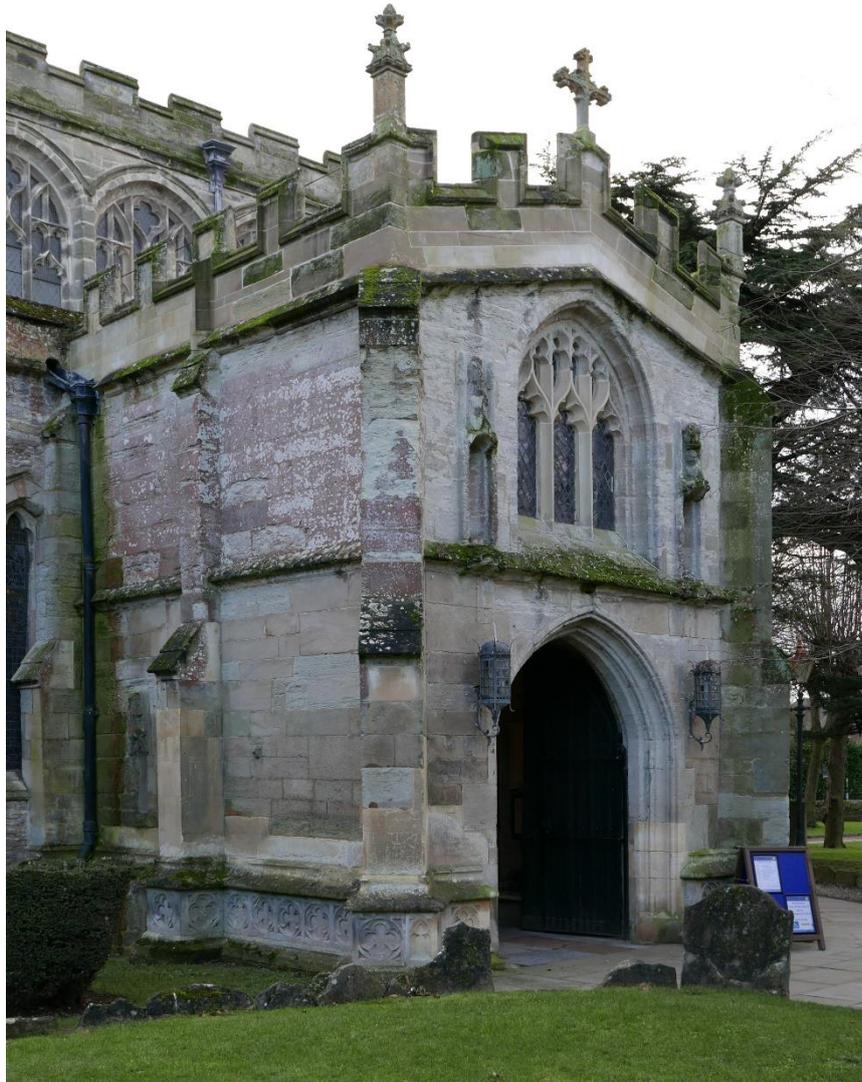


*Path around east side of chancel, Edward Hull (1885)*

### **Porch and Muniment Room**

At the end of the avenue is the north porch, the usual entrance to the church. It was constructed in about 1500 as part of the works for rebuilding the nave. In the centre of the porch ceiling is a stone boss depicting Christ in majesty, which was defaced during the Reformation. The porch served not only as a shelter from the weather but also as a meeting place, for business transactions and for teaching catechism to children. The room above was used for storing church records (muniments) and was probably also the venue for the 'bawdy court', chaired by the vicar.

In peace permit  
Our just and lineal entrance to our own;  
– *King John* II.i.85



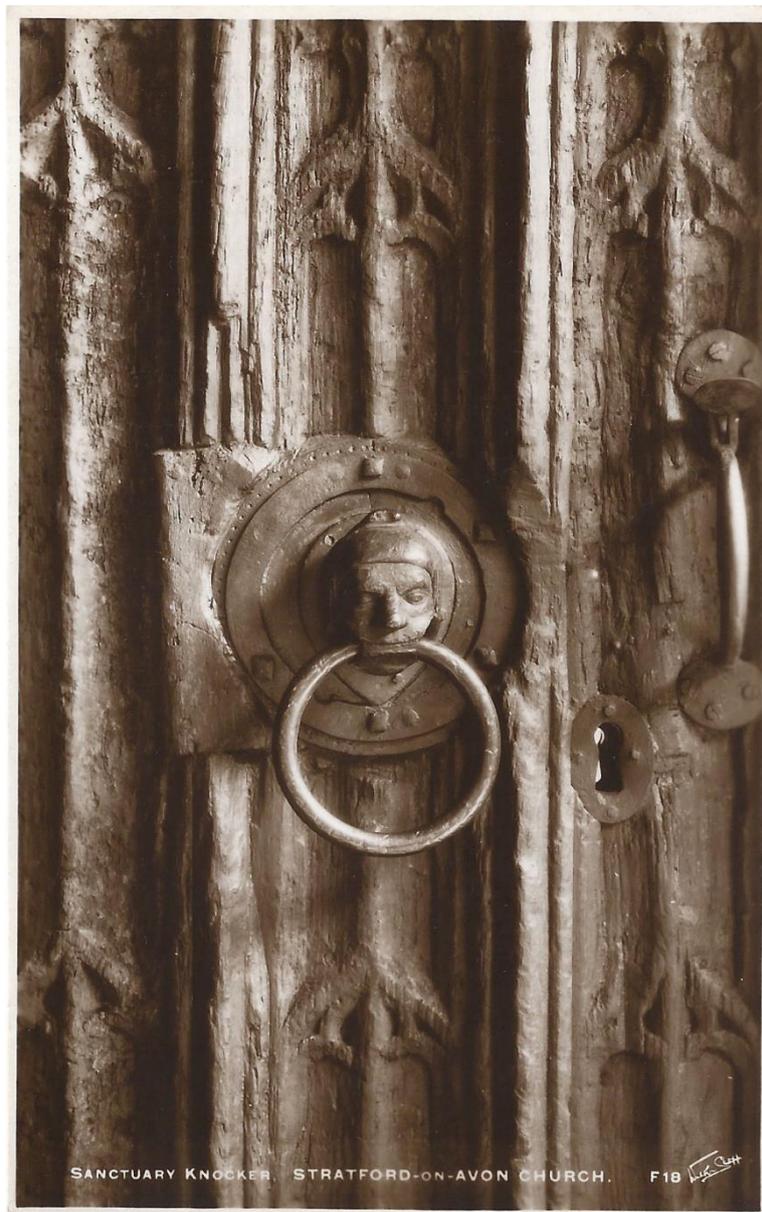
*North porch with muniment room above*

## Sanctuary Knocker

On the inner door of the porch is an ancient knocker and handle, which Shakespeare must often have seen and touched. It would serve for that on the abbey gate in *The Comedy of Errors*. Under medieval English common law, anybody who touched it was immune from arrest and entitled to 37 days asylum within the church. The laws permitting church sanctuary were overturned by parliament in 1623.

Go thou to sanctuary,  
And good thoughts possess thee!

– *Richard the Third* IV.i.94



*The sanctuary knocker, postcard published c.1930  
by Walter Scott, Bradford.*

## Windows

All of the stained glass windows in the lower level of the nave and chancel were smashed by iconoclasts after the Reformation and for three centuries they were glazed with clear glass, until the present windows were installed in Victorian taste. A few fragments of the ancient glass remain jumbled in the upper part of the window in the Clopton Chapel and in the top lights of the south-east corner of the chancel, but it is unclear whether these were on display in Shakespeare's day.

The grand windows of the clerestory were erected above the nave in around 1500. The space above each of the six nave arches on each side is divided into two bays, each containing a window of three lights. In total there are 24 large windows admitting light, giving the nave a wonderful bright and atmospheric feeling. Shafts of sunlight enter on the south side, with a yellowish tinge, and reflected skylight on the north side, with a bluish tinge. The glass is the original medieval material, cut in the regular quarry (diamond-shaped) pattern and has never been changed, so we see it now exactly as Shakespeare would have done.

But, soft! What light through yonder window breaks?

– *Romeo and Juliet* II.ii.2



*Light entering the nave through the large clerestory windows is bluish on the north side (left) and yellowish on the south side (right).*

## Chancel

The chancel is the glory of the church building, like a glimpse of heaven. It was built in around 1480 by Thomas Balsall, Dean of the College, and replaced a smaller quire of the earlier church. Following the Reformation, however, the high altar was removed and the Chancel was closed off and sat unused. By 1593 it was in a bad state, and the Corporation appealed to Lord Burley, Chancellor of England, to compel the tithe-holders, of whom Shakespeare was one, to put it into repair. It was not until after Shakespeare had been buried and his monument erected on the north wall, however, that the chancel was made “less unworthy of its illustrious dead” as Fripp put it.

This grave shall have a living monument.  
An hour of quiet shortly shall we see;  
Till then in patience our proceeding be.

– *Hamlet* V.i.291



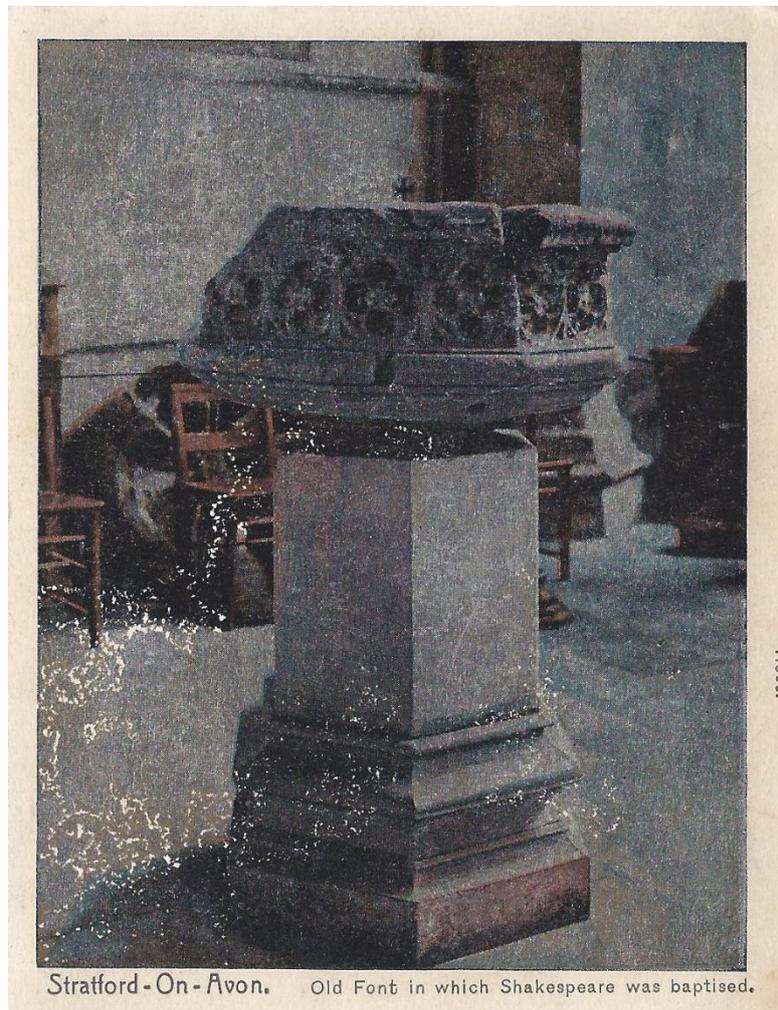
*Hand-coloured Edwardian postcard of the chancel, c.1910 (Tuck's Oilette)*

## Old font

The old Norman font is the one in which Shakespeare would have been baptised. It was smashed by Parliamentary troops during the English Civil War (1642-46), and replaced in 1747 by a blue marble font of classical design (now in the Guild Chapel). The broken basin of the old font was taken to the house of the parish clerk in Church Street and served there in the garden as a water cistern until rescued by the antiquarian Captain Saunders in 1823. Finally it was returned to the church in 1861 where it has been on display ever since. The current baptismal font at the western end of the nave is a Victorian copy of the original.

I have no name, no title,  
No, not that name was given me at the font,  
But 'tis usurp'd. Alack the heavy day,  
That I have worn so many winters out  
And know not now what name to call myself!

– *Richard the Second* IV.i.255



*The old font in which Shakespeare was baptised, depicted in a rare postcard c.1915 (Charles Voisey, London)*

## Misericords

The misericords are the original seats fitted in the chancel during Balsall's rebuilding in 1480. The name misericord is derived from the Latin *miserere* which means 'mercy'. Priests used to have to stand for almost all services in the chancel throughout each day. The misericord meant that the elderly or infirm could rest on the small seat at the top edge of the upturned main seat while appearing still to stand. There are three elements to each design with a central carving showing the main theme, flanked by two supporters.

One of the misericord designs shows a two-humped (Bactrian) camel, which Shakespeare would have seen as a boy. He mentions camels in *Richard II*, *Hamlet*, *Coriolanus*, and *Troilus and Cressida*.

Do you see yonder cloud that's almost in shape of a camel?

– By the mass, and 'tis like a camel, indeed

– *Hamlet* III.ii.394



*Carving on underside of oak misericord seat showing a two-humped camel flanked by two horned wyverns. The camel symbolises temperance (it can go for long periods without drinking) while the palm tree and leaves represent righteousness and resurrection.*

## Rood Screen

The medieval rood screen in Holy Trinity church, was across the eastern end of the nave, i.e. the western arch of the crossing. A doorway from the tower stair gave access onto the walkway across the top of the screen. The structure was moved at the Reformation from its original position to the eastern arch of the crossing to form a barrier to the chancel which was no longer used and fell into disrepair. Shakespeare's body would have been carried through the doors of this screen when he was buried in 1616.

In 1835, as part of the Victorian restoration of the chancel, the old rood screen was relocated to the middle of the north transept, at the edge of the lancet window with St Elizabeth. It remained there until the 1960s when it was moved forward to its present location across the northern arch.

Have you forgot me?  
No, by the rood, not so.

– *Hamlet* III.iv.14



*Drawing by Captain Saunders of the chancel in 1809, showing the old rood screen fitted across the arch. Note the plaster ceiling and plain glass windows.*

## Clopton Chapel

In medieval times the eastern end of the north aisle housed the Lady Chapel, but the Reformation caused it to be entirely dismantled in around 1540. During Shakespeare's early life little would have remained of the splendid altar, statues and images of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The one enduring monument was the altar tomb built for Hugh Clopton, which remained empty because he had died and been buried in London. This tomb with its elaborate parclose screen fills the easternmost arch in the nave arcade. The Shakespeare family pew was located close to this on the northern side of the nave.

In 1596, when Shakespeare was 32, the tomb of William and Anne Clopton was constructed against the north wall, with a panel on the wall above showing effigies of their seven children. The grand Carew monument against the east wall was not erected until 1637.

If a man do not erect in this age his own tomb ere he dies,  
He shall live no longer in monument than the bell rings and the widow weeps.

– *Much Ado about Nothing* V.ii.68



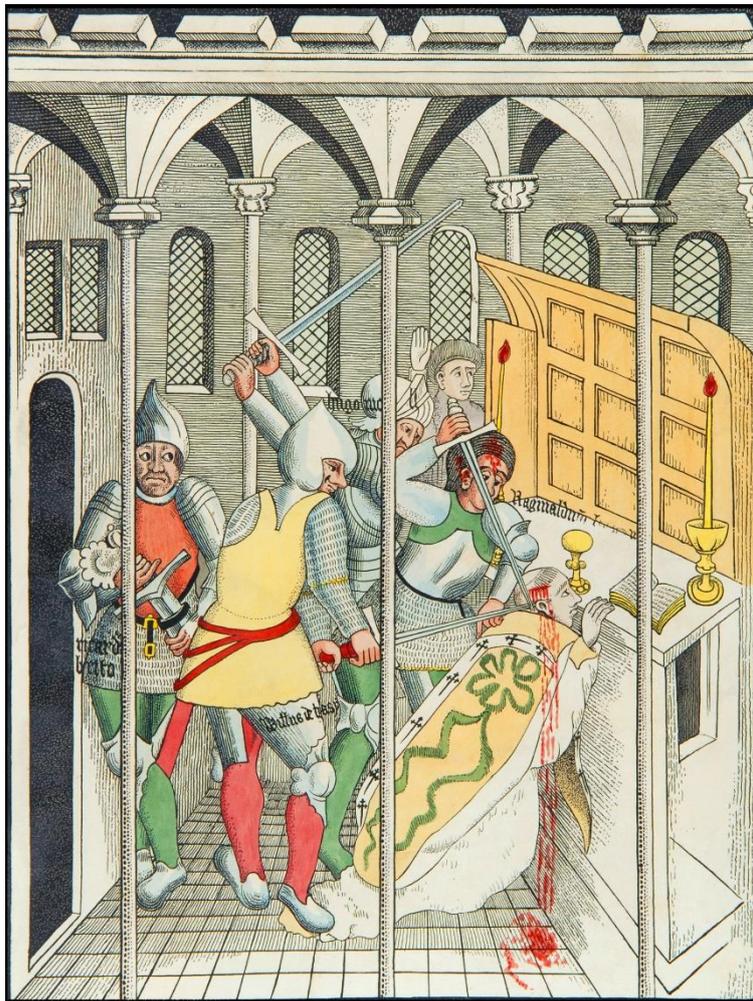
*Clopton Chapel, formerly the Lady Chapel, with monuments of William and Anne Clopton on the left and of Hugh Clopton on the right.*

## Becket Chapel

The chantry chapel dedicated to St Thomas Becket was founded in 1331 by Archbishop John de Stratford. It was located at the eastern end of the South Aisle, and serviced by priests who lived in the College neighbouring the Church. It became rich from the offerings of large numbers of pilgrims who came from all over the country. St Thomas was defamed by order of Henry VIII in 1538, and the chapel was demolished by order of Edward VI in the Chantries Act of 1547. By Shakespeare's time nothing remained but memories.

We'll set thy statue in some holy place,  
And have thee revered like a holy saint.

– *Henry the Sixth, Part One* III.iii.15



*The drawing by Thomas Fisher (1806) of the wall painting (c.1490) in the Guild Chapel depicting the martyrdom of St Thomas Becket. The altar at which Thomas is kneeling is believed to have been based on the altar in the Becket chapel in Holy Trinity.*

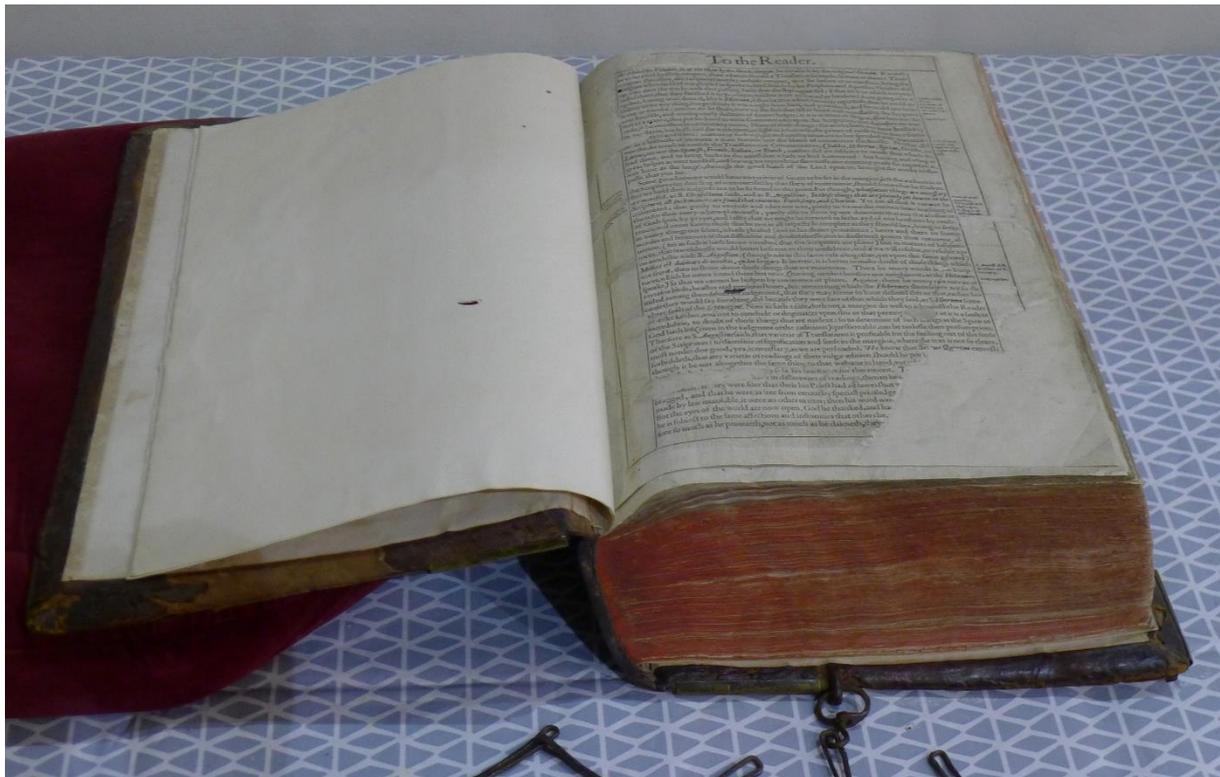
## King James Bible

In a mahogany case in the chancel is a King James Bible, the second printing from 1613 (known as the 'she' Bible). A brass plate on the cover says that the book was rebound in 1695, but was it the original or was it a replacement for an original that had been lost? The church tradition is that it is the very book from which Shakespeare might not only have heard the scriptures read in church, but might himself have read, if indeed he ever read anything out aloud in the church. The best we can say is that the book was probably there in the church during the period 1613–16, coinciding with the last years of Shakespeare's life when he was living at New Place.

In his writing, Shakespeare quoted mainly from the protestant Geneva Bible (1560) and sometimes from the anglican Bishops Bible (1568).

But then I sigh;  
And, with a piece of scripture,  
Tell them that God bids us do good for evil.

– *Richard the Third* I.iii.334



*King James Bible with old iron chain attached, showing damaged first page 'To The Reader'.*

## Tower and Belfry

The tower was heightened in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century and in 1558 a set of five bells was installed, brought from Hales Abbey. During the Civil War in the 1640s the bells were removed by Parliamentary troops for making armaments, and a new set of ten bells was installed in 1683. They can be heard throughout Old Town and as far as New Place, a distance of 400 metres (in a straight line) from the Church.

If ever you have look'd on better days,  
If ever been where bells have knolled to church, ...  
Let gentleness my strong enforcement be;

– *As You Like It* II.vii.114



*The bell-ringing chamber in the tower, accessed by the spiral staircase near the organ.*

## College

The College was built by Ralph de Stratford in 1352 to house the priests who served in the chantry chapel to St Thomas Becket. For nearly 450 years it was the largest house in Stratford, until it was demolished in 1799. After the dissolution of chantries in 1547, the College building passed into private hands. At some point it was leased to the Combe family and Thomas Combe was its resident. Both Thomas and his brother John were friends of William Shakespeare, both left him money in their wills and Shakespeare bequeathed his sword to Thomas's son (also Thomas) in 1616.

When our most learned doctors leave us,  
And the congregated college have concluded  
That labouring art can never ransom nature  
From her inaidable estate.

– *All's Well that Ends Well* II.i.115



*The College stood facing the church, where Trinity Close is now located between the Methodist Church and the Parish Centre (engraving in Gent Magazine, 1809).*