

TO BE OR NOT TO BE REMEMBERED: COMMEMORATING THE BARD OF STRATFORD

Chris Upton

William Shakespeare (1564–1616) is today universally acknowledged as among the greatest exponents of the English language and perhaps the finest dramatist of all time. Yet the man from Stratford-upon-Avon has had his downs as well as his ups.



Mixed Views

In the first half of the eighteenth century opinions were considerably more mixed than they are currently as to the quality of Shakespeare's writing. Classically trained critics reprimanded him for ignoring the 'Aristotelian Unities' of time and place, and for introducing buffoonery and tavern humour into the serious domain of history and tragedy. Even Samuel Johnson (1709–1784), more of an admirer than most of his era, regretted that the bard's treasure-house was 'clouded by incrustations, debased by impurities and mingled with a mass of meaner minerals'.

In his home town too Shakespeare was having his setbacks. In 1756 the Reverend Francis Gastrell, owner of New Place – the house in which the playwright had breathed his last – tired of the procession of tourists knocking on his door and chopped down the famous mulberry tree said to have been planted by the bard. Three years later he demolished the house as well.

One Champion

One man, however, continued to champion the bard's cause with an enthusiasm close to idolatry. This was David Garrick (1717–1779), native of Lichfield, friend of Johnson, actor, theatrical impresario, poet and playwright. If the eighteenth century believed in reincarnation, then William Shakespeare lived and breathed in Garrick. The actor's performance of Richard III in 1741 could be said to have been one of the first steps in Shakespeare's rehabilitation.

It was to David Garrick, then, that the corporation of Stratford-upon-Avon turned in 1769 to organise a show. The occasion was not the 200th anniversary of Shakespeare's birth – they had missed that opportunity – but to celebrate the rebuilding of Stratford's town hall. Garrick presented a statue of Shakespeare for the façade of the new hall, and the corporation returned the compliment with the freedom of the borough in a richly carved casket, made from the very tree that the Reverend Gastrell had cast down. How could Garrick refuse?

David Garrick with a Bust of Shakespeare, after Thomas Gainsborough RA. Destroyed by fire in the 1940s, the original was sold to the Corporation of Stratford for the Shakespeare Jubilee. This copy hangs at Charlecote Park in Warwickshire, www.nationaltrust.org.uk/charlecote-park

A Radical Proposition

Arts festivals have become an unavoidable feature of our time, and every village and city has a procession of them. Not so in eighteenth-century England. The idea of a festival devoted to a writer, pulling in the visitors and promoting the place, was radical indeed, especially in a sleepy Warwickshire town of fewer than 3,000 people.

Yet the timing was spot on: the festival was planned for September, when the London playhouses were closed for the summer and the provinces were able to spread their artistic wings. The country's educated elite too would be looking for a fix of culture during the capital's dry season.

Garrick's festival occupied the first weekend in September 1769. The programme he designed included a procession of Shakespearean characters, a performance of his specially commissioned 'Ode to Shakespear', with music by Thomas Arne (1710–1778), and the inevitable firework display. For indoor entertainment (and the balls and dances to follow) an octagonal wooden rotunda was constructed on the bank of the Avon. Perhaps the most curious feature of the Jubilee was the fact that not a single line of the bard's work was to be spoken, and none of his plays performed!

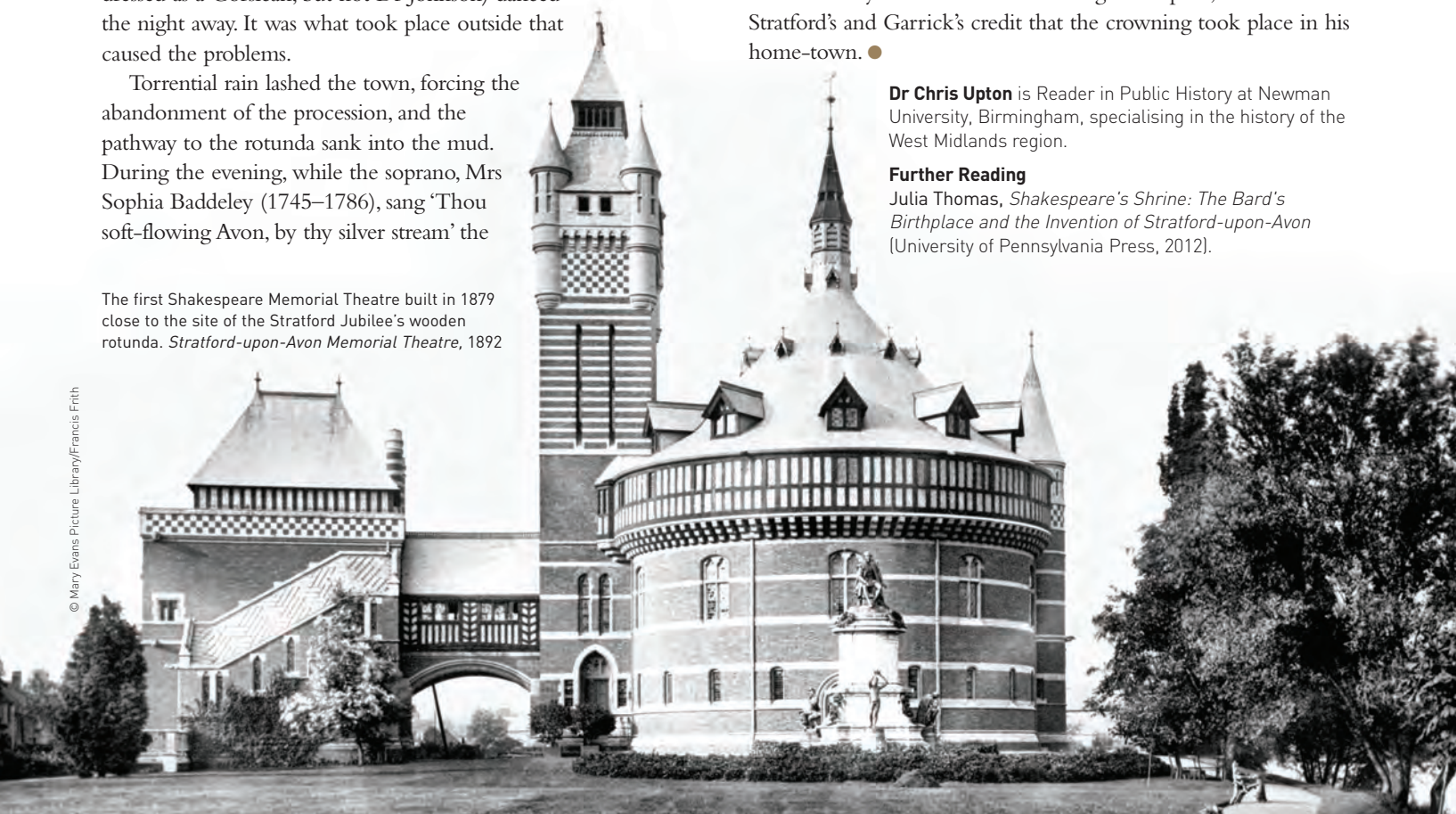
A Typical English Day ...

What went on in the rotunda passed off swimmingly (in more ways than one): Garrick's Ode almost literally brought the house down, a 327-pound turtle was consumed with evident pleasure, and the costumed revellers (including James Boswell (1740–1795), dressed as a Corsican, but not Dr Johnson) danced the night away. It was what took place outside that caused the problems.

Torrential rain lashed the town, forcing the abandonment of the procession, and the pathway to the rotunda sank into the mud. During the evening, while the soprano, Mrs Sophia Baddeley (1745–1786), sang 'Thou soft-flowing Avon, by thy silver stream' the

The first Shakespeare Memorial Theatre built in 1879 close to the site of the Stratford Jubilee's wooden rotunda. *Stratford-upon-Avon Memorial Theatre, 1892*

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river itself drew a little closer to hear its praises sung. By midnight, long before the ball was due to finish, the whole building was under several inches of water. But the more intrepid dancers waltzed on, departing at six in the morning along planks stretched from the rotunda to their waiting carriages. Not many braved the deluge on the following day to watch the Jubilee Sweepstakes on the now submerged Shutterly meadows.

The unfortunate weather gave Englishmen a-bed in the capital plenty of ammunition with which to shoot down this piece of 'provincial' excess, and to be glad they were not there. One cynical London critic catalogued its faults thus:

...an ode without poetry, music without melody, dinners without victuals, and lodgings without beds; a masquerade where half the people appear bare-faced; a horse-race, up to the knees in water, fireworks extinguished as soon as they are lighted, and a gingerbread amphitheatre, which, like a house of cards, tumbled to pieces as soon as it was finished.

... with Long-lasting Consequences

But the long-term significance of the festival could not be so easily dismissed. Garrick took his rained-off pageant, along with the Ode, to Drury Lane, where it ran for 153 triumphant performances. Similar celebrations soon began to be staged elsewhere in the capital, and souvenirs of mulberry wood began to flood the market: bardolatry was suddenly in vogue.

A further century after the Jubilee, and near to the site of the ill-fated rotunda, a memorial theatre arose for the permanent staging of the bard's plays. In September 1769 Shakespeare had been officially installed as the nation's greatest poet, and it was to Stratford's and Garrick's credit that the crowning took place in his home-town. ●

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Further Reading

Julia Thomas, *Shakespeare's Shrine: The Bard's Birthplace and the Invention of Stratford-upon-Avon* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).