



## **The Shakespeare Birthplace Trust**

### **Mary Arden and Mary Arden's House**

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#### **1. Some background information**

We know that Robert Arden, Mary Arden's father, was already a person of some substance when he paid 6s 8d to join the Stratford Guild in 1517. He was then probably already married and fathering his large family. In all he had eight daughters of whom four were married by 1550 when he drew up deeds settling property on them. He made his will and died at the end of 1556, leaving money and holdings in Wilmcote to Mary Arden. Mary apparently married John Shakespeare of Stratford in the following year, 1557.

By contemporary standards, her age at marriage was young. Her last child was born in 1580 which would make a birth date before 1535 very unlikely. On the other hand, as we shall see, she was named as her father's executor in 1556, suggesting she was then at least seventeen. Her first recorded child was baptised in September 1558. All this points to a birthdate of around 1539-1543 and suggests that she was in the region of 18-22 on her marriage. In contrast to this, the age of first marriage for women in nearby rural Worcestershire has been found to fall generally between 22 and 29, and most usually at 25. But, as we shall see, Mary had lost both parents by 1556, and would have had little reason to remain in the family home, especially as she had inherited land and money to bring to a marriage.

We are concentrating here on her early life spent in 'Mary Arden's house', so we should think of her as a child in the early 1540s (contemporaries regarded the age of 7 as being an important stage in a child's development) and an adolescent around 1550. In 1550, when Robert Arden drew up the settlement deeds, she would have been a significant member of the household, but still too young to be included in her father's aim to provide for his daughters who were either married (Agnes, Joan, Katherine and Margaret) or contemplating marriage.

Another point that needs to be established is the status of Robert Arden and his daughter. We are quite clearly told in the deeds of 1550 that Robert Arden was a 'husbandman'. There were three ranks below the gentry in rural society. These were yeoman, husbandman and labourer. The distinction between the three was not clear-cut but generally reflected the quantity of land that they held, the amount of personal wealth that they possessed, and their relationship with other sections of society. Labourers had smallholdings less than 10 acres, and therefore needed to earn wages part-time. Husbandmen were self-sufficient in terms of their holding and their labour. In other words, they had enough land to feed themselves and their families and often to provide at least a modest surplus, and they would obtain the bulk of the labour that they needed from their own family with the help of a small amount of hired labour. A yeoman had a large enough holding of land, usually more than a hundred acres, the cultivation of which required a good deal of wage labour and from which he derived a large saleable surplus.

We cannot be sure exactly how much land Robert Arden held. He had a considerable property in Snitterfield, probably in the region of 80 acres, but this was rented out to tenants. This did not give him great social superiority - it was just convenient to let out more distant holdings. He also had freehold and copyhold land in Wilmcote. Our best guide to the amount of land he worked at Wilmcote comes from his inventory of 1556. At this late stage in his life he may have been reducing the scale of his cultivation. We are told how much wheat was sown in the fields and this suggests that he had in the autumn of 1556 planted about 20 acres. At that time in south Warwickshire more spring corn (barley, oats and peas) was grown than winter corn (wheat), so he was probably intending to plant another 30 acres in the spring. As well as the total of 50 sown acres he would have had at least another 20 acres lying fallow - that is, land resting in preparation for planting in the following year. So we can estimate that he had about 70 acres of arable land which would put him well above the average for the period, when many people still lived on a yardland of about 30 acres. Later evidence suggests that Mary may have brought with her an estate in Wilmcote of at least 86 acres, if not 120 acres. And of course he was gaining rent from his land at Snitterfield. His total holding, including both the land that he worked and that held by tenants, must therefore have been well over 100 acres. Other evidence suggests that he was wealthier than most husbandmen, but not as wealthy as many yeomen. In his earlier years, when he was assessed for the lay subsidy of 1524, his goods were valued for tax purposes (in reality they would

have been worth much more) at £10.00, while the normal range of assessments for husbandmen lay between £3.00 and £20.00. When he died his inventory of goods came to an impressive £77. 11s. 10d, which was a considerable sum for a husbandman whose probate value was often at this time below £30.00. Of the ten Stratford husbandmen whose inventories have survived between 1565 and 1604, only one had goods worth more than Robert Arden's.

Of the 141 husbandmen's inventories for neighbouring Oxfordshire, for the period 1550-90, only 14 list goods worth more than £30, with well over half less than £30. We must also remember that the second half of the 16th century was a period of inflation, and that Arden's goods would have carried a higher valuation at 1590 prices. But many yeomen had goods worth hundreds of pounds and the value of Arden's inventory was rather inflated in 1556 by a temporary sharp increase in the price of grain. Also, in 1538 Robert was playing a prominent role in the religious fraternity at Aston Cantlow, which would suggest that he was an important person in village society. We can conclude that Robert Arden, as a husbandman, was one of the better-off cultivators of his village and must have been very near to being rated as a yeoman. So he belongs at the upper end of society, but obviously did not belong in the top 2% or so who were ranked as gentry or aristocracy. One further way of indicating his social status is the fact that he apparently had a house of only three rooms - a hall, a chamber and a kitchen. This would have been normal in the 1550s for a husbandman, but many prosperous husbandmen and yeomen would have had 4 or 5 roomed houses.

## **2. Growing up in a husbandman's household**

The striking feature of Robert Arden's household was the large number of daughters. The average family consisted of only two or three children, so to have eight children surviving into their teens was a remarkable achievement. Presumably this reflects on the relative prosperity of the household, in which no-one need have gone hungry. It may mean that considerable care was taken of the children in infancy and childhood. Or it may simply be the result of chance. The normal family size of two or three of course represents the result of a much larger number of pregnancies to each mother, but with a very considerable loss of children through infant and child mortality. Mary Arden would not herself have suffered from life-threatening shortages of food, but her poorer neighbours would have experienced periods of deprivation because of high prices caused by poor harvests at times of bad weather. She also survived a number of epidemics; for example, an outbreak of plague in 1545, and of influenza in the late

1550s.

The births were sufficiently widely spaced to mean that Mary did not necessarily grow up in a very large household. Not only would her elder sisters have left to marry in their twenties, but it is also likely that some of them left home in their teens to become servants in other households. This very widespread custom of 'life cycle service' meant that children of all social groups commonly spent at least a few years in their late teens and early twenties serving in households other than that of their parents. This was of course most common among poorer people, who simply could not afford to keep their children at home. But it was also found among the gentry, who valued the education that the receiving household could provide - normally the children of a gentleman or an esquire would enter the household of a social superior where they would learn good manners and accomplishments. This might not have been so common in the household of a prosperous husbandman, but one could well see that so many children would have caused difficulties in terms of accommodation and social tensions, and it may well be that local yeomen, gentry and clergymen or the more prosperous people in towns like Stratford or Warwick might have taken on a daughter of this household as a servant.

A complicating factor is that by 1550, after the death of Mary's mother, Robert Arden married a widow, Agnes Hill from Bearley, who brought with her four young children. This would further have enlarged the household, and made it even more likely that Mary's remaining elder sisters would have moved elsewhere. We might imagine that Agnes's arrival would have caused a major domestic and emotional upheaval, but it was a commonplace event at the time. Marriages were often broken by early death, and widows and widowers usually remarried. It made practical sense for a widower to find a replacement partner to help with the running of the household and land. However normal such a remarriage, there must have been some tensions, and the deeds of 1550 show Robert promising to daughters who might fear a loss of their inheritance, that they would receive a share in the land after Agnes's death.

Mary then grew up in a household of constantly changing size. In her childhood the original large group of girls diminished as they left home for service or marriage. By the late 1540s there were only three left with their widowed father. Then the number of people greatly expanded with the arrival of Agnes and the step-brothers and sisters. In 1550 there may temporarily have been as many as ten people, an exceptionally large group to live in one house at a time. But no doubt again the older

children would have been leaving during the 1550s. We cannot imagine that such an overfilled household would have had room for any other relative, and indeed it was unusual for relatives other than parents and children to live together. However, unless Agnes's sons in their teens worked on the holding, Arden would have needed to hire a male servant or two, and others may have been accommodated from time to time as part of the 'life cycle service' referred to above.

So certainly in the 1520s, 30s and 40s, Arden would have employed one or two servants who would have lived in the household, so as to be available for full time farm work. They would usually be young, again in their late teens and early twenties, the sons of neighbours or people from nearby villages who would value both the wages that Arden would pay and the training that he could provide in the skills of cultivation. He would also have employed workers by the day, especially in the harvest, or other peak times. These day labourers would have been neighbours who held smallholdings or cottages.

The daughters would be expected to make an important contribution to the labour of the household both domestic and agricultural. In a husbandman's household, with no great surplus of cash available for paying wages, children would be expected to work from an early age. This is apparent from records which sometimes identify children as "son and servant" or "daughter and servant".

This working life supposes a household under some considerable discipline, and we would be right to think that Robert was a figure exercising authority in his mainly female family. One notices in the inventory that there were three chairs - it was common at an earlier period for there to be only one, for the head of the household. However, even with three, the daughters and servants would presumably have been seated on benches while the parents and an honoured guest enjoyed the comfort and status of sitting in a chair. One can paint a very bleak picture of an authoritarian rule, in which corporal punishment might be applied, and in which the daughters enjoyed little freedom. However, this would be a one-sided picture, because there is ample evidence from letters of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries of a degree of affection between fathers and children. The existence of firm discipline did not necessarily rule out a degree of warmth in relationships among the members of the family.

The household was an influential institution in sixteenth century society, because for

many people it was the main means of education and training. We are familiar with the idea of apprenticeship in towns, an institution by which young people would live in the household of a master craftsman or merchant and acquire the skills of the trade over a long period (often seven years or more). In a more informal way, the children and servants living in the household of a husbandman would be gaining a whole number of useful experiences. In the case of women, this would include learning about food preparation, household management and social skills.

How much of a disadvantage in life was Mary's gender? We recognise of course that this was a male-dominated society, in which in many ways women were excluded from important activities. Men filled almost all public offices and their superiority was assumed by the legal system. However, women did not lack the ability to take initiatives and to carry responsibility. In the countryside, women's labour was valued, and there was some degree of partnership between husbands and wives in the tenure of property and in the running of the holding. Their rights to property were respected because wives were guaranteed a proportion of the holding after the death of their husband, and it was not uncommon, as Robert did, for a father to make grants of land for his daughters either during his lifetime or through his will. The fact that Robert could make two of his daughters his executors is a good example of the trust that men could place in women, and the women's ability to perform demanding tasks involving some financial and legal knowledge.

Perhaps the most important decision made by a young person was to leave home and to marry. Such a step was not taken lightly or without consultation. Again, we should beware of assuming that the family and particularly the father, controlled the whole process. One can find evidence for the family arranging a marriage, by choosing a marriage partner on the basis of the amount of land or wealth or social status he or she possessed, and paying scant attention to the wishes of the couple. But the fact that marriage was normally delayed until the middle twenties is an indication of the importance of the choices of the marriage partners. By the time they made the decision to marry they were capable, mature adults. In the material sense they prepared by saving money and above all by establishing a secure living on which a new household could be formed. In the countryside, that meant acquiring land or in the town, as in the case of John Shakespeare, buying houses and developing a business in a craft.

Of course it was difficult for children to decide to marry without the consent of their

parents, and in an ideal world all the parties would come to an agreement. In the case of Mary Arden, one notices that the marriage followed almost immediately after the death of her father. He left her with some land and the sum of £6 13s. 4d, which would have given her considerable freedom in arranging a marriage because she would have property and goods to bring to her husband. One therefore can see the John Shakespeare - Mary Arden marriage as one between two propertied and independent people. Mary moved from a household in which she was a subordinate, though no doubt an important contributor of labour, to one where she was mistress and where she was able to use the experience which she had acquired.

She probably met her future husband through family contacts, because John's father, Richard, had been a tenant of Robert Arden's Snitterfield land, and the two families were of similar social status. One sees a close pattern of intermarriage between the Ardens and the Webbe family of Bearley. Robert's second wife, Agnes, was a Webbe by birth, and her relative Alexander married Margaret, Robert's daughter. The Ardens, Shakespeares and Webbes were all husbandmen, linked to one another in a social network.

### **3. The household and the outside world**

Mary Arden's life, like that of most of her contemporaries, was centred on the household, which provided them with a living, a workplace and a secure environment. Robert Arden and his family belonged to the village community of Wilmcote and its parish, based on the larger settlement of Aston Cantlow. One sees in Arden's active membership of the Aston Cantlow religious fraternity evidence of his respected position in the village and his attachment to its social and religious life. These fraternities were important meeting places, where the community ate and drank together as well as taking part in church ceremonials. We should not think though of sixteenth-century people as being confined either within their households or within the larger community of the village or town.

We are presented with the problem of how a relatively prosperous husbandman like Arden got on with his neighbours. The majority of them would have been much poorer than himself - many of them as labourers who relied on wage earning and were subordinate to the Ardens. A century or two earlier there would have been much more equality in the distribution of land in a village like Wilmcote or Aston Cantlow, but by the middle of the sixteenth century a considerable gulf separated Arden, with his seventy acres (and more in the next village) and the many

smallholders and cottagers. No doubt Arden and the labourers felt the tie of community expressed through their attendance together at the parish church and at seasonal celebrations associated with sheep-shearing, harvest and Christmastide: but the interests of a large cultivator like Arden would have differed from those of his less well-off neighbours and this was bound to be expressed in their social contacts and mental outlook. The fact that he left in his will small sums of money to the poorer families of the parish suggests, however, his neighbourly feelings and a paternal concern for his community's welfare.

It would be a great mistake to think of anyone being committed to a single village for all of their lives. People commonly moved about and had quite wide horizons. But a wealthier' husbandman like Arden would have had more extensive contacts than a labourer. It is no surprise that his daughters married men from outside the village either from nearby Bearley or more remote places like Barton-on-the-Heath and Stratford-upon-Avon. Marriage outside the parish would have been normal for the period, and reflected contacts made in the course of farming or trade which would inevitably have brought Arden in touch with the wider world.

#### **4. Agriculture**

The house acted as the centre of family life but also as the place from which the farming of the holding was organised. The produce would have been partly for use by the family, and partly for sale. Arden grew wheat, barley, oats and peas for consumption as bread, ale and pottage, and in the case of the oats and peas for feeding animals as well. The household would also have been supplied from its own resources with dairy products (cheese, butter, milk, eggs) and also with bacon from the pigs, the occasional fowl, and honey from the bees. Fruit and vegetables came from the garden in season. However, the holding was not entirely self-sufficient. The most convenient way of consuming meat (and we should presume that a household of this status and of this period would consume meat regularly and in considerable quantity) would have been to buy it from butchers, probably in Stratford. The round-the-year trade in fresh joints, incidentally, gives the lie to the common belief that only salt meat was consumed in winter. Regular visits would have been made to Stratford to buy foodstuffs notably fish for the fast days (before the Reformation, each Friday, Saturday and in many cases, Wednesday, and every day during Lent). The commonest types were dried cod (stockfish) and herrings (preserved as red herrings, that is, smoked; or white herrings which were salted). Visits to market would

also have been necessary for the sale of surplus produce. Even allowing a very large amount of grain for the brewing of ale (and one presumes that they all drank ale regularly even as children), the holding would have had perhaps 10 quarters of grain for sale worth about £7.0.0 in the normal prices of the 1550s, as well as the various animal products. There would have been the wool from the fifty sheep that Arden owned in 1536 worth between £2 and £4 and also a surplus of calves and young cattle bred from the seven cows, with their butter and cheese.

The Arden holding was well provided with equipment and draught animals for cultivation. Arden owned a full team of eight oxen which would have given him the capacity to plough the whole of his holding, including the double ploughing of the fallow regarded as necessary for the suppression of weeds and the preparation of the soil for the next sowing. One reason for presuming that he employed at least one male servant, or later made use of the labour of a step-son, would have been that an ox plough ideally needed two men, one to hold the plough, the other to drive the oxen. His four horses would have been used to pull harrows in the fields but also for carts both for bringing crops home and also for taking heavy goods to market. One of them would have been a riding horse which gave him extra personal mobility. It is even possible that his daughters had use of a horse, though many places that they needed to visit, such as Stratford, were within easy walking distance. The close links that a husbandman maintained with the local market town as an outlet for his produce helps to explain Arden's membership of the Stratford Guild.

What would be the contribution of a young woman like Mary Arden to the holding? Firstly, there were certain traditional female tasks. In particular, brewing of ale from the malted barley, and also work in the dairy - milking of cows, churning of butter and cheese making. Women would also feed pigs and poultry and look after the garden. In addition some field work was traditionally performed by women, particularly in a family so short of male labour, which would include weeding (uprooting thistles and docks growing in the corn field in May and June), haymaking and harvesting. Another characteristic female role was to visit market to sell produce that could be carried by basket - eggs, cheese, poultry, fruit and vegetables. This could have been another way in which a young woman made independent social contacts with the local town.

## **5. Domestic Life**

Both the surviving house, and Robert Arden's will show that Mary was brought up in a three-roomed dwelling with a kitchen, hall and chamber. There is no evidence of

an upper storey, and indeed the will inventory makes a specific reference to "bacon in the roof" which shows that at least the hall would have been open to the rafters. Life in such a house would have been extremely cramped, with very little room for the many activities it was expected to contain, and a lack of privacy that we would find disturbing. The chamber would have been the sleeping room for all members of the family. When Robert Arden died it contained one feather bed and two mattresses (with various other pieces of bedding), suggesting that, with the departure of his older children and step-children, perhaps only four people were sleeping there, but one can imagine a much more crowded room in the previous twenty years when more children were living at home.

The routine of the day would have begun very early, at dawn. Breakfast, which was not a formal meal, did not occupy much time. The early part of the day would have been spent tending the animals, or in the fields, or in such domestic tasks as brewing, cheese-making, and food preparation. The family would assemble in the hall at about 11 o'clock for dinner. Robert and his wife would have occupied the chairs, and whichever daughters were living in the household at the time, together with a servant or two or a day-labourer receiving meals as part of his pay, would sit on benches down the side of the table. The boards of the table would presumably have been stacked at the side of the room during the day and would be placed on trestles for the meal. Bread, meat or fish, and cheese would have been the main ingredients of the meal, with a modest vegetable element.

Husbandmen would not have been able to afford much in the way of imported spices (such as ginger or pepper), but they enjoyed strong flavours, so dishes would have contained a good deal of mustard, vinegar and garlic. Everyone would have drunk ale. After the meal the tables and forms would again have been placed against the walls leaving more open space around the fire. Work would have begun again and the household would have assembled once more for the evening meal at about 4 o'clock in the afternoon. Any social life and leisure activities of the household would have taken place after this meal in the hall.

We can only guess at the cultural life of a husbandman's household, but it is a guess worth making in view of the subsequent career of Mary's son. Everyone would have had a basic knowledge of Christian beliefs and scripture, aided in Mary's teens by the availability of the Bible in English. She would have been brought up in a highly

ritualistic Catholicism, especially as her father was a member of two religious fraternities, with the great feasts of the religious year marked by special liturgies and processions. She would also have attended village seasonal festivities, like Plough Monday, summer games and bonfires. Households would have entertained themselves with stories and songs; Mary would have been familiar with Robin Hood and Guy of Warwick. Although no-one in the household need have been literate, they would, through sermons and public entertainments (such as performances by minstrels), have been aware of a literate culture.

Arden's inventory gives us a glimpse of the just-developing comfort of the household in 1556. One or two of the items of furniture such as "one little table with shelves" hints at some refinement, and one notes the presence of cushions in the hall and pillows and a feather bed in the chamber. At meals the table would have been covered with a linen cloth and towels would have been used in washing hands before the meal. Painted cloths hung on the walls of both the hall and the chamber. So, as they worked, ate and enjoyed conversation, the family was surrounded not by bare or whitewashed walls, but by colourful designs, perhaps including scenes from the Bible or folklore. But one must note that this was not a society which set great store by furnishings and the comforts of life. The total value of all the furniture, painted cloths etc. was £3.0.0, a small fraction of the £70.0.0 or so at which the animals and grain of the holding were valued.

Arden's inventory also reminds us of the work of the household, because so much of it is taken up with a listing of the equipment needed to provide the family's meals: pots and pans of brass; skillets and frying pans of iron; and wooden barrels, vats and pails for brewing, together with a kneading trough for bread making. The reference to "the wood in the yard", and axes and hatchets, recalls the constant effort to supply the household with fuel. In poorer households it was the woman's task to fetch firewood; perhaps Arden or one of his male servants carted it into the yard, but it may still have been the woman's job to cut wood and to bring it into the house. Similarly the women would have made tallow candles. Again, we should beware of presuming too much self-sufficiency. Much household equipment would have been bought from smiths, coopers and potters. Cloth, and even some garments, could also have been made by specialist craftsmen, though the women of the house may still have done some spinning, embroidery and mending for themselves.