

Please note: The Birthplace is a busy property with visitors coming from around the world. To enable all visitors to have the best experience, we would ask that if your visit coincides with a busy time, you ensure that your group allows other visitors to move around you.

Shakespeare's Birthplace

Background

The house where Shakespeare was born and grew up is a part-timbered, wattle and daub construction and dates from the 1530s. The outside was covered in lime plaster and window frames were made of wood.

It is thought that the windows were actually smaller in William's day and, instead of glass, the frames would probably have been filled with oiled cloth or horn. These were often known as 'fenestralls' and a sample can be seen in the workroom. The house was quite a substantial dwelling for the time and was constructed in two parts, house and workshop, allowing William's father, John to operate his business. Originally part of a terrace, the house passed to William (as the eldest son) after his father died. Having already bought New Place (the second largest house in Stratford at the time) for his family, he didn't need this house so he had an extension built onto the back and turned the house into a successful pub called initially 'The Maidenhead'. It was later renamed 'The Swan and Maidenhead' as Shakespeare became known as 'The Swan of Avon' (in the First Folio, Shakespeare was referred to as the 'Sweet Swan of the Avon'). The houses on either side were demolished in the 1800s to protect Shakespeare's birthplace.

Joan Hart's Cottage

Background

This room is part of the one-up, one-down cottage that was probably added to the Birthplace building 20 years after that was built. It is possible that Shakespeare and his bride, Anne Hathaway lived here when they first married. The cottage was fairly typical of the type of home lived in by a family of modest means. Shakespeare's younger sister Joan, her husband William and their four children lived here. In Shakespeare's day, the only entrance to the house was by the front door into Henley Street. The door by which you entered and the doorway through to the main house have been added to allow visitor access.

Room Highlights

- 1 Wool winder used for winding spun wool into skeins.

The Parlour

Background

The Parlour was the best room in the house and was where John Shakespeare may have conducted business-related work during the day and the Shakespeare family would have entertained guests in the evening. A 'best bed' in the parlour (as the warmest room in the house) would have been a status symbol of your wealth – it told people that you could afford beds upstairs for your family as well as a bed for occasional guests. (A bed like this would cost £8-10. A teacher would earn about £20 per year). The floor of this room (made of Blue Lias limestone quarried at the nearby Wilmcote Quarry) is the oldest in the house so you are, quite literally, standing on a floor that William Shakespeare stood on.

Room Highlights

- 1 Painted linen wall hangings were used for decoration and insulation.
- 2 16th century replica money pot on the table. These were commonly used for collecting money. To get the money out, the top had to be broken off.
- 3 Jug or piss pot (on bedside table). No toilets meant that pots were used at night.
- 4 The 'best bed' used when occasional guests came to stay.

The Dining Hall

Background

The main room that the family would have spent time in. The main meal of the day would have been around 11am as the working day began early. William started grammar school at 6am and he would have come home for lunch. The meal would have lasted around 2 hours and would typically have consisted of bread, pies, pottage (a type of savoury soup or stew), fish and chicken. Although some cooking or keeping warm would have been done here, the main kitchen was separate from the house to reduce the serious risk of fires, which could spread easily from house to house. At ten to eight every evening, the Guild Chapel bell rang, signalling that it was time to cover the fires. Only embers were left to smoulder until morning.

Room Highlights

- 1 A variety of replica wooden spoons on the table dating from the 15th and 16th centuries. Forks were not commonly used. Knives were for personal use and each person would have carried their own.
- 2 A grain or bread ark (large chest) by the right hand wall with parts dating from 1350 - 1700. The top could be turned over to form a kneading trough for making bread.
- 3 Wooden benches from the 15th and 16th centuries, more commonly used than stools or chairs.
- 4 16th century fire grate (with fish on top), used for cooking/keeping food warm.

The Cross Passage

Background

This passage marked the separation of John Shakespeare's home from his workshop and links Henley Street to John Shakespeare's yard. This was also the Shakespeare's front door. The passage was wide enough to allow a small horse and cart to pass through, taking animal skins into the yard. There would have been doors into the workshop and the house.

John Shakespeare's Glove and Leather Workshop

Background

John Shakespeare was a master glover and whittawer (leather worker). William would have grown up knowing about the glove-making business and it is possible that when he left grammar school at 15, he may have worked for his father. There are more than 70 references to leather and glove making in Shakespeare's plays. John would have had 2 or 3 apprentices working for him. An apprenticeship often started at age 12 and lasted around 7 years. The most popular skins used by John would have been sheep, goat, kid and occasionally dog. Gloves were an important item of Tudor clothing and the town's glove-makers would have been busy. A wooden pole hung outside with samples of items on it would have let people know what was being sold here.

Room Highlights

- 1 Piles of skins on the shelf ready for cutting out.
- 2 Centre table has examples of gloves, which the children may try on, and a rabbit skin (which was often used to line a glove).
- 3 Baskets of wool. John was also a wool trader.
- 4 Examples of gloves and pouches on the workbench and pole above the window.
- 5 A variety of tools on the workbench that would have been used during the glove- and pouch-making process.
- 6 Window frames (lined in a wooden frame) that would have formed the original windows.

The Exhibition Room and Girls' Bedroom

Background

This would have been the bedchamber for William's sisters. It would have been colder than the boys' room as it has no fireplace. As it is directly above the workshop, it may also have smelt more unpleasant, absorbing the odours of the leather. Above the entryway, you can see into the original attic where the apprentices would have slept and where John Shakespeare would have stored spare wool when he was a wool dealer. This would have been accessed by a rope or wooden ladder, most probably through the ceiling in the boys' bedroom. The exhibition charts the tradition, dating from 1769, of pilgrimage to Stratford and the Birthplace.

Room Highlights

- 1 'Signed window'. The oldest window in the house (dating from the late 17th century) and it was in the Birthroom until a decade ago.
- 2 The loft where John Shakespeare's apprentices would have slept.
- 3 Bust of Shakespeare in the window.

The Boys' Bedroom

Background

This would have been William's bedroom when he was a boy. He would probably have slept in here from the age of about 5. He would have shared his bed with his younger brothers, Gilbert and Richard. It is thought that this is more likely to have been the boys' bedroom as it contained the fireplace and so would have been warmer than the girls' room. It was common in Tudor times for people to share bedrooms and servants would have shared rooms or slept in rooms with their masters, using truckle beds or bed mats on the floor.

Room Highlights

- 1 Black-and-white painted cloth was copied from an original design found in the Golden Cross Inn at Oxford. The Golden Cross was an inn where Shakespeare stayed when travelling backwards and forwards to London. The cloths have been made in the same way as the originals would have been made. Linen cloth was stiffened using a mixture of animal glue and vinegar before being cut to fit the size and shape of the room. Then the cloth was fixed onto a wooden frame, which was attached to the walls. Lastly, travelling painters worked on the chosen designs.
- 2 Selection of replica children's toys from the period.
- 3 Children's clothing on the bed.

The Parents' Bedroom/Birth Room

Background

The room where tradition says that William Shakespeare and his 7 siblings were born. After birth, the babies would have been swaddled and placed into a cradle for the first few months. They would then have slept in this room until the age of about 5, sleeping on a truckle or trundle bed, which would have been pulled out from underneath the four poster bed at night. The main bed is a four-poster tester bed. The curtains would have been pulled out at night to keep out draughts and to allow the occupants some privacy. The tester or canopy on top would have stopped any debris/insects from the ceiling from falling into the bed.

Room Highlights

- 1 Wattle and daub exposed panel near the entrance to the room.
- 2 Four-poster bed and truckle bed (showing rope construction with rush matting on top).
- 3 Cradle for babies (contains a band that would have been used for swaddling).
- 4 Bible box or storage box (on the chest on the right of the bed).
- 5 Bed key or rope tightener.

The Swan and Maidenhead

Background

This extension to the house was added in 1603. Shakespeare rented out the house and it became an inn, first called the 'Maidenhead' and then the 'Swan and Maidenhead'. Upstairs, the rooms would have been communal sleeping areas. Downstairs would have been a drinking parlour plus a kitchen/buttery for the inn. A cellar was built under the extension to store barrels of ale and bottles of wine.

Room Highlights: Upstairs

- 1 The original early 19th century sign from the Swan and Maidenhead.

Room Highlights: Downstairs

- 1 Stairs leading down to the cellar (seen through a grill in the door).
- 2 Barrel stand at the far end of the buttery.
- 3 16/17th century oak ark or hutch used for storage.

Find out more about the Primary education courses offered at the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust
www.shakespeare.org.uk/education/schools



Be part of Shakespeare Week and register at www.shakespeareweek.org

