

Considerably more is known from the public records about John Shakspeare than about his son William. DVS member, Marion Peel, who lives in nearby Worcester, has been finding out more so as to explore the possible influence on the father's financial dealings on the son's business career in the theatre.

# *John Shakspeare's Finances*

**By Marion Peel**

If "The childhood shows the man, As morning shows the day" as Milton claimed (in *Paradise Regained* IV, 220-1) then the childhood of William Shakspeare would have produced an entrepreneurial, wheeler-dealing tradesman and businessman. This is not in any way intended to diminish the knowledge, skill and sheer hard work of this family unit. On the contrary, what John Shakspeare achieved was, in this reader's estimation, admirable and much misunderstood.

So many of John Shakspeare's judges have been either "gentlemen of means" with the education and leisure time available to examine him or academics who view him through a distinctly literary lens as the unwitting progenitor of a genius. Either view blinds them to the realities of his business life and obliges them to see him as a failure, left behind whilst his son blazed his way to literary glory in London.

Both views are profoundly unhistorical in that they ignore the prevailing financial context and assume that the father must be retrospectively judged in the light of the son's assumed achievements. The myth goes that William was obliged to seek his fortune in London as John was practically destitute in Stratford. This silly romantic notion is useful to Stratfordians who claim William developed both as a creative genius and a successful businessman. This usefully clears him of the charge of abandoning his wife and marks him out as a multi-faceted renaissance man. The truth is much more mundane.

## **John's early life**

John Shakspeare was the man who broke the familial pattern by moving out of Snitterfield away from the isolated tenant farm that his yeoman farmer

father ran. At least one brother, Henry, and possibly a Thomas also, remained nearby as a farmer but John saw other opportunities. The fact that he turns up at Stratford in 1552 at the age of 21 and described as a whittawer argues that he had been placed as an apprentice which would typically be for seven years. His father Richard was most likely the moving force behind this as he would have to pay the costs. It was also still the era when children were expected to respect and obey their parents irrespective of how good their personal relationship was.

It enabled the family to diversify, avoid overcrowding and move into a different area of trade. There were well over one hundred different trade guilds in existence and most acted assiduously to protect their defined area of activity. In a small town like Stratford everyone could literally see most of what you were doing. Any attempt to circumvent the guild would have resulted in a complaint from other glovers and a prosecution. Conversely the backing of the guild ensured your right to trade.

John would have left home at age 14 to live with his master for the required seven years and possibly moved to Stratford then. It is quite possible that his father knew the master personally as Richard had business contacts in Stratford. John's appearance in the records for keeping a *sterquinarium* or muck heap in Henley Street confirms that he is residing there but not whether he was a tenant or a householder.

Who would have put up the money to start his first business? As an apprentice his master was only obliged to provide food, clothing, a bed and a very small amount of spending money. It is not a case of starting from home as he evidently is not at Snitterfield. He would have needed rent for premises, capital to buy his own materials and tools

and pay his guild dues of 6s 8d for his “freedom” and 2d quarterly. He was possibly also paying the costs of a journeyman or apprentice. His main source of finance was surely his father. He would have been able to borrow money elsewhere but with no capital behind him the interest rate would probably have been very high.

## Property Dealings

The fact that he bought 2 freehold tenements in Greenhill Street and Henley Street in 1556 argues that not only did he not have any debts but that he was accumulating capital. It is also interesting that he bought the eastern wing of the Henley Street property. This is a sensible business move for practical reasons as it enables him to expand and probably diversify his business right next door to where he was currently living and working.

Would this be a wise move if he was only renting the western half? The requirement to vacate premises due to a falling out with a landlord is bad enough for a private tenant but can be disastrous for a business. If he had bought the western end already then his father again seems the likely source of capital. A private arrangement to repay the capital without interest is perfectly feasible.

The Greenhill Road property seems to be what we would call a buy-to-let scheme nowadays. As John is not yet married and has no other dependants having a third property is not required for residential reasons. The only other reason is as a capital investment that would produce a regular income. We know that in October 1575 John bought two more houses in Stratford and let one of them out. He charged £7 for the lease and when the tenant, a certain William Burbage, sought release from the contract John refused to pay out despite the judgement of arbiters that he should.

## Early Business

We get a glimpse of John’s business dealings in 1556 when he is sued by Thomas Siche a husbandman of Armscote, Worcestershire for £8, or roughly £1,600 in today’s money. The suit was unsuccessful but gives a taste of the scale of his trade. We know that he would have bought skins for his glover’s trade but he also dealt in wool, barley and

money-lending as other court cases testify. To describe him only as a glover is inaccurate but he is typical of so many Stratford businessmen who usually had one recognised trade but carried out a variety of deals in different commodities. He was essentially a broker or “brogger” in the course of which he would have joined a network of businesspeople.

This would require the ability to evaluate and acquire materials at the right price as well as the ability to negotiate with and persuade other people. His experience on the family farm would familiarise him with animals and crops and his apprenticeship would have shown him how the master organised his business as well as carrying on his craft. Only experience and character would show him how to negotiate effectively. In his late twenties he had evidently learnt well enough to be asked to join the Council as ale-taster.

This was not an onerous job but as it required him to check weights, measures and prices it could potentially bring him into conflict with his neighbours from a variety of guilds. It may also have been a conscious decision to seek some social standing as 1557 is also the year he marries Mary Arden.

She is just twenty, of good social standing and an heiress following her father’s death the previous year. If John had not deliberately gone looking for a socially desirable wife he certainly found one. Given that he would have known her from childhood as his landlord’s daughter he might possibly have delayed marrying to ensure his standing matched hers.

In 1558 John was appointed one of four constables which required him to cope with insults and aggression. He did cope and in the previous case in 1556 brought against him by Siche he claimed he used “necessary force” an explanation that was accepted by the court. His appointment the next year as “affeeror” required him to set the level of fine required for various infringements and was less physically dangerous. He was also capable of compassion as exhibited by the case he brought against Matthew Bramley for debt in February 1559. He declined to proceed as Bramley’s wife was ill and had therefore to pay a 2d fine. Mrs Bramley died that month.

So far we see a man who appears disciplined, aspirational, entrepreneurial and successful. His first

loss is of his daughter Joan born in September 1558 who died in infancy and then John's father Richard who died in 1560 and left £38 17s to be shared by either two or three brothers. Either £19 or £12 would be a very useful sum given that a labourer would earn no more than £10 in a whole year.

## Chamberlain

When John was appointed Chamberlain he was required to present the town accounts and did so for four years in good order. His prestige and his responsibilities were growing. This might be why he sold the copyhold of Snitterfield which would have tied him to at least managing some farming matters. When his second child, Margaret, died in 1563 he might have wondered if there was ever to be a male heir so William's birth in 1564 must have been very welcome.

Much less welcome was the outbreak of plague in July that year. Malone estimated that between one sixth and one seventh of the population were killed and the very young and the very old bore the brunt including Roger Green's four children in Henley Street. Did John send Mary and William to one of his other properties or to relatives? Owning properties and having solvent relatives gave him options.

The plague also obliged him to attend an emergency session of the council in August to organise relief for destitute victims. He would have known personally some of the victims and as a burgess of the town had been asked to contribute 12d according to his status. The cruel truth is also that such tragedies often provided opportunities for those with the liquid capital available. No doubt some houses changed hands and possibly at lower prices given the sudden glut on the market.

Other businesses would also have been affected. In fact the first victim was an apprentice named Oliver Gunne. There may have been a falling off of trade for a glover's wares for the six months it took the plague to end but this is where the diversification into wool and crops would have paid off. As John was now effectively involved in middle management of Stratford he would know who was affected and to what degree. His deals outside of Stratford would not have been affected and he may even have picked up some new clients or at least lost some of his old competitors.

## Alderman and Bailiff

When he achieved the post of Alderman in 1565 he was only one of 14 but when he was voted as Bailiff in 1568 ahead of two competitors it is fair to say he had been supported by a large tranche of his peers. It is impossible to know what his personal motivation was but the actual result is that he was running the business affairs of a small town. For one year this involved him acting as coroner, almoner, escheator, clerk of the market and Justice of the Peace. His physical presence was required at the Court of Record (for which he attended thirteen), Council meetings, Thursday market meetings and meetings with the Lord of the Manor or his deputies.

In addition he would attend any events organised by the council such as the two fair-days in May and September, play performances as well as Rogation Sunday parish boundary walks and church every Sunday. A year later he was owed £21 for wool by John Walford a clothier and later Mayor of Marlborough. This is a sizeable debt but John Shakspeare didn't act to recover it until thirty years later. Was he simply too overwhelmed with work at the time or just not in need of the money?

It may be that his civic duties caused him to neglect his business. It is important to note that he received no salary for this work only expenses. The benefit was in the kudos and business and social opportunities it afforded. Unless this could be translated into business profit it would remain a worthy but unproductive use of time. It may even be that he met more ruthless competitors and made bigger enemies on his upward progression.

## Trading in Wool and Money

In 1570 one enemy made life difficult for him by denouncing him to the barons of the Exchequer that he was dealing in wool and lending money at interest. James Langrake of Whittlebury, Northamptonshire made money by informing on people to the authorities and then accepting payment from the accused man to drop the complaint. Dealing in wool by middlemen was resented by the wool staplers who had a legal monopoly and dealt in very large volumes.

Shakspeare and many others like him fulfilled the need in the wool trade of individual spinsters and weavers to buy in small quantities. The government

was caught between the wealthy international merchants who wielded such clout in the City of London and the artisans around the country who provided much-needed employment and taxes.

The same situation obtained with money-lending: the adversaries were the church and the business classes. Thomas Wilson summed it up thus in 1572:

Let the *Clergy* apply their social zeal to preaching thrift and industry to the unemployed, and leave business questions to be settled by *Businessmen* who are the backbone of the *Nation*, provide employment for the *Masses*, keep the *Nobility* afloat with advances, and prove their *Patriotism* by subscribing heavily to *War Loans*.

The church disapproved on moral grounds whilst the business community got on with providing much needed working capital. Ten per cent was generally seen as acceptable but of course some borrowers, and some projects, were inherently more risky. Whilst what John Shakspeare did was strictly illegal it was a law more honoured in the breach than the observance. Hence men like Langrake could make a dishonest living by threatening exposure. He claimed Shakspeare loaned £80 to John Mussum of Walton D'Eiville, Warwickshire for £20 in interest.

However Shakspeare called his bluff by voluntarily appearing in person to hear the evidence and denied any guilt. This then required a further court case and to avoid any further expense he paid a 40s fine. Langrake made two more accusations of wool-dealing in Westminster and Snitterfield but now it looks as if Shakspeare simply gave up and paid him off.



Stratford Guild Hall and Chapel, drawn in the 1940s.

The law was changed in 1571 to allow loans but at zero interest. This would have been commercially suicidal both domestically and internationally. At least the government dealt with informers, or extortioners, by changing the law and Langrake amongst many others was fined £40 and imprisoned in 1574. Shakspeare evidently spent some time in London and the law courts as he successfully sued a glover for a £50 debt in the Court of Common Pleas.

Mussum seems to have been a regular business associate and in 1573 they were both sued for a £30 debt by Henry Higford of Solihull. Shakspeare avoided payment by simply failing to appear. He was evidently conversant with the court system now and perhaps growing cynical about whether the justice system was fit for purpose. The cost of a six-day-long journey there and back plus accommodation, plus the “inducements” often required to hurry a case along had to be taken into account.

### Further property dealings

His business was evidently still going well as he paid £40 in 1575 for two more houses with gardens and orchards in Stratford. Presumably these are more buy-to-let properties. The next year he stopped going to Council meetings. He didn't formally resign but then Aldermen rarely did. Some were expelled for bad behaviour and some were fined for refusing to accept election. He had also occupied the highest post available so there was nothing new to be attained. As it took the Council ten years to officially and rather regretfully remove his name it is obvious that he was not in any disgrace.

His decision to mortgage his wife's inheritance of Asbye's in 1578 is usually portrayed as a sign of a man in financial trouble. This is a house and fifty-six acres in the possession for life of Mary's stepmother Agnes and Mary's unmarried sister Alice. As no-one knew how long Agnes would live it could not be sold so John raised a mortgage by borrowing £40 from his brother-in-law Edmund Lambert. We do not know why he needed the money but it may be pertinent that William is now fourteen years of age. Did William cease school to begin an apprenticeship and did his father pay for this? Or did William serve an unofficial apprenticeship with his father and the money was destined for some other investment?

The point also needs to be made that John did not completely lose out on this transaction. He still had his £40. He did lose Asbye's which may well have been worth more but he still had the money. He always insisted that he had the £40 to repay but that Lambert demanded the additional payment of other unspecified debts. We are also in the midst of the family politics of twelve step-siblings and their spouses.

It is often claimed that William must have been obliged to leave school because of his father's financial situation yet it was normal for many boys of his age to begin apprenticeships, or work, unless they showed real academic aptitude and had a realistic prospect of more gainful employment. Also the period of 1560-1580 had been a period of consistently good harvests and the population was rising at 6% per annum. When the supply is good and the demand is rising this tends to lead to higher prices for non-discretionary purchases such as grain and ale. A career as successor to his father would have seemed perfectly normal to his society

When John sold a ninth share in Snitterfield it was assumed that he had a desperate need for cash either to repay debts or simply to spend. Any businessman would weigh up the possible future income to be generated from this asset against the immediate income to be got from trading or money-lending. Even less than 10% p.a. on either venture would be better than 0% continuing for an unknown period.

In 1582 John's expenses increased to take in William's new wife and imminent child. The timing was bad on a number of fronts. William had three brothers and a sister at home which made nine souls under one roof unless John put them in one of his other properties. If he did then he would have lost the rent on that. If William had been apprenticed to someone else he would have broken the terms of his apprenticeship which didn't allow marriage. Given the haste with which he was married it argues that he did work for his father.

### **Why did William leave for London?**

By 1585 William's twins had been born and whilst eleven under one roof wasn't unheard of in Stratford given that the glovers shop, woolshop and workspace were there it would be tight. Only John, William and Gilbert were of working age as Mary and

Anne would be expected to take care of the domestic duties. This may be why John officially included William in his suit against John Lambert for the Asbye's estate in the Court of Queen's Bench at Michaelmas 1588. He was looking for somewhere else for them to live or at least the money to support them. He still had both Henley Street properties and possibly the two Stratford properties bought in 1575.

Another reason is that John was by now about 58 year's old. He was not to know that he would survive another twelve years. A further reason is that the harvests failed from 1584-90 and life became increasingly difficult for everyone. Hunger and unemployment caused a great drift of the "indigent poor" towards London. This in turn caused a raft of legislation seeking to punish those who suffered worst from the effects of the downturn: landless younger sons, orphans, widows, unwanted land workers and the simply destitute.

For all these reasons it seems madness to suggest that William would gaily set out for London in the hope of finding "something" to sustain him, let alone his family, on the basis of his assumed literary gifts. He would need capital to pay for the transport, food and lodgings for some period of time. He would need to demonstrate that he was not a vagrant to avoid arrest and imprisonment and even a whipping.

Unless he had proven previous acting experience and existing knowledge of a play text he is unlikely to have been hired as an actor straight away and he was too old for an apprenticeship. He is far more likely to have used the skills his father taught him and quite possibly been given contacts and working capital also. As the situation in Stratford worsened it seems sensible to seek new markets closer to the commercial hub of the country.

### **Business Opportunities in Theatres**

Just as the "myth" of John Shakspeare as a wool dealer was proven true by the later discovery of Court papers there may be a kernel of truth in the story of "Shakespeare's boys" holding the horses at the theatre for the gentlemen. This would require very little capital outlay, the use of cheap labour and an avoidance of the official ostlers at the inns with their own guild. He could prove himself useful whilst getting to know the theatre owner and the business opportunities for buying shares. Theatres and theatre

companies were still unregulated by guilds, increasingly popular and when the building, props and costumes had already been acquired by someone else they were lucrative investments.



Artist's Impression of New Place, c. 1600

(BBC website)

After all, this is what he did do and it certainly proved lucrative if his purchases of property in and around Stratford are anything to go by. In 1597 he

bought New Place for an unspecified sum (perhaps £60) but it was a large, decayed building. This was the same year he avoided paying tax in St Helens ward, London. In 1602 he paid £320 for land outside Stratford. In 1605 he paid £440 for the lease of tithes at Stratford. To survive on the income from plays at £6 per play at possibly two per year would yield him £12 which is £2 more than a labourer. His pay for acting would have been 10s per week in London and 5s when on tour. How could he possibly afford the 12.5% stake he bought in the Globe on those wages which later enabled these purchases?

The one asset not always easily available was ready cash. William could have acted as a pawnbroker against small personal items as Henslowe did and given unsecured loans at greater interest to reflect the greater risk. That he moved on to play-broking and theatre management seems obvious. It must have been a full-time job nurturing his business contacts in the theatre world, keeping the necessary personal and legal records and maintaining his family ties with Stratford. That he did so successfully is a testament to his father's training and example. He would recognise the old saw:

“As the old cock crows so crows the young.”

## Further Reading

John Milton, *Paradise Regained*, London (1671)

J O Halliwell-Phillips, *Outlines of the Life of Shakespeare* (1898, tenth Edition)

W. W Greg, ed., *Philip Henslowe's Diary 1591 – 1609*, Bullen (1904)

E I Fripp, ed., *Minutes and Accounts of Stratford upon Avon Corporation*, Volume 1 1553-1566, Dugdale Society Publications (1921)

R H Tawney, *The Compromise of 1571 – A Discourse upon Usury by Thomas Wilson*, London, G Bell & Sons (1925), ed. Peter Etherden, June 2008, a cesc Publication.

B. Roland Lewis, *The Shakespeare documents: facsimiles, transliterations, translations, & commentary*. Stanford (1940)

John Russell, *Shakespeare's Country*, Batsford (1942)

Mark Eccles, *Shakespeare in Warwickshire*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison (1963)

Samuel Schoenbaum, *William Shakespeare, A Documentary Life*, Oxford University Press (1975) SDL

D L Thomas & N E Evans, 'John Shakespeare in the Exchequer', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Volume 35, No. 3 (Autumn, 1984), pp315-318

Nigel Head, *Tudor Economy and Society*, Hodder & Stoughton (1992)

Jeanne Jones, *Daily Life in Shakespeare's England, Stratford upon Avon 1570 – 1630*, Sutton Publishing Limited (1996)

Gregory Clark, *The Price History of English Agriculture* (2003).

[www.econ.ucdavis.edu/faculty/gclark/papers/agprice.pdf](http://www.econ.ucdavis.edu/faculty/gclark/papers/agprice.pdf). accessed 10/02/2013

## John Shakspere in public records (? 1530 – 1601)

- 1552 fined xij<sup>d</sup> (with Humphrey Reynold and Adrian Quiney) for making a *sterquinarium* (refuse heap) in Henley Street. *SDL 15*
- 1556, 11 Aug. Johannem Shakyspere de Stretforde identified as a glover in a case against him by Thomas Siche for £8. *SDL 27-8*
- 1556 bought leases to two houses (one in Greenhill Street, one in Henley St) *SDL 15*
- 1556 sued Henry Field for non-delivery of 18 measures of barley *Lewis 17*
- 1556 elected ale-taster of the Borough of Stratford *SDL 29*
- 1557 fined for missing sittings of Court of Record *SDL 29*
- 1558 sworn as one of four constables *SDL 29*
- 1559 appointed affeeror (to assess fines) *SDL 30*
- 1560? becomes burgess *SDL 30*
- 1561 described as *agricola* (farmer or husbandman) *SDL 27*
- 1561-6 Chamberlain to Stratford Guild *SDL 30*
- 1562 fined for neglecting his hedges in Snitterfield *SDL 27*
- 1563 gave to Alexander Webbe his lease to a property in Snitterfield *SDL 27*
- 1565 elected Alderman *SDL 34*
- 1566 John stood surety for Richard Hathaway *SDL 66*
- 1568 John Shaksper became Bailiff of Stratford [equivalent to Mayor] *SDL 34*
- 1570 became Chief Alderman *SDL 34-5*
- 1570 accused in the Exchequer Court of Usury for lending money at 20% and 25% Interest: *SQ, 35 (1984), 315-8.*
- 1570 Application for Coat of Arms is rejected. *SDL 36*
- 1572 entry to court of Common Pleas for a debt of £50 owed by John Luther *SDL 29*
- 1573 entry to court of Common Pleas for a debt of £30 owed to Henry Higford *SDL 29*
- 1573 described as a 'whyttawer' *SDL 27*
- 1575 Fine levied on purchase of two houses in Henley Street for £40 *SDL 29*
- 1576-8 misses council meetings; listed as tax-defaulter *SDL 36*
- 1578/9 Note of fine levied when an estate at Aston Cantlowe was mortgaged by John and Mary Shakespere to Edmund Lambert. *SDL 37*
- 1578 Mortgaged estate at Wilmcote to Thomas Webbe *SDL 37*
- 1579 Note of fine levied when an interest in an estate at Snitterfield sold by John and Mary Shakespere to Robert Webbe (£4) *SDL 37*
- 1580 identified as yeoman when fined £20 for not appearing in Court of Queen's Bench and loses £20 surety for a hatmaker, John Audley, of Nottingham *SDL 37*
- 1580 misses a court date about disputed land, which Edmund Lambert retains *SDL 37*
- 1582 (or before) let a house in Stratford to William Burbage *SDL 29*
- 1582 petitioned for sureties of the peace against: Ralph Cawdrey, William Russell, Thomas Logginge, and Robert Young *SDL 38*
- 1586 Johannes Shakespere a 'glover' stood £10 bail for Michael Price, a local tinker (later forfeited) *SDL 27*
- 1586 John Shaxpere released from the Board of Aldermen *SDL 36*
- 1588 Bill of Complaint against Edmund Lambert *Lewis 55*
- 1588-92 sued by William Burbage *SDL 29*
- 1589 Tries to recover property from Lambert family in Court of King's Bench *SDL 37*
- 1590 Johannes Shackspere owned leasehold of two houses on Henley Street *Lewis 67*
- 1591 sued by Adrian Quiney, Humphrey Plumley and Richard Hill *Lewis 68*
- 1592 noted as not attending church; 'for feare of processe of Debtte' and fined; described as a "senior" and "glover" *SDL 38*
- 1592 assessed Henry Field's estate *SDL 29*
- 1596 application for a Coat-of-Arms accepted. *SDL 166-171*
- 1597 sells a toft (small strip of land) to a neighbour in Henley Street *SDL 15*
- 1597 tries to recover property from Lambert family in Chancery *SDL 37*
- 1598 sells another toft to a different neighbour *SDL 15*
- 1599 entry to court of Common Pleas for a debt of £21 owed by John Walford from sale of land in 1568 *SDL 27*
- 1599 reinstated on the Town Council
- 1601, Sept 8 Burial M<sup>r</sup> Johannes Shakspeare