

Shakespeare

Piece by Piece

Ben Crystal

Sometime in the late 1580s a young actor named William Shakespeare left his family and home in rural Stratford-upon-Avon to make his fortune here, 100 miles away in London.

Over the next 20 years he produced some of the finest poems and plays in the English language.

So what happened here in London to transform the son of a glove maker into one of the world's greatest writers?

Today London is a global centre for finance, the arts and fashion, and is one of the most diverse cities in the world.

But what was London like when William Shakespeare first arrived here?

Dr Hannah Crawford: *It was obviously a much smaller city. Much of the activity was focused on the City of London, which is now the financial district. The rest of London was not very much developed. The West End didn't exist, Covent Garden was still a garden, and like modern London it was a very busy, bustling place. There were lots of people coming into the city looking to make a living. It was a very diverse population, lots of immigrants, different social classes living closely together, the very rich to the very poor, and all of these people were hungry for*

entertainment and particularly the entertainment that the theatre could offer.

The buildings that Shakespeare would have known were destroyed in 1666 in the Great Fire of London, so sadly we can't see the city as Shakespeare saw it.

Ben: *Do you think London was a source of inspiration for Shakespeare?*

Hannah: *Definitely. I am absolutely sure it inspired Shakespeare. Although he tended to write about faraway places, Athens or Rome, the plays are full of the energy of London, a city that's a real melting pot of ideas, the centre of political power, and that world I think is the world of Shakespeare's plays.*

In his first decade in London, Shakespeare built up a reputation as one of the country's most successful playwrights.

But at the end of 1598 Shakespeare's troop of actors, the Chamberlain's Men, had a disagreement with the landowner of their theatre in north London.

So in the middle of the night they took the theatre apart, brought the wood, piece by piece, down to the banks of the River Thames, floated every single piece of wood across the water and brought it here to Southwark, an area of London where the land was cheaper, and rebuilt the theatre and called it The Globe.

But today, much of Shakespeare's London has disappeared. Only the foundations of the original Globe Theatre remain.

Dr Chris Laoutaris: *We're opposite a square which looks quite plain, office blocks and apartment blocks around us, but this is the site of the original Globe Theatre which opened in 1599. This is where this magnificent theatre once stood.*

Ben: *With the arrival of the Globe Theatre, how did Shakespeare and his actors' lives change?*

Chris: *Shakespeare for the first time had some real financial stability behind him. He had a large share in the Globe, so he was earning quite a bit of money by this time, and I think from this foundation of financial security his creativity flourished. During the first six or seven years of the opening of the Globe he produces some of his most*

memorable plays, including the great tragedies, Hamlet, Othello, King Lear and Macbeth.

Ben: *What was their working daily life like here?*

Chris: *Shakespeare would have been working very hard indeed. Because plays changed very, very often, this meant Shakespeare would have written plays very quickly and under very demanding conditions.*

Shakespeare continued his playwriting almost until he died in 1616. But his work lived on thanks to his friends who saved many of his plays in a book now known as the First Folio.