

# Shakespeare's Life

## Birth

William Shakespeare was born to John and Mary Shakespeare around 23 April 1564 in Stratford-upon-Avon. He was the third of eight children and the eldest of the five who survived into adulthood.

Stratford in the mid sixteenth century was a small but busy market town in the rolling hills of Warwickshire's farmland. Both his mother and father came from farming families - his mother (Mary Arden Shakespeare) inherited her father's farm on his death. John Shakespeare was a respected citizen and successful businessman in his early married years, making and selling leather goods. In 1556 he bought a large house in Henley Street in Stratford where William was born. By this time John Shakespeare was an alderman, a member of the town council, and in 1568 he was appointed High Bailiff, the equivalent of Mayor of Stratford.



Shakespeare's birthplace bedchamber

## School years



A hornbook, from *The History of the Hornbook* by A.W. Tuer (London, 1897)

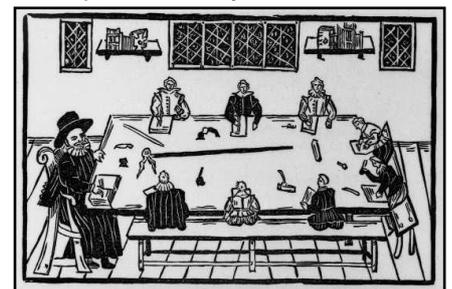
William would have attended the local 'petty' or small school at the age of four or five. He would have learned his alphabet from a hornbook, a sheet mounted on wood, bone or leather and protected by a cover of transparent horn. He would have learned to read, to write, and to do simple arithmetic. He would also have had lessons in religion and behaviour.

At the age of seven he would have moved onto King Edward VI Grammar School with other boys of his age.

Shakespeare would have studied Latin language, literature and history, and some Greek in upper school. He would have read Cato, Cicero, Ovid and Caesar. It is certain that Shakespeare did not go to university, but he must have paid attention in his years at grammar school for his plays regularly contain references to classical myths

and history. By the time Shakespeare was fourteen his father was in financial difficulty. John Shakespeare seems to have been involved in illegal money lending and was unable to recoup some important loans. His reputation suffered and ultimately he lost his position as alderman. It is likely that Shakespeare left school at 14, possibly because of his father's decline in fortunes.

Shakespeare was fortunate to attend school because education was not open to everyone. Formal schooling for girls was not encouraged, but by the middle of the sixteenth century a few girls were allowed to attend grammar school.



Petty school from *Roxburghe Ballads* (Hertford, 1874), II, 573

## Marriage and children

It is possible that Shakespeare worked in his father's craft shop when he left school. He married unusually early for the time, in 1582 when he was 18. His wife, Anne Hathaway was pregnant, eight years older than William and the eldest daughter of a family friend and successful farmer. They had three children: Susanna, born in 1583, and the twins Judith and Hamnet in 1585. Hamnet died 11 years later. Anne and the two surviving children lived in Stratford the rest of their lives. When William was established in London he made regular visits home to see his family.



Holy Trinity Church, Stratford-upon-Avon.  
This is the church where Shakespeare was baptised and is also buried

## The lost years

Very little is known about what Shakespeare did in the next few years. It is probable that he worked with his father and likely that he and his young family lived in the house in Henley Street. It is almost certain he saw the performances of traveling troupes of players who visited Stratford. These would have included some leading actors, possibly even Edward Alleyn, a very famous actor of the time. Did these experiences inspire him to seek his fortune in the theatre?

## London

Sometime between 1587 and 1592 Shakespeare arrived in London. He may have toured with a troupe of players before going to the Capital. We know he was an established writer by 1592 because in this year Robert Greene, a playwright, attacked Shakespeare in print, calling him an 'upstart crow.' This ridicule brought a chorus of defense from other authors who praised Shakespeare's integrity, his graceful writing and his gentle nature.

In these early years Shakespeare lived in the cheap suburb of Bishopsgate. By 1595 he was a member of the Lord Chamberlain's Men, later the King's Men, one of the two leading theatre companies. During his long relationship with this company he served as shareholder, actor and principle playwright. His works are chiefly associated with the Globe Theatre, built on the south bank of the Thames in London in 1599, but they would also have been performed at court, at other public theatres, on tour and at the indoor Blackfriars Playhouse.

Shakespeare may have written or collaborated on 40 or more plays. The First Folio includes 36 (*Pericles* and *Timon of Athens* are not included). Unusually for the time, Shakespeare wrote most of his plays alone. He also composed at least 154 sonnets and several longer poems, including *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*. These he dedicated to his patron, the Earl of Southampton. This patronage may have been particularly useful in providing the Shakespeare family with an income when the plague temporarily closed the theatres in 1593.

## Retirement

Financially astute, Shakespeare began buying property in Stratford while he was still in London. It may always have been his plan to retire to his native countryside. Around 1610 he moved back to Stratford, now a prosperous country gentleman. He lived with his wife in New Place, one of Stratford's largest houses. His daughter Susanna and her husband Dr. John Nash lived next door. Colleagues visited from London, including the playwright Ben Jonson, a close friend. Shakespeare died on 23 April 1616 and is buried in Holy Trinity Church where he was baptised 52 years earlier.

## **The First Folio**

None of Shakespeare's play manuscripts survives. About half the plays were printed in 'quarto' or pamphlet form, often by unscrupulous publishers. Having sold his plays to his acting company, Shakespeare made no effort to preserve them for posterity. Thankfully, a consortium led by actors John Hemmings and Henry Condell of the King's Men published the First Folio in 1623. Because these men worked from the original play manuscripts, the First Folio contains more faithful versions of the plays than most of the quartos. Second, Third and Fourth Folios were published later in the seventeenth century.

## **Further reading**

### **Shakespeare Birthplace Trust**

This website offers detailed information about Shakespeare's life, illustrated by some images from their extensive archives:

[http://www.shakespeare.org.uk/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=10&Itemid=10](http://www.shakespeare.org.uk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=10&Itemid=10)

### **Folger Shakespeare Library**

This facility in the USA holds a wide range of Shakespeare archives and resources, with plenty information about Shakespeare's life available online:

<http://www.folger.edu/template.cfm?cid=866>

### **The Willow Cabin**

This site was created by an American actor/academic and offers information about Shakespeare's life illustrated with some large images:

<http://www.willowcabin.com/life.htm>

### **Stratford-upon-Avon**

This website for visitors and local businesses describes Shakespeare's life with some watercolour images:

<http://www.stratford-upon-avon.co.uk/wslife.htm>

### **BBC Radio 4**

Listen to this episode of *In Our Time*, broadcast in 2001, to hear Melvyn Bragg investigating what we know about the life of Shakespeare:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00547ct>

Written by Mary Johnson  
Edited by Suzanne Worthington  
RSC Education