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Archaeologists go in Search of Shakespeare's House

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Archaeologists at the University of Birmingham have begun preparations for an archaeological excavation at the site of Shakespeare's final home 'New Place' in Stratford-upon-Avon, where he lived out his final years and in which he died in 1616. Initial work to test the feasibility of an excavation project is underway and will inform plans for a wider archaeological project by Shakespeare's Birthplace Trust at New Place next year.

In an effort to reveal more information about the final home of the great playwright, Birmingham Archaeology will commence a program of trial trenching and investigative work. The test work will help to establish levels of deposit survival at New Place and quantify the potential for waterlogged conditions, which are favourable for preserving organic materials that may otherwise decay. The test work comprises seven small inspection trenches and the initial findings suggest that structures and wells are indeed present in some areas of the site.

As the residence of William Shakespeare during his later years and the house in which he died, New Place has a colourful history. Built in 1483 with innovative materials such as brick, New Place was a distinguished property, the second largest in the town. The building was significantly altered and controversially demolished by then owner, Rev. Gastrell in 1759, and was also excavated by the Victorian antiquarian, Halliwell-Phillipps in the 1860's. However it is thought that much of the original remains could still lie buried across the site.

A new excavation of New Place would present fresh opportunities for today's archaeologists using modern techniques to re-explore the grounds and study the remains of Shakespeare's home, backyards and garden, including previously untouched areas of the site. Although the details of the 2010 excavation are yet to be determined the trial trenching is providing the Trust with a survey of the archaeological potential and helping to shape plans for a larger public project.

If the final results from the trial work prove to be positive, the project could start next year, recording the layout of the original property and searching for the foundations of New Place. Plans may also include a thorough examination of Victorian 'spoil', original wells, and possibly even rubbish pits.

Dr. Diana Owen, Director of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust said, 'Plans for a 'dig' are still at a conceptual stage. However our purpose would be to create a modern record of New Place, providing us with a better understanding of the site, and potentially revealing new information about the house in which Shakespeare died and the way in which the family lived there. We hope that a project of this kind would present a unique opportunity for our visitors to watch – even join in - an excavation as it unfolds and ultimately advance our learning and thinking about Shakespeare.'

Kevin Colls, archaeologist at the University of Birmingham, also commented, 'The project at New Place really is exciting and unique. As archaeologists we rarely have the chance to investigate remains which are directly associated with a single individual let alone one of the most important figures in history. Archaeology can compliment the documentary sources and written record, to build up a better picture of Shakespeare's life and times.'

Details of the investigative work are still being compiled by the Trust and a definitive picture of an archaeological excavation at New Place will not be clear until early next year. However the Trust is ambitious in its plans and the prospect of combining two exciting subjects, William Shakespeare and archaeology, certainly has the potential to create an intoxicating mixture and an unparalleled visitor experience.

Ends.

Notes to editors:

PHOTO CALL: Media are invited to attend the investigation of Birmingham Archaeology's final 'test pit' on Tuesday 1st December at 12.00pm at New Place Gardens.

New Place is a landscaped garden that attracts many visitors each year and is owned and cared for by the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust. It is one of five Shakespeare properties in and around Stratford, which also includes the iconic 'Shakespeare's Birthplace' on Henley Street.

Visitors to 'Nash's House* and New Place' are still able to glimpse the later cellar walls of the 17th century mansion, however little remains above ground of Shakespeare's 'New Place'. The Victorian antiquarian James Halliwell-Phillipps, an original member of the British Archaeological Association, famously excavated parts of the site at New Place in 1862 and some of the items he discovered can be seen in the current exhibition at Nash's House. The work carried out by Halliwell-Phillipps was certainly pioneering by Victorian standards; however what it concludes about Shakespeare, his house and life is not clear.

*Nash's House adjoins New Place, and was once owned by Thomas Nash, a wealthy property owner who married Shakespeare's granddaughter, Elizabeth Hall in 1626. The two buildings are closely associated through various relations of Shakespeare's family and New Place was also occupied at one time by Shakespeare's daughter Susanna and her husband, John Hall. New Place is accessed through Nash's House, which contains exhibits and information about the overall site.

Birmingham Archaeology is the commercial arm of the Institute of Archaeology and Antiquity at the University of Birmingham. It comprises three teams; Birmingham Archaeology Heritage Services, the Visual and Spatial Technology Centre (VISTA) and Birmingham Archaeo-Environmental (BAE). Each of the groups is responsible for the undertaking of commercial projects and services, the development of research projects and the delivery of postgraduate and professional training via taught Masters programmes and Continuing Professional Development workshops.

The Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, founded in Stratford in 1847, is the guardian of the world's greatest Shakespeare heritage sites, comprising Shakespeare's Birthplace, Nash's House & New Place, Hall's Croft, Anne Hathaway's Cottage and Mary Arden's Farm. Offering a unique Shakespeare centred experience, The Trust is a truly global brand that has been attracting visitors to the houses since as early as the 17th century.

At the heart of all things 'Shakespeare', the Trust is not only at the forefront of academic learning, but also an iconic destination in the UK and the cornerstone of the region's identity and tourism economy. The five houses offer a multi-layered experience for visitors unlike any other, giving people from all over the world the opportunity to learn about the life of the world's greatest playwright, discover his work and experience a real sense of the times that influenced him in Stratford.

The Shakespeare Houses and Gardens are winners of the Gold Award for 'Best Tourism Experience in the Heart of England Excellence in Tourism Awards 2009.

For further information

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