University Archaeologists Dig for Shakespeare: A Whole New Experience For Visitors to New Place

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Archaeologists from the University of Birmingham will give visitors to New Place and Nash's House in Stratford-upon-Avon a unique chance to dig deeper into the later life of the town's famous playwright, when the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust launches 'Dig for Shakespeare', an archaeological exploration and visitor experience at Shakespeare's last home.

From 26 March 2010 until the end of October visitors to Stratford will be able to watch as archaeologists unearth the foundations – and hopefully, rubbish tips – of Shakespeare's House, which was demolished in 1759. A special viewing platform has been constructed so that visitors will be able to peek over the shoulders of a team of archaeologists and volunteers as they excavate the area where Shakespeare's house and courtyard stood – an up-close view that will enable them to feel as though they are part of the dig team.

'We're excavating three areas in total – one large trench will run from the Chapel Street end of the property up to the end of the inner courtyard, a second will investigate the area currently occupied by the herb garden, and the final area will involve the excavation of one quarter of the knot garden at the rear of the building,' explains Dr Diana Owen, Director of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust. 'We do not know if the knot garden was an area used by Shakespeare – it may have been a yard simply used by his servants, but this could actually yield some fantastic results, especially if it was an area where rubbish was thrown or the cess pit was located.'

The excavation is being undertaken by archaeologists, who will be working on the dig seven days a week. Kevin Colls, from Birmingham Archaeology at the University of Birmingham, says, 'Through documentary evidence we know Shakespeare lived at New Place but we have very little information regarding the layout of the house and gardens at this time. Through archaeological fieldwork, in particular the excavation of structural remains and the recovery of artefacts, we hope to fill in the blanks. Even the smallest shard of broken pottery has the potential for giving us tantalising glimpses into the life of Shakespeare such as what he liked to eat and drink'.

To help visitors understand why the Trust is undertaking such an extensive excavation, Nash's House – the building that adjoined New Place, and which was owned by the husband of Shakespeare's granddaughter – will feature a new exhibition focusing on what is known of Shakespeare's life when he returned from London to Stratford and explaining what archaeologists are hoping to find buried beneath the soil.

Visitors will also take a different route around the property, walking through from the front to the rear of the house and exiting through the former education room, which will be relocated to the first floor. They will be guided around the perimeter of the knot garden, where archaeologists and interpretation staff will explain the current position of the dig, before returning to the front of the property along a raised platform, which takes them right between the two other trenches for an unrivalled view of the largest excavation.

Ends.

PHOTO OPPORTUNITY:

At 11.30am on Friday 26 March, Professor Stanley Wells, Chairman of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust and former Director of the University of Birmingham's Shakespeare Institute, will cut the first sod to mark the start the dig. Professor Wells and Kevin Colls, Project Manager for Birmingham Archaeology, based at the University of Birmingham, will be available for interview on the day.

Notes to editors

1. 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.

2. 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 here 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.

Admission prices, which include access to Shakespeare's Birthplace and exhibition, Nash's House and New Place, and Hall's Croft are £12.50 for adults, £8.00 for children and £11.50 for concessions.

For more details, please call +44 (0) 1789 292 325 or book online at www.shakespeare.org.uk

For further information about the houses, please visit www.shakespeare.org.uk

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