

London's best-preserved Tudor playhouse unearthed

William Shakespeare performed at Shoreditch theatre as an actor



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YESTERDAY by: **James Pickford**

Archaeologists working in east London have uncovered the best-preserved remains of any of the capital's Tudor playhouses, at a venue where [William Shakespeare](#) was known to have performed as an actor.

The Curtain in Shoreditch, which hosted the first performance of *Henry V*, was used as a theatre from 1577 to 1625, the longest stretch of any the city's Shakespearean-era playhouses.

Unveiling the results of their dig on Tuesday, experts from Museum of London Archaeology said they had found Tudor brickwork above foundation height in an "exceptional" state of preservation, as well as artefacts including a bird whistle possibly used for theatrical performances.

The archaeologists had been expecting to find a circular or polygonal-shaped playhouse, matching the design of most contemporary examples, but were surprised to discover the Curtain was a rectangular structure. This suggests it was unlikely to have been purpose-built as a theatre, but instead converted from a pre-existing house or tenement block.

"This is the really exciting thing. It's the first rectangular [playhouse] building we've looked at ... We're into new territory," said Heather Knight, senior archaeologist on the dig.

Shakespeare's appearance on the Curtain's stage came when he was performing not one of his own plays, but *Every Man in His Humour*, a hit play by Ben Jonson that was premiered at the theatre in 1598. Jonson's first folio lists Shakespeare as a member of the cast.

The 22m x 30m design presented the archaeologists with a discrepancy, since the prologue of *Henry V*, known to have been performed there, describes a circular construction:

"Can this cockpit hold
The vasty fields of France? Or may we cram
Within this wooden O the very casques
That did affright the air at Agincourt?"

However, literary experts working with the museum said it was not uncommon for prologues to be added well after a play's initial performances, or texts to be subsequently rewritten. In the case of *Henry V* the play was known to have been put on later at the Globe, which bore a circular design.

Audiences on the ground floor of the Curtain would have stood to watch plays, while three galleries flanking the stage housed seats for higher-paying customers. Ms Knight said further work was needed to be able to estimate its capacity, but evidence suggested the venue could take about 1,000 people.

With the backstage areas yet to be unearthed, excavations will continue for another month. The team has been working quickly ahead of construction of a £750m mixed-use development by investment group Cain Hoy, with shops, offices and a 37-storey residential tower across a wider site.

The public will be able to view the excavation after the work is completed at a visitor centre planned for the project.

The land's attractiveness to developers predates its use as a theatre. Julian Bowsher, a senior archaeologist at the museum, said the area on which it stood was owned by a priory until the Dissolution of the Monasteries in the late 1530s. Sold off to Henry VIII's favourites, the site had become home to a large house, tenement or lodge by 1567, records show. When it fell out of use as a theatre in the 1630s, it was reused as housing for Londoners.

The theatre is named after the curtain wall of the priory it originally adjoined.

Public tours every Friday from May 20 to June 24: mola.org.uk/events