

Archaeological dig to prove Shakespeare was a 'Shoreditch boy'



A senior archaeologist has argued Shoreditch must be fully acknowledged as the home of Shakespeare. CREDIT: REK/JALAMY

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With his natty facial hair and creative ambitions, it will come as little surprise that William Shakespeare spent time in Shoreditch.

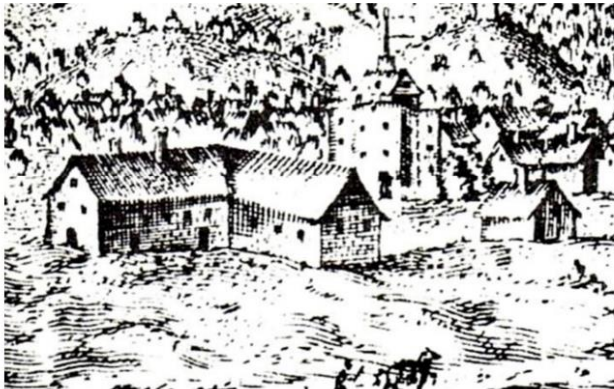
But a senior archaeologist has argued the hipster streets of East London must be fully acknowledged as the home of Shakespeare, putting Stratford-Upon-Avon and the Globe in the shade.

The Museum of London Archaeology is leading a project to uncover and explore the remains of the Curtain Theatre, the 16th and 17th century venue where Shakespeare is known to have first staged Romeo and Juliet.

First identified four years ago, it is now ready to unveil its secrets as experts begin the final stage of exploring its ruins.

In the coming months, it will secure the site ready for a free-entry visitor attraction, preserving the remains of the theatre amid a multi-million-pound new development assembled around it.

Once finished, it is intended to form a key new part of the Shakespeare tourist map, bringing visitors and admirers off the well-worn Stratford to Bankside trail.



The Curtain Theatre

Speaking at an early viewing of the site, Heather Knight, the senior archaeologist leading the dig on behalf of MoLA, said: "People often go to Stratford-upon-Avon to take in Shakespeare's birthplace and his grave.

"But people forget that it was here, in Shoreditch, he was living, working and writing.

"At the end of this project, when people can walk across those ruins and see the building, I think they'll finally get to realise he's a Shoreditch boy really."

Shoreditch is already well-known among theatre-lovers as the home of some of London's earliest stages, with Shakespeare and his peers performing at the Curtain Theatre and 300m up the road at The Theatre.

Preceding the Globe, they showcased some of Shakespeare's most famous works, including Henry V, and were the base of his company from 1597-99 until they were lured to Bankside to take to the stage at the Globe.

One of his least-documented playhouses, the Curtain Theatre lived on, but closed in 1622 during an economic downturn and was eventually buried beneath a Victorian goods yard.

Its remains were rediscovered in 2012 by excavators, during an exploration of the site for development.

"They'll finally get to realise he's a Shoreditch boy really"

Heather Knight, senior archaeologist

The walls have now been uncovered and the site declared ready for full exploration, taking place over the next few weeks.

A spokesman for MoLA described ruins as "exceptionally well preserved", adding: "It is hoped that the remains of the Curtain, which are approximately two to three metres below modern ground level, will give archaeologists more clues about the physical structure and use of the theatre and shed new light on the cultural makeup of the area and performances in the 16th and 17th centuries."

Archaeologists, who hope to reveal some findings in just three weeks, will be looking for evidence of the stage, the backstage area, the yard and the stairwells that led the theatregoers up to their seats.

Once complete, the site will be secured and left open for the public to see, surrounded by new development of residential and retail buildings in a £750m project.

Ed Vaizey, culture minister, said: "I can't tell you what a visceral thrill it is to be at an archaeological site like this.

"To actually discover a venue and to uncover it after 400 years, knowing exactly who may have walked through its doors and what they may have been performing, adds a special touch of magic.

"This will provide an absolutely lovely, exciting and mesmeric attraction in this part of London."

Heather Knight added: "Over the next few months we hope to learn more about Shakespeare's world and Shakespeare's Shoreditch, by looking at not just the building, but things associated with people. The pottery, the clay pipes, what people were eating, what they were using.

"It's an enormous privilege to be working on this site. There were only ever handfuls of these buildings, and they are so intertwined with an international icon."