

Birmingham's First Folio Goes on Tour

By Diane Parkes

A rare First Folio of William Shakespeare's plays which belongs to the residents of Birmingham is to go on tour to venues across the city including libraries, museums and community centres.

The 15-venue tour, which begins on April 23 and runs into 2023, is organised by 'Everything to Everybody', a project aiming to raise awareness of Birmingham's Shakespeare Memorial Library.

Founded in 1864, the collection of more than 100,000 items is both the first major Shakespeare library in the world and also the only extensive Shakespeare collection which belongs to the people of a city.

The 'Everything to Everybody' Project director Prof Ewan Fernie explains: "It's uniquely Birmingham - it was the first great Shakespeare Library in the world but it wasn't a Shakespeare library for just the local worthies it was for all people of the city.

"It remains, more than 150 years later, by far the biggest Shakespeare collection held in any public library in the world. And now 'Everything to Everybody' is breathing new life into it."

The collection, which is housed at Library of Birmingham, is an eclectic blend of items from across the globe.

"There are so many things in the collection which show how Shakespeare has come to life in different cultures, different languages and different ways," says Ewan, who is Fellow and Chair of Shakespeare Studies at the University of Birmingham's Shakespeare Institute.

"For example, you have antiquarian books from Shakespeare's lifetime or not long afterwards shelved alongside posters from schools from the 1950s and scrap books which have been made by obscure 19th century gentlemen and their families and then items which have come from Ethiopia.

"The collection is in 94 languages and almost all of them are spoken in Birmingham. It shows how Shakespeare has been so many different things to so many different people."

Central to the collection is a rare 1623 Shakespeare First Folio, the first collected volume of Shakespeare's plays – and one of only 235 First Folios currently known to exist. Its purchase for Birmingham in 1881 was unique.

"It's the only First Folio in the world which was bought as part of a vision of comprehensive culture," says Ewan. "It's a really significant book, possibly the most important secular book in Western culture.

"But the particular value of this book is that, more than any other First Folio, it's the People's Folio, it belongs to the people of Birmingham and it's therefore really important to take it out and tell people 'it's yours'."

The tour begins at Sutton Coldfield Library on April 23, Shakespeare's birthday, and continues to venues including the Black Country Living Museum in Dudley, Sense TouchBase Pears in Selly Oak, Selly Manor in Bournville, Highbury Hall in Moseley, GAP Arts in Balsall Heath, and The Hive in the Jewellery Quarter.

The 'Everything to Everybody' Project community engagement and volunteer officer Lauren Jansen-Parkes says each venue is then connecting with the book in different ways.

“For example, The Friends of Sutton Coldfield Library are putting on a full festival with actors, performances and talks, all celebrating Shakespeare and the plays while Sense are very much looking at how Shakespeare can be accessible in its truest form.

“Black Country Living Museum are running with the theme of Black Country accents and The Hive will be looking at physically how books are made, and why this is an important part of our creative and printing history.

“Selly Manor Museum are looking at the Tudor, Elizabethan and Jacobean history of the book while Highbury Hall is looking at the Victorian revolutionaries and how Shakespeare has been used politically to make Birmingham what it is today.”

The team have worked hard to ensure the First Folio will be protected on its travels with tight security and temperature and light-controlled conditions.

“This tour is a truly ground-breaking initiative, I’m not aware of anywhere else in the world or any other institution which has done this,” says Lauren. “The tour will enable people to see this book which is usually kept deep within the stacks of Birmingham Library.

“It’s important that it leaves the building because it belongs to the people of Birmingham and there is something truly magical when people see the book and see that it is stamped by the librarians as belonging to Birmingham Public Library and therefore it belongs to everyone.”

A collaboration between the University of Birmingham and Birmingham City Council with funding from the National Lottery Heritage Fund and History West Midlands, the ‘Everything to Everybody’ Project includes more than 40 community partners and features a range of activities.

The team have a series of family fun days at Library of Birmingham and are working with the Royal Shakespeare Company to stage the exhibition Everything to Everybody: Your Shakespeare, Your Culture between July 22 and November 5 as part of the Birmingham 2022 Festival.

The project also includes digitising many of the items in the collection – with a team of volunteers helping with events and the digitisation.

“‘Everything to Everybody’ is unlocking this treasure which a lot of people don’t know exists,” says Lauren. “A lot of it is about restoring it, so bringing it online and repairing items, and in some cases discovering what treasures we have in the library.

“On the other side it is reaching out to people and saying, look this is yours, how do you want to engage with it and connect with it?

“The library is unique to Birmingham’s heritage, a wonderful creative collection of things which tell the story of Birmingham and how people have come here from all over the world and have always been responding to Shakespeare’s plays.”

For more on the First Folio tour and opportunities to volunteer with the ‘Everything to Everybody’ Project see <https://everythingtoeverybody.bham.ac.uk/getinvolved/> and follow the tour’s progress on Twitter @E2EShakespeare