

## The Birmingham Shakespeare Memorial Library: Discovering the First Folio

The Birmingham Shakespeare Memorial Library's copy of Shakespeare's esteemed First Folio was 'acquired specifically for a public institution as part of a vision of working-class education', the only copy in the world to have such an aim.<sup>1</sup> During the nineteenth century the First Folio became a symbol of wealth and prestige, by contrast, the founders of the Birmingham Shakespeare Memorial Library sought ownership as part of their vision for 'civic improvement'. They wanted a First Folio for the people of Birmingham. But what is a First Folio, how did Birmingham acquire their copy, was the city home to any other copies, and how does its acquisition and ownership compare with other publicly owned First Folios?

The First Folio was published in 1623, seven years after Shakespeare's death, by Edward Blount and Isaac Jaggard who took the best part of two years to prepare the 907 page tome.<sup>2</sup> The plays were brought together by John Heminges and Henry Condell, colleagues from the King's Men acting company who seemingly had no previous experience of publishing.<sup>3</sup> It is thought that around 750 copies were printed, and the most recent census has identified 235 that have survived, a strong survival rate for a seventeenth-century book.<sup>4</sup> However, with an estimated cost of £250 for the print run, and a sales price of 15s. for an unbound copy, financially it was a risky venture, with 333 copies needing to be sold just to break even.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, the publishers were forced to economise as much as they could. They employed at least one inexperienced apprentice compositor, and mistakes were made, but all misprinted pages were used and corrections only made for future copies.<sup>6</sup> As a result of this approach, together with rebinding and repairs, and annotations made by some owners, no two surviving copies are exactly the same.

Without Heminges and Condell's endeavours, many of Shakespeare's most famous plays may never have been published, indeed, out of the thirty-six plays included in the First Folio,

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<sup>1</sup> E. Smith, *Shakespeare's First Folio: Four Centuries of an Iconic Book*, (Oxford, 2016), p. 107.

<sup>2</sup> M. Dobson, 'Folio Freaks: the fetishisation of Shakespeare's First Folio', *The Guardian* (8 November 2001)

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*

<sup>4</sup> S.K. Galbraith, 'Collectors' in E. Smith (eds.) *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare's First folio*, (Cambridge, 2016), p. 139.

<sup>5</sup> E. Rasmussen, 'Publishing the First Folio' in E. Smith (eds.) *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare's First folio*, (Cambridge, 2016), p. 27.

<sup>6</sup> Dobson, 'Folio Freaks'

eighteen had never been published before.<sup>7</sup> Those that appear for the first time include *All's Well That Ends Well*, *Macbeth*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Twelfth Night*. So, without its production we may never have heard anyone say 'If music be the food of love, play on', or watched a sleepwalking Lady Macbeth trying to wash the blood of the murdered Duncan from her hands.

Before the end of the eighteenth century the First Folio was regarded as 'merely an outdated book in poor condition'; yet, once book collecting flourished in the early nineteenth century, the price of First Folios began to escalate.<sup>8</sup> Buyers were 'mostly professional and distinguished men', and American collectors also entered the market.<sup>9</sup> Some fortunate academic institutions benefitted from their connections with these wealthy individuals, being bequeathed copies of First Folios following their deaths. But the influential men of Birmingham fostered a different vision. Charismatic minister, and author of the 'Civic Gospel' George Dawson, and Shakespearean scholar and local businessman Samuel Timmins had a unique ambition. They wanted a First Folio for the people of Birmingham, to be housed in the Shakespeare library along with 'every edition and every translation ... connected with the life or works of our great poet'.<sup>10</sup> However, achieving their dream was not easy. Following its opening in 1864, the library amassed a 'wonderfully rich' collection; nevertheless, *The Publishers' Circular* (the chief publication of the book world), lamented its 'miserable fourth' edition, asking 'will no lover of his country present this library with a First Folio?'.<sup>11</sup> And desire wasn't limited to the middle classes or those in the book world. In 1871, a 'working man' from Small Heath called for 'perfect Shakespeare', asking 'why should not Birmingham be the first to present to the world an unpolluted Shakespeare?'.<sup>12</sup>

It was 1870 when a desirable copy of the First Folio was identified, and a proposal to purchase it made. Described as 'a splendid and unsurpassed copy', it came with a hefty

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Galbraith, 'Collectors', p. 140.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p. 142.

<sup>10</sup> Editorial, *Birmingham Gazette*, 20 April 1861.

<sup>11</sup> 'From the Birmingham Free Library', *The Publishers' Circular*, 1 July 1869.

<sup>12</sup> A Working Man, Small Heath Aug 28, 1871, in 'Materials for a History of the Shakespeare Memorial Library Birmingham 1871-1930', S993.2.

price-tag of £520, over twice the annual salary paid to John Mullins, the Chief Librarian.<sup>13</sup> Bernard Quaritch, the renowned London bookseller who marketed this copy in his 1870 catalogue (image 1), warned that the opportunity to secure ‘a fine copy ... may not occur again for many years’.<sup>14</sup> Despite the significant expense, the library set up a special fund with Joseph Chamberlain depositing £50 to start the appeal. However, by 1873 sufficient funds had not been secured, and a decision was taken to suspend the proposed purchase, ‘since the opinion of many of the best Shakespeareans was that some other copy would be procurable before long, at a much lower cost’.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, it is interesting to speculate about this First Folio’s provenance. In 1869, Quaritch purchased a ‘sound and perfect’ copy at the sale of Clement T. Swanston’s collection. Acquired for £338, it is the same size as the one in his 1870 advertisement (First Folios vary in size due to being rebound, the larger copies being more greatly prized), and clearly the timing fits.<sup>16</sup> However, this is all we can glean from the newspaper reports of the sale. So, this could be ‘the splendid copy’, but we cannot be sure. Interestingly, the whereabouts of this copy is currently unknown, just one of many First Folio mysteries waiting to be solved.

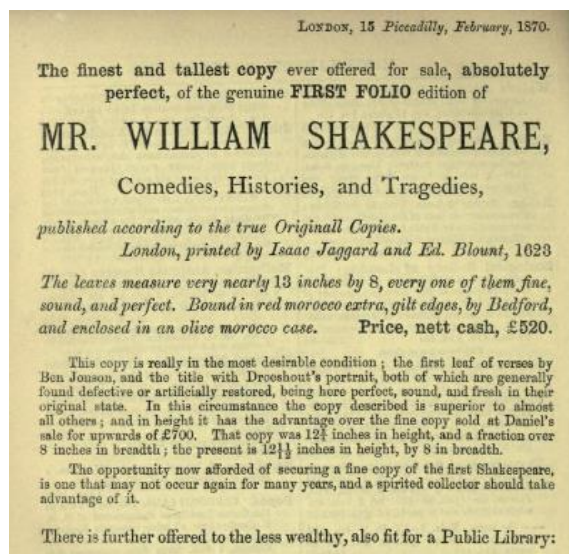


Image 1: B. Quaritch, *A general catalogue of books, arranged in classes*, 1870

<sup>13</sup> Shakespeare Memorial Library, *Birmingham Daily Post*, 25 April 1870; BCC/AT/1/1/2, Free Libraries Committee Minute Book 1866-1871, 4 June 1870.

<sup>14</sup> B. Quaritch, *A general catalogue of books, arranged in classes*, 1870

<sup>15</sup> Shakespeare Memorial Library, *Birmingham Daily Post*, 24 April 1873.

<sup>16</sup> *Literary News*, *Derby Mercury*, 1 September 1869.

The agreement to suspend this purchase was, quite possibly, a fortuitous decision, because in January 1879, a devastating fire destroyed much of the library's collection.<sup>17</sup> However, rather than deterring the ambition, the setback seems to have made those at the Shakespeare Memorial Library more determined. A week after the blaze, they vowed to 're-make our chief glory ... the Shakespeare Library', and renewed the desire to 'attain the rare distinction of possessing a copy of the First Folio'.<sup>18</sup> The opportunity came just two years later. On 29 September 1881, the Library's Management sub-committee resolved that 'the Book Committee be requested to consider the feasibility of securing a copy of the First Edition of the works of Shakespeare offered by Mr Quaritch'.<sup>19</sup> The copy was sent on inspection, and on 2 November 1881, the Chairman of the Book sub-committee reported that if the First Folio and a Third Folio were bought together, Quaritch would give a discount of £15.<sup>20</sup> This reduced the price of the First Folio from £250 to £240 and the Third Folio from £75 to £70.<sup>21</sup> He recommended that the offer be accepted, and on 4 November 1881, referring to the comments from 1879, the *Birmingham Daily Post* reported 'it gives us much pleasure to state that this anticipation has been realised, the Book Committee of the Free Libraries having just purchased a copy of the First Folio, in excellent condition'.<sup>22</sup> When the library reopened in 1882, the mayor received the library catalogue, and being given the honour of requesting the first book, called for the First Folio of Shakespeare, stating that 'in that county of Warwick a more fitting one could not be called for on that occasion'.<sup>23</sup>

But what do we know about the history of this copy, and where had it been for the previous 258 years? This has proved to be a very difficult question to answer. In 1902, Sir Sidney Lee carried out the first survey of First Folios. He sought to trace all surviving copies, and to provide a provenance where possible. Lee identified 158 known copies.<sup>24</sup> In the latest survey, published in 2012, Eric Rasmussen and Anthony James West identified 235 copies.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> The Fire at the Birmingham Library, *The Times*, 14 January 1879.

<sup>18</sup> News of the Day, *Birmingham Daily Post*, 16 Jan 1879

<sup>19</sup> BBC/1/AT/3/1/1 Management Sub-Committee Minute Book, 29 September 1881.

<sup>20</sup> BBC/1/AT/6/1/1 Book sub-committee Minute Book, 2 November 1881.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid*

<sup>22</sup> The Shakespeare Library, *Birmingham Daily Post*, 4 November 1881.

<sup>23</sup> Borough of Birmingham, *The Twentieth and Twenty-First Annual Reports of the Free Libraries Committee, on the years 1881 and 1882*, p. 36.

<sup>24</sup> S. Lee, *A Census of Extant Copies*, (Oxford, 1902).

<sup>25</sup> E. Rasmussen and A.J. West, *The Shakespeare First Folios, A Descriptive Catalogue* (Basingstoke, 2012).

However, rather disappointingly, neither survey provides any explanation as to the whereabouts of the Birmingham copy before 1881.

Could the newspaper reports from the time, or indeed the catalogues produced by Bernard Quaritch, provide any clues? A newspaper article from 1871 reports that Quaritch purchased 'a perfect and most desirable copy', 'elegantly bound in red Morocco by Riviere' from the late Joseph Lilly's stock, another eminent bibliopole.<sup>26</sup> The Birmingham copy also has red bindings by Riviere; this could be the same copy, but a purchase from 1871 is probably a little too early. Could any of Bernard Quaritch's catalogues offer any more pointers? In a catalogue dated 1875, Quaritch first lists a copy that matches many of the features of the one in Birmingham. Priced at £250, he describes it as being, 'entirely perfect with the exception of the letter-press portion of the title, which is facsimile', and bound in 'red Morocco extra by Riviere'.<sup>27</sup> The price is consistent with that paid by the library (before the discount was applied), and the other features match those listed by Rasmussen and West.<sup>28</sup> It appears again in 1877 under the heading, 'addenda of English books, from the libraries of the late George Ormerod, of the late Lord Bishop of Manchester, and chiefly of the late Honourable Edward Twistleton' (image 2, listing 9938).<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, this copy does not appear in any Quaritch catalogue after 1881. Some rather significant clues you would think, and taking the evidence from these catalogues, it could reasonably be deduced that this is the copy that is now in Birmingham, and that it was purchased by Quaritch in 1875 from one of these library sales. However, it has not been possible to find any evidence that any of these libraries contained a First Folio, and the archives at Bernard Quaritch Limited have no record of the purchases from these libraries, or the sale to the library in Birmingham. So, some clues have certainly been uncovered, but this intriguing mystery remains unresolved, at least for now.

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<sup>26</sup> Rare and Curious Books, *The Times*, 28 March 1871.

<sup>27</sup> B. Quaritch, *A new catalogue of English books; followed by the classical, theological, and general library of the late the honorable Edw. Twisleton*, (December 1875), p. 765

<sup>28</sup> Rasmussen and West, *First Folios*, p. 7-8

<sup>29</sup> B. Quaritch, *A general catalogue of books, offered to the public at the affixed prices by Bernard Quaritch. The supplement: 1875-77, (1877)*, p. 723 and p. 765.

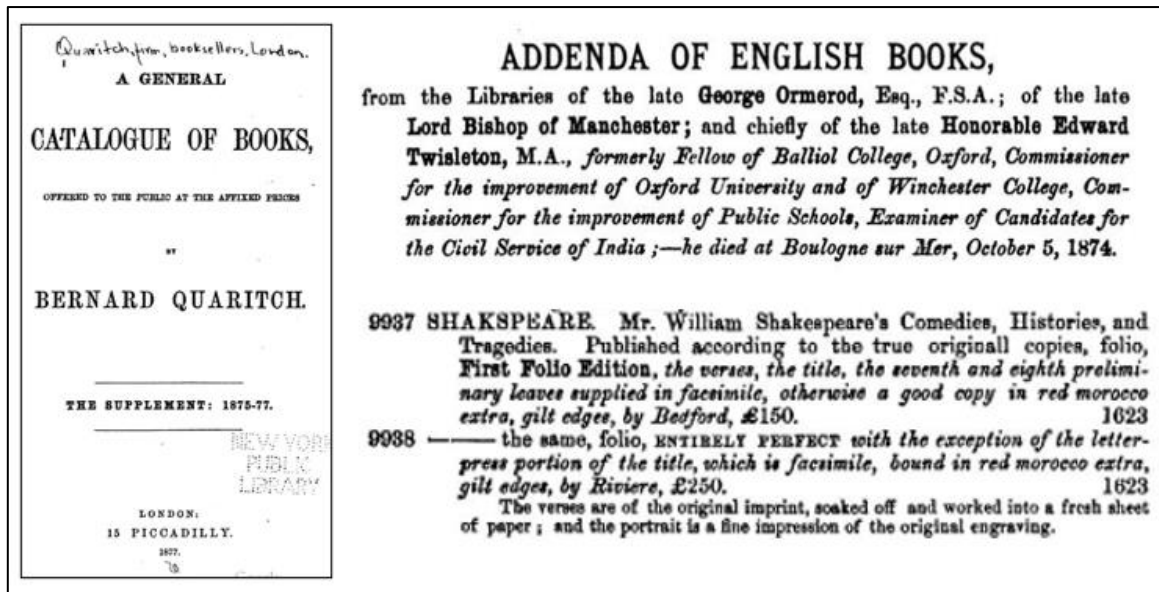


Image 2: A general catalogue of books, offered to the public at the affixed prices by Bernard Quaritch. The supplement: 1875-77. (1877)

During the twentieth century, the Library of Birmingham was also home to another First Folio, although in contrast to the publicly owned copy, its owner was a private individual. On Christmas Eve 1925, the region witnessed another devastating fire. This time at Hagley Hall in Worcestershire. A newspaper article reports that the hall was almost completely destroyed. However, it goes on to state that ‘the one consolation is that the wonderful set of four folios of Shakespeare, which themselves made the library famous, are saved. By happy chance the owner had only a few months before removed them to the strong room, where the fire did not reach them’.<sup>30</sup> After the fire, Viscount Cobham retained ownership, but the First Folio was deposited at the Birmingham Reference Library, presumably to mitigate any further risk of loss. And, in contrast to the Birmingham copy, we know quite a lot about it. Owned by Bury St. Edmonds M.P., Sir Thomas Hervey in 1660, in 1810 it was acquired by William Henry, third Baron Lyttelton.<sup>31</sup> It remained in his family, and was still owned by the 11th Viscount in 1990. It was at this point, however, that decades of family ownership ended. The First Folio was sold, along with copies of the Second, Third and Fourth Folios, to the Meisei University in Japan for \$900,000.<sup>32</sup> This university now owns twelve copies.

<sup>30</sup> ‘Fire at Hagley Hall’, *The Times*, 28 December 1925.

<sup>31</sup> A.J. West, *The Shakespeare First Folio: The History of the Book Volume II*, (Oxford, 2003), p.277

<sup>32</sup> *ibid*

Curiously, for a few years at the end of the nineteenth century, another First Folio could call the city of Birmingham home. But this time home was the Oratory of Saint Peter Neri, in Edgbaston. A newspaper report from 1894 tells us that Reverend William John Bowden bequeathed his copy of the First Folio to the Oratory, together with the 'residue of his property'.<sup>33</sup> This copy had been part of Thomas Gaisford, the Dean of Christ Church, Oxford's library, until it was sold in 1889. But it was only in Birmingham for five years. In September 1899, John Caldwell, Treasurer of the Westinghouse Air Brake Company in Pittsburgh, 'found and bought it'.<sup>34</sup> Caldwell, an avid collector of books and pictures, was the owner when Lee carried out his census in 1902.<sup>35</sup> Upon his death in 1910, the copy was sold to Henry and Emily Folger for \$6,250, to become part of their growing collection (by the time their museum opened in Washington D.C. in 1932 they had amassed a staggering 82 copies).<sup>36</sup> But there is more to learn here too. What is the Reverend William John Bowden's connection to the Oratory, how did John Caldwell find out about this copy, and how much did he pay for it? Tracking First Folios can be fascinating, but it is also frustrating, and there is always another question to answer.

Within the context of First Folios the Birmingham copy is unique, being owned by the people of the city. In 1902 when Lee carried out his census, only around 30% were publicly owned, by 2003 this percentage had increased to approximately 88%. Moreover, in addition to the shift towards public ownership, many First Folios (including the one that was once housed at the Oratory in Birmingham) crossed the Atlantic, driven in no small part by Henry and Emily Folger. Of the known publicly owned copies, 37 remain in the UK, with 139 in the USA and 25 in the rest of the world. As we have seen, in contrast to the First Folio in Birmingham, most were bequeathed by wealthy benefactors, or purchased by American institutions. However, there are a few with curious stories to tell.

Interestingly, two Birmingham residents were responsible for providing Australia with their only known First Folio. Now housed in the State library in New South Wales, it was donated in February 1885 by Richard and George Tangye who purchased the volume for £850 in 1884 (again, we know nothing of its whereabouts prior to this date). At the time, the

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<sup>33</sup> 'Bequest to the Oratory', *Birmingham Daily Post*, 23 August 1894.

<sup>34</sup> West, *First Folio*, p.161

<sup>35</sup> Lee, *Census*, p. 32.

<sup>36</sup> West, *First Folio*, p.161

Birmingham engineering firm formed by the Tangye brothers was one of the largest suppliers of jacks, pumps, steam engines, and hydraulic presses.<sup>37</sup> Richard travelled extensively for business including to Australia where he established branches in Sydney and Melbourne. When the Folio arrived in Australia it was housed in a carved oak casket made from oak grown in the forest of Arden. A report from November 1884 in the *Birmingham Daily Post* provides a wonderfully detailed description. The casket being made by Messrs Marris and Norton, of Birmingham, the design 'while rich and abundant', being 'kept strictly within the limits of good taste, the designer having skilfully availed himself of the variety of Elizabethan decoration, while avoiding the more florid characteristics of the period'.<sup>38</sup>

In England, three Folios owe their fate to the actions of local women. Until 2011, the Craven Museum in Skipton thought they had a Second Folio (1632), that was until Anthony West examined it and declared that he had discovered a 'new' First Folio.<sup>39</sup> It was bequeathed to the town museum by Ann Wilkinson who died in 1936. She came from a local family of wealthy mill owners, the book being purchased by her brother, an amateur playwright.<sup>40</sup> Consequently, a copy of the prized First Folio is now on permanent display at a small museum in North Yorkshire. Over a century earlier, in 1829, Plymouth residents Mrs. Fortescue and Mrs. Gillis, offered their First Folio to the public library in Plymouth.<sup>41</sup> Rather surprisingly, readers could borrow it like any other book until a note was added 'not to circulate'. This copy now forms part of the Folger collection, being sold and taken to America in 1913.<sup>42</sup> The copy held by the John Rylands University Library in Manchester, was donated along with around 40,000 other books purchased from Lord Spencer at Althorp in 1892 by Enriqueta Rylands who sought to create a permanent memorial to her husband, textile manufacturer, John Rylands. Bernard Quaritch commented that she bestowed 'a peerless gift upon her fellow citizens'.<sup>43</sup> So, whilst many copies are inaccessible to members of the general public, or have migrated to America, as is the case of the copy from

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<sup>37</sup> Shakespeare at the Library, <https://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/stories/shakespeare-library/shakespeares-first-folio> (accessed: 15 December 2022).

<sup>38</sup> 'Shakespeare in Australia, A Birmingham Gift', *Birmingham Daily Post*, 21 November 1884.

<sup>39</sup> Shakespeare's First Folio, <https://skiptontownhall.co.uk/collection-stories/cs-shakespeares-first-folio/> (accessed: 15 December 2022).

<sup>40</sup> *ibid*

<sup>41</sup> Folger First Folio 59, <https://www.folger.edu/first-folio-number-59> (accessed: 15 December 2022)

<sup>42</sup> *ibid*

<sup>43</sup> West, First Folio, p.110.



Plymouth, a small number, including those in Birmingham and Skipton, still have a connection with 'ordinary' people, the very people Shakespeare intended his plays to entertain.

In 2020, a First Folio sold for nearly \$10 million, described by Christie's as 'the most expensive work of literature ever auctioned'.<sup>44</sup> Over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a dramatic change had taken place. As Adam Hooks states, 'Shakespeare's book is now a sanctified object, one that can be defined as a 'fetish' in a number of ways ... a commodity emptied of meaning but possessing immense financial capital'.<sup>45</sup> Whilst always relatively expensive, it was once within reach of 'commoners of standing'; now it is strictly an elite item.<sup>46</sup> Perhaps this is why the Birmingham copy is so important, a copy still genuinely in 'public ownership', one that has retained its meaning, and that the people of the city can engage with. Revered, but not fetishized.

Joan Turner

'Everything to Everybody' Heritage Ambassador



Using Birmingham's forgotten past to inspire our future  
Unlocking the world's first great people's Shakespeare Library for all



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<sup>44</sup> Shakespeare's First Folio Is the Most Expensive Work of Literature Ever Auctioned, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/shakespeares-first-folio-sells-ten-million-dollars-180976074/> (accessed: 15 December 2022).

<sup>45</sup> A.G. Hooks 'Afterword: the Folio as Fetish' in E. Smith (eds.) *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare's First folio*, (Cambridge, 2016), p. 186.

<sup>46</sup> *ibid*, p.192.