

‘Your beautiful little Shakespeare library’, Halliwell-Phillipps and the Shakespeare Memorial Library

One of the Shakespeare Memorial Library’s many donors during the early decades was James Orchard Halliwell-Phillipps (1820-1889). Antiquary and literary scholar, Halliwell-Phillipps gave a number of valuable items to Birmingham’s Shakespeare collection, including a number of facsimile Quartos.

Then in May 1868, in a letter to Samuel Timmins, who was Secretary to the subscribers’ committee, H-P hinted at a proposal designed to enhance the value of ‘your beautiful little Shakespeare library’. What he had in mind wasn’t clear and I couldn’t immediately find any further reference to it in the archives.

Meanwhile H-P donated a large number of books and manuscripts to Edinburgh University with the intention of establishing a Shakespeare Library for Scotland. This was in 1872. Before that, he’d given five hundred books to the local authorities at Stratford-upon-Avon to help establish the library of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust.

Then, on his death in 1889, it turned out he had made provision in his will for the Birmingham Corporation to acquire his remaining, but still valuable, collection of Shakespeareana, on condition it paid his Trustees the preferential sum of £7,000. H-P had originally intended to leave his collection to the

Stratford Corporation but, following a long running dispute with the authorities (the details of which I've not so far been able to discover), he'd revoked the bequest.



James Orchard Halliwell-Phillipps, by Ernest Edwards, published by Lovell Reeve & co. 1863.

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His will also specified that if this offer was not accepted the collection was to be deposited until it could be sold for a price not less than £10,000. If it was not sold after twelve years had elapsed, it was to be put up for auction.

This tempting offer placed Birmingham's Free Library Committee in a dilemma.

To spend such a significant amount of ratepayers' money on what was undoubtedly a very valuable collection, would threaten the completion of three new district libraries currently at the planning stage. Sam Timmins urged

acceptance of the offer, but the Town Council decided against. An attempt was made to raise the funds by private subscription but was not realisable. When Birmingham failed to meet the offer the collection was finally sold in 1897 to Marsden J. Perry of Providence, Rhode Island, and in 1908 the majority of it passed to Henry Clay Folger, where it now remains in the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, DC.

Steve Hewett, Doctoral Research Student, Dept. of History, University of Birmingham. Heritage Ambassador Lead, 'Everything to Everybody' Project.

Notes

Freeman, A., & Freeman, J. Phillipps, James Orchard Halliwell- (1820–1889), *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <http://www.oxforddnb.com>

Library of Birmingham, Shakespeare Collection, S993.2, *Memoirs of the Shakespeare Memorial Library*.



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

