

Two Small Towns



Bird's Eye View of Birmingham, William Merrett Hodges 1886, BMT



Stratford-upon-Avon Ordnance Survey Map 1908, Nat Library Scotland

William Shakespeare, the world's greatest playwright, was born in Stratford-upon-Avon in April 1564. 300 years later the world's first Shakespeare library was established in nearby Birmingham for the benefit of its people. When William was born, both Stratford & Birmingham were small towns in rural Warwickshire.

There is no evidence that William Shakespeare ever travelled to Birmingham. He went to London where he found great success writing plays and acting. He came back to his family towards the end of his life to live in a fine home, called New Place, in Stratford.

During Tudor times, when Shakespeare was alive, Stratford and Birmingham were a similar size with trades based on farming. They both held weekly markets and had a church for Christian worship.

As transportation improved, Stratford-upon-Avon gradually became a destination for visitors interested in the work and life of Shakespeare and the theatre. A huge Shakespeare celebration in 1769 began a tradition of a Shakespeare festival and Shakespeare's birthplace was saved as a site of national significance in 1847. Samuel Timmins, a Birmingham factory owner and founding figure of the Shakespeare Memorial Library, was part of this venture.

Birmingham, however, developed into a busy commercial town and was at the centre of the Industrial Revolution. Birmingham was the hub of a vast canal network that allowed manufacturers to trade goods and Birmingham became known as the Workshop of the World.

Today, Birmingham is regarded as the "second city" after London and Stratford-upon-Avon, due to its Shakespearean connections, is a must-see town for tourists from home and abroad. As the home of the Royal Shakespeare Company, Stratford attracts worldwide audiences to see staged performances of the plays. Birmingham, however has made significant choices to make Shakespeare accessible to working people; Birmingham REP was the first company to perform Shakespeare in modern dress and George Dawson, founder of the city's Shakespeare library, associated him with a new, modern world.

The towns have developed in remarkably different ways, yet both continue to share a love of Shakespeare.

Activities:

Why are there so many chimneys on the Birmingham image (top left)?

Colour in the main roads, railway line and the canal on the Stratford image (top right).

Create a table comparing features in Birmingham and Stratford-upon-Avon include population, geographical features. Do they have any features in common?

visitbirmingham.com www.wikipedia.org

www.visitstratforduponavon.co.uk