



The Guild Chapel  
STRATFORD-UPON-AVON



## The Guild Chapel – Stratford-Upon-Avon

Standing on the corner of Church Street and Chapel Lane, the Guild Chapel is one of Stratford-upon-Avon's most iconic and important historic buildings.

It is home to one of the rarest series of medieval wall paintings in all of Europe – covered up on orders given to Shakespeare's father in the 16th century following the English Reformation.

They were re-discovered centuries later, preserved in incredible detail and offering a real glimpse into our medieval past and the world into which William Shakespeare was born.

### **History of the Guild Chapel:**

The story of the Guild Chapel began in 1269 when the Guild of the Holy Cross was given permission to build a hospital and chapel in the town.

Within a century the guild had become a dominant social force in Stratford and during the 15th century, the guild enjoyed great prosperity.

It built the Guild Hall, schoolhouse and almshouses that dominate Church Street today and a schoolmaster was employed to teach the members' sons. It also acquired property and wealth through the generosity of its members, who in return expected the priests of the Guild to pray for their souls after death.

In the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, many of the Chapel's wall paintings were applied, funded by the 1496 will of Hugh Clopton, a wealthy Guild member, local benefactor and Lord Mayor of London.

But then came great change.

When nine-year-old King Edward VI came to the throne in 1547, his aggressively Protestant council suppressed all the guilds in the kingdom, and confiscated their property. In Stratford, it was the end of an era. The Guild was abolished, and with it Stratford lost its civic infrastructure. The town petitioned the King for a Royal Charter of Incorporation to establish the Town Corporation of Stratford, which was granted a few days before Edward's death in 1553. Much of the confiscated property belonging to the Guild was given back to the Town Corporation, including the Holy Cross Chapel.



## **The Wall Paintings**

The Chapel was once a riot of colour and imagery.

The walls were painted with a series of striking images depicting the saints, the gates of heaven and hell, and other popular reflections on the afterlife. Following the Reformation, these images were banned, Elizabeth I passing Royal Injunction in 1559 demanding "removal of all signs of superstition and idolatry from places of worship". In Stratford, that Royal injunction was acted on in 1563/4 by John Shakespeare, father of the playwright, who was Chamberlain of the Corporation of Stratford. He authorised 2 shillings to be spent on defacing the images in the chapel.

Whether they were all covered at that time or at a later date is unknown. William Shakespeare was born in 1564 and it is quite possible the paintings, or some of them, were still visible during his lifetime. Speculation also surrounds John Shakespeare's willingness to follow the orders he was given, with scholars long debating whether John and his family followed the Catholic faith the Reformation was out to suppress. What we do know is that rather than the paintings being defaced, they were largely limewashed over instead – and this lime washing actually served to protect them.

The chancel walls are understood to have been decorated with ten scenes from the Legend of the True Cross, while beneath the windows on the lower north wall of the nave there were scenes of the Dance of Death.

On the south wall we have discovered fragmentary remains of the Life of Adam painting, while on the upper part of the west wall, there were depictions of the murder of Thomas Becket and St George and the Dragon.

## **Conservation works:**

The painstaking conservation of two of the Chapel's best-preserved wall paintings was completed at the end of 2016.

These are the large graphically illustrated 'Doom' which can be seen above the Chancel arch, and the 'Allegory of Death', which is found on the west wall.

The 'Doom' depicts the Day of Judgement, with Christ central to the scene, sitting in judgement of souls as they rise to the glories of Heaven or descend into Hell.

The 'Allegory of Death' had, for many years, been hidden behind wooden panelling on the lower south side of the west wall. The mural illustrates the transitory nature of earthly glories and the suffering for sins following death, a message repeated throughout the Chapel and which the Guild was keen to deliver.

The paintings now appear brighter, clearer and more legible to the naked eye, allowing visitors to the Chapel to gain an impression of these works of art as they were originally intended.