

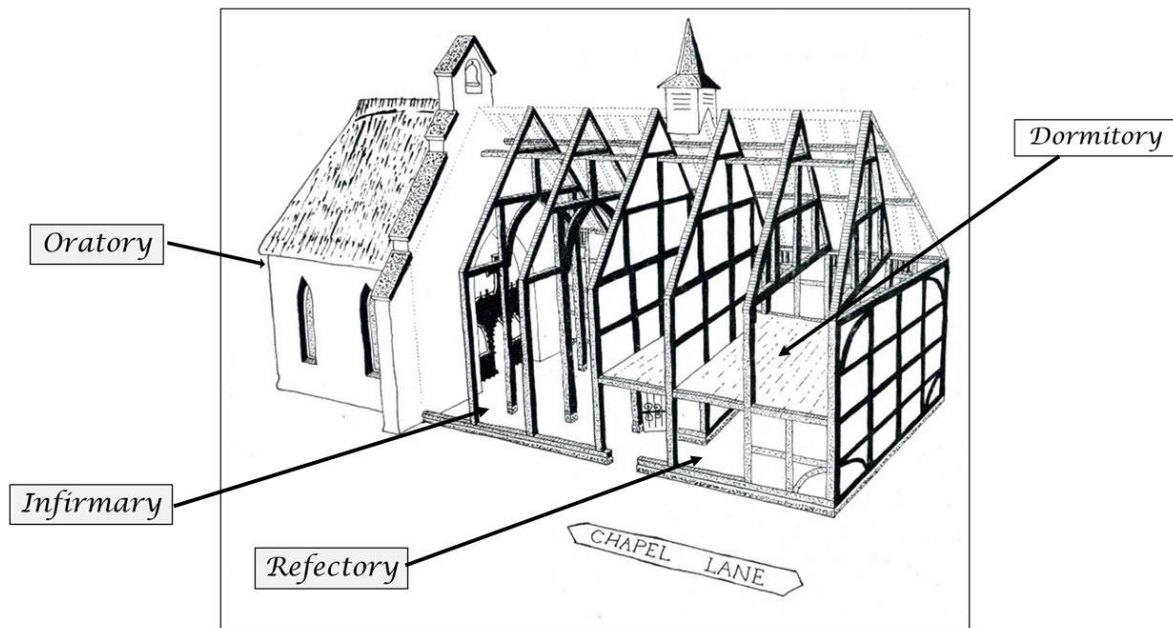
The Guild of the Holy Cross in Stratford & its Buildings*

The Guild of the Holy Cross



The Guild Chapel, Guildhall, schoolroom, and almshouses

The Guild of the Holy Cross in Stratford-upon-Avon dates from at least 1269. We know this because this is when the Guild was granted a licence from the Bishop of Worcester to build a chapel and hospital for poor priests in the diocese. The hospital was built on the site of the current Guild Chapel. It was usual for medieval hospitals to have an oratory or private chapel, and parts of this 13th century structure have survived in the east and south walls of the chancel.



Suggested layout of the 13th century hospital. Adapted from a drawing by Wilfrid Puddephat

The Guild of the Holy Cross was a religious and charitable guild, not a trade guild. The priests of the Guild would say prayers for deceased members to help them get into heaven more quickly, a widespread belief in the medieval period, and the Guild built the hospital as part of their charitable work. Doing 'good works' was also seen as important if you wanted a 'good death'.

Anyone could join the Guild, as long as they could afford the joining fee and, for most people, it was the equivalent of today's gym fees or a golf-club membership, although some did pay more. Joining the Guild was a good idea if you wanted to meet influential people and widen your network of contacts. Most members were local tradesmen, craftsmen and their families, but local clergy, gentry and nobility joined too. There were even some royal members. Some members came from nearby towns like Coventry and Warwick, but also from as far away as London and Bristol.

In addition to the hospital, the Guild also provided 'social services'. It helped its members when they were ill, and supported their families if they died; it also gave 'alms' (charity) to poor and vulnerable local people, and provided 'almshouses' – a bit like sheltered housing – next to the chapel. The almshouses that were built around 1500 survive to this day, and still provide housing for elderly and vulnerable Stratfordians.



The Guildhall and almshouses

The Guild also took an interest in maintaining local infrastructure like bridges, and founded the first school in Stratford. In 1295 they appointed a schoolmaster called Richard as 'rector scholarum' to teach members' sons Latin, music, and the principles of Christian faith.

The Medieval Guild Chapel



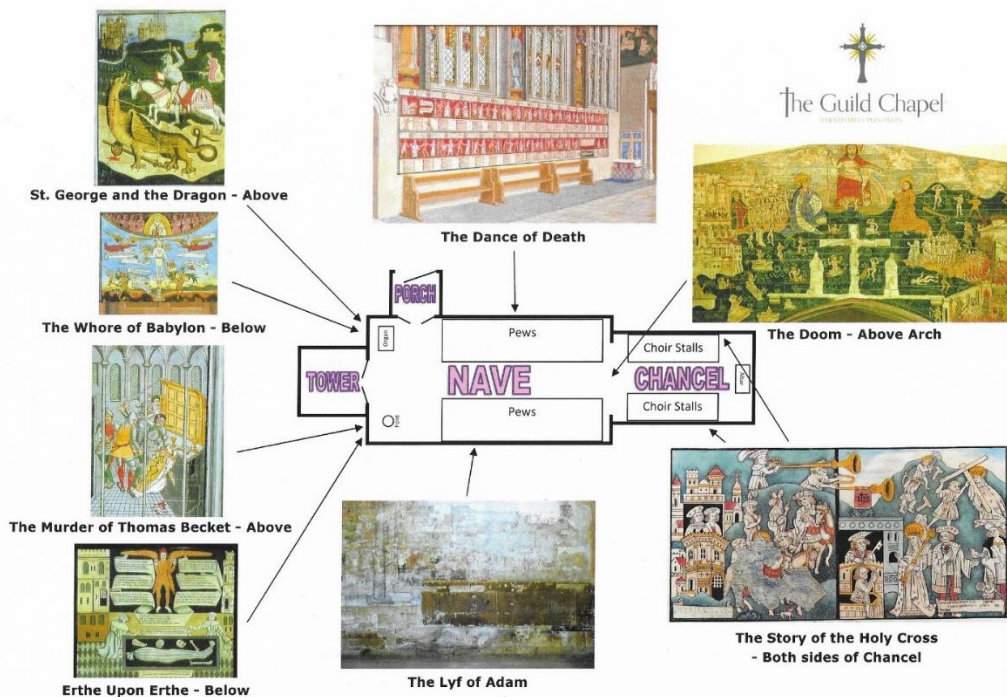
The Guild Chapel on the intersection of Church Street and Chapel Street, Stratford-upon-Avon

To start with, the Guild of the Holy Cross in Stratford simply had an altar within the parish church, Holy Trinity, but as they became wealthier and more powerful, they wanted their own place of worship. The area that had been the hospital in the 13th century was converted in the early 1400's, and records show that proctors from Stratford made the long journey to Rome to obtain permission from the pope to allow the Divine service to be held there in

1424/25. Two years later, a new altar stone of alabaster replaced a temporary altar within the Chapel.

In 1449/50, rafters and scaffolding were purchased to build a new chancel, and in 1451/52 further bequests of money were made to furnish the new structure. In the 1490's, the old timber-framed nave was replaced with a stone structure, the porch and tower were added, and the walls painted. The 1490's refurbishments were paid for by the wealthy local merchant, Hugh Clopton, whose house, New Place, was just across the lane from the Chapel.

Take part in the [Clopton Trail](#) to find out more about Hugh Clopton's significance in the town.



For more information about the Chapel's wall paintings, click [here](#).

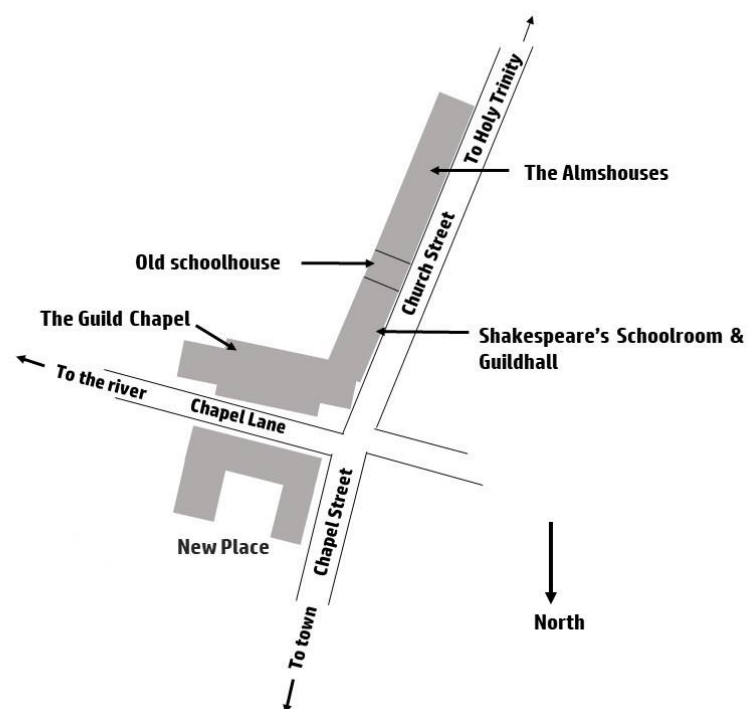
We do not know exactly what the Chapel's original ceiling would have looked like but it was probably very different to the plaster ceiling we see today. Most likely it would have been a shallow-pitched ceiling (sloped rather than flat), made of timber and decorated with carved wooden angels, some of which survive. These angels would also have been painted in bright colours. The shields they carried would have featured the coats-of-arms of the patrons and benefactors of the Chapel.



Medieval wooden angels from the original timber ceiling

There was also a highly decorative rood screen (a 'rood' is a cross or crucifix). The rood screen was a wooden screen, see-through in its upper half, which separated the chancel from the nave. Above the screen was a rood loft, a platform on which there were carved wooden figures, flanking the rood or crucifix. Again, these would have been painted, all adding to the drama.

The Guildhall and schoolhouse



Location of the Chapel and the Guild buildings. Image courtesy of Pamela Devine.

It was in the early 1400's that the Guild built the Guildhall next door to the Chapel. Tree-ring dating suggests the timbers date from 1417-18. The Guildhall became the headquarters and meeting room of the Guild. The house next to the Guildhall was built in 1427/28 and this was

the Guild's schoolhouse. A teacher called a 'grammar priest' taught the sons of Guild members on the ground floor, and lived in a room upstairs.

By 1530, the Guild buildings were the most impressive complex of buildings in Stratford.

After the Reformation

Like similar guilds elsewhere, the Stratford Guild had become wealthy and powerful, but this wealth and power was part of their undoing. During the Reformation in the 16th century, when England went from being a Catholic country to a Protestant one, King Edward VI dissolved (closed) all religious guilds in 1547 and confiscated their property. It was the end of an era, in Stratford and across the country.

The Chapel was closed after the Guild was dissolved, but the wall-paintings survived until 1563/64 when they were covered over with whitewash following an injunction from Queen Elizabeth I, and it is thanks to William Shakespeare's father, John Shakespeare, that we know when this happened. He was the town chamberlain (treasurer) at the time and he recorded the payment of 2 shillings (about 10 pence) in the town accounts 'for defasyng ymages in ye chappell'. The Chapel itself had a variety of uses in the following years: parts were rented out; it was used as a preaching venue; it was a petty school (like an elementary school); and in the seventeenth century a puritan vicar was accused of allowing his children to play ball and his servants to hang clothes in there, allowing his dog to use it, and using it for his pigs and chickens!

After the Guild was abolished in 1547, Stratford needed someone else to run the town, and in 1553, King Edward granted the town a Royal Charter of Incorporation, creating Stratford Borough Council. All the Guild's properties and assets were handed over to the new town corporation, including the Guild Chapel, and the Council became responsible for them, as well as caring for the almshouse poor, paying and housing the vicar and his chaplain, and the schoolmaster. The Guildhall became the headquarters of Stratford Borough Council and remained the heart of civic life in Stratford for over 400 years, until 1848.

The school became known as The King's New School (later still, it was renamed King Edward VI Grammar School). It moved into the Guildhall in the 1560s and the school continues to use the site today. This is the school that William Shakespeare almost certainly went to as a boy in 1571.

Many changes have occurred within the Council since then. After the formation of Stratford Town Trust in 2001, the Trust became custodians of the Guild Chapel and responsible for its upkeep, using the income from the Guild and College Estates to fund both that and many worthy causes within the town.

Later changes



A major refurbishment of the Chapel was started in 1804, when the present plaster ceiling was installed, replacing the original 15th century timber roof which was by then rotten. This was when some of the wall paintings were first rediscovered but, although there was some interest in them, they were quickly covered over and the walls were painted white.

Timber paneling was subsequently installed up to dado-level around the nave, and up to the height of a new gallery on the west wall which was installed in 1835 to accommodate a growing congregation in the town. The pews were laid out in a different arrangement to now, and faced forwards towards the altar. There was also a pulpit and organ at the front of the nave, next to the chancel arch.

At some point the Day of Judgement or Doom painting was overpainted with scrolls, and prayer boards were fixed to the chancel arch; we believe this might have happened around 1850. They were removed in the early 20th century.

The Friends of the Guild Chapel



By the middle of the 20th century the Chapel had fallen into considerable disrepair. The Friends of the Guild Chapel was formed in 1954 and over the next thirty years the Friends undertook significant repairs and alterations to both the interior and exterior of the building, financed initially by money raised by the Friends, and latterly the Town Council. At first, the repairs and alterations were made under the supervision of the architect Stephen Dykes-Bower. The work undertaken included:

- repairs to tower stonework
- repairs to porch stonework
- removal of gallery, box pews, paneling, organ, and pulpit
- removal of chancel floor and replacement with concrete flagstones
- removal of underfloor heating system
- installation of new pews and paneling, to resemble an Oxbridge college chapel in style
- replacement of the windows in the chancel with new stained glass designed by Vernon Spreadbury



The interior of the Guild Chapel today

The Chapel's historic graffiti



Historic graffiti in the Guild Chapel. Images courtesy of Pamela Devine

The walls of the Chapel are covered with historic graffiti, some of it dating back over 500 years. There is a growing awareness that such graffiti is a valuable historical resource which needs to be preserved and recorded. Historic graffiti tells us what was important to those who left it, people so often excluded from historical records. The graffiti in the Guild Chapel shows us what was important to the medieval Guild members, William Shakespeare's contemporaries, and the people who have come and gone from the building in the centuries afterwards. Nowadays, the graffiti is hard to see but shine a raking light onto the walls and it leaps out at you. Bring a torch and discover it for yourself!

****Volunteers at the Guild Chapel offer online and in-person talks on many aspects of the Guild Chapel. If you would like to know more, please click [here](#)***

Further Reading

- Pamela Devine (2020) *Writing on Shakespeare's Walls. The Historic Graffiti in the Guild Chapel, Stratford-upon-Avon* (Oxford & Shrewsbury: YouCaxton)
- Kate Giles, Anthony Masinton and Geoff Arnott (2012) 'Visualising the Guild Chapel, Stratford upon Avon', *Internet Archaeology* 32: <https://intarch.ac.uk/journal/issue32/1/toc.html>
- Mairi Macdonald (2007) *The Register of the Guild of the Holy Cross, St. Mary and St. John the Baptist, Stratford-upon-Avon* (Dugdale Society no. 42)
- Ronnie Mulryne (ed.) (2013) *The Guild and Guild Buildings of Shakespeare's Stratford-upon-Avon* (Farnham: Ashgate)
- Nicholas Orme (2021) *Going to Church in Medieval England* (London: Yale University Press)