William Shakespeare

William Shakespeare was born in Stratford-upon-Avon in Warwickshire and was baptised a few days later on 26 April 1564. His father, John Shakespeare, was a glove maker and wool merchant and his mother, Mary Arden, was the daughter of a well-to-do landowner from Wilmcote, South Warwickshire. It is likely Shakespeare was educated at the local King Edward VI Grammar School in Stratford.

**Marriage**

The next documented event in Shakespeare’s life is his marriage at the age of 18 to Anne Hathaway, the daughter of a local farmer, on November 28, 1582. She was eight years older than him and their first child, Susanna, was born six months after their wedding. Two years later, the couple had twins, Hamnet and Judith, but their son died when he was 11 years old.

Again, a gap in the records leads some scholars to refer to Shakespeare’s life between 1585 and 1592 as 'the lost years'. By the time he reappears again, mentioned in a London pamphlet, Shakespeare has made his way to London without his family and is already working in the theatre.

**Acting career**

Having gained recognition as an actor and playwright Shakespeare had clearly ruffled a few feathers along the way – contemporary critic, Robert Green, described him in the 1592 pamphlet as an, "upstart Crow".

As well as belonging to its pool of actors and playwrights, Shakespeare was one of the managing partners of the Lord Chamberlain's Company (renamed the King's Company when James succeeded to the throne), whose actors included the famous Richard Burbage. The company acquired interests in two theatres in the Southwark area of London near the banks of the Thames - the Globe and the Blackfriars.

In 1593 and 1594, Shakespeare’s first poems, 'Venus and Adonis' and 'The Rape of Lucrece', were published and he dedicated them to his patron, Henry Wriothesley, the Earl of Southampton. It is thought Shakespeare also wrote most of his sonnets at this time.

**Playwright**

Shakespeare was prolific, with records of his first plays beginning to appear in 1594, from which time he produced roughly two a year until around 1611. His hard work quickly paid off, with signs that he was beginning to prosper emerging soon after the publication of his first plays. By 1596 Shakespeare’s father, John had been granted a coat of arms and it’s probable that Shakespeare had commissioned them, paying the fees himself. A year later he bought New Place, a large house in Stratford.

His earlier plays were mainly histories and comedies such as 'Henry VI', 'Titus Andronicus', 'A Midsummer Night's Dream', 'The Merchant of Venice' and 'Richard II'. The tragedy, 'Romeo and Juliet', was also published in this period. By the last years of Elizabeth I's reign Shakespeare was well established as a famous poet and playwright and was called upon to perform several of his plays before the Queen at court. In 1598 the author Francis Meres described Shakespeare as England’s greatest writer in comedy and tragedy.

In 1602 Shakespeare's continuing success enabled him to move to upmarket Silver Street, near where the Barbican is now situated, and he was living here when he wrote some of his greatest tragedies such as 'Hamlet', 'Othello', 'King Lear' and 'Macbeth'.

**Final years**

Shakespeare spent the last five years of his life in New Place in Stratford. He died on 23 April 1616 at the age of 52 and was buried in Holy Trinity Church in Stratford. He left his property to the male heirs of his eldest daughter, Susanna. He also bequeathed his 'second-best bed' to his wife. It is not known what significance this gesture had, although the couple had lived primarily apart for 20 years of their marriage.