

MARCH MEETING

Second Speaker Court Halls and Market Crosses

A talk by Jon Iveson

Reported by Terry Sutton

Following the 400th anniversary in 2016 of the death of William Shakespeare there was a growing interest in the life and career of the poet and playwright. One of many questions was did Shakespeare visit Dover and if he did where did he perform?

It was a question asked of historian Jon Iveson, Dover District Council's museums' curator who is also the council's senior officer responsible for tourism. Jon had to admit he did not know but to try to solve the conundrum he began a detailed research.

At the end of it, as he told our members at our March public meeting, he still cannot give a definite answer backed up with proof. But his research proved very interesting as described in Jon's illustrated talk entitled Court Halls and Market Crosses.

Jon believes if Shakespeare performed at all in Dover it would have been at, or possibly at the foot of, the town's Guildhall or Court Hall. Shakespeare had a managing role in a group of theatrical players who were first called The Lord Chamberlain's Men and later, following the crowning in 1603 of James I, they were renamed The King's Men. Research shows they performed in Dover at least three times between 1597 and 1610. Was Shakespeare with them and did he take part in their shows? Jon is not sure. But it is possible.

Jon's next line of research was to locate the town's Court Hall and this he did with the use of a series of ancient maps dating back to 1541 which Jon displayed on a screen. These maps

indicated the Court Hall was somewhere in Bench Street, probably near the present corner with Queen Street. It was here, says Jon, where the first performances took place, probably sponsored by the Corporation.

In 1605 Dover Corporation decided to replace the old Court Hall in Bench Street with a new one bang in the middle of the Market Square. Contemporary artists' impressions show the new hall was built with arches underneath and steps leading up to the room above. It seems probable that at one stage, for a short period, there were two Court Halls in the town.

By 1737 additions had been made to the Market Square Guildhall to make it L shaped and another artist's work in 1850 showed it was still there with a market in progress in the arches underneath.

But in 1861 an advertisement appeared in the Dover Express offering for sale parts of the Guildhall that had by that time been demolished.

"So", said Jon to the meeting, "After all that research we still do not really know the answers to the questions posed."



The Court Hall 1822 with the market underneath by John Eastes Youden Courtesy of Dover Museum