

Factsheet

Shakespeare and the Tower of London

Working for playhouses in Shoreditch, Southwark and Blackfriars and living in Bishopsgate, Shakespeare spent his time in London in the shadow of the Tower of London, the most famous landmark at the eastern end of the city. By the 1580s when he was starting his career, the Tower had already secured its infamous reputation as a fortress, prison for high-ranking citizens and place of sudden death. Shakespeare exploited this dramatic potential to the full, drawing on and adapting a wealth of sources including the great Elizabethan chroniclers Hall and Holinshed.

- As far as we know despite living and working in the area, Shakespeare never visited the Tower of London although it figures heavily in many of the history plays.
- Most of Shakespeare's understanding of English history and the Tower of London came from the writing of Ralph Holinshed. Holinshed had a particularly low opinion of the Tower and in 1588 he wrote that the Tower is *"Rather an Armourie and a house of munition and thereunto a place for the safekeeping of offenders, than a palace roiall for a king and queen to siourne in."*
- Shakespeare echoes this sentiment in Richard III when Queen Elizabeth, the mother of the Princes, refers to the Tower as a "rough cradle for such pretty ones, rude ragged nurse, old sullen play fellow."
- The Tower plays a significant role in Richard III, in contrast to later plays such as Henry VIII in which it is a threatening presence in the wings, from which characters never return.
- It is possible to identify genuine events and historical characters in the plays although often details have been altered or lost. However, William Lord Hastings really was arrested at a council meeting in the Tower and given a summary execution, becoming the first of only a seven of prisoners to be executed within the Tower's walls.
- Richard III and the murder of the Princes in the Tower must be one of the great inspirations for many visitors. Some locations for the plays events are still

visible today. The Princes were allegedly held in the Bloody Tower before their murder and a plaque half way up the entrance steps to the White Tower marks the spot where two sets of children's bones were found in 1674.

- *Henry VI part 3* shows Shakespeare's favourite villain up to his old tricks. In 1471 under the orders of Edward IV, Henry dies in the Tower. Shakespeare attributes the murder to Richard Duke of Gloucester although in reality this is very unlikely.
- A plaque on the floor of the Wakefield Tower, laid in the wishes of King George V, marks the spot where Henry was believed to have been murdered. Each year roses and lilies are laid on the spot by representatives of Kings College Cambridge and Eton, institutions founded by King Henry.
- To bring things right up to date, the film *Shakespeare in Love*, shows the Bard bemoaning the fact that all his poetry deserts him at the sight of Gwyneth Paltrow, turning him into one of the "Talking ravens of the Tower."