

This image: Holy Trinity Church in Stratford-upon-Avon, where many members of the Shakespeare family are buried
Right: A portrait generally believed to be Shakespeare's granddaughter Elizabeth



The Last Shakespeare

350 years since the death of the last direct descendent to William Shakespeare, **Jenny Rowe** traces the Bard's family tree to its premature conclusion

Elizabeth Hall, Elizabeth Nash and Lady Barnard: Three names shroud the final direct descendent of William Shakespeare. Known as the Bard of the Avon, Shakespeare was born and spent his whole life in Stratford-upon-Avon in the West Midlands, but how did the family line of this great English playwright terminate just 54 years after his own death? The 350th anniversary of the death of Shakespeare's only granddaughter, Elizabeth Hall, who died in 1670 aged 61, calls for the epilogue of the world-famous writer's story to be told.

This abrupt end to the Bard's bloodline was surely not how he would have imagined it. Both of his surviving children, Susanna and Judith, were married prior to his death in 23 April 1616 and he had even lived to meet his first grandchild, Elizabeth Hall.

Sadly, William's only son (and Judith's twin), Hamnet, had died in 1596, aged just 11 years old. Three years later William wrote *Hamlet*, the tragic play that would become one of his most renowned. Perhaps the protagonist's name immortalised his son, who had in turn been named after the local baker, Hamnet Sadler (it has been argued that the letters L and N sounded so similar that they were once written interchangeably).

At least William would have been glad to see the Hall family – Susanna, John and young Elizabeth – happy and comfortable. It isn't known for certain where the family lived at first, as it was then customary for newly-weds to move out from their respective family homes. By 1613, the family are believed to have purchased Hall's Croft, then a new-build in Stratford's Old Town and well suited to the middle-class professional family's needs. Today the timbered Jacobean home is grade I-listed and open to the public, with the walled herb garden a particular highlight.

After William died in 1616, the Halls moved back into the Shakespeare family home, New Place, just a few streets away. They did so to keep the Bard's widow, Anne Shakespeare, née Hathaway, company until she herself died seven years later (she was buried alongside her husband in the sanctuary of Holy Trinity Church).

It is generally thought that Anne didn't inherit New Place personally as it was (correctly) assumed that the Halls would move in to look after her, thus saving her the paperwork and hassle. Instead, with no male heir, William bequeathed the bulk of his comprehensive estate, including property and land in Stratford-upon-Avon and London, to his eldest daughter Susanna. His only granddaughter, Elizabeth, understandably much-loved ➤

DAVID CCA/ALAMY/SHAKESPEARE BIRTHPLACE TRUST/ANDREW THOMAS



JULIA NOTTINGHAM/SHAKESPEARE BIRTHPLACE TRUST/GL ARCHIVE/ALAMY



Top: The garden at Hall's Croft
Bottom: The Chandos portrait is the most famous apparent depiction of William Shakespeare

by her grandfather, was both a direct and indirect beneficiary of his will, as it instructed that upon Susanna's death all that she had inherited from her father was to pass to either her male heirs, or, if there were none, to Elizabeth.

Meanwhile, Susanna's only sister, Judith, was starting a family of her own. Missing an introduction to his famous grandfather by just seven months, little Shakespeare Quiney, the son of Judith and her husband Thomas Quiney, was born in 1616.

Sadly, he lived for just six months. Judith and Thomas, who was a winemaker and tobacco dealer, went on to have two other sons, Richard and Thomas, but neither lived beyond the age of 21 – they both died in 1639, a week apart, most likely from the plague. These tragic events left Elizabeth Hall as the last grandchild of William Shakespeare.

Happily, Elizabeth did reach adulthood and in 1626 she married Thomas Nash, the son of the land agent, Anthony Nash, who had managed William's tithes. The details of the courtship between Elizabeth and Thomas are hazy but she was 14 years his junior when

they married. Thomas had attended Oxford University and entered the Honourable Society of Lincoln's Inn, one of four Inns of Court, although he never practiced law, instead taking over his father's land agency.

With the death of her father in 1635, Elizabeth found herself in a new era of responsibility. Repeating history, the Nashs moved back in with Elizabeth's mother at New Place, adjacent to a property owned by Thomas. Now known as Nash's House, it is a grade I-listed museum that traces Stratford-upon-Avon's history. Unfortunately, a later, eccentric owner destroyed New Place in 1759, but a memorial garden designed and looked after by the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust exists in its place, with a Mulberry Tree grown from a cutting planted by William Shakespeare himself. Down the road is the Royal Shakespeare Company's theatre, which stages productions of the Bard's work, including this year's mid-century take on *The Winter's Tale* (until 2 October 2020).

New Place was one of the wealthier households in Stratford-upon-Avon at the time and, after the English Civil War broke out in 1642, the family were chosen to "play host" to 14 prominent Parliamentary officers. Elizabeth and family generously put them up for "nine of 10 nights and dayes", but the troops that followed in their wake were less than kind, plundering cattle, horses and ►



Shakespeare's New Place was one of the wealthier households in Stratford-upon-Avon

food from the town's people. Thomas Nash even recorded that there was a "silver spoone" and "a scarlet Peticoat of [his] wifes" missing. But he was a merciful man (or, as new research by Shakespeare's Birthplace Trust suggests, sympathetic to Parliament's cause) and their thievery was forgiven, because by September 1642 he became the borough's largest contributor to the war chest.

The following year, Queen Henrietta Maria and a small army of Royalist troops also chose to rest their heads at New Place as Her Majesty travelled back to London from Holland, where she had been raising money and support for her husband, King Charles I. With the Royal party staying for three days in mid-July, Elizabeth and Thomas Nash were, from the outside, a picture of high society.

But an unnerving twist in the tale leaves a question mark beside Thomas's intentions. He died in April 1647, leaving New Place, plus other property and land, to his cousin Edward Nash. However, it wasn't his to give. Whether Elizabeth was in on this is unknown, but needless to say she refused to fulfil this part of his will. She resettled it: New Place was rightfully inherited by her mother, herself, and the heirs of her body.

Elizabeth did marry again in June 1649, this time to John Barnard, a successful lawyer and a "gentleman of wealth and position" from Abington near Northampton. He was widowed seven years previously, leaving him with eight children, which may explain why he and



This image: The memorial garden at Shakespeare's New Place
Top left: An executor's copy of Shakespeare's will is on display at New Place

Elizabeth never had their own children. Barnard was also an old Shakespeare family friend and warmed to the idea that Elizabeth would be the one to look after his household “and so esteem and friendship of old standing may have deepened into a tenderer feeling by degrees”.

Presumably, he was right. They were married in Billesley, a rural parish three miles west of Stratford-upon-Avon, probably chosen so the wedding would slip through the authorities’ net: the Church of England’s marriage rites were banned during the Interregnum (the period between Charles I’s execution in 1649 and his son Charles II’s restoration 11 years later), so going under the radar meant their ceremony could be as close to the real thing as possible.

For a few months New Place was, for once, full of children, though sadly none that were descended from William Shakespeare himself. Susanna died later that same year and was buried close to her parents William and Anne’s graves in Holy Trinity Church. The first stanza of her epitaph says it all: “Witty above her sex, but that’s not all / Wise to salvation was good Mistris Hall / Something in Shakespeare was in that, but this / Wholly of him with whom she’s now in bliss.”

The large Barnard entourage soon made the decision to move out of Stratford-upon-Avon for breathing space, which they found at the grand Abington Park Manor on John Barnard’s country estate (now another grade I-listed museum housing local history displays, art exhibitions

and more). Back in familiar territory, he became Justice of the Peace and accepted a knighthood from Charles II in September 1661, making the Bard’s granddaughter Elizabeth Hall, Lady Barnard.

The Lord and Lady of the Manor both lived the remainder of their years in the midst of pastoral parkland. When Elizabeth died in mid-February 1670, she entrusted her Stratford-upon-Avon properties, including New Place, to a Henry Smith, who sold it on her behalf. Humouring her first husband’s wishes, Elizabeth asked that first refusal went to “her loving cousin, Edward Nashe” [sic].

And with that, William Shakespeare’s family tree had shrivelled too soon. *King Lear*, Shakespeare’s 1606 tragedy, charts the fallout from an aging ruler’s wish to divide his kingdom equally between his three daughters. Yet perhaps more ‘tragic’ than this, would have been for him to have no children to share it with at all.

Then again, “Nothing can come of nothing”, the king famously laments when his youngest, Cordelia, refuses to play his game; in the case of the Shakespeare family, England had already had its fill and there was simply nothing more to give. ■



Above: A portrait believed to depict Elizabeth’s second husband, John Barnard.
Below: Abington Park Museum in Northampton



DAVID HUMPHREYS/ALAMY/ANDREW THOMAS/SHAKESPEARE BIRTHPLACE TRUST