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*'And from his touchwood trunk the mulb'ry tree
Supplied such relics as devotion holds
Still sacred, and preserves with pious care.'*

William Cowper, 'The Task', 1785



Stratford-on-Avon has, since the 17th century, been associated with the poet and playwright William Shakespeare (1564-1616). I was born and brought up in Stratford for the early part of my life and while I remember it being a busy town, active with tourists, it was the advent of cheaper air fares in the 1970s which substantially swelled the numbers and increased their diversity.

In the 18th century, of course, the picture was very different, travel and tourism were the preserve of the rich but Stratford was very much on the 'list'. One of the most popular Stratford attractions was New Place, Shakespeare's last home. It had been built in the late 15th century by 'Sir' Hugh Clopton, erstwhile Lord Mayor of London, and it was the second largest home in Stratford when Shakespeare bought it on 4th May 1597; ownership eventually returned to the Clopton family. The original house was demolished in 1702 but the

garden remained in which grew a mulberry tree which it is widely reported was planted by Shakespeare in 1609 when mulberry trees were introduced to the area. The house was re-built and was sold to the Rev. Francis Gastrell in 1753.

It was at this point that the history of New Place takes an unfortunate turn, the house and the tree became objects of veneration and attracted many visitors. The Rev. Gastrell became incensed by the intrusion into his privacy and in 1756 cut down the mulberry tree in the dead of the night. Tourists continued to flock to the house and in 1759 the small-minded cleric took the extraordinary decision to demolish the house itself.

Following the destruction, Gastrell was forced to leave Stratford 'amidst the rage and curses of the inhabitants', and a local bylaw put in place to prevent anyone of the same name living in Stratford. Ten years later, local pride



Figure 1. An oval carved mulberry wood tea caddy, c.1770, stamped 'Shakespeare's Wood - Sharp - Stratford On Avon'. 5½in. wide. (Private collection, Warwickshire)



Figure 1a. Detail showing the repeated maker's stamp and the construction of the caddy, the joint can be seen between the W and O of WOOD.

found expression in the Shakespeare Jubilee of 1769. The original impulse was due to John Payton, the landlord of The White Lion, a genuine enthusiast and a friend of the Shakespearian editor, George Steevens. In 1768, when Steevens was staying at The White Lion, Payton invited some of his friends among the leading inhabitants to meet him. The new Town Hall had just been finished and it was regretted that 'an open niche had been constructed on the north side of it without any prospect of obtaining a statue or even a bust to grace it'. A statue of Shakespeare was suggested as the most fitting adornment and Steevens offered to persuade David Garrick (1717-1779) to present one. The Corporation seconded his endeavours by conferring on Garrick the Freedom of the Borough in a box made from the wood of Shakespeare's mulberry tree. The casket was elaborately carved by Thomas Davies of Birmingham with Garrick in various Shakespearean roles and is now housed in the British Museum. This led Garrick not only to present a statue of Shakespeare but to come back in 1769 and organise a Shakespearian festival in Stratford which proved to be a disastrous rained-out event.

At this period of 'bardolatry', led by figures such as Samuel Johnson (1709-1784) and Garrick, objects fabricated from the wood of this mulberry were much prized. The writer, George Keate (who had made the presentation to Garrick) had in turn been given an inkstand made from the tree.

Despite the Rev. Gastrell's anti-tourist sentiments he had sold the wood from the mulberry tree to various carvers and turners anxious to make souvenirs. The principal purchasers were Thomas Sharp, William Hurdis Harborne, William Hunt, local wood carvers and general wood craftsmen and a Mr Pierce; the last was an ivory turner and jeweller.

Given that the tree was cut down in 1756 and time was needed for the wood to season, the first mulberry wood souvenirs appeared around 1760. There seem to have been three principal Stratford craftsmen involved in the souvenir industry: George Cooper, Thomas Sharp and John Marshall.

George Cooper was born in Stratford in 1720, and little is recorded about him until 1759 when he is mentioned by the antiquarian John Jordan who includes Cooper's name among the buyers of the mulberry. He states, 'he was a poor joiner of Stratford whose curiosity excited him to work what little he was able to purchase into toys such as tea chests, boxes and tobacco-stoppers etc. some of which were prettily carved.'

Thomas Sharp was a successful and enterprising Stratford businessman involved in silver, clocks and guns and soon after Cooper purchased his mulberry wood Sharp took over the business and employed Cooper as an assistant. It seems almost certain that the various mulberry wood pieces with Sharp's distinctive stamp were carved by Cooper. Two tea caddies both



Below and left. Figure 2. A magnificent silver gilt lined mulberry wood cup and cover, stamped 'Sharp', showing typical carving on a punched ground, the silver hallmarked for 1812. Note the Shakespeare bust finial. 7½in. high. The silver gilt lid lining (left) shows the marks. (Private collection, Warwickshire)





Figure 3. A fine oval mulberry tea caddy, c.1770, stamped fully for Sharp. Note the elegant silver rim and escutcheon, the latter with engraved crest. 5½in. wide. (Courtesy of Thomas Coulborn and Sons, Sutton Coldfield)



Figure 3a. Detail showing Sharp's stamp on the lid.

dated 1759 have appeared at auction with Cooper's stamp but thereafter his work appears to give way to Sharp's.

John Marshall was an established local carver who conducted a business carving relics. He not only obtained wood from the mulberry tree but expanded the volume of his production by acquiring other timber directly associated with Shakespeare. He had obtained timber from the barn at New Place and was employed on the renovation of Shakespeare's birthplace, some suggest that he over-zealously removed sections of 'damaged' timber during the process. His 1887 obituary reads, 'Mr Marshall had many opportunities of acquiring wood that was in different ways associated with Shakespeare, which he occasionally made into such articles as boxes etc and many are now possessed by eminent persons in all parts of the world.'

The potential for fraud did not go unrecognised. In his play *The Jubilee*, Garrick presents a tinker selling 'Toothpick cases, needle cases, punch ladles, tobacco stoppers, inkstands, nutmeg graters and all sorts of boxes made out of the famous Mulberry Tree', who is challenged by a second trader with the accusation that 'His goods are made of old chairs and stools and coloured to cheat gentlefolks with.' Nonetheless, Garrick possessed various pieces manufactured from the wood (and even purchased blocks of timber for himself), thus helping to give these artefacts a genuine and lasting association with the revival of national interest in Shakespeare.

The souvenir sellers were conscious that, in terms of the mulberry wood, buyers would be aware that production would be limited to timber available from the original tree. Edward Pinto alludes to this in his book *Treen and Other*

Wooden Bygones: according to a writer 100 years ago, 'boxes made from Shakespeare's mulberry tree could have cubed up sufficient wood to build a warship'. So determined was Sharp to protect his reputation that on his deathbed he swore an affidavit confirming that all his named work was produced from the original timber.

The scarcity of the timber and its pro rata value was of importance to producers, the tea caddy illustrated in figure 1 has been cleverly constructed in four sections, one joint is visible in the detail showing the lock and stamp. This method considerably reduces the volume of valuable timber needed. The silver-lined cup and cover (figure 2) also shows restraint in manufacture in that the handles are joined rather than being carved out from one solid block.

The pieces made by Cooper and Sharp are all carefully and precisely marked. The former stamped his wares 'George Cooper Stratford On Avon Maker' and usually with a date. Sharp (after 1759) with Cooper working alongside used 'Shakespeare's Wood - Sharp - Stratford On Avon'. Cooper's and Sharp's work is quite distinctive; pieces stamped by them are always finely, if not exceptionally well carved. Those of any reasonable size feature a falcon argent supporting a spear (the Shakespeare family coat of arms) and a spear and shield (the Shakespeare family crest). These devices are usually enclosed by branches of fruiting mulberry and arranged on a punched ground with a variety of zigzag, guilloche or other borders. Other common motifs are the bust or mask of Shakespeare.

The rarest pieces are those with silver mounts such as the oval tea caddy shown in figure 3 and the twin-handled covered cup (figure 2). These pieces combine Sharp's knowledge of silver with Cooper's fine carving. The tea



Left and above. Figure 4. A carved mulberry wood goblet by J. Marshall showing the bolder carving favoured by Marshall. 8½in. high. (Private collection, Warwickshire)



Right. Figure 5. A carved oak goblet by J. Marshall, 'Oak From Shakespeare's House', dated 1858. 8¼in. high. (Private collection, Warwickshire)

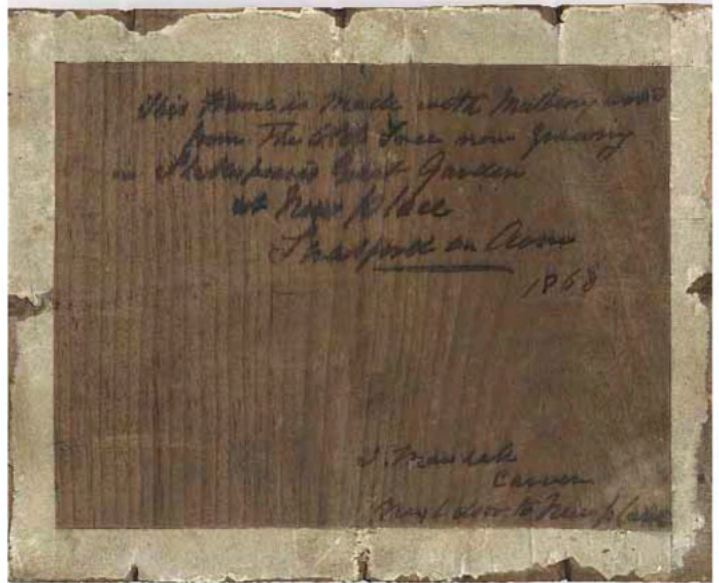
caddy, with its elegant silver band, bears an identifiable crest to the escutcheon, that of the Cunningham Graham family of Gartmore House, Stirling. Given the date of the caddy it almost certainly belonged to Robert Graham who extended Gartmore in 1778/9. The family had extensive connections with the US as tobacco barons but also, interestingly, exported mulberry bushes to Virginia in the 18th century. The twin-handled cup and cover mounts are gilded silver and bear the marks of Sheffield 1812 for John Roberts, Samuel Mosely and John Settle. It is interesting that Sharp preferred to order his silver from Sheffield rather than Birmingham, the latter, at least geographically, would have been more convenient.

John Marshall's work also has a distinctive appearance. His carving is bolder and usually higher in relief and includes both mulberry wood and associated Shakespearian timbers. Like his competitors his work is usually clearly stamped 'J Marshall Carver Stratford on Avon' and is often dated. Figure 4 is typical of his mulberry work with the half length portrait based on the image on Shakespeare's tomb at Holy Trinity. His works often incorporate carved inscriptions, in this case 'We shall not look upon his like again' from *Hamlet*; another favourite was taken from the poet Ben Johnson's eulogy 'He lived not for an age but for all time'. Figure 5, titled to the base 'Oak from Shakespeare's House', relies less on Shakespearian sources with its strapwork-style carving and stylised sea monsters.

The Catalogue of Books, Manuscripts and Works of Art and Relics Present Exhibited at Shakespeare's Birth-

place, 1910, lists numerous articles from Shakespeare's mulberry tree but also gives an insight into other Shakespearian timbers used by Marshall. For instance, there is a 'Casket made of oak from Shakespeare's birthplace ... presented by Mrs Marshall, widow of carver, Dec 7th 1887' (the year Marshall died); 'A little round box made of oak from Shakespeare's birthplace - taken at restoration 1859'; and a 'Bookcase made of old oak timbers found by John Marshall'.

Figure 6 by Sharpe [*sic*], a lithograph print by H.C. Pidgeon, gives another twist to the mulberry wood saga. Although the image is of a piece attributed to Sharp and made from Shakespeare's mulberry wood the backing board bears an ink inscription, presumably by



Left and above. Figure 6. Lithograph print showing a cup made by Sharpe [sic] 'formerly in possession of Mr Munden and used at the meetings of the "Rebellious Seven" to drink to the immortal memory of Shakespeare.' The reverse (above) with ink inscription by J. Marshall relating to 'The Old Tree'.

Figure 7. Charming mulberry wood cylinder toothpick case engraved to the gilt mount 'Shakespeare's Mulberry Wood' and with handwritten note concerning its connection to Garrick. 4in. Sold for £2,000 in 2006. (Sotheby's)



Figure 8. Gold and mulberry wood toothpick case stamped 'Made of The Mulberry Wood Planted By Shakespeare'. 3 1/4 in. x 1 1/4 in. x 5 1/2 in. Sold for £8,750 in 2010. (Sotheby's)



Marshall, 'This frame is made from Mulberry wood from The Old Tree now growing in Shakespeares Great Garden at New Place Stratford On Avon, 1868 – J Marshall, Carver next door to New Place.' This 'old tree' refers to the mulberry descended, legend has it, from the original tree planted by Shakespeare.

Fakes

Clearly there are worries concerning the number of artefacts that claim to be from Shakespeare's mulberry tree. However, the earlier the piece the more likely the chances of it having come from the felled 'original'. It is clear that even in the early 19th century there were



Figure 9. A carved mulberry wood goblet by J. Marshall with typical bold carving and inscriptions, dated 1867. 8¼in. high. (Private collection, Warwickshire)

fears that the original timber must have been exhausted but even as late as the 1860s Marshall was still prepared to aggressively claim his work as from 'Shakespeare's Mulberry wood'.

Values

While it is still possible to obtain smaller items relatively cheaply, particularly if they are unrecognised, the more substantial pieces have seen some dramatic prices. In November 2000 a dated casket-form tea caddy by George Cooper realised £14,300 at Sotheby's and reappeared in 2009 to sell with Christie's in New York for \$20,625. Goblets by Marshall appear occasionally at auction; Christie's sold an example with the 'we shall not look upon his like again' in 2011 for £2,000 and in June this year an example with 'he lived not for an age but for all time' for £4,740.

A charming gold-mounted mulberry toothpick case (figure 7) inscribed to the collar 'Shakespeare's Mulberry Tree' with a handwritten note recording 'made out of a piece of Shakespeare's mulberry tree gathered at the

Stratford Jubilee by Mr Garrick and given by him to Mr Stevens the editor of Shakespeare' was sold by Sotheby's for £2,400. This was eclipsed by a gold and mulberry wood toothpick case with chased two-coloured gold fruiting mulberry borders (figure 8), the interior inscribed 'Made of the Mulberry Tree Planted by Shakespeare' which sold after a fierce battle for £8,750 – a rare case of making poetry pay.

Lastly, I am informed on good authority that at least one major Shakesperian actor never takes to the stage without his talisman of a piece of Shakespeare's mulberry wood.

Robert Bleasdale was previously Regional and Group Managing Director of Bonhams and now runs Bleasdales Ltd which holds specialist sales of sewing tools and related items.

