

Three Sheldon Mysteries

Three unexplained mysteries related to Sheldon follow. First, there is a 1594 notation “Mr Shealden, player” in the *Diary of Philip Henslowe* (Shakespeare Society, 1845, p. 112); according to the book, this is the only mention of “Sheldon as a player.” Then, in the period since Sheldon’s death in 1613, two other mysteries arose, one regarding the Sheldonian Theatre at Oxford, first conceived in 1663, 50 years after the death of Ralph Sheldon; and the second, a 1879 report that the actor Shakspeare’s skull was stolen from his grave in 1794 and found in Ralph Sheldon’s crypt at Beoley, Worcestershire.

Mystery #1: In his *History of the Elizabethan Stage* (vol. II, p.339), E.K. Chambers lists ‘Shealden’: “A ‘player’, witnessed a loan for Henslowe on 24 August 1594,” referring to the aforementioned notation in Henslowe’s Diary. There is no further notice of ‘Shealden’ (or Sheldon) in either the Diary or any other list of Elizabethan players. In June 1594, the Henslowe’s troupe had just begun a series of joint operations with Shakespeare’s Lord Chamberlain’s Men. But at the same time, scandals surrounded the both Sheldon and the name of Shakespeare. The year before, in 1593, the writer had first used the name ‘William Shakespeare,’ publishing the wildly popular *Venus & Adonis*, which was also gaining a reputation as a lascivious poem (see *HM* on Labeo, 212-17). In its wake, another popular poem *Willobie His Avisa* (1594) which referred to “Lucrece rape” added to the scandal, referring to “W.S.” – as an “old player” who unsuccessfully wooed Avisa (perhaps the ‘Dark Lady’). Further, during the same month Sheldon witnessed Henslowe’s loan, he was in London for a Privy Council inquiry concerning a Catholic plot to kill the Queen (the charges against Sheldon were found baseless, *HM* 211). Subsequently, a hitherto unknown actor named William Shakespeare was recorded for the first time in the records of the era, headlining, with actors Kempe and Burbage, the court Christmas festivities 1594/5. Was this possibly a mask for the unexpectedly newly notorious writer ‘William Shakespeare’?

Mystery #2: The history of the Sheldonian Theatre, dedicated in a great ceremony in July 1669 in Oxford, is odd. Gilbert Sheldon (1598-1677), son of a yeoman and a distant cousin of Ralph’s, rose to prominence after the Restoration becoming the Archbishop of

Canterbury in 1663. At that time, he proposed that a Theatre be built as the Oxford graduation hall, and he himself paid for its entire construction: even so, he notoriously refused to attend the dedication ceremony, or even see the building that was to be named the Sheldonian in his honor. Modeled after the open-air theatres of the 16th and 17th century, it was first time a theatre was built and used for such purpose. If there were to be a tribute to Sheldon as the playwright Shakespeare, the Sheldonian Theatre – with its U-shaped design, ceiling painted to mimic the sky, located facing the Bodleian Library – would be ideal. See Appendix I.

Mystery #3: Two magazine articles in 1879 and 1884 reported that art historian Horace Walpole (1717-97) offered 300 pounds to anyone who could obtain the skull of the actor Shakspere. Walpole’s ancestry was Catholic, and he was a close friend of Lady Frances Browne, born Frances Sheldon. Frances Sheldon was the daughter of Edward Sheldon, the great-great grandson of Ralph Sheldon. Subsequently, in 1794, the Shakspere skull was stolen, and it was reported that the skull eventually ended up in the Sheldon family crypt at Beoley in Worcestershire, specifically in the funerary urn of Ralph Sheldon.

Modern investigation using radar imaging found, indeed, that the Shakspere’s skull was missing from his grave in Stratford. In 2009, a photographer for a local newspaper investigated a rogue “undersized” skull that was found in the Sheldon crypt. But the skull itself (over 200 years later) has not been conclusively identified as the Shakspere skull. Nonetheless, most of the details of the original account have proved accurate. See New York Times, 3 March 2025.

Appendix I: The Sheldonian: Why a Theatre?

As noted, the Sheldonian Theatre has an odd history. It’s unquestionable purpose from its inception in 1663 was to be an auditorium for the annual

Oxford graduation ceremony (the “Act”).¹ Yet the building has always had an uncanny resemblance to the London playhouses built in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries; the contemporary Oxford antiquarian Anthony Woods noted at the time that the auditorium was “built theatre-ways” with gated entrances much like the London playhouses.² Moreover, in its theatre design it was unique: according to architectural historian Anthony Geraghty, it was the first example of a theatre design actually built and used for the purpose of the graduation ceremony.³ How was this concept conceived, and whose idea was it?

The project was first mentioned in 1603, early in the era of the English Restoration. In January 1603, the Earl of Clarendon, then Chancellor of Oxford wrote to Vice-Chancellor Walter Blandford:

I remember it was in the designes or hopes of my Lord of Canterbury to gett in the Tenements betweene the Scholes and St Maries, & there to have erected a Theatre for the Act, which indeed the University stands in need of, and St Maries ought to be freed from it; if that designe could be persued it would well bring all ends to passe, and containe a noble structure for the Press as well as other purposes.⁴

So, where did this novel idea of a Theatre come from, and from whom?

Geraghty argues strenuously that the idea for the Theatre came from Clarendon, acting upon the memory of William Laud (1573-1645), Chancellor of Oxford from 1630 and Archbishop of Canterbury from 1633. Laud had long

¹ Anthony Geraghty, *The Sheldonian Theatre* (Published for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 2013), 1.

² Geraghty, 18.

³ Geraghty, 98 ; Geraghty notes that a similiar theatre concept had been considered for a university in Naples in 1615 but was never completed.

⁴ Geraghty, 28.

sought to separate the secular function of the graduation “Act” from the church of St. Mary’s, thereby protecting the religious sanctity of the church from the “profaneness” of the annual ceremony.⁵

Traditionally, however, the idea has been thought to have come from Gilbert Sheldon, a man newly appointed as Archbishop of Canterbury in 1563. Sheldon, an ally of Clarendon’s,⁶ went on to personally finance the entire cost of the Theatre, with an additional fund for its upkeep.⁷

Despite the obviously key role of Clarendon, Geraghty also acknowledges that Clarendon’s role was “quickly eclipsed” by the “munificence” of Sheldon, and he notes that Anthony Wood made no mention of his role with the Theatre in his biography of Clarendon.⁸

Moreover, Geraghty’s research indicates a strong “shadowy” background influence from Sheldon. According to Geraghty:

There is reason to believe that he [Clarendon] was encouraged in this respect [that is, to promote the building of the new Theatre] by Gilbert Sheldon, whose early involvement with the Theatre that was eventually to bear his name is somewhat shadowy. There are grounds for supposing that he was involved from as early as the spring of 1663. At this stage Clarendon was still hoping to fund the project by several ‘good Benefactors’, and on 30 April he informed the vice-chancellor that he already knew ‘where 1000 [pounds] is to be had’. As this is exactly the sum that Gilbert Sullivan subsequently donated (in June 1664), we can be fairly confident that the “1000 pounds” mentioned by Clarendon had been promised by Sheldon. If so, then Sheldon’s encouragement of the project from behind the scenes would tally with [Anthony] Wood’s statement that the Theatre was

⁵ Geraghty, 26-27.

⁶ See Geraghty, 29, referring to Clarendon’s “friend Sheldon.”

⁷ Charles Edward Mallet, *A History of the University of Oxford*, vol. II (Oxford, Methuen & Co., 1924), 426.

⁸ Geraghty, 28.

‘animated . . . by the exhortation of divers eminent persons, especially those Bishops that had been formerly Members of the University’.⁹

Sheldon had been elected Fellow of All Souls College, Oxford, in 1622, and in 1635, became the Warden of the College.¹⁰

While there can be no doubt of Clarendon’s commitment (and that of Laud) to removing all secular activity from St. Mary’s,¹¹ the question still remains: why a theatre and why a theatre modeled after the open-air London theatres of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries?

The building was the first major structure designed by architect Christopher Wren (1632-1723); while it is unknown exactly how the then-novice architect Wren was appointed to the task,¹² both Wren and his father were associated with Sheldon as former Fellows of All Souls College.

Although the Theatre has never been used to stage plays, Wren’s preliminary design in early 1663, included a model of a theatre to be used in the “acting of plays.” Henry Oldenburg, Secretary to the Royal Society, wrote to John Evelyn of 16 April 1663: “Dr. Wren has brought to town the modell of a Theatre, to be built for the Oxonian Acts, and for Playes also.”¹³ Thus, even though the Sheldonian Theatre has never been actually used to stage plays, in its original concept, it was not only to look like a Theatre but also to function as a playhouse.

⁹ Geraghty, 31-2.

¹⁰ Vernon Staley, *The Life and Times of Gilbert Sullivan* (London, Wells, Gardner, Darton & Co, 1913), 32.

¹¹ Geraghty, 31.

¹² Geraghty, 35.

¹³ Geraghty, 52.

As earlier noted, Sheldon went on to fund the entire project, apparently of his own funds. Sheldon was born in the village of Stanton in the county of Staffordshire in 1698, son of Roger Sheldon, the servant of Gilbert, the seventh Earl of Shrewsbury.¹⁴ As mentioned, Gilbert Sheldon was elected Fellow of All Souls in 1622 and then Warden in 1635. In 1648, he was removed from his position as Warden of All Souls, and imprisoned for six months.¹⁵ In 1660, with the Restoration of Charles II, Gilbert was appointed Bishop of London, and then, in 1663, Archbishop of Canterbury.

There is no indication of how Sheldon acquired the immense amount of money (14, 470 pounds, according to Mallet) necessary to fund the construction and operation of the Sheldonian Theater.¹⁶ Although his biographer Staley speculated that as the Sheldons “were an old Staffordshire family,” there was “no doubt Gilbert Sheldon inherited some of those ample funds which he later contributed so lavishly to public objects in both Church and State,” he provides no evidence for this statement.¹⁷

The construction of the Theatre preceded relatively quickly, with the building completely constructed by 1669. The opening ceremony was held on 9 July 1669, with the consecration of the Theatre, and continuing with great celebrations through 12 July. According to Anthony Wood, it was a “great Act: a vast concourse of people. The players (duke of York’s) came and acted at the

¹⁴ Staley, 4-5.

¹⁵ Anthony Wood, *The History and Antiquities of the University of Oxford*, vol. I (Oxford, 1796), 554-605; Staley 53-4.

¹⁶ Mallet, p. 426, footnote 2: Mallet states that the actual construction of the building cost Sheldon 12,239 pounds, according to Oxford accounts.

¹⁷ Staley, 4.

Guildhall yard – carried away de claro 1500li. Scholars pawned books, bedding, blankets – laughing at London – but afterwards they grew wiser.”¹⁸

In the meantime, Sheldon had been elected Chancellor of Oxford upon Clarendon’s withdrawal in December 1667. However, according to Mallet, he “could never find time to visit Oxford.” Moreover, in astounding fashion, he did not even attend the “chief event of his Chancellorship,” which was the “opening of the Theatre that bears his name.”¹⁹

At the ceremony, with Sheldon in absentia, the University Registrar read “the founder’s [Sheldon’s] grant and gift of it [the Theatre] to the University”;²⁰ and also the Vice Chancellor declared that Sheldon intended to “endow his Benefaction,” giving an additional sum of 2000 pounds for its upkeep.²¹

John Evelyn was present in Oxford for the Sheldonian opening ceremony, and on that day he wrote: “In the morning , was celebrated the Encaenia of the New Theatre, so magnificently built by the munificence of Dr. Gilbert Sheldon, Archbishop of Canterbury, in which was spent 25,000 pounds, Sir Christopher Wren, the Architect (as I remember) told me; and yet it was never seen by the benefactor, my Lord Archbishop having told me that he never did nor ever would see it.”²² Sheldon resigned his Chancellorship the following month, in August 1669.

¹⁸ Wood, *Life and Times of Oxford*, vol. II (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1891-1900), 165.

¹⁹ Mallet, 426.

²⁰ Staley, 152.

²¹ Wood, *Life and Times of Oxford*, vol. II, 800.

²² Staley, 151-52.

There has never been any explanation for Sheldon's seemingly inexplicable refusal to attend the opening of the Theatre for which he contributed such huge amounts of money and which bore his name.

As mentioned at the outset, if there were to be a most fitting tribute to the memory of Ralph Sheldon, it would be the Sheldonian Theatre. Although Gibert Sheldon was not directly related to Ralph's family from Worcestershire/Warwickshire, he did adopt the coat of arms of Ralph's family (historic arms for the family, signified by its three sheldrakes) in 1660, upon his ascension to Bishop of London. He was the first member of his Sheldon family to adopt such heraldry. In passing, it is also worth noting that Anthony Wood, the chief chronicler of Oxford of the time, was a long-time friend of Ralph Sheldon, the grandson of Ralph Sheldon of Beoley. And as it happens, Wood did not mention the absence of Sheldon in his otherwise elaborate description of the event.