

The First Folio

Seven years after Shakespeare's death, John Heminge and Henry Condell, his friends and colleagues in the King's Men, collected almost all of his plays in a folio edition. (A folio is a large book in which printed sheets are folded in half only once, creating two double-sided leaves, or four pages. Folios were more expensive and far more prestigious than quartos).

The 1623 First Folio of Shakespeare, however, is the earliest folio consisting only of an author's plays. The first Folio groups the plays for the first time into comedies, histories and tragedies. More importantly, the First Folio preserved eighteen of Shakespeare's plays that had never been printed before.

The Preface to Shakespeare's first Folio written by Henry Condell and John Heminge reads:

'We have but collected them and done an office to the dead to procure his Orphans, Guardians, without ambition of selfe-profit or fame, onely to keepe the memory of so wortheie a Friend and Fellow alive as was our SHAKESPEARE.'

The Businessman

Aged 12 Heminge went to live at Shottery, Stratford-upon-Avon, with his relatives Richard Heminge and John Heminge. He was to become an apprentice to the grocery trade, a trade which he was fond of - in his will he described himself as 'a citizen of London and a Grocer.'

He became a Freeman of the Grocers' Company 24th April 1587. The Grocers' Livery Company was one of the top 2 livery companies in rank in the City of London. To be a Freeman of one of the top livery companies was a prestigious position. There is still a Grocers' Livery Hall in Princes St. London today where it has been since 1426. This is close to St Mary's, Aldermanbury where Heminge lived, during his married life.

The Businessman

Whilst he acted he continued to run his own business. This shows that Heminge was an intelligent and organised man.

Between 1595 and 1628 he employed 10 apprentices to work for him and 8 of these performed with the acting company. Heminge and Jackson acted as Trustees for William Shakespeare when he purchased a property at Blackfriar's Gate in 1613.

He was a 12.5% shareholder in the first Globe Theatre and owned the only adjoining building to the Second Globe which was a Tap House (serving Ale). His shares in the theatre may have increased over the years particularly in the Second Globe which was rebuilt after a fire had destroyed the original Globe in 1613.

In his later years besides being Treasurer and Administrator of The King's Men he became Leader of the Company on the death of Richard Burbage on 12th March 1619.

**Droitwich Spa
Heritage Centre**

John Heminge

**The man who saved
Shakespeare for the
world.**



Timeline

25th November 1556

John Heminge (also known as 'Old Hemmings, Hemming, Hemminge) was **born in Droitwich and baptised at St Peter's Church on 25th November 1556.**

1568

Aged 12 Heminge Moved to Shottery, Stratford-Upon-Avon to become an apprentice grocer. It was here that he first met the boy William Shakespeare.

Once he had finished his apprenticeship as a Grocer he moved to London to pursue a career in acting. There he moved in circles very close to the stage and met Rebecca Knell.

10th March 1588

He Married Rebecca Knell, the widow of William Knell an actor with the Queen's Men, who was killed in Oxfordshire by a fellow actor in 1587.

Between 1588 & 1619 Heminge lived happily at St. Mary's Aldermanbury where he was church Warden and had 14 Children!

His acting friend and fellow editor of the First Folio Henry Condell also lived in St Mary's and was also a Church Warden.

1603

Heminge is listed alongside William Shakespeare and Henry Condell (amongst others) on a document licensing the 'Lord Chamberlain's Men' as the 'King's Men'.

1616

Shakespeare died in retirement in Stratford-Upon-Avon in April aged 52. In his will he left a bequest-

'To my ffellowes John Hemyng, Richard Burbage & Henry Cundell a peece to buy them Ringes.'

1619

Rebecca Knell died and was buried at St Mary's Church Aldermanbury. Heminge was heart broken and moved to Southwark, London.

1623

John Heminge and Henry Condell collected and published Shakespeare's first folio.

1627

Henry Condell died aged 51 and was buried in St Mary's .

1630

John Heminge died in October 1630 at Soutwark. At his request he was buried in St Mary's near his wife. The burial service was conducted by the Bishop of Canterbury which was an indication of his standing in London. There is little left of Heminge. His will was written up while he was ill but unfortunately it contains no signature from Heminge. This is evidence that he died before he was able to execute it.

At that time living to the age of 74 and acting well into his 50's was very remarkable. If he had not out-lived Shakespeare by a number of years he would not have been around to save his plays and publish the First Folio. Without this Shakespeare may never have been heard of or recognised for his genius.

July 15th 1896

A memorial to John Heminge and Henry Condell was unveiled by the Rt. Hon The Lord Mayor of London on the site where St. Mary's Church used to be.

'To these two men, Heminge and Condell, mankind is indebted for that precious volume we now call 'Shakespeare'.

The Actor

Heminge first made the acquaintance of the boy William Shakespeare at Shottery and they became good friends. Family records say that they used to follow the strolling players who visited Stratford acquiring some experience in the art of the stage. As soon as his apprenticeship to the grocery trade was over Heminge went to London to seek out employment on the stage.

The reputation of early Elizabethan actors was not good and many were viewed as no better than rogues and vagabonds - actors were not to be trusted. The standing of actors improved when purpose-built theatres were introduced and some Elizabethan actors became the equivalent of today's superstars. An Elizabethan ballad mentions John Heminges as follows:

'The perrywigs & drumme-heads frye like to a butter firkin, A wofull burneing did betide to many a good buffe ierkin: Then with swolne eyes like druncken flemminges, Distressed stood old stuttering Heminges.'

Heminge performed in all Shakespeare's plays at The Globe Theatre and was rumoured to have played Falstaff. The offices to which they were appointed which we find in records from the Parish books show that both Heminge and Condell were well respected. This says a lot given the reputation that actors had at this time.

In 1616 Heminge's name was at the head of the 'King's Players', Condell coming next.

Heminge continued to act well into his 50's. It is probable that both Hemminge and Condell relinquished the active duties of their profession around the time that they undertook the collection of Shakespeare's plays for the press as there is no trace of them after this time.