

Much ado about something



The Bard's connection with a Merseyside town may have been long argued over, but **Gerry Corner** finds what has never been in doubt is the commitment shown in bringing the Shakespeare North theatre to Prescot

If a council's bold gamble pays off, and a small northern town cashes in on its claim to be the Shakespeare industry's missing link, it will mark an extraordinary revival in fortunes.

Prescot's most recent claim to fame was as a case study for a *New York Times* account of UK austerity. The wider Merseyside borough of Knowsley is one of the country's most deprived areas, harder hit by government cuts than any other local authority.

All the more courage was required, then, for Knowsley Council to sink

£6 million of an ever-diminishing budget into an arts venture that the National Lottery had walked away from.

Inspired by Prescot's connections with the greatest playwright of them all, a building project is set to reinvent the once industrial town as a cultural destination. Work begins in spring on the £20 million replacement for a long lost town centre playhouse built around the

time *Romeo and Juliet* was first staged.

By doing so, Prescot hopes to follow the likes of Leicester, the one-time textile giant where, in the four years after the skeleton of King Richard III was found buried beneath a car park and reinterred in the cathedral, £20 million is said to have been generated by visitors to the tomb and visitor centre.

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prospective Shakespeare North as "the crowning glory of the north of England", while others suggest it may achieve for the region what the Eden Project has done for Cornwall.

Plans for the original, mid-1590s Prescot Playhouse have never been recovered so the new building will have at its heart a 350-seat auditorium

faithfully recreating – padded seating and air conditioning aside – the design of London's 17th century Cockpit-in-Court theatre.

Oscar winner Helen Mirren and ex-prime minister Gordon Brown are among backers of the scheme – a partnership between the Shakespeare North Trust and Knowsley Council in collaboration with Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU).

A year-round programme ("We want to be open 364 days," trust chief executive Ian Tabbron says) will be offered, with visiting productions, including candlelit performances, by leading Shakespearian and other companies, student and community theatre, streamed performances, plus music, dance, comedy and more.

It's estimated the theatre alone will attract around 140,000 visitors annually, drawn from the town, the wider region (the motorway network is on the doorstep), across the UK and beyond. Plans are afoot to put it on the programme of passengers aboard the ocean liners sailing into Liverpool, a 30-minute drive away.

The casual observer might have dismissed Prescot as another economically depressed satellite of Liverpool, ignorant of a place whose knack for renewal stems from the 14th century granting of a license for a weekly market. They may have questioned whether a town no bigger than a modest suburb is a worthy home for what will, by the winter of 2020, be one of the north's great cultural treasures.

But look closer. Here and there are clues to an illustrious past. One is the signpost for BICC Cables Football Club, which continues to thrive as a community concern long after the manufacturing giant that named it was sold, stripped of its worth and finally shut.

In town centre Eccleston Street, the local Wetherspoons is the Watch Maker, an allusion to Prescot's standing, circa 1800, as Europe's foremost producer of

clock and watch movement parts, before the Swiss seized that mantle.

Wind back another 200 years or "so and Prescotians, ever resourceful, were providing drinking and gambling opportunities for visitors to the town's market, cock-pit and annual fair at a time when a young playwright from Stratford-upon-Avon was making a

name for himself. This little Las Vegas in 1590s Lancashire existed alongside the Knowsley estate (nowadays home to Knowsley Safari Park) of the powerful Earls of Derby, whose support and patronage were crucial to developing Shakespearian drama.

Thus, conditions in the north of England were ripe for the construction of the only proven purpose-built, indoor Elizabethan theatre outside the capital and what Shakespeare North Trust calls a “hugely significant development in the evolution of drama”. And while the Bard’s links to Lancashire are long known, long argued over, the discovery of the Prescot Playhouse was key to unlocking the area’s cultural potential.

The Playhouse’s existence was uncovered in the 1950s by local historian Frank Bailey, and it would be another 50 years before LJMU academic Dr Matt Jordan had the idea to rebuild it for the city’s European Capital of Culture programme in 2008.

His proposal, at first considered fanciful, gained momentum, an organising body in the shape of Shakespeare North, and, via actor and supporter Judi Dench, the entire set of the film *Shakespeare in Love*. But the plans ran into a brick wall.

At its height, BICC employed 15,000 people, their insulated cables playing a major role in the National Grid’s construction. By 2007, a year after the last BICC workers had lost their jobs, and with the town slipping further into decline, hopes for a Shakespeare theatre and university college, and the wide-scale benefits they might bring, foundered on a failed second-stage Lottery bid.

Come 2016, the scheme was revived, in large part thanks to the courage of Knowsley Council, which, despite its impoverished state, staked £6 million on the enterprise. Its involvement brought in the Liverpool City Region authority, whose mayor Steve Rotheram has thrown in around another £14 million.

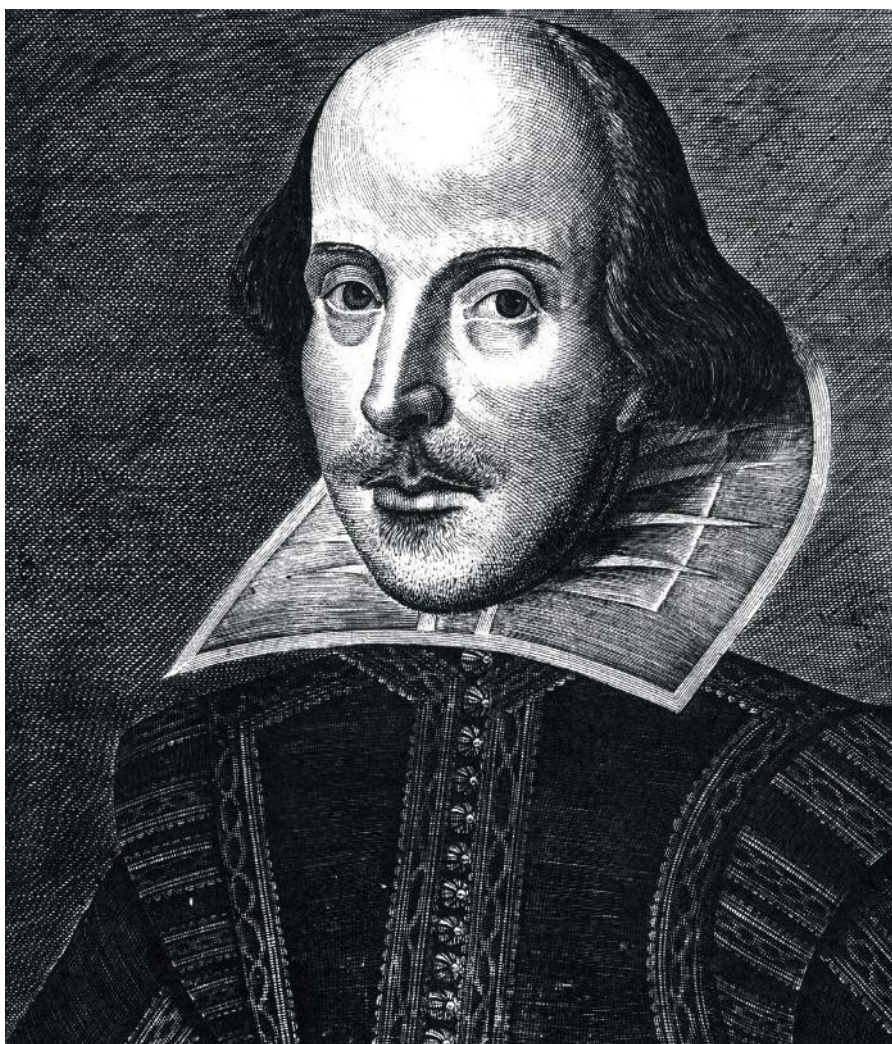
Knowsley Council leader Graham Morgan says: “By 2020 we will have lost £100 million in the cuts, but we didn’t want to stand still. We’ve got to be brave. We’ve got to make some big decisions but I think we will get the rewards from it.”

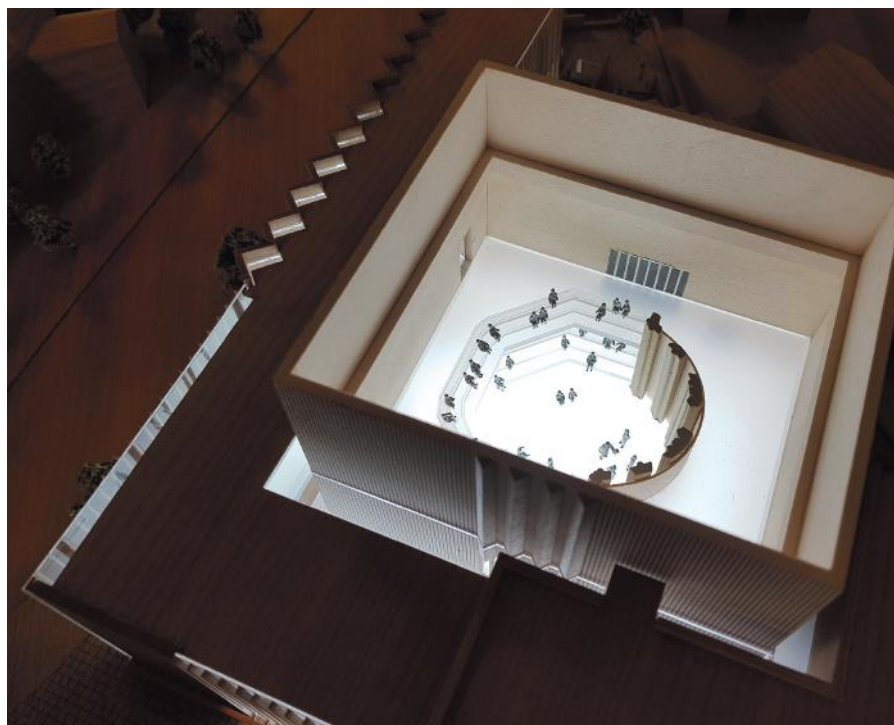
Those rewards are coming already. As the Bard micropub, the Kingsmen street food restaurant, and Hamlet’s Kitchen have opened their doors, it’s hard to deny this is the Shakespeare effect.

Others investing in the town include North West restaurateur Gary Usher, whose crowd-funded venture Pinion has opened there, while a boutique, Shakespeare-themed hotel is on the way.



Internal (left) and external (above) plans for the new playhouse honouring the Bard (below)





Left: Ian Tabbron (top) and Graham Morgan (bottom). Above: model of the 350-seat auditorium

Of 1,500 houses presently under construction, Morgan says: “A lot have not even been built and they’ve been bought, deposits put on the plots. Imagine, if you say Shakespeare North’s there – you want to be there.”

Prescot has become an attractive prospect again. There is, says town historian David Davies, “great excitement, a buzz about the place”.

Tabbron, tasked with seeing through the ambitious plans, applauds the council’s commitment. “I think Knowsley have done a very smart thing choosing a theatre to be the anchor project for the regeneration of Prescot. In the old days you might have said: ‘Oh, we’ll get a Debenhams.’”

The northern link in the Shakespeare story is not entirely straightforward but what is known for sure is that the fifth Earl of Derby funded a band of actors in Knowsley, Strange’s Men, who performed one of the Bard’s earliest plays, and whose leading members later joined Shakespeare’s own troupe at London’s original Globe theatre.

Anything beyond that is speculation and much of it – that Shakespeare fled north after poaching deer in Stratford-upon-Avon, that three of his plays were written in Knowsley, that several of the most famous plays were debuted

Planners are keen to attract a working class audience at prices they can afford

there – is dismissed by Professor Elspeth Graham, a director of Shakespeare North who, as a lecturer in English literature at LJMU, has spent a decade studying the north-south connection.

But even the cautious academic concedes “it’s possible, even probable” that Shakespeare spent time in the area. And she adds: “For all that remains unresolved in this story, what is certain is that the worlds of Shakespeare, the people of Prescot, and the Earls of Derby overlapped.”

A former town centre car park has been cleared for the new playhouse, hoardings speak of “Much Ado About Something”, and preparatory work is done for a “completely unique building”, to include a studio theatre, performance garden, café-bar, and education and exhibition spaces, the front doors opening on to a newly named Prospero Place.

Within a brick and stone facade of 21st century design, the centrepiece will be an oak box, in the shape of a double octagon, containing a replica of the theatre designed in 1629 for King Charles I by England’s first great architect, Inigo Jones.

Included in the plans is a screen – part scenic backdrop, part artwork, part architectural installation – based on the Teatro Olimpico in Vicenza, a World Heritage Site. It is, says Tabbron, “extraordinary. Nobody’s done one of those since the 17th century”.

Whatever the hopes for an artistic enterprise that may transcend the material world, bringing cultural

not there, but there will be educational opportunities from early years to the University of the Third Age.

All concerned are keen to attract a working class audience at prices they can afford, so that watching *King Lear* does not become merely an elitist pursuit. The poorest paying customers at the Globe, so-called groundlings, were allowed in to see Shakespeare’s new works for the price of a loaf. Tabbron won’t promise that much but insists they will be “constantly sensitive to pricing”.

Morgan concurs. “The Playhouse is intended to break down barriers, including financial ones. £500 for an opera ticket in London? That’s not going to happen here.”

Ordinary Prescotians appear keen to make the new theatre their own. Graham sees the enthusiasm in “all sorts of places. I was talking to a man mending the road and he said to me: ‘Do you know we’re getting a Shakespeare theatre?’”

If proof were needed, a production of Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* by local arts group MATE, sold out three open-air performances. Graham recalls: “People said: ‘Oh no, Shakespeare’s not for us.’ Then they said: ‘I think the kids are doing it at school, so perhaps we’d better bring them.’ And they turned up, and afterwards came to us and said: can we come again?”

Prescot is one of the oldest settlements in this part of the world; the Grade I listed parish church was rebuilt in the Bard’s time. The town’s form and structure, including the UK’s second narrowest street, have remained virtually unchanged since Strange’s men trod the boards, as if it is awaiting its chance to be at the heart of English theatre once more. ■

enrichment that can’t be measured, the future of Shakespeare North came down to cold, hard numbers.

Tabbron was seconded from the Arts Council but speaks like a businessman. Focus groups and demographic analysis, talk of a “place shaping opportunity” and “rebranding Prescot” illustrate the modern reality of the Shakespeare business.

Original plans for a “Shakespeare degree”, run by LJMU, have had to be put to one side because the money is

