

Shakespeare's will and the mystery of the missing ring

In Shakespeare's time, more people could read than could write, and many could not read or write at all. Although printed books had become more accessible, and the Bible was available to read in English, some people had only basic reading skills. Many could not even write their own name and would 'mark' (sometimes with an X for example) their name on a document instead.

As well as marking their name, people sometimes added their seal to a document including wills.

In 1616 Shakespeare made changes to his will. He signed the new document, but where it says he had sealed the document, the word "seal" has been crossed out. Had he lost his personal seal?

Many people and scholars have wondered why Shakespeare signed his name, but did not use a seal. Some believe that Shakespeare lost the signet ring he used to make his seal at his daughter Judith's wedding, which took place at Holy Trinity Church in Stratford-upon-Avon. Therefore he had to sign the new will by hand instead.

Years later, in 1810, a solid gold ring was found by a female farm labourer named Mrs. Martin, in a field called Mill Close next to the churchyard at Holy Trinity Church.

When it was examined, it was found that it could be dated back to a time when Shakespeare was alive and what's more it had the initials WS on it!

Shakespeare's will and the mystery of the missing ring

The ring was very dirty when it was first found. By the time the local historian, solicitor Robert Bell Wheler, got to see it he was very upset to find that Mrs. Martin had dipped it in nitric acid to clean it! Luckily the ring was made of gold and not silver, otherwise the ring would have dissolved. Mr Wheler bought the ring for 36 shillings.

Amazingly, there is little wear on the ring, which suggests that it was relatively new or had not been used very much when it was dropped.



The design is typical of man's signet ring of Shakespeare's time. It is large and quite heavy (about 18 grams of solid gold). In the middle of the face (or bezel) of the ring are the initials 'WS' (reversed so that when the ring is pressed into hot sealing wax, they would produce the letters WS in the wax the correct way round). These letters are intertwined with a tassel known as a 'Bowen' or 'true lover's knot'.

Shakespeare's will and the mystery of the missing ring

Creative writing activity

Using the information provided in the story of the missing ring write your own account of the missing ring. Think of a title for your report and who you might be in the story.

- Are you Shakespeare who may have lost the ring? How did you lose it and what did losing it mean to you?
- Are you Mrs Martin who found the ring? What were you doing when you found it and was it exciting to find a gold ring?
- Are you a journalist writing up the story for the local paper? How will you retell the story for your readers?
- Are you an archaeologist who unearthed the ring yourself? Where did you find it and what might it tell you about the person to whom it belonged? We've included a template to help you draft your report.
- Alternatively, create a 'lost ring' poster. Add your own description and drawing to help people look for it. Will you offer a reward for it? We've included a poster template to get you started.



Shakespeare's will and the mystery of the missing ring

ARCHAEOLOGIST'S NAME:

ARTEFACT DISCOVERED

DATE DISCOVERED

DESCRIPTION OF ARTEFACT

PICTURE OF ARTEFACT

PLACE FOUND:

**ARCHAEOLOGIST'S
THEORY/HISTORIC
SIGNIFICANCE**

OTHER INTERESTING FACTS

-
-
-
-
-
-

Shakespeare's will and the mystery of the missing ring

LOST!



Any information please notify: