Dr Ailsa Grant Ferguson

King's College London

“When wasteful war shall statues overturn”:

Forgetting the Shakespeare Hut

“When wasteful war shall statues overturn”:

Forgetting the Shakespeare Hut

Abstract

This paper explores the significance of the commemorative YMCA Hut, the Shakespeare Hut, erected for the Shakespeare's death tercentenary in 1916 on a site in Bloomsbury, originally bought for the erection of a Shakespeare Memorial National Theatre (SMNT). The Hut was the brainchild of Prof Israel Gollancz, leading light of the SMNT movement. The Shakespeare Hut was built primarily for the use of New Zealand Anzac servicemen, providing entertainment and shelter for those on leave and recuperating from their injuries – hundreds of thousands of beds were let from 1916 to 1919, before it was rented to the Indian YMCA until its demolition c.1924. Focusing on the notion of the Hut's place – or rather lack of it – in public memory, the paper uses extensive new primary research to unpick the history and disappearance from memory of this unique wartime memorial to Shakespeare. The Shakespeare Hut is used as a paradigmatic model to examine the commemoration of Shakespeare; the notion of commemorative space and place; the significance of forgetting in the study of collective memory and memorialization, especially during the declining years of imperialism and during World War I.

“When wasteful war shall statues overturn”:

Forgetting the Shakespeare Hut

One evening in 1919, an audience of four hundred New Zealander and Australian Anzacs sat in a wooden hall in London, nearly 12,000 miles from home, gazing at a simple stage. Through the curtain stepped a 15-year-old girl, cross-dressed as Henry V (Figure 1). This girl was a young Fabia Drake, later a well-known actress and director, who proceeded with gusto to perform the King’s most stirring speeches. Recalling the performance six decades later, Drake gushes with patriotic pride: “We had no extras, we had no army, but we had an audience of four hundred soldiers and Edy Craig had the inspiration that I should come out in front of the curtain and speak the Agincourt speech to my Army on the floor” (36). Featuring an all-female cast that included Ellen Terry herself, the performance Drake describes was staged at the Shakespeare Hut, a huge mock-Tudor bungalow at the corner of Keppel and Gower Streets in Bloomsbury (Figure 2). A YMCA building dedicated to the memory of Shakespeare, the Hut aspired to be a home-from-home for serving Anzacs from 1916 to 1919. In 1920, it became the base of the Indian YMCA before its demolition in the early twenties, beginning its swift descent into oblivion. But, according to Drake, on that night in 1919, the Hut couldn’t have been more alive, as “Four hundred war-weary men rallied to the cry of ‘God for Harry, England and Saint George’, springing to their feet and cheering to the rafters” (37).

Figure 1: Fabia Drake, aged 15, as Henry V for a Shakespeare Hut performance in 1919, directed by Edy Craig and co-starring Ellen Terry

Figure 2: The Shakespeare Hut c.1917 (from the archives of the YMCA)

The Shakespeare Hut (Figure 2) was one of many YMCA huts across London and at the front. Built to provide respite to soldiers on leave, these large, semi-temporary structures were the closest thing to home many soldiers would see during their service. The huts all included dormitories and some comforts and entertainments, but the Shakespeare Hut was the largest, grandest hut the YMCA had ever built. It was also the only hut to be named as a memorial. While the Hut bore Shakespeare's name, its status as a commemorative object is complex to define. There is nothing unique in the naming of a functional building as a memorial. Yet the combining of this wartime practicality with a memorial to an historical figure with no military experience – even to one of the most famous Englishmen in history – is unusual, especially since by and large, as Allyson Booth has noted, "...architectural memorialisation of the dead and missing [has been] kept distinct from the design of architecture that would be used and inhabited by the living" (127). In the sense that the Hut was *not* technically memorialising lost soldiers, this distinction perhaps doesn't matter. Yet, as I shall show, not only did the Hut divide its commemorative function between Shakespeare and a recently lost soldier, it also acquired a commemorative function in the minds both of those who stayed there, and their relatives back in New Zealand and Australia, representing not only Shakespeare's name, but the ghosts and memories of the men who stayed there, just for a few nights, before being killed in battle.

The Shakespeare Hut was conceived by Israel Gollancz, professor of English at King's College and leading light in the Shakespeare Memorial National Theatre movement (which I shall abbreviate to SMNT from here on). Mooted in early 1916 and approved as a partnership by the YMCA in March, the Hut was erected on the site in Bloomsbury that had been acquired in 1914 by the SMNT for the planned national memorial theatre to Shakespeare. Money was raised to erect and maintain the Hut, since many in the SMNT movement didn't approve of the central funds being used for this purpose (rather than for an actual national theatre). Nevertheless, the Hut proved a popular cause and, in contrast to the preceding rather barren years of attempting to fund a national theatre, the funds needed for the Hut were raised in a matter of mere months. The Hut opened on Friday, August 11th 1916. Thousands of men stayed there over the course of the war - sometimes over 2,000 soldiers a week - and it was staffed almost entirely by around 350 female volunteers. Over one twelve-month period nearly half a million meals were served, and over 95,000 beds were let. Shakespeare was kept central to the Hut in a range of ways, including regular performances and readings of Shakespeare's work and a special emphasis on education for the young men, which was to include a Shakespearean element in the 'curriculum'.

But how did the English movement for commemorating Shakespeare and the 1916 Tercentenary of his death come to be marked not with a statue or imposing building, but with this temporary - and long-forgotten - pragmatic place? To understand this, we need to consider the contexts and personalities involved. We must explore the wider significance of the hut in our 21st-century struggle to unpick the function and meaning of collective memory, commemoration and, perhaps more particularly, forgetfulness. We must also consider the Hut as a memorial that is located at the intersection of place and space, and as a site of remembrance that became as multi-layered as it was multi-functional, before being so quickly forgotten.

Paul Connerton, in his taxonomy of forgetting, articulates the centrality of forgetting to our understanding of remembering, especially in collective and public contexts. "We generally regard forgetting as a failure", he writes. "This implication has cast its shadow over the context of intellectual debate on memory in the shape of the view, commonly held if not universal, that remembering and commemoration is usually a virtue and that forgetting is necessarily a failing" (2008: 59). For the Shakespeare Memorial movement, the rhetoric of failure and neglecting patriotic duty is central to the fervent arguments they made for the

erection of a solid memorial to Shakespeare in England. Rather than a straightforward desire for a simple, joyful celebration, very often the driving force of the movement seems to have been their horror of in some sense ‘forgetting’ Shakespeare, a notion arguably stemming from anxiety over his elusive life, personality and body, which cannot ever fully be ‘remembered’. Adding to this is the obvious fact that, by this time, cultural understanding of Shakespeare was so bound up with notions of Englishness that, for the English, to forget him might be to forget ourselves. Alongside this anxiety to construct a solid ‘Shakespeare’ to enable the country to remember, time and again the argument is supported by the notion that other countries are remembering Shakespeare better than his own England. In his contribution to a huge souvenir book produced for the Shakespeare Memorial Ball in 1911, Lord Lytton gushes his support for the erection of a monument to Shakespeare, which he analogises as a form of worship akin to religious reverence. “The fact that a movement is now on foot to erect a National Memorial to Shakespeare is proof that the present generation of British men and women feel the absence of any such memorial to be a reproach to their country” (22-3).

In Connerton’s earlier work, he suggests that social memory is distinct from “historical reconstruction”, the latter of which, he writes, consisting of “traces...the marks, imperceptible to the senses, which some phenomenon, in itself inaccessible, has left behind” (1989: 13). The construct we think of as ‘Shakespeare’ consists of just such traces, and the process of ‘remembering’ him cannot be in the sense that an individual is remembered as a body or a defined personality. Commemoration of the long-dead, such as Shakespeare, elides historical reconstruction into social memory, suggesting and implanting notional memories in collective perception. In Shakespeare’s case, this process is particularly vexed and, in the wartime context of 1916, this creation of ‘memory’ is all the more significant as an agent of national identity.

The debate over *how* best to manifest this longed-for commemoration of Shakespeare had been fraught enough in the early years of the twentieth century. Ideas ranged from an imposing stone or marble statue of the playwright to a benevolent gift in his name, such as Shakespeare almshouses, to a library to a ‘reconstruction’ of an early modern playhouse – of which Shakespeare’s Globe is the contemporary manifestation. In the late 1900s, advocates of a memorial statue to Shakespeare made an uneasy alliance with the movement for a national theatre for Great Britain. Linking notions of memorialisation that were little short of

worship with an idea of remembering Shakespeare by performing his plays for ‘the man on the street’, this alliance was precarious and often contradictory. At the outbreak of war, and increasingly as the conflict brought with it a tide of loss, the whole notion of commemorating the dead altered amid an unprecedented pandemic of grief, both public and private.

Memorialisation of the dead became part of the day-to-day physical, architectural, emotional and psychic landscape like never before, producing, as Connerton frankly puts it, “an orgy of monumentalisation” (2008: 69).

Perhaps largely because of this traumatically heightened era of monumentalisation and despite years of discussion of how best to commemorate Shakespeare, the two “solid objects”¹ that materialised in the name of Shakespeare’s Tercentenary of 1916 in London were neither statue nor theatre. Gollancz took a central role in campaigning, fundraising and promoting the erection of either a theatre or monument or both to Shakespeare. Yet, in 1916, he was directly responsible for effecting the only two tangible English ‘memorials’ to Shakespeare for the Tercentenary: his *Book of Homage to Shakespeare* and the Shakespeare Hut. Compared to the stone ‘permanence’ of a statue or a large theatre, these were precarious, fragile memorials of paper and wood.

In a time of unprecedented modern warfare and increasing privation on the home front, the very notion of permanence must inevitably have become fractured. Entrenched notions of permanence, inherent in commemorative activities (such as the erection of memorial statues), vied with makeshift, temporary, spontaneous and individual expressions of commemoration. Nevertheless, the lines were distinctly blurred. One of the most popular monuments constructed at the ending of the Great War was Lutyens’ Cenotaph, constructed of plaster and wood in 1919 but replaced with a stone version in 1920 due to public demand for it to become ‘permanent’. Versions of the Cenotaph were then erected in many cities across the country and replicas were created in their thousands for people to buy cheaply and display in their own homes. The Cenotaph’s expression of the temporary and the permanent in constant flux is paradigmatic of the complex dynamic of mourning and commemoration that took place during the First World War and its immediate aftermath. This was the vortex in which Shakespeare’s 1916 Tercentenary found itself. It led both to the unprecedented style of

¹I borrow the phrase from Virginia Woolf’s short story of that name, which first appeared in *The Athenium* in 1920 (Woolf 54).

commemoration enacted in the erection and use of the Shakespeare Hut and, indeed, to its subsequent annihilation in public memory.

Blair, Dickinson and Ott have recently offered a re-exploration of the relationship between place and memory. They write that “if we think of space as that which allows movement, then place is pause; each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place” (23). The Shakespeare Hut’s multi-functionality offers an invaluable example through which to explore these notions in the context of the idea of the ‘memorial’. The planned Shakespeare Memorial National Theatre, whose Bloomsbury site this cluster of buildings usurped, would have offered its own version of this multi-functional memorial site, just as the Shakespeare Library in Sydney differs fundamentally from the statue in its mode of commemoration. Yet the Shakespeare Hut offers a rather different interaction of function and meaning. A library or a theatre bears direct relation to the established perception of Shakespeare’s ‘gifts’ to the nation, the Empire and the world: the book and the play. The mode of commemoration enacted in the pragmatic Shakespeare Hut is less clearly defined. It constitutes neither the pure benevolent ‘name’ of Shakespeare that was suggested in the unpopular and short-lived idea of the Shakespeare almshouse nor the direct ‘preservation’ of his gifts facilitated by a theatre or library. Instead, the ‘Shakespeare’ of the Shakespeare Hut is an amalgam both of performance or learning *and* of a form of patriotic English ‘fatherhood’ for the boys from beyond the seas.

To complicate the significance of naming in the story of the Hut, it is worth noting that its main recreational area, the Lounge, was in fact funded by a donor, Mrs Alec Tweedie, as a memorial to her son, Lieutenant Leslie Tweedie, who had been killed in action in 1915.² Thus, one room in the Hut, at least, represents two layers of memorial. Mrs Tweedie’s very personal, individual dedication, the Leslie Tweedie Memorial Lounge (as it was known), is spliced together with an act of collective memorial, of impersonal worship of the bard, which does not express grief or loss *per se* but has quite a different cultural function.

Blair, Dickinson and Ott, defining place and space, present the naming of a place as an act of forming place *out of* space: “a *place* that is bordered, specified, and locatable by being named

² Later, Mrs Tweedie audaciously credited herself with bringing about the erection of the Shakespeare Hut as a whole: “I also put up the Shakespeare Hut behind the British Museum in memory of my son, who was killed in action, and we used to have between two and three thousand Anzacs there each day” (*Brisbane Courier*, 27th October, 1928).

is seen as different from open, indifferentiated, undesignated *space*” (23). Naming, then, is an act of delineation and enclosure, fixing that space into a bordered *place* that has a specific use, meaning and physical tangibility. In the case of places that are named as memorials, then, the act of naming creates a border that encompasses both the physical presence of the place *and* the person, event or location that is represented in the name.

In the particular case of the Shakespeare Hut, the undelineated space of the SMNT’s Bloomsbury site was becoming increasingly problematic, in a more literal sense. We know, from many contemporary newspaper reports and some archival records of correspondence of the SMNT, that the reputation of the movement was already tarnished by accusations of elitism, money-wasting and ineffectuality, all of which would be brought brutally into focus to passers-by of this expensive, unused site. It was a geographical space that smacked of impracticality and excess in a time where the only acceptable patriotism was characterised by austerity and wartime sacrifice. Associating Shakespeare’s name with this ‘space’ for any length of time would surely have spelled even more disaster for the already failing SMNT scheme. It is important, at this point, to recall how ardently those personalities that had driven the schemes, Gollancz especially, had fought for the commemoration of Shakespeare. More broadly, we must also appreciate the role and importance of Shakespeare’s name in the war effort itself. It is in these contexts that the delineation of the Bloomsbury site as a pragmatic memorial becomes crucial in the story of Shakespeare in 1916.

Clara Calvo has characterised one of Shakespeare’s guises in 1916 as “Shakespeare the patriot, Shakespeare the soldier, who did his bit for the war effort by helping to collect funds for the Red Cross and the soldiers’ huts run by the YMCA” (199). Werner Habicht identifies the use of Shakespeare as a “cultural weapon” during the First World War as a distinct change from the nationalistic “hero-worship” demonstrated in the 1864 celebrations of Shakespeare’s birth tercentenary (449). Shakespeare was also used as another kind of ‘cultural weapon’: as part of the battle for recruitment. Authorities in England invoked Shakespeare’s name, early in the war effort, to recruit young men to join up and fight. Posters using Shakespearean quotations were put up as one of the many strategies employed to rouse patriotic spirit high enough to generate volunteers for the front. An early poster (Figure 3) shows a simple message: “Stand not upon the order of your going / But go at once” (*Macbeth*, III.iv), taking the line so far out of context, of course, as to endow it with an entirely different meaning. Yet, in so doing, this fragment of text becomes a synecdoche for Shakespeare ‘the

Patriot’ and weaves around it a heavy meaning of duty to our English heritage, our ancestors and our way of life – all of which are embodied in Shakespeare. Another image (Figure 4) shows an amalgam of Tommy and chivalric knight, “TO FRANCE!”, it orders, with the Shakespearean epithet “an ever-fixed mark / That looks on tempest and is never shaken” (*Sonnet 116*), exchanging love for war, eliding romantic love and patriotic love. While away, soldiers could be boosted by postcards from home, emblazoned with slogans; one surviving example deploys the (altered) Shakespearean phrase, “Nought shall make us rue, if Britain to herself to rest but true. Shakespeare” (*King John*, V.vii³), alongside a picture of a fluttering Union Jack and the phrase “FOR KING AND COUNTRY”. Broadsheets of extracts from the plays were sent out to serving troops, and plays were performed for wounded soldiers (as you will observe in the exhibition footage), also, indeed by British prisoners of War. As Virginia Woolf writes in *Mrs Dalloway*, Septimus Warren Smith, still one of the most lasting images of a shellshock victim, “went to France to save an England which consisted almost entirely of Shakespeare’s plays and Miss Isabel Pole in a green dress walking in a square” (73). So which is the Shakespeare that was to be invoked by the naming of the Shakespeare Hut – hero, weapon or both?

Figure 3: Poster issued in early 1915 by the Parliamentary Recruiting Committee
© Imperial War Museums, Art. IWM PST 5154

³ Of course the word ‘Britain’ has, significantly, replaced ‘England’ in the quotation.

Figure 4: Poster issued by the British Civilian Association (date unknown)
© Imperial War Museums, Art. IWM PST 10964

The Hut allowed Shakespeare's name to be tied to national pride and to pragmatic urges to contribute to the war effort. This mode of memorialisation did much to save the notion of Shakespearean commemoration from its growing perception as the superfluous pursuit of the rich (Bryce and Lytton), the scholarly (Lee and Gollancz) and the downright eccentric (Poel and Shaw). A newspaper clipping found in Gollancz's papers (dated 6th February 1916), notes wryly the new plans for the Tercentenary celebrations in London:

"From one point of view the War seems to have done real good in regard to the Shakespeare Tercentenary...At least, there is now withdrawn all temptation to waste any money on statues and marble shrines and things of that sort. We do not even hear anything of the 'Shakespeare Garden' scheme, which was brought out officially at the Mansion House a year or two ago, when the National Theatre enthusiasts were growing restive. Somehow, in that Shakespeare Garden I could not help detecting the thin end of the statue!"

Clearly the notion of commemorating Shakespeare by way of a statue or "shrine" was, at this time, becoming almost laughable. By the outbreak of war, and increasingly between 1914-1916, these schemes were viewed by many as an unacceptable waste of money.

Immediately before the war, fundraising and publicity for the SMNT had been dominated by spectacle and increasing bombast but little material gain for the cause. In 1911, the SMNT Ladies Committee organised an epic costume ball, attended by 4,000 guests in the Albert Hall, all dressed as Shakespearean characters in an opulent display of wealth by the great and the good of Edwardian England. The 'Shakespeare's England' exhibition of 1912 provided a 'reconstruction' of a street as it would have looked in Shakespeare's lifetime, complete with a 'replica' of the Globe Theatre but, while it was fairly well attended, the enormous cost of the enterprise led to an overall loss being made, the scandal of which was widely publicised in the UK and abroad. These high-value events reflected spectacular theatrical fashions of the late Victorians and Edwardian eras. Given the association of Shakespeare's name and 'spirit', these SMNT fundraising events and documents become commemorations of Shakespeare in their own right, a function that is amplified by the eventual failure of the scheme to produce the tangible memorial for which they were ostensibly raising money. Soon, contemporary newspaper coverage reveals, there was increasing dissatisfaction with the SMNT. The movement was accused of secretiveness, of hiding its financial affairs, and suspicions started to rise that money was not being used to any real effect, while expensive events were instead simply entertaining the well-to-do. While Gollancz and others publicly refuted these claims, by the outbreak of war the scheme was looking increasingly unlikely to come to fruition.

This 'spectacular' commemoration and fundraising had also alienated Tree's nemesis, William Poel and his devotees to the new theatrical puritanism that he extolled. The Hut changed this divide, at least temporarily, both in its approach to commemoration and, more overtly, in the pragmatics of performance within its bare and practical environment. Having been wholly opposed to the SMNT scheme, Poel started to defrost a little when it came to the Shakespeare Hut; he donated his guinea to the scheme and even became a member of its Entertainment committee. In a carefully worded letter to Gollancz on the opening of the Hut, Poel only thinly veils his antagonism towards the direction of the SMNT and the scholarly endeavours of the *Homage*, yet there appears to be genuine approval expressed for the Shakespeare Hut. He writes:

"Scholars will look upon [the *Homage*] as a valuable contribution to the Tercentenary Celebration...I am very glad to think that owing to your indefatigable labours the site of the Memorial Theatre is now being used to such good purpose under the management of the YMCA who provide such greatly needed comforts for the soldiers. From all quarters we hear nothing but praise for this movement."

Poel's weighty use of an ellipsis after "celebration" to leave hanging his opinion of a book for "scholars" foreshadows the real purpose of this letter, which goes on to argue that the SMNT Committee be disbanded and a new, small committee should be formed that should not include any "experts" to be replaced by "actors and dramatists or practical men of the theatre" - no scholars, in other words.

Just before the war, Sir Oswald Stoll, the Australian-born theatre producer and philanthropist, had donated 1616 guineas to the SMNT as prize money for a competition to design a Shakespeare Memorial. In March 1916, Gollancz approached Stoll to ask if a portion of the money could be used as seed funding for the Shakespeare Hut. In his letter heartily accepting this suggestion, Stoll refers to the Hut idea as "your patriotic and humane scheme, so fully in consonance with the patriotism and humanity of Shakespeare". This notion of a totally different direction for the commemoration of Shakespeare clearly impressed Stoll. His immediate acceptance of the Hut foreshadowed a total turnaround in the public perception of the material Shakespeare commemoration scheme during the war, once it became focused on the Hut.

The YMCA was unsurprisingly positive about the scheme. Basil I. Yeaxlee of the YMCA responded enthusiastically to Gollancz's notion of a YMCA Shakespeare Hut and his letter encapsulates the merger of patriotism, commemoration and practicality that Hut was to represent:

"Your proposals is that the site should be used for a practical and National service in the spirit of Shakespeare, who would certainly desire that those who are maintaining the tradition of his England should be sustained and inspired, not only during the war but afterwards. It seems to you that our work offers the best facilities for this and the grant will enable us not only to provide a building on the actual site of the ultimate memorial, where the purpose of the Shakespeare memorial could be at present fulfilled as far as possible during war time by the arrangement of lectures and rendering of plays, but to give practical expression to his spirit of patriotism in other ways."⁴

The Hut thus not only altered the mode of commemoration being adopted for Shakespeare's Tercentenary, but altered the very Shakespeare we were 'remembering'. This is a Shakespeare for the 'man on the street', the conscript and the war hero. As it turned out, he

⁴ Letter: Basil I. Yeaxlee to Israel Gollancz, 3rd March, 1916

also became Shakespeare the rehabilitator, the comforter of the shellshocked and morally lost, the protector of the young men we were sending into hell in the name of the Empire.

A few descriptions of the Shakespeare Hut and its advantages do survive in New Zealand newspaper archives. One article goes into ecstasies in explaining to New Zealanders at home the wonders of the Shakespeare Hut:

“The Shakespeare Hut [is] the centre of social life for the Dominion troops...It may best be described as a huge private hotel... the ‘boys’ are looked after at the Shakespeare Hut, and the happy atmosphere ... pervades that comfortable home while they are in London...Among the many centres of Y.M.C.A. activity for the benefit of troops of the overseas Dominions, none can be found with better provision for the material comfort and entertainment of the men than the Shakespeare Hut... This hut has probably done more to make up for the loss of home life that our troops must necessarily experience during the time they spend in London than any other agency, and it will be a satisfaction to many anxious parents in the Dominion to know that this is so.”⁵

Surviving accounts such as this show that efforts were made to represent the Shakespeare Hut to New Zealanders as a place for their loved ones to be safe and well looked-after.

Shakespeare’s name offers an added gravitas to the place as well as linking it with a sense of the ‘positive’ side of England, encouraging a notion of shared history and national – or racial – identity.

The Shakespeare Hut’s physical presentation is of course integral to how we read its meaning as a memorial or commemorative object. It was swiftly designed by W. Charles Waymouth and was to be the grandest YMCA hut ever built. The extensive external beams were a deliberate design feature, intended to produce a mock-Tudor style, signposting the Hut’s link to Shakespeare and ‘his England’. In a letter to Gollancz as early as March 1916, Yeaxlee is already proud of Waymouth’s concept, pointing out that “he has provided in the elevation for Tudor touches”.⁶ Indeed, as soon as the Hut scheme was made public, the idea of the Shakespeare Hut as an architectural homage to Shakespeare’s age was becoming firmly entrenched, with newspapers frequently pointing out its “Elizabethan style”⁷. As we can see from surviving photographs of the Hut, mock-Tudor beams covered the entire surface of the

⁵ *Northern Advocate* (New Zealand), 13th December 1918

⁶ Letter: Yeaxlee to Gollancz, 3rd March 1916

⁷ *The Observer*, 15th March 1916

external walls. The overall effect is quite unique and comes together as a quasi-reconstruction, just four years after the ‘reconstructed’ Globe theatre of the ‘Shakespeare’s England’ exhibition.

The Hut’s idiosyncratic design is equally crucial to its commemorative *and* its broader ideological functions. It represented a form of cosy, utopian Englishness for the benefit of Anzacs arriving from horrors more and more clearly caused by British command bungles. Yet the Shakespeare Hut’s very incongruity and anachronism within its architectural surroundings confounds the notion of it representing a recognisable ‘England’ in any convincing sense. It was very much a gesture, one which ostensibly commemorated Shakespeare but additionally acted as a conspicuous reminder, imbedded in the architecture of central London, of an Arcadian ‘merrie old England’ that was worth fighting for. When Anzacs bought postcards (see Figures 5 and 6) of the Hut to send home (a few examples of which still survive), their relatives received pictures of beautiful landmarks but also the Hut’s comfortable rooms, innocent pursuits and, in the building itself, an image of ‘Shakespeare’s England’, that benevolent Imperial motherland.

Figure 5: Postcard from the Shakespeare Hut
(from the private collection of Prof. Philip mead, University of Western Australia)

Figure 6: Detail of a picture of the Shakespeare Hut pantry, showing postcards for sale in racks on the wall (from the archives of the YMCA)

Yet perhaps this view of the Shakespeare Hut is clouded by a post-colonial academic cynicism that belies the complexity of its function and importance for troops, volunteers and the general public who encountered it. In a time of thankless brutality punctuated by official messages of cheery patriotism, the YMCA huts were, effectively, separate from the British or any other government and were therefore not directly complicit in the causes or effects of wartime decision-making. In that sense, by approaching the YMCA, Gollancz created a pragmatic memorial to Shakespeare that was, while associated with the ‘war effort’, distinct from direct links to those in command. The Shakespeare Hut thus aligned Shakespeare much more with the ‘fighting man’, its user, and the ‘caring woman’, its volunteer, than with the powers that be.

The Shakespeare Hut’s function of establishing an England of which Dominion troops could be proud also merged with a sense that the Shakespeare Hut could be used to show appreciation of the sacrifices and endeavours of these troops from ‘beyond the seas’. In 1917, the Queen visited the Hut and, while this event received only small coverage in the UK press, in New Zealand it was much bigger news. One paper reports, “The men - mostly New Zealanders - were delighted to meet her Majesty. The Queen saw a wounded New Zealand soldier, and sympathetically inquired where he was wounded and in what fight. Then a Maori met her eye, and was proud to chat of ‘God’s Own Country’, while later an Australian soldier claimed her interest. After the inspection, the Queen presided behind the canteen counter, and

handed to each man a cup of tea.”⁸ The fact that the Queen herself served tea to the soldiers was also pointed out in the English papers. However, here, it is highlighted that Queen chatted to a Maori soldier of “God’s Own Country”, a patriotic term by then widely used by New Zealanders for their homeland. The effect of this phrase, and the attention given by the Queen to a Maori soldier as well as the incredible notion of the Queen serving tea herself, all represent the Shakespeare Hut as a place where New Zealanders are given very special treatment and where their homeland is respected in balance with belonging to the Empire. The Shakespeare Hut Lounge (Figure 7) also demonstrates this notion of the Hut as a little piece of New Zealand in London, where within the ‘Shakespearean’ mock-Tudor walls, we find a room decorated with colonial furniture, tropical plants and, above all, the Maori greeting ‘Kia Ora’ emblazoned above a very English fireplace.

Figure 7: Photograph of the Shakespeare Hut Lounge (from the archives of the YMCA)

In addition to their obvious purpose as shelters, one of the key functions of YMCA huts was to provide ‘clean’, affordable entertainment for the servicemen staying there, “a healthy environment”. The Shakespeare Hut was portrayed in the press and promoted as a kind of safe, wholesome, home-like haven for the New Zealand Diggers, where they could see the sights of London while keeping their morality intact, where “Hundreds of New Zealand sons have been kept straight by the fine accommodation at our hut”⁹. The wholesome image of the YMCA was significant in the war for all Allied soldiers, yet this notion in relation to

⁸ *Feilding Standard*, 28th April 1917

⁹ *Hawara and Normanby Star*, 15th March 1917

Dominion and Empire troops takes on further meaning. In the New Zealand press, London is seen as the bad side of England, where all manner of unhealthy habits and temptations lurk and the Shakespeare Hut is the idyllic, leafy, Shakespearean ‘merrie old England’ of nostalgia and affection. This building and its entertainments aligned Shakespeare with the softer side of England. Rather than simply tying the Shakespeare Hut to that patriotic Shakespeare who called young men to war through stark quotations on recruitment posters, here is a Shakespeare that is aligned with a paternalistic, nurturing homeland.

After all of this, how was the Shakespeare Hut forgotten? In 1919, Lieutenant Colonel Arthur Murray made a request in the Commons that the Shakespeare Hut be taken over as a hostel for “limbless soldiers” but this was obviously not taken up, as in 1920 the Hut was rented to the YMCA as a base for the new Indian YMCA. This rent paid for the formation and touring of the New Shakespeare Company until the sale of the site in 1924. By 1939, we find the Hut mis-described as an American Red Cross facility.¹⁰ In 1982, Sally Beauman describes the Hut cursorily (and clearly inaccurately on two counts) as “a *small* wooden hut in which to entertain *British* troops” (69, my emphasis).

Built on the site of the Shakespeare Hut during the mid to late 1920s, the School of Tropical Medicine now forms an imposing part of the local architecture. On the School’s website, an interactive timeline teaches its readers the apparent history of the institution. Given what we now know of the significance of the Shakespeare Hut to its users and volunteers, and indeed to the history of Shakespeare and commemoration, the description of the site prior to School is hauntingly inaccurate. It states, “The National Theatre Committee was formed to set up a memorial to Shakespeare in London. It had purchased the land in 1913 intending to build a Shakespeare Memorial Theatre in readiness for the tercentenary of the playwright’s death in 1916. These plans were shelved at the outbreak of war and the vacant site remained a

¹⁰ In their “history of the Shakespeare industry”, *Amazing Monument* (1939), Ivor Brown and George Fearon mention the hut only briefly, in reference to the wartime use of the Bloomsbury site: “During this period the site was rented to the American Red Cross, for an annual figure of about £3,000, and used for ‘The Shakespeare Hut’, whither came soldiers on leave for entertainment and refreshment” (299). This is all very confused – the site was not rented to the American Red Cross, of course; in fact, it was not rented out for this figure of “around £3,000” until after the war, when the *building* and site were rented to the YMCA as a base for the new Indian YMCA and the rental income used to fund the New Shakespeare Company to tour the country. This inaccuracy is one of many Chinese whispers leading to the Hut’s disappearance from public memory.

wilderness of huts and rubble until the mid-1920s.”¹¹ This account reveals how the Hut has been - almost literally - written out of architectural and cultural history and, therefore, collective memory. The words are accompanied by the picture below (Figure 8) in which the back of the Shakespeare Hut complex can just be seen peeping through, yet it is relegated to the “wilderness” both physically and figuratively.

Figure 8: Image of the Hut site shown on the LSHTM website timeline (as online in 2012)

The appearance of the Hut, as we have seen, fed into its myth, but the entertainments available within were equally significant. Even before the Shakespeare Hut had finished being built, an Entertainment Committee was formed to plan the programme and nature of events for its men. The star actress, Lady Forbes Robertson was the Chair and a leading light in the entertainments at the Hut for the rest of the war. Shows at the Hut were very frequent - at least once a week - and Lady Forbes Robertson arranged and even appeared in many of them. In 1918, a newspaper correspondent describes the scene he found when he dropped into the Shakespeare Hut on a tour around the troops in London:

“We found a packed audience listening with the greatest of delight and pleasure to a party arranged by Sir Johnston Forbes-Robertson and Lady Robertson. The party was a most

¹¹<http://timeline.lshtm.ac.uk>. It must be acknowledged that, when made aware of my research on the Hut, the LSHTM have enthusiastically agreed to amend the website entry and to include the Shakespeare Hut fully in its presentation the School’s pre-history.

excellent one. The actor knight gave a short address on Shakespeare, illustrated by extracts from his plays...Lady Forbes-Robertson sang some character songs admirably.”¹²

In fact, Lady Forbes-Robertson’s benevolence and provision of ‘clean’ entertainment for New Zealanders at the Hut won her an extremely affectionate reputation back in their home country. In the sparse references that have so far been made to the Hut’s entertainments, it is presented as having been a space for amateurs to entertain the troops.¹³ In fact, the Hut’s stage saw regular performances by not just professionals, but some of the most famous actors and actresses of the time, such as Ellen Terry, Ben Greet and, of course, the Forbes Robertsons. This part of the history of Shakespeare on the stage has simply been erased, by both neglect and, perhaps, selective memory.

As the School of Tropical Medicine timeline demonstrates, the Shakespeare Hut is now all but forgotten and, judging from archive sources in both the UK and New Zealand, the beginning of this forgetting was the end of the War. The last significant step for the Shakespeare Hut was in 1924, when the people of New Zealand presented a gold tiki statuette to Lady Forbes Robertson, in recognition of her service to their troops. After that, from the mid-1920s onwards, the trail of remembrance of the Shakespeare Hut becomes very faint indeed.

In the memory of the Diggers who used the Hut, there may have been the last images of many friends and colleagues lost or mutilated (physically or mentally) during the War. For those users of the Hut, the conflict between cultivating its memory and the temptation of forgetfulness would, like other aspects of their active service, be troublesome. Allyson Booth, in examining the notion of ‘wartime architecture’ in the First World War, sees individual forgetfulness of the trauma of war as being facilitated by the forgetting of specific, related objects. “When the past that has pooled into objects is a past that includes the war”, she writes, “characters sometimes take advantage of that reification as a way of discarding an experience they would just as soon forget. If memories are conceived of as residing in certain

¹² *Evening Post* (New Zealand), 15th March 1918

¹³ In John Elsom and Nicholas Tomalin’s (1978) *A History of the National Theatre*, they refer to the Shakespeare Hut as “to entertain wounded troops”, which is of course an incorrect description of its function (52). Based, quite reasonably (considering the dearth of material on the Hut), on their account, Michael Dobson describes the Hut in his exploration of amateur Shakespearean productions: “The ‘Shakespeare Hut’...mainly provided entertainment and warm meals for servicemen on leave. But to mark the tercentenary year of Shakespeare’s death, the Hut also hosted performances of extracts for the plays – which were given by amateurs” (92). Indeed, the ‘forgetting’ of the Hut’s function as a professional performance space for an extended period of time (at least 1916-19), is complete.

objects, it becomes possible to place, manipulate, or discard those memories” (147). Indeed, it barely needs noting that the previously orderly process of forgetting and remembering was painfully destabilized, in the context of the sheer numbers of amnesiacs suddenly entering to society. At the same time, official endorsement of certain aspects of remembering, such as officially sanctioned memorial sites, attempted to erase or prohibit dangerous cultural memories, such as the lethal mistakes of the British command. Moreover, in the rush to memorialise the dead, those who returned from the war with their memories or limbs wrenched from them were an inconvenient reminder of the war that defied mythmaking for many decades beyond the Armistice.

One other possible element in forgetting the Hut must be the ‘female’ identity it acquired through the gender of many of its entertainers (Figure 9) and workers (Figure 10) and, often, its high profile supporters. While the hut was visited by military bigwigs on occasion, the famous name attached to it was Lady Forbes Robertson, almost all its ‘workers’ were women and, while these women were not in direct authority in the Hut, it was represented to its users day-to-day as the female face of the war. After the war ended and the Anzacs slowly returned home, the hundreds of women of the Hut returned to their pre-war position, often as middle-class wives and mothers. As Booth has noted, attitudes to women returning to the domestic sphere after their ‘war work’ often added up to their contribution being valued as training in domestic ‘hard work’ so that they would solve the “servant problem” by becoming good servants to their husbands or fathers, newly equipped with the capacity for physical labour, “in other words”, she ironically notes, “the war... taught women to be servants” (129). So, in line with much of women’s ‘war work’, the Hut may have been sidelined in that sense as better forgotten.

Figure 9: The Shakespeare Orchestra (from the archives of the YMCA)

Figure 10: The pantry (from the archives of the YMCA)

Perhaps forgetting the Shakespeare Hut is paradigmatic of cultural and individual forgetfulness after the war. The Hut was designed to offer a moment of respite in the midst of the unthinkable violence to which servicemen were subjected, yet this may itself be the very reason for the amnesia surrounding it. In Australia and New Zealand, the Anzac myth relies heavily on an emphasis on British command bungles, abjection and relentless suffering. English authorities were unequivocally responsible for disasters such as the Gallipoli landing and it is certainly no consolation that a venture like the Shakespeare Hut, whatever its ideological agenda or result, was a small positive gesture for Anzacs. Nevertheless, while it did clearly peddle a paternalistic attitude to Dominion troops, it still demonstrates another side of the English war effort that distanced itself from the cold-hearted orders that sent those same troops to almost certain doom.

In fact, the Shakespeare Hut almost became an even more complex memorial construct. In 1919, a group of Anzac servicemen proposed to build a war memorial and the form they decided upon was to be a replica of the Shakespeare Hut, to be reconstructed in New Zealand. One New Zealander paper reported: “Officers, non-coms, and men of the division...are subscribing to build a Hut in a New Zealand city on the lines of the Shakespeare Hut, London...as a memorial to those fallen during the war.”¹⁴ It appears that this scheme was never realised, probably due to funding problems. Nevertheless, this incident shows how crucial the Shakespeare Hut had become as a symbol of the New Zealand Diggers. A

¹⁴ *Feilding Star*, 29th January 1919

memorial to Shakespeare would have become a memorial to those men that stayed in the Hut, layering commemoration of those actually mourned onto the foundation provided by an ‘historical reconstruction’, Shakespeare. Just as Lieutenant Leslie Tweedie’s memorial was encapsulated within Shakespeare’s ‘memorial’, the more general monument that would have been represented by the replica Shakespeare Hut would have merged Shakespeare’s name with those of hordes of fallen New Zealand soldiers. What this plan also teaches us is that the Shakespeare Hut moved from the opposite of forgotten - that is, replicated for posterity - all the way to oblivion in just a few decades.

In the end, it is this very ‘forgetting’ of the Shakespeare Hut that broadens our perceptions of the function and meaning of commemorative objects during the First World War, of remembering Shakespeare and indeed of notions of commemoration in a much wider sense. Connerton’s differentiation between the actually ‘remembered’ (and therefore mourned) and the ‘historical reconstruction’ of the long-lost person or event is a useful starting point in dealing with the commemoration of Shakespeare. Yet, in the case of the Shakespeare Hut, these definitions are blurred. In the first instance, Shakespeare’s name shared the space with Lieutenant Leslie Tweedie, whose memorial faded with the forgetting of the Hut. Hauntingly, too, while the Hut was designed for relaxation, entertainment and shelter, the high death toll of the war by 1916 was starkly visible and there is a sense that the proximity of death was always upon the Hut’s users. It then can be seen as a living memorial to everyone who passed through it and appears to confound Booth’s claim that “architectural memorialisation of the dead and missing was kept distinct from the design of architecture that would be used and inhabited by the living” (127). On the contrary, this instance of temporary architecture quite consciously did both. The invocation of Shakespeare’s name to delineate the Bloomsbury site into a physical place both of commemoration *and* of use by active soldiers led to a highly unusual intersection of the living *and* the dead, the historical *and* the mourned. Shakespeare’s largest material commemorative object in 1916 was merely temporary, merely functional – yet, as we resurrect it from oblivion, we find that it serves valuably to blur the boundaries in any attempt to define commemoration.

References

- Beauman, Sally (1982) *The Royal Shakespeare Company: A History of Ten Decades*, Oxford: OUP
- Blair, Carole, Greg Dickinson and Brian L. Ott, (2010) *Places of Public Memory: The Rhetoric of Museums and Memorials*, Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press
- Booth, Allyson (1996) *Postcards from the Trenches: Negotiating the space between modernism and the First World War*, New York, NY/Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Brown, Ivor & Fearon, George (1939) *Amazing Monument: A Short History of the Shakespeare Industry*, London/Toronto: Heinemann
- Calvo, Clara (2010), 'Shakespeare as War Memorial' in *Shakespeare Survey* 63, pp. 198-211
- Connerton, Paul (1989) *How Societies Remember*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Connerton, Paul (2008) 'Seven Types of Forgetting' in *Memory Studies*, vol1 no. 1, pp.59-71
- Drake, Fabia (1978) *Blind Fortune*, London: Kimber
- Elsom, John and Tomalin, Nicholas (1978) *The History of the National Theatre*, London: Cape
- Cornwallis West, Jeanette (ed.) (1911) *A Souvenir of the Shakespeare Ball*, London: Frederick Warne
- Habicht, Werner (2001) 'Shakespeare Celebrations in Times of War', in *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Vol. 52, No. 4 (Winter, 2001), pp. 441-455
- Woolf, Virginia (1920, this edition 2001), 'Solid Objects' in (ed. David Bradshaw), *The Mark on the Wall and Other Short Fiction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 54-9
- Woolf, Virginia (1925, this edition 2000) (ed. David Bradshaw) *Mrs Dalloway*, Oxford: OUP