



By **Fiona Holland**

Enter stage left: 18th-century forger W H Ireland and his Shakespeare play, rediscovered after 200 years

With 1 April on the horizon and a fascinating discovery in the Wren Library, the stage was set for a compelling, if complex, story about the 'original, 18th-century forgeries' of a notorious Shakespeare fraudster.

As Communications Officer at Trinity, I worked with Librarian Dr Nicolas Bell to promote the discovery of William Henry Ireland's fascinating *Authentic Account of the Shakesperian Manuscripts*, &c. BBC Look East's Shaun Peel got to grips with the story, which we retell here.

220 years ago Richard Brinsley Sheridan was assembling a star-studded cast for the world premiere of a newly discovered Shakespeare play – when he was told it was a hoax.

Vortigern went ahead at Drury Lane anyway – as an April Fool's Day

production in 1796, met with universal derision. Now the original 18th century forged opening scenes of *Vortigern* have come to light at Trinity.

Dr Nicolas Bell explained, "These manuscripts were created by William Henry Ireland, probably the most notorious forger of Shakespeare.

Initially, he claimed the accusations of fraud were 'a malevolent and impotent attack.' But soon afterwards he published his confessions and this newly discovered volume includes some of the original forgeries – never seen before – which caused such a stir in the 1790s.

"The faked scenes were discovered in a large album compiled by William Henry Ireland, Ireland's album also contains his 'original' version of *King Lear*, forged letters and poems ostensibly by Shakespeare, and a genuine letter (dated 1577) signed by Queen Elizabeth I – as well as the forger's confessions.

VORTIGERN.

A Malevolent and impotent attack on the SHAKESPEARE MSS. having appeared, on the *Eve* of representation of the Play of *Vortigern*, evidently intended to injure the interest of the Proprietor of the MSS., Mr. Ireland feels it impossible, within the short space of time that intervenes between the publishing and the representation, to produce an answer to the most illiberal and unfounded assertions in Mr. Malone's enquiry. He is therefore induced to request that the Play of *Vortigern* may be heard with that Candour that has ever distinguished a *British Audience*.

* * *The Play is now at the Profs, and will in a very few days be laid before the Public.*

Set in ancient Britain, *Vortigern* quickly became notorious as a fraud. Tellingly, a court Fool plays a pivotal role in the play. But at the time it was accepted by a public fascinated by the Bard and eager to believe that a new Shakespeare play could be unearthed."

Dr Bell said, "Nowadays any new Shakespeare discovery would be treated to careful forensic analysis before being declared genuine, but 200 years ago the thrill of discovering a hidden cache of documents seemed to cloud people's judgement. William Ireland wrote this play when he was only 19, and what is most amazing in hindsight is that so many people were taken in by what is basically a very bad attempt at forgery."

Ireland's motivation for the fraud seems related to his aspirations to be a playwright and his complex relationship with his father, Samuel Ireland, a writer and print-maker. But things got out of hand when Samuel opened his house to visitors keen to pay homage to the Bard.

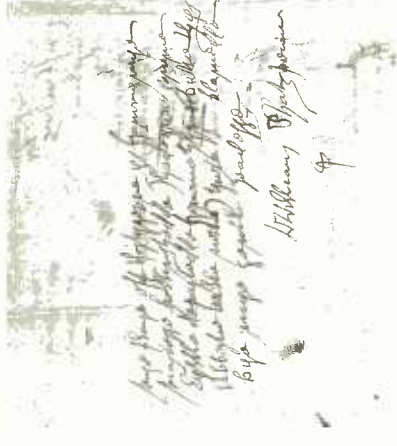
The impressive bound album, ironically entitled *An Authentic Account of the Shakesperian Manuscripts, &c.* ends with Ireland 'sincerely regretting the offence'.

"Here then I conclude, most sincerely regretting the offence I may have given the world, or any particular individual, trusting at the same time, they will deem the whole the act of a boy, without any evil or bad intention, but hurried on thoughtless of any danger that awaited to ensnare him."

Opposite page: W H Ireland's announcement before the first night of *Vortigern*.

Below left: Portrait of W H Ireland.

Below right: Shakespeare's ghost appearing to the forgers – satirical engravings by William Hogarth.



The album will be on display in the Wren Library until 30 September 2016. Read more on the Wren Blog, at trinitycollegeibrary.cambridge.wordpress.com

Fiona Holland (1988) is the College's new Communications Officer, who joined in September 2015. She read History at Trinity.

