Research in the arts

Above left: William Shakespeare, whose religious views are the subject of a new study at Sussex

Above right: Abi Curtis, winner of the 2008 Crashaw Prize for poetry
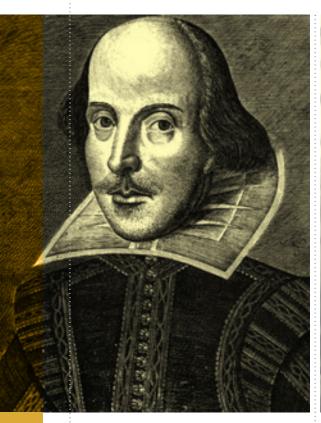
The mystery of Shakespeare's religion

One of the greatest mysteries about Shakespeare – his religion – is the subject of a new research project by a Sussex academic.

Brian Cummings, Professor of English, is to spend the next three years analysing the Bard's greatest works to find out how his fictional characters betray his own religious views. Professor Cummings, who has been awarded £131,691 by the Leverhulme Trust to carry out the research, will be taking his quest to the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington DC and the Shakespeare Institute in Stratford-upon-Avon.

'Religion is the last great mystery of Shakespeare studies,' says Professor Cummings. 'But it's not a mystery that can be uncovered by biographical evidence, which is full of illusion and uncertainty. Instead I am going back to the plays – to the multiple forms of "confession" which the plays include – and the voices of fictional others rather than the direct "voice" of Shakespeare.'

Bright outlook for poet's award-winning collection

A Lecturer in Creative Writing from the Centre for Community Engagement (CCE) launched her award-winning debut poetry collection in the summer.

Unexpected Weather by Dr Abi Curtis was one of four winners of Salt Publishing's inaugural Crashaw Prize in 2008. The poems take science, art and nature as their subjects and are experimental in form. Describing her writing, Abi says: 'I try to make the familiar extraordinary and the supernatural everyday.'

Abi, who gained a DPhil at Sussex in creative and critical writing, teaches creative writing workshops and has taught courses on the relationship between psychoanalysis and creative writing. She says: 'The study and teaching of psychoanalysis has encouraged me to be interested in the strangeness of language; and investigating the creative process with my students has enhanced my own practice as a writer.'

Diary date with Rory Bremner and Victoria Wood

A television programme featuring a visit to the Mass Observation Archive in the Library by TV stars Rory Bremner and Victoria Wood was shown in January on BBC 4. The programme is part of a series, '*Dear Diary*', which explores the act of diary writing, illustrated by some very famous examples.

Political satirist and impressionist Rory Bremner included the visit to the Mass Observation Archive as part of his look at journals by Samuel Pepys, Alan Clark and Captain Scott – and the wartime diaries written by Mass Observation correspondents during World War II.

Bremner chatted to comedian and actor Victoria Wood about the significance of the Archive's collection of wartime diaries kept by ordinary people on behalf of the Mass Observation project. Wood won a BAFTA two years ago for her adaptation of Nella Last's Mass Observation diaries. She also starred in the resulting ITV drama, '*Housewife, 49*'.

Special Collections Manager Fiona Courage and her team were on hand to help the celebrities navigate the brown boxes of original letters and diaries that make up the Mass Observation Archive, stored in Special Collections in the Library, joined by Dorothy Sheridan, Director of the Mass Observation Project.

Dorothy said: 'The film crew were keen to capture Victoria Wood's first actual sight of the original Nella Last diary. For her drama, she had worked entirely from the edited book for "*Housewife 49*". This was the first time she had visited the Archive at Sussex, seen the diary in context – and seen Nella's handwriting. With the new wave of interest in family history, personal stories and life history, the Mass Observation diaries have really come into their own. This period of our history is now slipping away from living memory so the diaries become increasingly important as a way of understanding adult experience during the Second World War.'