

THE SHAKESPEARE CLUB OF STRATFORD-UPON-AVON

The 870th meeting of the Shakespeare Club took place at Mason Croft on Tuesday 17 April 2012. The meeting was chaired by Dr James Stredder who introduced Paul Lewis, formerly Head of Media and Cultural Studies at the University of Wolverhampton, who spoke about 'The Boydell Shakspeare Gallery'.

Alderman John Boydell, later Lord Mayor of London, opened the Shakespeare Gallery at 52 Pall Mall in 1789. A printer and entrepreneur, Boydell decided at the age of 67 to round off his career by commissioning the most eminent artists of his day to create paintings to be exhibited to the public as a sort of National Gallery. The chosen subject was Shakespeare, with scenes from the plays illustrated by painters such as Fuseli and Zoffany. A coincidental connection between Stratford-upon-Avon and Boydell was the alto relievo of Shakespeare flanked by the Muses of Drama and Painting originally on the front of the Gallery building and now in Hall's Croft Garden.

Mr Lewis set the scene with contemporary paintings of exhibitions at a time when these were social as well as cultural events and illustrated the tradition of theatrical portraiture on which the Boydell Gallery drew. The paintings, however, did not necessarily represent actual performances even when actors' likenesses were used and they often showed the Gothic influence on art and theatre at the time, with ghosts in Hamlet and Macbeth being favourite subjects.

Poor relations with France affected the sale of engravings and prints and by 1783 Boydell was bankrupt. After an unsuccessful attempt to dispose of the paintings in a lottery, the gallery closed in 1805 and the pictures were dispersed, lost or known to be cut-down or destroyed. But the commercial basis of the Galley was the sale of engravings based on the paintings, published in 1803 and having a long and wide influence as individual works of art and illustrations to editions of Shakespeare's works. Mr Lewis drew attention particularly to the skill and artistry of the engravers whose work continued to be reproduced well into the late 19th century. The Boydell Shakespeare Gallery, Mr Lewis concluded, was a potent example of 'cultural capital'.

After questions from the audience the meeting finished at 9.10pm.