

Shakespeare Club of Stratford-upon-Avon

The 902nd meeting of the Shakespeare Club took place at Mason Croft on Tuesday 12 April 2016. The main speaker was Councillor Tony Jefferson, Chair of the Shakespeare Celebrations Development panel since 2014, whose subject was plans for Stratford's 2016 Shakespeare's Birthday Celebrations. Susan Brock and Sylvia Morris provided context for the main paper with a short illustrated presentation on Celebrating Shakespeare from Garrick's Jubilee in 1769 through the 1864 Tercentenary to the present day.

Mr Jefferson candidly told the rather dispiriting story of the Shakespeare Celebrations Development panel which began work in 2013 and had ceased to exist in 2016. It was tale of falling local government budgets, government policy changes, administrative challenges and bureaucratic costs. In 2009 Advantage West Midlands, the regional development agency, had funded the creation of a development and business plan for the Stratford celebrations but, before the half million pounds to implement the plan could be raised, the Government abolished the RDAs across the country. At this point in 2012 the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, which had co-ordinated the Birthday Celebrations for decades, stood down leaving the Town Trust to organise the Birthday procession that year. Nevertheless, despite – or because of – budget cuts imposed on them after the 2010 General Election, both Town and District Councils saw the value of the celebrations as a source of substantial tourist revenue to the Stratford area. The Development Panel was established to make the Celebrations financially sustainable and to reduce the pressure on the councils to provide funding.

Various ideas were tried out, Mr Jefferson explained, for example a Friends scheme (but only 50+ Friends were recruited) and the creation of a portfolio of marketable projects to attract sponsors (but the necessary data and evidence were not available). To apply for grants etc. the Panel needed to have charitable status. The cost of acquiring charitable status was estimated at £112,000 and a lead-in time that could not take effect before 2017. Although the response from the main stakeholders to the charity idea was broadly positive, at least £150,000 pa was needed to keep the celebrations going with £350,000 upfront needed to make the charity independent. Meanwhile Stratford District Council needed to lose £2 million from its budget by 2019/20.

In what seemed an intractable set of circumstances Mr Jefferson was mildly optimistic. Funding opportunities had been identified and stakeholders were willing to cooperate. The Birthday Celebrations in Stratford can't just stop he declared. We hope he is right!

After questions and discussion the meeting close at 9pm and members retired to the Conservatory for refreshments.