

The Shakespeare Club of Stratford-upon-Avon

On 18 October 2022 the Shakespeare Club of Stratford-upon-Avon held its 948th meeting at the Methodist Hall. Professor Ewan Fernie told the Club about 'Everything to Everybody', a collaborative project by the University of Birmingham and Birmingham City Council, funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund. The aim of the project, of which he is Director, was to revive the city's almost-forgotten Birmingham Shakespeare Memorial Library, housed in the iconic Library of Birmingham. It was the first great Shakespeare library in the world, as well as one which from the very beginning has belonged to all the people of the city.

Professor Fernie began by countering modern preconceptions and prejudices about Birmingham. One of the founders of Birmingham's Shakespeare Memorial Library was the radical preacher and lecturer, George Dawson who, in his time, almost exceeded the reputation of Joseph Chamberlain as the founder of the modern city. Dawson formulated the 'everything to everybody' ethos, which fuelled a significant movement for public welfare and cultural participation in nineteenth-century Birmingham which favourably impressed many eminent Victorians. The Birmingham Shakespeare Memorial Library was one of its most important surviving legacies. Dawson conceived of a library where the Bard and his works would belong to every citizen, not just a cultured elite or academia.

Professor Fernie outlined the work being done to raise awareness of this important legacy and to reinvent it not just for but with Birmingham communities: for example, by digitising the Library's catalogue, taking the Library's First Folio (the only Shakespeare First Folio in the world owned by the people) to venues across the city; funding graffiti murals for schools in Sparkbrook and Balsall Heath; influencing the Opening Ceremony and Cultural Programme of the Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth Games, and arguing with the help of Adrian Lester and Frank Skinner that the accent closest to Shakespeare's English was Brummy.

Members of the audience who already knew of the Library were reminded of its riches and those who had not were encouraged to discover more by exploring the collection for themselves.

The meeting was the first of the 2022/3 season and a return to regular live events for the Club after the Covid restrictions in spring 2020.