

Shakespeare Club of Stratford-upon-Avon

The 903rd meeting of the Shakespeare Club took place at Mason Croft on Tuesday 11 October 2016 immediately after the Annual General Meeting. The speakers were Susan Brock and Sylvia Morris whose subject was 'Long Life to the Club call'd "Shakspearean"' based on their recently published history of the Shakespeare Club from its foundation in 1824 to the present. Having provided an overview of the Birthday Celebrations from the Club's point of view earlier in the year they proposed to focus on some of the individuals who sustained the Club over two centuries and were responsible for its achievements. A Club after all was only as strong as its members and the new history was dedicated to members of the Club, past, present and future. The speakers confessed that they had felt directly connected with their predecessors as they researched their history but there was not always space in the book to give them their due. So the paper was a tribute to some of their particular local heroes and heroines.

Illustrated with images of the people and places that figured in the history of the Shakespeare Club, the chosen heroes included two men listed among the first Committee members of the Club in 1824: a young Stratford man Charles Frederick Green, the circumstances of whose life seemed to run in parallel with Shakespeare's, and secondly Captain James Saunders, a gifted antiquarian and artist but not entirely a force for good as he set up a rival Shakespeare Club called the True Blues in 1828. In the 1840s Dr John Conolly set the Club off on a more serious direction, undertaking the repair and conservation of Shakespeare's monument and the graves in Holy Trinity and eventually securing Shakespeare's Birthplace for the nation in 1847. In the 1880s men like Charles Edward Flower and Sir Arthur Hodgson and later wine merchant George Bird and F.W. Evans expanded the literary interests of the Club and took the celebration of Shakespeare's Birthday to a new level with crowds of visitors, international flags, masques and country sports.

Women played a significant part from 1901 when they were admitted as full members to the Club among them Elizabeth Flanagan, the first female member; the novelist Marie Corelli; Charlotte Carmichael Stopes, the first woman to be an honorary Life Member; Kathleen Scriven the first woman to be elected to the Committee and Annie Justins, the Club's first woman President in 1930. In more recent years George Darlow, the Club's longest serving Secretary (22 years 1946-1968), and Harry Pigott-Smith, the Club's first and last Press Secretary in the 1990s, made their mark.

There were many others worthy of memory but to conclude Dr Brock proposed a toast to be drunk immediately after the meeting closed at 9pm when members retired to the Conservatory for an informal reception and book-signing: Long Life to the Club Call'd 'Shakspearean'!