

Secretary's Report for the Gaskell Society 2020 AGM

The 34th Annual General Meeting of The Gaskell Society was held at Cross Street Chapel, Manchester, on Saturday 6th April 2019

Shirley Foster was re-elected as President.

Professor Francesco Marroni and Jenny Uglow were re-elected as Vice-Presidents.

Libby Tempest and Ann O'Brien were re-elected as Chair and Vice-Chair.

The Officers and committee members were re-elected en bloc.

Linsey Parkinson and Jane Wilkshire were elected and welcomed to the committee.

Grahame Nairn was elected as Independent Examiner of Accounts.

The Daphne Carrick Memorial Lecture was delivered by Dr Katherine Skaris who took as her title "The Unsung Heroes of Elizabeth Gaskell's Fiction." After lunch, Professor Mary Hammond delighted us with "French Novels, Lemons and Lumps of Sugar": picturing the travelling reader in 1850-1930.

We were grateful to both speakers for such stimulating talks.

The Autumn meeting was held in Knutsford on 28th September. In the morning, The Joan Leach Memorial Lecture was given by Dr Carolyn Lambert, taking as her title, "Narrating Sexuality." After lunch, our afternoon speaker was John Tiernan speaking on "The Hollands of Liverpool and Wirral: Merchants, Entrepreneurs and Adventurers." Yet again we had two outstanding speakers to delight us.

The annual Gaskell Service, held at Brook Street Chapel, Knutsford on 22nd September 2019 took the theme of Friendship. Four members read extracts from *North and South*, *Mary Barton* and Jenny Uglow's *A Habit of Stories*. It was yet another moving service in Elizabeth Gaskell's memory.

The New Year Lunch was again held at The Cottons Hotel, Knutsford and organised by Carolyn McCreesh. After lunch, we were spectacularly entertained by The Gaskell String Quartet, playing a Mendelssohn Quartet and Dvorak's American Quartet. It was a truly memorable occasion, attracting a record number of diners.

On Valentine's Day, we hosted our Romantic Heroes event in partnership with Elizabeth Gaskell's House and the Brontë Society. Our Chair, Libby Tempest, presided over the contest between Mr Rochester, Heathcliff and our own Mr Thornton. Libby also started a reading group in conjunction with The Portico Library's librarian, Thom Keep. It's a group for those who have never read a Gaskell novel but always meant to and is proving very popular with the first meeting being a sellout to the point where they have now read very many Gaskell novels!

Our Study trip in May, was to Quarry Bank, Styal, where Gaskell's Uncle Peter Holland had been the doctor to the apprentices at the mill. It was owned at that time by the Greg family who were well-known to Elizabeth Gaskell. A National Trust property, it is one of the best preserved textile mills of the Industrial Revolution and a superb museum of the cotton industry.

The main event of 2019 was the Conference, held at Tankersley Manor Hotel, near Sheffield in July. Our theme was Elizabeth Gaskell and Working-Class Culture and Politics, to tie in with the bicentenary year of both Peterloo and John Ruskin's birth.

The scene was set on Friday evening by local social historian, Brian Holmshaw and Blue Badge Guide Ellen Outram introducing us to the history and literature of Sheffield and the Peak District.

On Saturday morning, Dr Lizzie Ludlow opened the Conference with “Methodism and Spiritual Egalitarianism in Elizabeth Gaskell’s Fiction” looking at how Gaskell represents Methodist characters who challenge ideas about gender and class.

Our second speakers were a change to the programme as committee members Dr Diane Duffy and Anthony Burton, saved the day by stepping in at the last minute when our scheduled speaker dropped out. They gave a superb presentation on Elizabeth Gaskell’s knowledge of working-class people and places in Manchester.

The third speaker of the day was Professor Francis O’Gorman, a Professor of English Literature and Chairman of the Ruskin Society, who spoke to us of Ruskin’s views and beliefs.

After Conference Dinner, we held a fun literary quiz which was very much enjoyed by all. Professor Robert Poole, author of *Peterloo: the English Uprising* opened our Sunday session with “Peterloo, Gaskell and Cheshire”, giving us a rounded account of the event. Dr Michael Sanders followed with “I’d rather say nought about that...” Chartist silences in *Mary Barton*. This talk followed on superbly from Peterloo. We were privileged to have had a truly world-class line up of speakers.

On Sunday evening, Diane and Anthony made another brilliant contribution to the Conference, bringing the house down with a wonderful entertainment, compiled by Anthony, called *The Poetry of Humble Life*.

We had had two very interesting trips on both afternoons, to Oakwell Hall, visited by Charlotte Brontë and used as a model for Fieldhead in *Shirley* and to the Ruskin Exhibition in Sheffield.

Elizabeth Williams led her popular study session on *Libbie Marsh’s Three Eras* on Saturday, as an alternative to the trips.

In addition, en route to Tankersley, we visited Cannon Hall, a Georgian country house, to see their fine collection of William de Morgan ceramics and homeward bound on Monday, we visited Wentworth Woodhouse, the largest privately-owned house in Britain. Grade 1 listed and referred to as “the forgotten palace”, it is now being restored in partnership with the National Trust.

So ended a brilliant Conference and we look forward to the next one.

In May, a local theatre group produced “Gaskell Voices” at Knutsford and Wilmslow libraries. The Society had been asked for some ideas for it and it finally came to fruition.

In June, the Society and the Friends of Elizabeth Gaskell’s House attended an event at the Victoria Baths in Manchester. The event was called A Weekend in Words and the theme was local publishers. We both rented tables, displaying relevant material, enabling us to raise awareness of Elizabeth Gaskell to the viewing public.

In August, we were invited to attend an open air performance of *Cranford* at Lytham Hall, performed by a travelling theatre group. Several members were able to attend and enjoyed an excellent performance but marred by typical English bad weather!

Another lovely event took place in Knutsford when three members were invited to a local care home to talk about Elizabeth Gaskell to a packed sitting room of residents. Dressed in our best Victorian dresses, we chatted to the residents over tea and cake and spent a memorable afternoon in their company.

All our Branch meetings continue to be well supported. Northwest meetings were held at Cross St Chapel, Manchester and Brook Street Chapel Hall, Knutsford. Cross Street meetings included Anthony Burton asking “Can we devise a Gaskell brand which could

compete with Austen, Brontë and Dickens's brands in literary heritage?" Blue Badge Guide Sibby, spoke on "Ancoats – the World's First Industrial Suburb." Linda Clarke, Retired Archivist at Cheshire Archives, spoke about the Whitfield Collection at Knutsford Library. John Greenwood, Gaskell newsletter editor looked at "Elizabeth Gaskell and the French Connection." Finally in December, our Christmas meeting was held at the Portico Library where Margaret Beetham, retired lecturer at Manchester Metropolitan University, delighted us with "The Agony and the Recipe: the Victorian invention of the Woman's Magazine." Knutsford meetings held at Brook St Chapel Hall and led by Dr Diane Duffy studied *Mary Barton* in the Spring session and continued with *Cousin Phillis* in the Autumn.

London and the South East Branches have enjoyed a varied programme.

In February, Professor Martin Hewitt, Professor of History at Anglia Ruskin University, spoke on "Domestic visiting as a means of social knowledge and reconciliation in Gaskell's fiction."

This was followed in May, by "Whose line is it anyway? William Gaskell's revisions on *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* delivered by Lucy Hanks, a doctoral student at the University of Manchester.

In September, Dr Flore Jansson spoke on "Out in Public with Gaskell's Women." Finally in November, Annick Pommier spoke on "Connectedness in *Cranford*."

The South West group began their programme with two seminars:

The first in February, focussed on Jane Austen's *Emma* and Anne Brontë's *Agnes Grey*.

The second in March, examined *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë and *Wives and Daughters* by Elizabeth Gaskell.

The speaker for the Spring Meeting in May was Professor Pite whose topic was "*Cousin Phillis* and the Development of the Railways."

A most successful Summer lunch was held in a member's garden and this was

Followed in the Autumn, with Dr Caroline Lambert speaking on "Marriage in Literature" covering the relationship between Dickens and Gaskell and Fanny Trollope.

The Journal continues to excel under the editorship of Dr Rebecca Styler and excitingly, the Gaskell Journal Index Vols 1-30 (1987-2017) was published and is available to purchase.

John Greenwood is doing an excellent job with the Newsletter and is always grateful for articles.

Janet Allan has continued to represent the Gaskell Society at the ALS meetings in Birmingham.

The Website continues as a most useful source of reference and a source of new members under the expert guidance of Linsey Parkinson, our Website Manager.

2019 was an incredibly busy year for the Gaskell Society as shown by this report. Many thanks to all who played their part in running the Society and as always to our wonderful membership for their continued enthusiasm and support.