

Secretary's Report

The 35th Annual General Meeting of The Gaskell Society was held by Zoom on 26th September 2020. This meeting was postponed from April due to Covid 19 restrictions, following a lockdown situation in March. We had delayed the meeting from April, in the hope that we would be able to meet in person later in the year, at Cross Street Chapel but as this was not going to be possible, we resorted to a Zoom meeting which was extremely successful.

Shirley Foster was re-elected as President.

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.

Grahame Nairn was elected as Independent Examiner of Accounts.

The meeting was purely a business meeting but we look forward to eventually being able to return to our usual format to include two speakers and a lunch.

2020 began normally with our New Year Lunch in January held at Cottons Hotel, Knutsford, organised by Carolyn McCreesh. After a delicious three course lunch we were entertained by Diane Duffy and her fellow thespians performing "The Old Nurse's Story."

In January, in Knutsford, Dr Diane Duffy led our study of "Mr Harrison's Confessions", after our customary lunch. The Gaskell Books Exhibition was also on display upstairs at Brook Street Chapel.

February's Manchester meeting was held at The Portico Library, when to celebrate LGBT History Month, we welcomed Dr Jill Liddington, whose scholarly research into the diaries of Anne Lister inspired the BBC/HBO series Gentleman Jack. The event was a sell out which was fantastic. Having visited Anne's home, Shibden Hall in Halifax, the previous year, the talk was particularly poignant for us.

Dr Diane Duffy discussed "The Doom of the Griffiths" at the February Knutsford meeting after our customary lunch.

At the beginning of March at Cross Street Chapel, Susan Dunne talked to us about Charlotte and Patrick Brontë's visit to Manchester for eye surgery to save Patrick's failing sight. It was such an interesting talk and was in fact the last event that we were able to hold in person in 2020, due to Covid 19 restrictions.

The March and April meetings in Knutsford were subsequently cancelled, as were the AGM and a Peak District Tour with Elizabeth Gaskell and Florence Nightingale connections.

By July, thinking that we really should attempt an online event by something called Zoom, Dr Diane Duffy bravely talked to us about Elizabeth Gaskell's Cultural Connections. This proved to be a great success and such talks kept us going throughout the rest of 2020!

In August, Bob Gamble gave the Society's second online talk with Mrs Gaskell's Personal Pantheon. Using material from his new book, Bob presented previously undiscovered biographical information about Elizabeth Gaskell.

By September, in place of our Knutsford Autumn Meeting, we felt brave enough to hold our postponed AGM by Zoom which was most successful, mainly thanks to the technical skills of our committee member and website manager, Linsey Parkinson.

A lovely highlight in September, was being able to hold the annual Gaskell Service at Brook Street Chapel, Knutsford, as it was by then, allowed to open for 30 people.

We laid the customary flowers on Elizabeth Gaskell's grave and our much loved Joan Leach's grave prior to the service. The theme we chose was, appropriately, Epidemics in Gaskell's novels.

In October, our new season of Manchester Zoom talks recommenced with the Rev. Dr Ann Peart giving her online talk on Researching Unitarian Women. Ann had recently published her book "Unitarian Women: A Legacy of Dissent."

The Portico Library also repeated the Anne Lister talk by Dr Jill Liddington on Zoom.

The October Knutsford meeting recommenced on Zoom with Dr Diane Duffy's study session on "The Squire's Story."

In November, Sherry Ashworth gave her online talk on Elizabeth and Esther, looking at what use Elizabeth Gaskell made of the book of Esther in her fiction.

The Knutsford Meeting in November was an online discussion with Diane Duffy on "The Well of Pen Morfa."

Our final online meeting of the year in December, was A Christmas Ramble, in which Anthony Burton led us on a virtual walk that the Gaskells took on Christmas Day 1861, there and back from their home to Cross Street Chapel.

The decision was made in December to postpone the 2021 Conference until 8-11th July 2022 when there may be a better chance of it going ahead.

The London Branch of the Society cancelled its February and May meetings and hope to reschedule when the time is right.

The South West Branch was able to hold its annual event of two Saturday afternoon discussion meetings in February and March where they examined marriages in chosen Victorian novels. February's session opened with Ann Brooks explaining the legal position of married couples at the time thus giving an insight into the marriage of Elizabeth and William Gaskell. There then followed a discussion of the marriages of Helen and Arthur in Anne Brontë's "The Tenant of Wildfell Hall" and Mr and Mrs Gibson in Elizabeth Gaskell's "Wives and Daughters."

The second Saturday considered "Middlemarch" by George Eliot. The discussion focused on Dorothea and Casaubon and Lydgate and Rosamund, looking at how marriage was affected by the legal position of the time, how relationships changed over time and how any children might be affected by the law.

The two Saturdays were well attended and thoroughly enjoyed with tea and cakes to follow.

Throughout the year, Janet Allan has represented the Society at the Alliance of Literary Societies meetings and represents us on the ALS committee.

We thank Dr Rebecca Styler for all her work in producing the Journal and John Greenwood for his enthusiasm and hard work with the Newsletter.

The Website is expertly run by Linsey Parkinson whose technical skills are amazing.

2020 was a most extraordinary year but we have been able to keep The Gaskell Society alive and running with our free Zoom sessions of excellent talks and book studies, attracting attendees from all over the UK, Europe, USA and Japan, which surely is a positive result to come out of the Covid epidemic.

Very many thanks to Linsey Parkinson and Diane Duffy for their time and expertise in facilitating our meetings and to all our guest speakers and most importantly to all the members who embraced technology and joined the online sessions.

Pam Griffiths

