

The Shakespeare Club of Stratford-upon-Avon

The 933rd meeting of the Shakespeare Club of Stratford-upon-Avon took place on Tuesday 13 October. This was the opening meeting of the 2020-21 season, and the Club's first ever virtual meeting. Dr Rebekah Owens delivered a lecture on the subject of "Frederick Samuel Boas, a University-Extension Shakespearian". The talk was introduced by Chairman Susan Brock and the lecture which was read by Secretary Sylvia Morris was accompanied by illustrations.

Dr Owens' paper looked at one aspect of Frederick Boas's long and distinguished career, his work as a young man as one of the first Oxford University Extension lecturers in the late nineteenth century. These courses were intended to bring University-standard education to those who could afford neither the time nor money to attend one of the Universities. Students did not merely attend lectures but could stay behind for discussions with the lecturer and were expected to read around the subject, write essays and sit exams. Successful students achieved a formal qualification. Summer Schools offered students something close to a University experience. These courses led to many other educational developments for adults wishing to undertake life-long learning. Like all the lecturers Boas travelled by train to venues as far apart as Torquay in the west, Huddersfield in the north, Ramsgate in the east and Southampton in the south.

The Courses lacked funding and Dr Owens considered the conflict between the desire to provide courses that were intellectually rewarding against the need to cover costs by attracting large numbers of participants. This impossible conflict resulted in the Extension courses attracting considerable criticism.

There were however considerable successes. At the time, Shakespeare was not taught at Universities so Boas's lecture programmes set the curricula for the Universities' Schools of English founded in the 1890s. The Universities were entirely male, and the Extension Courses were popular with women thirsty for the education denied them. There was also debate around whether Shakespeare was a suitable subject for education for the working classes. Was it wasted on them, and should they be spending their time on more practical subjects? Dr Owens' talk ended with a report of a meeting in the Yorkshire mill town of Todmorden at which one contributor was loudly applauded when he described the experience of attending Boas's lectures on Shakespeare as "priceless".

The meeting, which was pre-recorded, closed after questions. Over the three days it remained available, 107 people watched the recording.