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*The Record Society  
of  
Lancashire and Cheshire*



## Official Newsletter

No. 2 2021

### Welcome from the RSLC

Thank you for reading the *Record Society of Lancashire and Cheshire Newsletter*, and for your interest in our Society. The RSLC – established in 1878 – is a registered charity which aims to promote understanding of, and public interest in, the history of Lancashire and Cheshire – including Manchester, Liverpool, Chester and Preston – through the publication of editions of historical records and other activities.

If you are a member of the Society, we are very grateful for your support. If not, you can find out more about the RSLC, including details about how to join (and receive our annual volumes in return for your £20 subscription), at <http://rslc.org.uk/>. Alternatively, you can write to Diana Dunn at East Manley Hall, Manley Lane, Manley, Frodsham, WA6 9JE or [d.dunn@chester.ac.uk](mailto:d.dunn@chester.ac.uk)

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### The RSLC in 2020

This has been a challenging year for organisations of all kinds, including historical societies. Although 2020 began well, with a launch to celebrate the publication of RSLC volume 156, other planned events – including our annual lecture – had to be cancelled. The Society's finances have also been hit by the wider economic downturn and by the retrenchment forced upon local and university libraries. However, thanks to the support of our members and the work of our Council, we look to the future with confidence.

We are always keen to welcome new members, and so please do pass on news about the Society to anyone you think may be interested in our activities and publications.

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## Annual General Meeting 2021

We have decided to hold our 2021 AGM online, via Zoom. Although we are disappointed not to be able to meet in person, we feel that this is the safest way to proceed this year. We hope also that an online AGM will allow participation by members who live some distance from north-west England, and who are not ordinarily able to attend our events. The AGM will take place on **Wednesday 7 April**, beginning at **2.00pm**. It will be followed at 2.15pm by the Colin Phillips Memorial Lecture, to be delivered this year by Dr Paul Booth: "The Oldest Lancashire Ghost Story".

Dr Booth was formerly a Senior Lecturer in Medieval History at the University of Liverpool and co-director of the *Gascon Rolls, 1317-1468* project. He has published several books and editions on the medieval history of Lancashire and Cheshire, and is currently president of four local history societies.

**ALL ARE WELCOME.** To register for the AGM and lecture, please contact Diana Dunn (see postal and email address on page 1) in advance of the meeting, providing your email address. We will then send you a Zoom link for the meeting a few days beforehand.

## RSLC on Facebook!

The Society is pleased to announce that we have recently launched Facebook account: <https://www.facebook.com/Record-Society-of-Lancashire-and-Cheshire-103846055012201>

As well as publicising our activities and publications (and those of kindred societies), we will be using this account to share interesting stories found within our previously published volumes. Many of our past editions are available, free to users, on the society's website: <http://rslc.org.uk/publications/> – and so those interested can follow up our social media posts at their leisure.

Our 157 published volumes shed light on every aspect of life in north-west England, from the eleventh to the twentieth centuries. Perhaps inevitably in present circumstances, we have decided to start with tales of past pandemics. RSLC editions provide insights into the experiences and sufferings of our forebears during the Black Death, the multiple early modern outbreaks of plague, the cholera epidemics of the 1830s, and the spread of Spanish Flu in 1918-20. These stories are often poignant, and reveal some striking parallels with the Covid-19 pandemic. If you're interested in finding out more, please check out our Facebook page and join in the conversation. We aim to post a new tale from our archive every couple of weeks or so.



*DAVID BRAZENDALE tells us about the research behind his new RSLC edition (co-edited with Professor Mark Towsey), **The First Minute Book of the Liverpool Athenaeum, 1797-1809**, and reveals some of the fascinating insights the minute book provides into Georgian Liverpool.*

**How did you become interested in historical research?**

I have always been interested in history and thought of writing history books since my aunt sent me a book – *Ages and Ages Ago* in 1943. I studied history at school and it was the subject of my degree at Manchester University. After taking my PGCE at Liverpool I spent over thirty years teaching in a wide variety of schools. But in addition to my work as Head of Department, I was also researching a number of historical topics and after early retirement began an intensive programme of work in adult education as tutor in Liverpool University’s Continuing Education programme as well as working in a variety of other organisations, while running my own business as a freelance historian.

**Why did you decide to undertake this particular piece of research?**

In 2000, I became a Proprietor – as members are known – of the Athenaeum in Liverpool where my interests became known and I was asked to Chair the Library Sub-Committee. This put me in charge of a library of more than 60,000 volumes, many very rare if not unique, as well as archives and artefacts. The choice for a subject for research was wide but the Minute Book kept during the first ten years of the Athenaeum, 1797-1809, especially fired my interest and chimed with my research into the development of the town in the Georgian period – a topic dealt with in my previously published books *Georgian Liverpool* and *Brierley’s Liverpool*. In this I was always encouraged and guided by Professor Mark Towsey whose encyclopaedic knowledge of the period has been invaluable.

**What have you discovered about the history of Liverpool through your work on the Athenaeum Minute Book?**

The Minute Book tells us – in great and unusual detail – of the thoughts and mindset of the pioneering Georgian gentlemen who founded the Athenaeum. It was interesting to find that at no stage were women excluded by the Laws, and it was social mores rather than the Athenaeum which kept them out. Indeed, in the early days of the club there were ladies who, albeit briefly, held shares.

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**In what ways do you think the Minute Book will be of use to historians of the future?**

I imagine it will provide useful material for researchers into two aspects of historical research, in particular. Firstly, it will intrigue those who are investigating the eighteenth-century phenomenon of 'associationalism'. Here you have a complete and detailed record of the foundation of a club, its intentions, its aims, and the mechanisms which were used to create a new room and library, from the preliminary discussions, the erection of the building and the development of its activities and services. Secondly, the Minute Book will be invaluable to those studying the minds, cultural aspirations, interests and taste of the Georgian elite of a very prosperous provincial town.

**Can you develop your last point and give us some idea of the original Proprietors?**

When this question about the original founders is asked, the flip answer is "Oh the Liverpool merchants"; but a more detailed assessment shows that although there was a large mercantile cadre, they were under-represented amongst the active members and committee men. Here the new class of professional men were of importance: doctors, surgeons and lawyers dominate together with a strong clergy contingent, and there are sometimes meetings where all those present are churchmen drawn from both the Established Church and the Nonconformist churches, especially Unitarians. Another myth that can be exploded is the emphasis on the part played by William Roscoe, often cited as the 'founder' of the Liverpool Athenaeum. Although he was involved, he was not the guiding spirit and in no sense the founder. This title can more fairly be given to Dr John Rutter, who had previously created the medical Institution. This judgement is supported, specifically by Roscoe's son Henry in his biography of his father.

**You have touched on the subject of associationalism. Was the Athenaeum a typical gentlemen's club?**

Not if you are comparing it with the celebrated London clubs such as Brooks's or White's, which provided food, drink, gambling and residential facilities. The Athenaeum had a more serious purpose. It was a newsroom where papers, pamphlets, maps and a serious information service were available. This was linked to a fine reference library where, to quote the initial prospectus 'well selected books in all useful, as well as ornamental branches of knowledge, in the learned languages, and in some of the modern languages of Europe as well as our own' were to be available. Nor did the Athenaeum have any avowed political orientation or aims. Its general ethos was to bring together men of disparate opinions – Whigs and Tories, Slave Traders and Abolitionists, Free Churchmen and Anglicans – and blend them into a harmonious whole. This is in harmony with the 'Enlightenment' ideal much promulgated by Addison and the Augustans, of the solving of differences by discussion and debate rather than contention and hostility.

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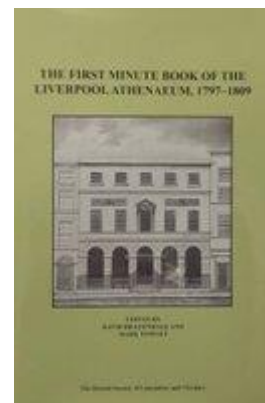
**If a modern Proprietor could go back to the Athenaeum at this time what would seem most different to them?**

In the first place, the actual building has changed. It stood on Church Street and was purpose built by John Foster and the Minute book contains many interesting sidelights on architectural practice at the time. Secondly, I think they would be struck by the much more Spartan atmosphere: boarded and sanded floors, no carpets until 1844, fewer chairs, no upholstered furniture. Perhaps the twenty-first century visitor would be horrified at the lack of provision of food and of drinks – the plan to serve tea and coffee soon broke down, presumably for lack of demand. The absence of a bar would be another big difference. No alcohol was served until the new building was opened in 1928 and then only after fierce debate. The first Librarian, Henry Gearing, almost lost his job and did lose his in-house accommodation because he was consuming spirits on the premises, even though the Library had not yet opened. The early Athenaeum did not provide that wide range of interest groups and social events that flourish today. One startling fact revealed by the Minute Book was the heated discussion about whether Members were allowed to take their dogs into the Newsroom! However, I like to think that the visitor would find unchanged the friendly conviviality of the Proprietors, the varied personalities and the wide ranging conversation of the members.

*To purchase this volume for the non-members' price of £30 (+ £4 p&p), please send a cheque for £34 – payable to 'Record Society of Lancashire and Cheshire' – to Dr Fiona Pogson, Department of History and Politics, Liverpool Hope University, Hope Park, Liverpool, L16 9JD. Alternatively, you can contact Dr Pogson by email ([pogsonf@hope.ac.uk](mailto:pogsonf@hope.ac.uk)) for details of how to pay by bank transfer. New members joining during the first half of 2021 will receive this volume in return for their £20 subscription.*



**The Athenaeum Committee Room**



**RSLC volume 157:**

*The First Minute Book of the Liverpool Athenaeum, edited by David Brazendale and Mark Towsey*



*DR CRAIG STAFFORD completed his PhD at the University of Liverpool in 2019, with a thesis entitled 'The Worst of Drunkards: Female Drunkenness in Mid-Victorian Lancashire'. He describes some of the sources which he used in the course of his research, and the stories they tell.*

I started my research by transcribing the female admission registers for Strangeways Prison, Manchester, between 1869 and 1876. This was a period of tremendous national and local concern about drink, so it is fortunate that this amount of quantitative material still exists. The records are held at Archives+ at Manchester Central Library, but also online at [www.findmypast.co.uk](http://www.findmypast.co.uk). These registers contain a wealth of legal and personal information, such as the offence for which a woman was committed, its location, the sentence and the committing magistrate. They also give the age, address, place of birth and marital status of prisoners. This enabled me to approach my research, broadly speaking, from two directions.

Using the boroughs of Salford and Rochdale as case studies, I was, firstly, able to examine the sentencing patterns of magistrates and whether the approach to prosecuting women differed between the two areas. Secondly, I was able to build up a picture of the 'type' of woman who was committed for drunkenness, and whether there were any patterns in the social, economic and family background of these women. The online census was also a great help here and supplemented the data from the registers.

I also made extensive use of local newspapers. Both boroughs had two newspapers, with the *Weekly News* and *Chronicle* in Salford and the *Observer* and *Times* in Rochdale. I consulted these on microfilm at the respective local history libraries – although the Rochdale papers for this period are now online at [www.findmypast.co.uk](http://www.findmypast.co.uk) – and the British Newspaper Archive. These sources provide a fascinating glimpse into life, and attitudes, in these archetypal industrial boroughs. Women who appeared in court made good copy for journalists and so their behaviour and demeanour were reported on regularly. Readers would no doubt have been thrilled, and appalled, by Salford's Susan Wilson, who once hurled her boot through a courtroom window, or Rochdale's Mary Kelly, who was often wheeled to the police office in a barrow, the worst for drink.

Although they would have provided some entertainment value to Victorian readers, the reports expose the brutal and short existence that many of these women had, and the prejudice held against them by magistrates, police and public alike. Unfortunately, the women I studied left no written records of their own, and so we must learn about them through the filter of a middle-class lens.