

First steps into a virtual world

Implementation of the Guildford Classical Association's programme for 2020-21

With Covid-19 having put paid to our programme of traditional events for the foreseeable future, we have taken our programme online and plunged into the world of virtual meetings and webinars. It has proved quite an adventure, but, with a lot of help from the CA, we have survived, and found advantages and opportunities as well as drawbacks in the new way of working. We hope that our experiences will embolden other CA Branches to venture likewise.

The Guildford Classical Association (GCA), was founded forty-five years ago by a group of young, enthusiastic local teachers with the twin aims of supporting the teaching and learning of Classical subjects in local schools and encouraging an interest in the Classics in the wider community.



These remain our core aims as reflected in our annual programme. Each year we provide support for local teachers, currently in the form of termly Teach Meets where ideas and resources are shared. We provide events for schoolchildren, ranging from talks aimed at younger secondary students, GCSE and A Level students to inter-school competitions such as the ever-popular Reading Competition to the University Challenge-style Certamen and the new, young Sixth Form Pizza Night with its inter-school discussions or quizzes. In addition to these school-focussed activities, we hold talks on Classical topics and themes of general interest which are open to any interested members of the public.

Covid restrictions forced the cancellation of our Summer programme. We didn't want to follow this with the cancellation of many of this year's events, too, so started investigating the possibility of holding on-line events using Zoom or a similar platform. Half of our committee are still serving teachers, rapidly gaining experience in teaching remotely, but with no spare time to learn further skills needed for hosting larger events on-line. Most of the others are retired teachers with more time but very rusty computer skills. So the thought of hosting on-line webinars for hundreds of people was daunting, to say the least.

Also, we didn't have any sort of paid-for video conferencing licence that would have supported events on the scale we needed.

Our first speaker in September was to be the well-known classicist and broadcaster Natalie Haynes, and we hoped to be able to go ahead by presenting her talk online. Time was ticking away, and the safest option would have been to use the services of a professional production team, but this would have been quite expensive, so we contacted the CA to see what help they might be able to give us. They came up with an alternative plan. They were considering whether to add a webinar extension to their Zoom licence. Would we be interested in using that? Well, of course we were interested, but, when we thought about it, quite nervous, too, about trying out something so new and alien to us for the first time, and with a high-profile speaker. However, we felt we had little choice, as we'd already advertised the event by then, and of course as a virtual event it was of more than just local interest as it was accessible to anyone in the UK (and beyond!). So if we messed up the technology, we would let down the GCA in front of a nationwide audience of, potentially, hundreds.



With just a week to go until Natalie's talk, the CA purchased a Zoom webinar licence capable of supporting an audience of up to 500 and made it available to us. We urgently set to work learning everything we could: watching videos on running webinars and trying things out. At the same time we were fielding all the applications for the (as yet non-existing) link which were flooding in, not only from our own members but from around the UK.

The national CA staff were a fantastic support, both morally and practically. They found us a willing technical helper and arranged for a practice session at the weekend with a number of CA staff in addition to some of our committee. That session was vital in putting what we had managed to find out into context, as well as showing us things we hadn't even thought about. We were kept very busy with practical arrangements over the few days before the webinar, but in the little time we had for more practice we felt that we had learnt just about enough to run the meeting.

The day of the meeting arrived, and we were still being kept busy with yet more applications for the link to join the webinar. We didn't have time to put together a welcome page for when people arrived or work out how to display it. We trusted that the audience were seeing on their screens what we saw on ours, Natalie Haynes' name on a black background. Unfortunately, as we later found out, that proved not to be the case, and many were bemused to see instead me and my husband looking worriedly at our computer. This

prompted a number of queries on our technical support chatline from people who thought they had come to the wrong place.

However, once the webinar proper began, all was well – till we lost Llewelyn (Prof Llewelyn Morgan, our President) just before he was due to introduce Natalie. This was entirely our fault. We accidentally ‘demoted’ him from presenter to audience member, then had to search through the attendees to find him and bring him back onto the panel. Luckily, our Chair, Stefanie Michalopoulou stepped in and coped brilliantly, though Natalie didn’t get quite the introduction she deserved. The rest of the event was relatively straightforward for us and seemed to go well. We had lots of compliments from the audience afterwards, so the slight hiccups early on obviously didn’t spoil their enjoyment of the event.



We have held a further webinar since, our Schools Talk with Caroline Lawrence talking to school students about her writing, and with some technical improvements (including a proper welcome screen!). Having started out as very hesitant, we now almost feel like old hands, and are looking forward to our third webinar shortly. Each one is slightly different, requiring different facilities, so we are learning as we go.

Our next challenge is to work out how to run our Reading Competition and Certamen virtually. And will it be possible to hold a virtual Pizza Night for our Sixth Formers before Christmas? These events involve individuals, pairs or teams and are much more interactive, so may need a totally different approach. But we’re determined to find a way, if there is one, and keep our events running this year.

Virtual meetings aren’t the same as live get-togethers, and many of our members must miss meeting their friends for a chat over refreshments. However, there are compensations. Members who had difficulty getting to meetings can partake without travelling from home and schools from further afield that our immediate neighbourhood have been able to take part. Virtual meetings are a perfect way to collaborate with other CA groups. By sharing our programmes with one another, we can each make extra talks available to our members. Along the way, we have enjoyed and benefitted from the increased interaction with the CA

nationally and with committee members from other branches, exchanging information and learning new ideas.

If you are on another branch committee and wondering whether to take the plunge into this new, virtual world, I would strongly recommend it. The national CA staff are incredibly helpful and, with their assistance, you'll soon be up and running!

Mrs Sheila Conway, GCA Hon Sec