

The Black Books Society

by Mark Ockelton, Convenor of The Black Books Society

As with so many of the Inn's activities, the programme of events planned by the Black Books Society for 2020 had to be cancelled or postponed. We were, however, able to participate in an event which was both a tremendous success in itself and also revealed exciting future possibilities.

Prior to the March lockdown, the Black Books Society had been in discussions with the other Inns and the Selden Society with a view to establishing an annual lecture which would be organised and promoted by all the societies. The first such lecture took place on Zoom on Wednesday 21 October on the subject: *The Fire Courts: Successfully Delivering Justice in a Time of Plague and Fire*.

The speaker was Professor Jay Tidmarsh of Notre Dame University whose study of complex litigation led him to an interest in the Fire Courts which were established after the Great Fire of London. This was a particularly apt topic, not just because it represents the legal system providing solutions to a major national crisis, but also because each of the Inns of Court has at least one of the portraits of the 'Fire Judges' painted to acknowledge the considerable amount of the time they gave for free to determine the property disputes arising from the fire.

The lecture took the form of a conversation between Professor Tidmarsh and HH Judge Cryan of Inner Temple, who had suggested both topic and speaker. This format worked well in overcoming the rather impersonal nature of most Zoom events.

Over 300 people logged into Zoom to hear the lecture live. As Judge Cryan remarked in his introduction to the lecture, this possibly the highest number of people who have attended a legal history lecture at any one time. The lecture was recorded and has been viewed many times since. Anyone who missed it can still watch it on YouTube and I heartily recommend it. Professor Tidmarsh is very knowledgeable on the subject and is a very engaging speaker.

There will be a programme of events in 2021, and the prospect of live-streaming and recording our events is an exciting one and will allow us to expand our audience to anyone who is interested in the history of the Inn wherever they are based. The Committee is very much looking forward to holding events in person once again, but one of the few positive legacies of the pandemic will be our continued use of technology to reach a much wider audience.



Sir Wadham Wyndham, by John Michael Wright, one of the five portraits of Fire Judges hanging in the Great Hall. [Photograph: Samuel Whittaker, Opus Conservation]