

Speaking for Katherine: Reflections on the U3A Women's History Study Day

On 12th March I had the privilege of speaking as part of the U3A online Women's History Study Day. Around 400 people attended across the day—an audience far larger and more dispersed than anything I would have imagined when I retired in 2016, at a time when most of us had never even heard of Zoom.

I have always seen myself as an interactive speaker. Whether in a church, a village hall, or a lecture theatre, I read a room—adjusting pace, tone, and emphasis as I go. Online, that dynamic is different. You speak into a camera rather than a room, and the usual cues are absent. But it is a format that brings its own opportunities, not least the ability to reach a wide and engaged audience.

I was particularly pleased that so many members of Lincoln Bailgate U3A were able to join the session. Their support, and the conversations that followed, meant a great deal.

A few days later I attended a talk on Katherine Swynford in Lincoln Cathedral. It was reassuring to find that much of the interpretation aligned with my own work. What stood out, however, was the attention given to rehabilitating John of Gaunt's reputation—something I will now look to develop further in future talks.

The feedback from the Study Day has now arrived and it was overwhelmingly positive. One comment in particular captures exactly what I hoped to convey:

That I showed how much I care about Katherine and her reputation.

That, for me, is at the heart of it. My work is driven by a desire to move Katherine beyond the persistent and unhelpful label of “the scarlet woman,” and to present her life with the care and balance it deserves.

If that came across to the audience, then the talk achieved what it set out to do.