

The Blake Society: Annual General Meeting

12 January 2016

Waterstones Bookshop, 203/206 Piccadilly, London W1J 9HD

Members present:

Samantha Bell, Michael Bundy, Tessa Burrington, Adriana Diaz-Enciso, Peter Dodd, Henry Eliot, Debbie Elliott, George Fort, Luis Garrido, Jack Greengrass, Tim Heath, Catherine Kelly, Dieter Loechle, Elizabeth Maudslay, John McIntyre, David McLaughlin, Barnaby Rogerson, Louise Stoddard, Rachel Searle, Philomena Verlaan, Antony Vinall, Christina Vinall.

1. Apologies for absence:

Carol Garrido, Josie McQuail, Paige Morgan, Rod Tweedy.

2. Minutes of previous year's AGM

The minutes of the 2015 AGM were agreed unanimously.

3. Matters arising from the minutes

There were no matters arising.

4. Chairman's Report (Tim Heath)

The year of 2015 marked the thirtieth anniversary of the Society and for the first time we published a calendar that featured 12 consecutive monthly events, marking us as one of the most active literary societies in Britain.

We held two public readings, one simple and one difficult : An Island in the Moon and The Four Zoas. We looked at Blake through the eyes of an artist Dieter Loechle and an illustrator John Riordan. Blake's work was interpreted by an academic John Mee and by a hip-hop rapper named Testament.

The Society went on a pilgrimage to Glastonbury to find the true Albion and were guided on a walk through Blake's visionary London. Our 2015 Tithe Grant focused on film and was judged by the Hollywood film director Sir Alan Parker.

We gathered at Blake's Grave as we have done each year since the Society was founded in 1985, and to celebrate our 30th birthday, we published a visionary map of London, Golgonooza, that can be ordered from our website.

There are many William Blakes and next month we will hear about his encounter with the Bhagavad Gita while our Annual Lecture at St James's Church will be given by the leading intellectual of our generation Iain McGilchrist who champions an escape from reason.

As a Society we try to hold the middle ground between the many bodies that lay claim to Blake – the Universities, the Galleries, the Museums, the Artists, the Anarchists, the

Poets & Writers, the Green movement, the city folk who would put Blake on a banknote and the destitute who sleep rough in our doorways yet still shout esoteric lines of Blake at you. And then there are the lunatics and the dispossessed, the blessed who claim Blake as their saint.

As a gift to all of them, and as proof of our coming of age, we gave birth to a new body, The Blake Cottage Trust. We would like to thank all those who gave so generously to the campaign to acquire Blake's Cottage and put it into trust for the nation - and the only nation is the *Imagination*.

5. Treasurer's Report (Luis Garrido)

During the course of the year the Society exceptionally continued to handle donations for the purchase of Blake's cottage in Felpham, pending the formal setting-up of the Blake Cottage Trust (BCT). £146,404 was added to the £18,761 already held in this separate restricted account. After deducting legal and other expenses incurred on its behalf, £139,055 was passed over to the BCT during the accounting period.

Income from membership subscriptions in the year to 31 October 2015 totalled £5,238, an increase of £778 over the previous year, reflecting the increase in membership resulting from the Cottage Appeal. Income from other sources (donations, ticket sales, sales of prints and maps) was £513, giving a total of £5,751 compared to £4,630 in the previous year.

Expenditure at £5,072 covered the usual items of printing, managing the website, fees and expenses for speakers and administrative costs – a cost-effective budget for a programme of 12 events. Reserves remained steady at £1,606.

The fund for Blake's grave (on hold because of the cottage appeal) remained at £4,441, the same as the previous year.

The accounts were approved unanimously.

6. Secretary's report

Antony Vinall presented the following report from Rod Tweedy, who was unable to attend.

The number of paid-up members showed an encouraging increase to 291 (up from last year's 264). The increase in membership has been helped by the publicity around the cottage appeal, together with the availability of membership forms at events. Beyond the UK, there were 57 members in 12 other countries across the world (also up, from 50 members in 10 other countries last year). The Society's wider reach was shown by the 1,023 names on the mailing list for the newsletter (up from 916 names last year), again no doubt helped by the international coverage surrounding the success of the Blake Cottage campaign.

Louise Stoddard suggested that the arrangements for subscriptions to be paid through the Society's website might be modified to allow additional donations to be made at the same time.

7. Report on Blake's Cottage (Tim Heath)

In one of Blake's letter to George Cumberland, a lifelong friend, is the phrase 'I live by Miracle' and it is indeed a miracle that the Blake Community raised over half a million pounds to buy Blake's Cottage. But there is a greater miracle – the Blake community managed to hold together long enough to achieve this extraordinary feat.

The background to this tale begins in 1957, the bicentenary of William Blake's birth when one of the great scholars of Blake, Geoffrey Keynes, the brother of the economist Maynard Keynes, first urged that the remaining homes of Blake be purchased and put into trust.

The trust could not be the Blake Society itself for legal reasons – we are an unincorporated association, a body that is not devised to own property or hold significant assets.

The Blake Society also did not have the administrative capacity to organise such a campaign, so it was set up and run independently yet with the help and blessing of the Society. There has been some confusion, understandably so, in separating one from the other, but it is a birthing, where one body gives life to another, independent yet dependent, a parent and child.

In Law there are two main types of charitable trust, one is representative like the Blake Society where we meet once a year to elect ten of our number to run the Society for the following twelve months. The other is a trust that works through trust. A handful of people are chosen to hold an asset according to a vision, and they in time appoint new trustees in their own image to secure and continue the vision.

The Blake Cottage Trust has 3 inaugural trustees : Michael Philips, Peter Johns and myself. Michael was born in America and lives in Edinburgh and is an international scholar whose academic career has focused on Blake and in particular the homes of William Blake. Peter Johns lives in an historic listed building in West Sussex a few miles from Felpham that Blake used to visit; he qualified as a chartered accountant and is a management consultant.

For those who enjoy numbers, the campaign raised £510,000; the Cottage was purchased for £495,000 and there were 750 donors of whom 10 provided 95% of the funds. Donations came from all around the world and we received as much money from Sydney, Australia as we did from Felpham, West Sussex.

In terms of funding we are one third of the way there – we need perhaps another half a million pounds to restore the Cottage and perhaps another third to endow its future.

Paradoxically, the campaign to secure the home of one of England's greatest visionaries succeeded through it's lack of vision – each person could project onto the project their own view of Blake, and could place in the Cottage their own imagination of a literary house.

So the campaign set out neither to be prescriptive nor proscriptive but instead tried to suggest that a home for Blake should be an extraordinary place, unlike any museum or existing artist's studio. There are so many canonical phrases of Blake that force us to re-imagine what a Cottage might be: I must Create a System or be Enslaved by Another Man's or Where shall We take our Stand to view the Infinite and Unbounded?

As chair of the Blake Society and director of the campaign I would like to thank everyone who has contributed so generously in terms of support, money, advice and vision.

Finally a special thanks to all those who have held their peace in the knowledge that their Blake could never be another's Blake, yet to acquire the Cottage might yet enrich us all.

In discussion:-

Peter Dodd said that thanks were due to all who had contributed to the success of the project.

Several members asked about future plans for the cottage and whether there would be public access. Tim Heath responded that the BCT intends that there will be some form of access for visitors, but any arrangements will need to be sustainable financially and take account of the constraints of the site.

Adriana Diaz-Enciso made a statement criticising the handling of the appeal and the setting up of the BCT, on the grounds that donors had been given to understand that the Society itself would acquire the cottage; and that the BCT had not been set up in a transparent manner. In particular, an understanding about the number of Trustees had not been respected. The present number (3) was insufficient. In view of her major contribution to the earlier stages of the project, she was aggrieved at her exclusion from decision-making. She had written to the Charity Commission informing them of these matters.

Rachel Searle, expressing concern on behalf of the Felpham-based Big Blake Project at what she saw as a lack of representation of relevant interests in the BCT, asked why the Executive Committee had agreed to the setting up of a separate Trust, rather than itself setting one up or managing the project directly.

Responding as Chair of both the Society and the BCT, Tim Heath explained that the BCT had been established in accordance with legal advice, with the sole aim of purchasing and preserving the cottage in perpetuity. Only a properly constituted Trust with appropriately qualified members could carry out this function independently of pressure groups; the Society's legal status as an Unincorporated Association did not allow it to do so.

Rachel Searle stated that the Big Blake Project does not consider itself a pressure group.

Speaking as members of the Executive Committee, Luis Garrido and Antony Vinall said there had been near-unanimity in support of the proposal that the cottage project should be handled by an independent Trust. The Executive Committee minutes could be made available on request. While fully supporting the Trust's objectives, the Committee recognised that a literary society run by enthusiasts from diverse backgrounds lacks resources and experience, as well as the legal status, to take on responsibility for a project of this nature.

Luis Garrido moved a vote of thanks on behalf of the Society to everyone who had made possible the purchase of the cottage, with special acknowledgment of the vision, commitment and devoted effort of Adriana Diaz-Enciso.

8. Election of the Honorary Officers for 2016

There being no other nominations, the following were elected or re-elected:

Tim Heath, Chairman
Luis Garrido, Treasurer
Antony Vinall, Secretary

9. Election of the Executive Committee for 2016

As the number of nominations did not exceed the number of places on the Committee, the following were re-elected:

Henry Eliot 
George Fort
Catherine Kelly
Josie McQuail (Tennessee, USA)
Paige Morgan (Florida, USA)
Christina Vinall

An objection by Adriana Diaz-Enciso to the re-election of Paige Morgan was noted. 

10. Any Other Business

None.

APV
13.i.2016