

Chapter IV. What Happened with the Blake Cottage Appeal



DIVIDE AND RULE?

We learnt in Chapter III that Tim Heath, the Blake Society's Chairman, and fellow Trustee Henry Eliot had been engaging in work for the Blake Cottage appeal behind my back, the extent and nature of which will remain a mystery to us. But what became of the other members of our initial team, those who would supposedly form part of the large and plural consortium that we wanted to create? And where were all the other people that Mr Heath had been inviting? Had he and Mr Eliot been in touch with them? What did they discuss? Why did all of them end up disappearing? Again, I guess I will never know the answer to these questions.

When we restarted work together at the end of May 2014, at least it was clear to me that they had met with Mrs Rachel Searle, Chair of the Big Blake Project, the Felpham-based Charity devoted to promote Blake's legacy, and done some work together. I did know that Mr Heath had invited the Big Blake Project to be part of the appeal, fully aware that they were capable to muster the local support that was crucial for us to succeed. However, it was impossible for me to know what had taken place between them during the time I had been kept "off the loop".

I do believe that the period in which Mr Heath and Mr Eliot were in touch with the Big Blake Project unbeknown to me set a precedent to the obstacles to communication between the BBP and the Blake Society, which in the end led to this organization's work being shamefully used and abused by Mr Heath, the Blake Society that we were representing, and now the Blake Cottage Trust.

In some conversations I had with Mr and Mrs Vinall, then with Mr Eliot in 2015, after the Cottage was acquired, they made some attempts at justifying the appalling unfairness with which the Big Blake Project has been treated by adducing that we had had communication problems with them during the campaign. It is a poor excuse for the blatantly unethical, unprofessional and I believe, touching closely on the illegal, behaviour of both Mr Heath and the BCT.

I am not pretending to deny that such communication problems existed, but you don't sort out such issues with colleagues through exclusion and divisive tactics, and they don't give you any right whatsoever to lie to them, then steal the fruits of their work.

Shortly after I was back "in the loop", Mr Heath, Mr Eliot and myself had a meeting with Mrs Searle. With the exception of the launch of the campaign in Parliament soon after and a meeting in the summer with some potential supporters, I would never attend a work meeting with the Big Blake Project's representatives again. On one occasion early on, I couldn't because of work commitments, but regarding all the other meetings, I always found out about them after they had taken place, and all I knew about what happened there was what Mr Heath chose to tell me. When I asked him why I

was not asked to attend, he invariably told me that the Big Blake Project didn't like me, that they believed my passion was a liability, that they weren't comfortable engaging with me and therefore, for the sake of the project it was better that I stayed away.

After the Cottage was acquired in 2015 I met up with Mrs Searle again. She told me then that during those meetings, when she asked why I was not there, the Chair told her that I was very busy. Therefore, from the onset of the Cottage appeal Mr Heath was succeeding in keeping all his co-campaigners apart: he told me I was not liked by the BBP; to them he said I was too busy to attend the meetings, which might have been sensed as a lack of interest or wish to engage with them, and he had already done his very best to polarize disagreements between Mr Eliot and me to justify their covert way of working. The result was that throughout the campaign there was a sense of fracture, of people never working fully together and not being able to see the whole picture, and that Mr Heath had full control, since only he knew what he discussed with the different parties on his own.

Were there problems of communication with the Big Blake Project? Yes. Did I disagree with some of their views regarding the way to present the campaign to the public? Yes. Did I think some of the issues were serious? Yes. Such things are bound to happen when you work in a team. They are in fact an important element in the learning process that allows a team to unravel different perspectives and harmonize them for the good of their projects. Disagreements are no justification for lack of ethics. After all the lies and manipulation of information that Mr Heath and the Charities he runs have indulged in, their attempts at discrediting both me and the Big Blake Project, and pointing at our disagreements as a reason for me to keep silent, it is important that we disentangle the poisonous knot by telling the truth ourselves, so I will try to summarize here what problems we had and what my concerns were. I can of course talk only of my own perspective. The Big Blake Project will have their own, and their own way to tell the story.

DIRECTION OF THE PROJECT

In the meeting we had with Mrs Searle mentioned above, I was very worried because I felt that the representatives of the Blake Society (Mr Heath, Mr Eliot and me) and the Big Blake Project were moving in disparate directions, duplicating work and sending different messages to the public. It seemed to me as if the BBP was keen on running a campaign different in style to what we had in mind and what I thought we had all agreed to when we had started working on the project.

My biggest fear was that, because we had such a tight deadline to raise the money, we might end up trying to get it no matter what, dumbing down the campaign, telling people only what they'd want to hear, cheapening the appeal. I believed that, if we did that, even if we got the money we might have reasons to regret it, because what we said, the language and images we used would inevitably inform the project and become part of it. I won't deny that at some point I was worried enough to wonder whether if we could still go on working together, and that I was angry to see our efforts to formulate the ideal of the project seemingly disregarded. Some of those concerns (and I fear my anger too), may be clearer to the reader in the following emails that I sent to Mr Heath and Mr Eliot:

Email of 12 June 2014 to Mr Heath

[. . .] a marketing strategy, being dishonest (ie giving people "what they want", and not the real thing we have in mind) is a bad footing. This is not a self-righteous statement. It is practical, one has to believe in what one is doing, if we want to convey any message at all. Successful campaigns have solid grounds, at least in the arts world, though selling peanuts may be another matter, I don't know about that.

And there is indeed the ethical question. This is about William Blake. We set out with the aim of creating a centre for creation, for thought, for imagination and dissent. To pretend to get the money for that

through the belief that people are zombies and we just have to jump in the train of how things are, giving people what they want etc., with all the disrespect that entails for what Blake understood as divine humanity, is inappropriate and crass.

Also, that we want to open the centre for all does not mean, in my view, to the masses in any way. Everyone is *not* the masses. Everyone is everyone who cares and is curious about the creative imagination, and dissent, and freedom of spirit. An inquisitive mind and spirit are the entry ticket.

Email of 12 June 2014 to Mr Heath and Mr Eliot

The idea is still that of a place for creation, where things are conceived in a spirit that honours Blake, to then go out into the world. The core values are still imagination and dissent.

The Big Blake Project wanted that too; they never deviated from the original purpose of turning the Cottage into a centre for creation, but I believed that there were serious discrepancies as to the way each of us wanted to convey that to the public.

While writing this chapter of my testimony, I have been going through some of our inner correspondence and correspondence with the Big Blake Project during the Cottage appeal. I've found it deeply saddening. My perception is that we all contributed to the communication issues and that we had different priorities. For us (the Blake Society representatives) the priority was to turn the Cottage into a centre for creation that honoured Blake with the same uncompromising spirit that fuelled both his life and his work, and offering its fruits to Britain and the world. For the Big Blake Project, my perception was that the priority was to create such a centre as well, but also to make of the Cottage an element that might help the regeneration of the area, focusing on the benefits it would bring locally, and to convince local donors to support us bearing that in mind.

Both postures were legitimate, worth fighting for, and could have been married successfully, but I believe that, beneath the pressure we were under to gather the funds required in just a few months, at moments we were not very good at listening to each other. In that respect, we all were at fault and yet we all, stressed and overworked, meant well... In *that* respect.

However, on top of that there was another, heavier pressure to bear, casting a shadow of mutual distrust, and it was the direct result of Mr Heath's tactics of division. It did a lot of harm to our relationship with the Big Blake Project and, I believe, with Felpham as a whole.

What happened with Blake's Cottage appeal is complex, and distressing. I have talked above about what were the priorities of the Blake Society's representatives. Yet I wonder if that was fully the case. I know those were *my* priorities, and that I went through them endlessly in correspondence, conversations and phone calls with the Chair, but seeing what he has done since the Cottage was acquired, I realize that *I do not know what the Chair's priorities were, or are, at all.*

I do not believe that he meant ill *all* the time. I think that sometimes he genuinely believed what he was saying, but was constantly changing his mind and got mixed up trying to marry his intentions for the project with his own personal aims, secret for the rest of us; I believe that there were other times when he truly meant ill and projected on us his own distrust – his not being able to confide in us with his covert ambitions – and that he got thoroughly confused by his own conflicting aims. To acknowledge this is very upsetting and has been so for nearly three years. Therefore, I owe an apology to the Big Blake Project, to the public, to donors and supporters, for not having been able to read what was happening before my eyes, and for having believed what Mr Heath told me about the

Big Blake Project's intentions, as if I hadn't seen enough of him being untruthful and fracturing collective work. With hindsight, I have the impression that all along he had already, woven through his muddled aims, the intention to do what he did: to use us all, then bully us out of the project and Blake's Cottage. It is a painful thought, because a lot of people have been harmed and betrayed.



Regarding the communication issues with the Big Blake Project, there are a few things I believe relevant to point out, as they may clarify matters to the reader.

On May 2014 Mrs Searle sent us an email, after having had a conversation with Mr Heath, with an outline of what they were working on and asking for our comments. I knew nothing of what had transpired in Mrs Searle's and Mr Heath's conversation.

The Big Blake Project were planning to repeat a Blake Trail and a local festival to "raise awareness of Blake in the area and link it to cultural tourism", and thought that it would be a good opportunity to link them to the campaign to acquire the Cottage as well. They were also doing an enormous amount of work talking with potential donors and supporters, including Chichester University and Arun's authorities. (Tragically, Mr Heath was the only representative of the Blake Society engaged with Arun. Invariably, I would either only learn about such meetings after they had taken place, or be kept away from them because I was "not liked" and my passion was a liability – an accusation that Mr Heath would wield against me again very soon, in a context of rather severe bullying.)

In her email Mrs Searle asked very clear questions about how to move forward to avoid misunderstandings. At the same time, we were upset because in an accompanying document regarding the BBP's work, mention of the Cottage appeal seemed to us to suggest this was more of a Big Blake Project initiative rather than the Blake Society's.

Mr Eliot responded to her questions on 29 May 2014, and it is interesting to read the following, yet further unequivocal evidence not only about this being a Blake Society project, but about our being keen on this being clearly understood:

"It's essential this is done jointly. Independent fundraising will be highly confusing - and dilute both sets of messages. Obviously the more people involved in the effort the better, but I think there must be a single point of coordination, and I think that point of coordination must be with the Blake Society, as we are running the donor event, crowdfunding campaign, and have the option on the cottage. If we are going to do this together, we need weekly communication - things are moving so fast."

Mr Searle agreed on the need of a more coordinated approach, rightly adding:

"There has been misunderstanding hopefully more frequent communication will lessen it's chance of happening again."

And yet, those weekly updates encouraged by Mr Eliot stopped very soon indeed, as the Chair simply would not honour them.

One thing that strikes me as particularly unfair now in those emails is how we were asking for the Big Blake Project not to put much emphasis on their own festival that year. In Mr Eliot's words:

"I think there's a danger of this year's festival distracting from the priority Cottage campaign, but I think it could be used effectively as a focal point for the launch of the crowdfunding campaign. It will be a good photo opportunity for press releases, and hopefully spread the word in the local area. Then, once the Cottage is

bought, the festival could grow in dimensions and reputation each year. Big names and big funding this September would be counter-productive. . . . The festival will be very useful if it's part of the overall Cottage strategy (i.e. this year it's primary goal is to provide a focus for one aspect of the fundraising campaign)"

We did believe it would be distracting, but we had no right to ask for another organisation to give a lower profile to their own activities, particularly if it's a smaller organisation working in an area that has much less support for the arts and culture than you can get in London. Yet they agreed, and if they were ready to make that sacrifice it was exclusively so that the Cottage appeal succeeded. They were doing their best to trust us, and explicitly agreed that the Blake Society was coordinating the campaign. It horrifies me to read this now, knowing that as soon as the Cottage was acquired Mr Heath elbowed them out and started treating them like enemies, without having ever acknowledged the work they did for the Cottage campaign, a pivotal role for all the local support that we got.

Another thing that I think we, as the Blake Society, didn't take seriously enough in that correspondence was Mrs Searle's comments on the local resistance in West Sussex to see Blake's cultural importance. I believe that, from our own perspective of wanting the Cottage to be a place to honour Blake in the highest possible artistic standards – from our comfortable London quarters, where most people would understand that desire –, we failed to acknowledge the Big Blake Project's challenges and often frustration in their attempts to find local donors who would be equally enthusiastic, their insistence on the need to direct the campaign also to people with less literacy and the worth of doing this grassroots work within a community much less privileged in terms of cultural wealth.

I acknowledge that I was dismayed by concepts such as "cultural tourism" in their correspondence, particularly linked to Blake. In a way I still am, and the way we are transforming the arts into a commodity in our times can be the subject of much debate. However, my fear of that spirit touching Blake's Cottage blinded me to the efforts that the Big Blake Project were doing from their particular standpoint, and for that too I apologize to them.

My reservations may be clearer in the email I sent to Mr Eliot with copy to Mr Heath on 13 June, when we were editing publicity for the campaign in which we had disagreements with the BBP, but I was also objecting to Mr Eliot's deleting a paragraph that I thought important:

I believe that stating our real aim is much more important than being punchy. Blake is complicated, and his world simply won't adapt to the ordinary way we do things. We are trying to do something challenging too, and Tim's paragraph stated with clarity its meaning, what is truly at stake behind all this work and effort.

We should not be afraid of regaining a language that encompasses ideals, and courage. If we want others to understand what we're doing, and convince them that it is worth doing and the investment in it, we must be ready to spell it out.

I know time is putting stress on us and sometimes we skip over details, things that seem too subtle, but I'd very much hope we hold on fast to subtlety and meaning too, that we don't let go of the Blakean intent --the reason why we're doing this-- carried by the rush and stress of so much work.

I should have shared these concerns openly with the Big Blake Project, rather than addressing them only to the colleagues I thought shared my vision, but by then I believed that this was precisely the passion that they supposedly disliked me for.

Around that time, Mrs Searle sent a letter to Mr Heath I now find revealing. The Chair had started to show his disagreements somewhat aggressively, saying that the BBP had their own agenda. Understandably, they seemed to resent this, so Mrs Searle called for better communication and clearer guidance from our side:

Email from Mrs Searle, 12 June 2014:

"More than happy to work under a single agreed direction. We do believe that there needs to be a common message and a common style to achieve a shared goal. There are clear disparate target groups and one solution may be to split the work by market. We think we need to communicate to each market something that that market wants to hear and perhaps that is what you mean by our own agenda.

If you still would like us to share the campaign under your direction we need to sit down and make sure we do understand the agenda before producing any further documents. (My agenda was to help and bring in others to help with a shared fund-raising campaign, to ensure that we do raise enough money to buy the cottage). Once we have agreed a way forward then hopefully more regular communication by email/phone should ensure the success of the campaign.

Peter and I are happy to meet with you soon London, Felpham or anywhere in between. Please look at Peter's letter since this will give you an understanding of our starting point. If it is too far removed from what you are trying to achieve then a joint approach is probably not within reach. There is a lot of experience in terms of communication, structure, timing and profile not to mention passion and energy that under direction stand a chance of achieving the miracle purchase of Blake's Cottage in 4 months time."

She's referring to a letter by a fellow member of the Big Blake Project that states:

I've just had a chat to Rachel about the language style and the content of various drafts, proposals and documents for Blake's Cottage.

And, perhaps unsurprisingly, my starting point was rather different. Not WHAT WE wanted to say but rather WHAT THEY needed to hear to get the message. Simplistically then, I pigeon holed people, important as our audiences are so disparate and will be both receptive and critically responsive to equally disparate messages.

Accordingly I arrived at 4 distinct groups (Labels only for distinguishing purposes!) **[here he defined these different categories, and continued:]**

So the message, and the supporting text and images will vary quite dramatically between each group. [. . .]

To achieve the immediate target we must, I believe, appeal to the widest possible audience. Consequently we cannot adopt a 'one size fits all ' document/proposal/leaflet. They must be seen to come from the same 'family' but with varying messages/styles.

It's critical therefore (for The Masses, for example) that there is a link to Rugby/Kate and Will etc. [. . .] The way fwd then must be to be driven by our audiences not the in depth knowledge of Blake's spectrum of work.

Be delighted to meet chat discuss any time soon to reach the right working partnership.

There was again the call for coordinated communication. The reader will note that Mrs Searle was stating the possibility that our styles for publicity might be too different to reconcile. As stated earlier, at some point I had had the same concern. No doubt the thing to do would have been to sit all of us together and openly try to bridge our differences, but as we have seen, Mr Heath had succeeded in keeping all of us strictly apart. I won't put all the blame on him though: I had been gullible regarding his remarks about the BBP disliking me for my passion, and I allowed it to poison my attitude towards them: this was one of the most important projects of my life, and not only a work project; I believed in it wholeheartedly as a way to honour Blake through fostering freedom of thought and an uncompromising belief in the power of art in a world that was in great need of that, and I found it offensive that passion for such aims should be frowned upon. This probably blinded me to the passion with which the Big Blake Project were working themselves. I genuinely disagreed with their proposed publicity approach, but I should have made an effort towards greater understanding among us.

On the occasions in which I mentioned to Mr Heath the need to address the question of whether we could really agree on a joint approach with the BBP, he ignored me. In view of the treatment the Big Blake Project received as soon as the Cottage was acquired, I believe that he had decided from very early on that he didn't want to work with them, but knew that their work was essential if we wanted the appeal to succeed, since they were gathering all the local support, so he simply decided to use their work, then discard them.

In any case, we were all feeling the strain. The Big Blake Project needed clearer information from us. From our side, we were frustrated by their suggestion of publicity that didn't seem to take on board what we were trying to do or the documents that we had already created. It seemed to us that we were wasting precious time going over endless drafts. We were angry, and I suspect they were angry too. Our positions were becoming polarized and I think that both sides feared the other simply wanted to appropriate the project.

So the reader may imagine how ashamed I feel to realize that, in their case, their fear was well-founded, for that is exactly what Mr Heath did.

Despite the prevailing tension, the Big Blake Project showed its good faith by constantly asking for our guidelines and seeking clarification where there were doubts. We had the launch of the campaign in Parliament coming and on the run to it we all did our best to put differences aside and pull together for an event that was quite successful, as stated in a previous chapter. I think we were all happy afterwards.

A few days after the launch I went away for a week. I don't know what happened during that time, but on my return the mutual mistrust would keep on reappearing. The campaign started to feel as an oddly isolated endeavour, despite all the support that we were getting from hundreds of people. I felt that I wasn't working directly with the Big Blake Project, because everything I thought could only be expressed to Mr Heath or, while he was still in the campaign, Mr Eliot: by then, the "ban" on my ever joining a meeting with the BBP was total, so I relied entirely on what Mr Heath told me. This didn't seem to be team work at all. By July, with Mr Eliot no longer in the Cottage appeal, it felt as if I was working with Mr Heath alone. We were working together quite well at the time and with a seeming community of purpose, but our disagreements with the Big Blake Project continued.

I would be very dishonest if I didn't acknowledge here that I had concerns, was often very critical of the BBP, believed we were pulling in different directions and was very frustrated by that state of affairs. It would be dishonest too not to acknowledge that I should have known better than simply believing what Mr Heath told me regarding his communications with them.

A good example of where I lost perspective completely is with regards to an application form for a local potential donor in West Sussex that required for the applicant to be a resident in the area. Both Mr Heath and myself saw it as a Big Blake Project attempt of appropriating the project and our stubbornness meant a waste of time over correspondence that was only exacerbating our lack of mutual understanding.

Mr Heath and Mrs Searle then had a meeting on their own. I don't know what exactly happened there, but a letter from Mrs Searle following on the meeting reminded the Chair that she had already sent him information about this particular Fund only accepting local applicants and of how they had agreed about how things should be done, only for him to then appear surprised and annoyed. On reading that letter I started to recognize my own feelings in working with Mr Heath, both in the Cottage appeal and in the Blake Society: the frustration at his contradictory messages

and at his unreliable memory about matters previously agreed. She also stated that we shouldn't allow for simple matters as that to create such tension, and she was right.

It is painful to read now what I wrote in a letter I sent to Mrs Searle on 11 August 2014,

“To apply on somebody else's name for anything related to Blake's Cottage is inappropriate and sets a bad precedent. We have discussed this with you at length before. All applications must be made on the name of a single organisation and that is The Blake Society, an established charity that has the capacity to undertake and coordinate this project.

This is the only way that we can guarantee consistency, community of purpose and transparency. But also, and this is very important, this is the only way we can guarantee accountability as well.”

Accountability! I believed firmly in everything I was saying in that letter; I believed wholeheartedly that running the project from the core of the Blake Society, backed by its 30-year history, would guarantee accountability and transparency. As it turned out, the Blake Society would not be accountable or transparent in any degree, and it would wash its hands off their responsibility for the project as soon as they saw there were problems. To do so, they have been willing to lie unashamedly to the public and to their own members, so I was thoroughly misguided.

Mrs Searle was understandably exasperated, wrote to us clarifying yet again that the BBP had never said, verbally or in writing, “anything other than it is the Blake Society that negotiated the cottage deal and that you will be setting up a Trust to manage the cottage”, nor that it would “be managing the money or purchasing or running the cottage”, and she resented the implication in our correspondence that she might be somehow misleading people. She was right to be upset.

The reader will have seen how strictly we were demanding for the Blake Society to be acknowledged as the leader of the Cottage appeal, so whatever documents they and the Blake Cottage Trust are now publishing in their websites with claims about it being a project independent from the BS are clearly irrelevant.

A VIDEO, AND FURTHER COMMUNICATION BREAKDOWNS

By August, the need to decide on the video for the crowdfunding phase of the appeal was pressing. Mr Heath and I had agreed that we'd be working on its script together. I had found a director that Mr Heath rejected right away. Something similar happened with Mrs Searle's proposal of another director, to which Mr Heath never responded. He also ignored my questions as to where we were standing in that regard. These were the very last weeks before Mr Heath closed down communication with me as well altogether, about which I will talk in the following chapters. In due time it will also become clearer how, while I worked on two different drafts for the script that were completely ignored, and the BBP's proposal of a director and questions about the filming progress were ignored too, Mr Heath had already decided to work secretly and for his own personal reasons in a video about which none of us running the campaign with him were ever consulted or even informed about – one day before the supposed launch of the crowdfunding appeal, I was distraught because it seemed as if we had no video at all.

Much later, towards the end of the campaign, Mr Heath would tell me over the telephone that the Big Blake Project had talked about trying to get support from some property developers. Since I wasn't part of those conversations, I only had what Mr Heath told me to go by. On the phone he sounded truly unhappy and the way I understood it, this might have risked the Cottage belonging to a private owner at the expense of our project. It felt to me as a well-intentioned but reckless

attempt from the BBP to secure the Cottage before our deadline to raise the necessary funds expired. I wrote to the Chair:

“We are trying to make of Blake's Cottage a place that *belongs to all*. The whole project, work on it, the donations from individuals, the enthusiasm, stem from that sense of sharing and generosity built around an artist and the wish for sanctuary for others - all of it talks about how nonsensical the very concept of ownership actually is.”

He responded by saying that he believed there was a deeper motivation, and that there was a group of people in Bognor who

“have always wanted to own the cottage and run it as an enterprise. This is partly why she **[Mrs Searle]** has been so difficult and disingenuous over the year.”

I was worried about potential ensuing problems with the BBP over this. It made me fear again that we and the BBP were working in opposite directions. I am ashamed to say that I believed what Mr Heath was telling me without asking him to show me what evidence he had to suspect the Big Blake Project's intentions, and for this too I sincerely apologize.

Now this being my testimony, I cannot talk about what I do not know. Since shortly after this I'd find it so impossible to go on working on the Cottage appeal that I would leave, I never found out what exactly had Mr Heath and the BBP discussed regarding those “property developers” or whoever they were talking about. I have been much more in touch with Mrs Searle now than ever during the campaign and I am convinced that they meant well and were not trying to appropriate the project. I am trying to be fair to all and all I can say in Mr Heath's defence is that, on this occasion, he may have truly meant what he said, he may have truly felt betrayed, and perhaps neither him nor the BBP were at fault. It might have been, again, a misunderstanding because the prevalent poor communication. I won't speculate about what the concrete proposal was, because I don't know. The one thing I know is that it was misguided of me to trust Mr Heath's understanding of the matter. I had already seen him manipulate, lie and being dishonest. I had also seen him in the past genuinely feeling betrayed for no reason, or upset with someone's behaviour because *he* had forgotten a previous conversation or agreement.

The writing of this chapter is becoming a very painful task for me, because I am becoming aware of just how much I allowed the Chair to manipulate me, how unquestioningly I accepted far too much of what he said that was going on, and I feel that the emphasis in this chapter must be in my apologies to the Big Blake Project, and also to supporters, donors and the public, because I should have been much more vigilant, much less gullible, and should have actively encouraged open communication among us all, rather than sulking because the BBP “didn't like me”.

In my defence, I guess I have the enormity of the stress I was under, the conditions in which I was working on this campaign, that will be much clearer for the reader in the following chapters. But still, I can't wash my hands off my responsibility, and I do apologize where apologies are due.

There was a moment though during the campaign in which I had the first inkling that the Chair might be lying to us all, and that he was treating us all very ill indeed. This was at the beginning of September 2014, a moment when coordinated work was crucial prior to the launch of our crowdfunding appeal. By this time, Mr Heath had stopped communicating with the Big Blake Project altogether. We were receiving ever more urgent communications from Mrs Searle that I didn't know how to respond to, because Mr Heath had started to stop communication with me as well: it was the onset of a rather serious episode of not only dishonesty, but extremely disturbing behaviour from the Chair, that hit the Cottage campaign precisely at the point when we all should have been most

responsible and united. I was already sensing something very bad coming, and when I told Mr Heath that we needed to respond to the BBP, he rudely told me not to. So I didn't, not because I thought it was right to obey him, but because I was afraid, because I didn't know anymore myself what was going on and felt the need to know before I spoke. This means that while Mrs Searle kept on asking us what was happening, why we were not having the agreed weekly updates, what was happening with the video for the crowdfunding appeal, about any new developments, concerned about many of our deadlines having slipped, I was also writing to Mr Heath asking very much the same questions, which he ignored completely. Mrs Searle was even wondering whether if we had decided not to go further with the crowdfunding campaign or had lost our commitment to the acquisition of the Cottage. I was wondering exactly the same in regards to Mr Heath.

Very soon the reader will learn more about what exactly happened at the time. By then, I was getting very ill beneath the strain. It is hard to adequately express the distress of that period: having what was by then a very public campaign running, within weeks of our deadline to raise the necessary funds, all the work we had set off now unstoppable, while Mr Heath suddenly stopped communication with us all. I didn't know if I should stop working altogether and raise the alarm, or bear with Mr Heath until whatever mood he was in passed and trust on the strength of the work already done. The only possible answer seemed to be to do a bit of both; I felt that by now I was *myself* working in opposite directions and I was breaking at the seams. I believe that the BBP's experience must have had much in common with mine.

However awful things were, both the BBP and I kept on working fiercely, trying to trust Mr Heath, trying to engage him in communication. The BBP had their festival, in which they focused on raising the Cottage appeal's profile. They were working extremely hard indeed.

THE VISITOR CENTRE

Now I must draw the reader's attention to the plan of creating a visitor centre (a Centre for the Imagination) that would be closely linked to Blake's Cottage, and about which we had all agreed from the very beginning of the appeal.

Blake's Cottage is a small building and can't hold large numbers of people, so we had plans to develop a further visitor centre to broaden the scope of the project and, in particular, its local benefits. We always agreed that this visitor centre would be, a) built in land adjacent to the Cottage, and b) that we would be working on it as a further stage in our project, *after* the Cottage had been renovated.

We never even discussed the possibility to demolish the 20th Century annexe to the Cottage, let alone build the visitor centre on its grounds. Mention of this is relevant because now the Blake Cottage Trust is planning to do exactly that, and it has become one of the many controversial issues around their work (or lack of it) on the Cottage. We will go into more detail about this in due time in this narrative, but for the time being I want to point in the direction of the enormous betrayal that these plans mean with regards to the Big Blake Project.

The Visitor Centre was a priority of the BBP rather than of the representatives of the Blake Society. The Chair and I were, without the shadow of a doubt, much more interested in the centre for creation within the Cottage itself, and what this means in practical terms is that the Big Blake Project put all the work towards the concept, research and communication with potential donors and supporters regarding the Visitor Centre. It was agreed that we would take the lead of work on the Cottage and the BBP of work on the visitor centre (or Centre of Imagination), that would draw in a wider audience and contribute to the regeneration of the Bognor area. This was clearly articulated in the presence of the local authorities as well.

Again, we discussed with the BBP that the appeal would first concentrate on raising money for the Cottage itself, and efforts for the Centre of Imagination would be concentrated on a second stage. We had been talking of roughly five years to develop it after the acquisition of the Cottage if the campaign was successful, and in an email to Mrs Searle by Mr Eliot on 29 May 2014 he even went as far as saying,

“I think independent money-raising and campaigning for a Centre for the Imagination, at this stage, in anything but the vaguest, 10-year-strategy terms will be counter-productive.”

Those who have been following the sad aftermath of the acquisition of Blake’s Cottage will know that the Blake Cottage Trust has allowed for the building to go into disrepair, that they don’t have money to repair it and furthermore, that instead of concentrating on that essential priority, they are now seeking funds to demolish the 20th Century annexe and build a visitor centre on its grounds, ignoring completely the vocal opposition from people in Felpham and beyond to such a confusion of priorities, and to such disfiguration of the Cottage’s grounds.

This is appalling news in many ways. It also is a flagrant contradiction of what we all had agreed upon during the campaign: the Cottage’s urgent renovation first, then the visitor centre, and it always was the visitor centre closely linked to the Cottage, but not – never – on its grounds. I had several conversations with Mr Heath in which he was adamant, and sensibly so, in preserving the integrity of the building. Now he and the Blake Cottage Trust have turned these agreements upon their head; we will get there in due time.

For the time being, though, in what concerns the Big Blake Project, it is very important to note the underhand way in which Mr Heath took advantage of their original plans for a visitor centre, of their connections and of the interest this project (one in which the Chair had never been much interested) had elicited among local supporters in order to advance the Blake Cottage Trust’s plans for the visitor centre they are now proposing to build, as if it was their own idea. They are blatantly stealing the Big Blake Project’s work on an element of our planned strategy that was very dear to their heart, and to which they devoted endless work and energy.

I hope that the local authorities and supporters will understand this clearly. If there is to be a Blakean visitor centre in Felpham or its vicinity, it should be the prerogative of the Big Blake Project to create and run it. It is their idea, they put the work behind both the idea and gathering local support, and it is them, not the Blake Cottage Trust, who deserve the support and investment. They are also the ones who deserve people’s trust, something that the Blake Cottage Trust has betrayed from the moment it was created.

IGNOMINY

The Big Blake Project, invited to the Cottage appeal by the Chair of the Blake Society himself, worked steadfastly and ceaselessly from the beginning till the end of the campaign, despite the communication blockages mentioned above. They raised directly a significant amount of money, and indirectly through their extensive promotion of the campaign, always on behalf of the Blake Society.

The two screenshots from their website I show below are just two pieces of evidence of the work they were doing publicly:



The Big Blake Project: 2 Appeal

Appeal

Let's Buy Blake's Cottage

William Blake lived in 9 houses during his lifetime. Of these only two survive, a small Georgian house in London and a cottage on the Sussex coast. It was while living here by the coast that he wrote the words for the hymn Jerusalem. Blake's Cottage in Sussex is where he discovered 'England's Green and Pleasant Land' yet it was also where he was arrested and tried for Treason.

- Do you love Blake?
- Want to see a missing piece of English heritage saved?

...then lets buy the cottage where Blake saw Angels and wrote Jerusalem

Things you can do to help us right now:

Donorship Opportunities

- Lord Egmont
- John
- Barry Beebeck
- Richard Skinner
- SJ Watson



The Big Blake Project: 2 News and Events: 2 Celebrating William Blake at Waterstones in London!

Celebrating William Blake at Waterstones in London!

Help raise funds for Blake's cottage by joining us for an evening of readings, music & discussion with an all star line up including:

- Katherine Ellis
- Deborah Levy
- Alex Marwood
- Hajji Karam
- Richard Skinner
- George Tomlin
- SJ Watson

This unique event takes place on Saturday 19th September 7-8:30pm and brings together an eclectic range of bestselling and award-winning novelists, poets, and Blake aficionados to celebrate his life and his poetry. The evening will be packed with readings, music, discussion and will feature new interpretations of and responses to his poems. All proceeds go directly to the Blake Cottage

Join us for an evening of literary readings and discussion

AWARD WINNERS SUPPORT BLAKE'S COTTAGE APPEAL:

Rowan Coleman

author of Richard & Judy Book Club choice The Mercy Book

Katherine Ellis

leading vocalist & songwriter

Alex Marwood

Blake scholar

Scary as hell - Stephen King

Delia Bevan



They contributed to the appeal's vision's initial documents; they opened up their networks to the campaign and focused their 2014 Felpham Festival on raising awareness of it; they drew journalists into the campaign from major newspapers in the UK and abroad; they directly contacted a number of organisms that went on to provide grants of from £2000 to £10,000; they liaised with Blackwell's Blake Festival and the Petworth Literary Festival and widely distributed literature about the campaign; they arranged for meetings such as that with the Chelsea Arts Club, at which Mr Heath

and Mr Eliot would be introduced to an eminent director whose support they later sought for a Blake Society project; they arranged for a joint announcement of the appeal on BBC radio with Mr Heath in London and Mr Searle in Sussex (an offer that Mr Heath never took up); on a local level they had articles in the paper on a weekly basis and secured support across the community; they arranged for a meeting with local authorities where both the Cottage and the Centre of Imagination were discussed as a key element to the regeneration of the Bognor area, after which the Big Blake Project submitted planning documents for the Centre of Imagination and built up a local consortium in support of an Exhibition Centre in the town; they gathered the disinterested and steadfast local support of many people, including author Beryl Kingston, who generously gave their time and work freely and in good faith; they secured an agreement for a mortgage to take the property off the market when the campaign was failing; they undertook meetings with several potential donors and supporters from major trusts and cultural institutions; on September 2015, very close to the actual acquisition of the Cottage, they organized a fundraising event with prominent poets and novelists at Waterstones Piccadilly in London.

I am sure that if the reader contacts them directly, they will be able to add details of the work they did to this list. And what did they get for their efforts? Not even a "thank you". They were elbowed out of the project as soon as the Cottage was acquired instead, were labelled "a pressure group" and were on the receiving end of Mr Heath's several insults. I don't want to speak for the Big Blake Project; it's up to them to decide whether to make them public or not, but the insults to them and to several local people who supported the Cottage appeal in different ways have been many.

What I can say is that, despite their extremely hard work and passion, when the Cottage was finally acquired the press sang the praises of Mr Heath, the Blake Society and some very famous donors and supporters of the Cottage appeal, but there was no mention whatsoever of the Big Blake Project or the support given by the local community. There was no mention of me either, by the way. All the merit was directed to Mr Heath.

I am trying to be as fair as I can possibly be in this testimony. I won't put all the blame on Mr Heath regarding the communication issues we all had working together. I did my bit, as I have acknowledged in this chapter, and I still believe that the Big Blake Project was not always taking on board decisions that had been made regarding the way we wanted to direct the publicity for the Cottage appeal. We were all under enormous pressure.

But there is no doubt that Mr Heath did all he could to exacerbate the misunderstandings, to divide us all so that he'd become the only point of contact for each of us, concealing and distorting information, and wilfully deceiving us.

I have just mentioned the passion with which Mrs Searle and the Big Blake Project worked. It would have been odd for them to resent somebody else's passion regarding a common goal. Remember that story of Mr Heath's, that he didn't inform me of the meetings with the BBP because they didn't like me owing to my passion?

Well, when I got in touch with Mrs Searle again after the Cottage was acquired, and realized what Mr Heath had done, excluding both the Big Blake Project and the Blake Society from the whole affair, Mrs Searle sent me an email in which she said, "*I remember not so much what you said at the Patrons event but how you said it. It really moved me I will never forget your passion.*" We met after that. That's when she told me that when she asked about me in their meetings, Mr Heath told her that I was too busy to attend.

Now what kind of poison would make an individual twist truth like that? I start to suspect that Mr Heath was jealous both of Mrs Searle's passion and mine. Perhaps he had realised that we were working from a space that he had cut himself off from very early on: that of good faith, without which joy in a project simply cannot exist.

Had he not poisoned the entire campaign as he did, we all could have had a much more positive and fruitful dialogue. The fact is, we still can, all those of us who truly care about Blake's Cottage, and it's most urgent that we engage in it so that it is repaired and can then flourish.



In the following chapters I will resume my testimony chronologically, from the time when Mr Eliot left the Cottage campaign and we were nearing our deadline for launching the crowdfunding appeal. The worst was still to come.

