

## Chapter III. What Happened with the Blake Cottage Appeal



### Leaving the Blake Society

In March 2014, I was still overjoyed regarding the Blake Cottage appeal, but because of the circumstances pointed at in chapter II, I decided that I had had enough of the Blake Society.

We had great projects to look forward to that year, some of them proposed by me. I would work on all of them, and my post as Secretary, with the usual commitment and passion, but it would be my last year as a Trustee. This meant that I'd be stepping down in January 2015. In the following chapters the reader will understand better why the Committee was such a toxic place to work in, particularly for me.

I informed the Chair of my decision. However, I made it very clear that I wished to continue engaged in the future of Blake's Cottage. My decision didn't alter either the fact that the Chair, Mr Eliot and myself were at that moment in charge of the Cottage appeal as representatives of the Blake Society.

To recapitulate: the Blake Society was launching a public campaign to acquire Blake's Cottage in Felpham and turn it into a centre for the dissenting imagination. The Committee agreed, and we duly informed the public about this decision, that the Blake Society didn't have the capacity or legal structure to manage the Cottage, so if the Society's campaign succeeded, we would create a new Trust to administer the project.

I was sure that in the large organism that we were trying to create, and that indeed was indispensable for the good governance of the Cottage, there would be no place for the elements of dubious practice that were undermining the work of the Blake Society. It would be a plural, inclusive and professional consortium, and the way we (or at least I) had envisioned it, it would have been impossible for Mr Heath to get away there with what he got away with in the BS. The new Trust certainly wouldn't be subjected to his sole authority. The fact is, that however much I admired Mr Heath's intellect and insights into Blake's work, I didn't believe that he had the universal ownership over William Blake's legacy.

In the new Trust I would be able to go on working around Blake with other people too, joyfully and in peace.

What I didn't know was that such an organism – what we had promised to donors and the public that we would create – would never exist.

The Chair was very angry about my decision. As was usually the case with him, rather than being explicit about his anger, he let it show in some form of aggression, this time in a meeting that we

had a few days later. I didn't dwell on it. Though it was painful for me in many ways to leave the Society, I still had nearly a whole year to bring my projects with it to a conclusion. I was convinced that leaving was the right thing to do and I hoped that the Chair would eventually come to understand that as well.

Work for the Cottage continued. Mr Heath and I were engaged in constant correspondence about the appeal, doing research and discussing plans. However, some things I started to find worrying. First, I realized that he was acting on things I had suggested, yet cutting me out; for instance, going to visit Clare's Cottage with another Trustee without even mentioning it to me, to ask for advice and support for the appeal (in fact its Chair, Mr Barry Sheerman, generously offered his offices in Parliament for the launch of the campaign), an idea that I had suggested to him in an email of 9 July 2013:

**"Going back to the houses, you may have already thought of this but have you contacted the John Clare Trust? They managed to buy Clare Cottage as you know and got an award from The Heritage Lottery Fund. They may be able to offer advice on the best way forward. Beautiful things could be done in the houses joining efforts with the BS, and if a Clare project found important support translated into £ I don't see why a Blake project would not, to translate the £ back into inspiration and vision(s)."**

Later I found out that, accompanied by Mr Eliot, Mr Heath had also been to Glastonbury to visit Michael Beavis, another potential supporter, again without having ever mentioned to me that they would do so, let alone inviting me to come along.

I was getting more concerned as I noticed that the original team that had got together in our first Cottage appeal meeting was very silent and we didn't seem to be taking any concrete steps forward, despite all the correspondence between the Chair and me. I knew what a pressing deadline we had and that we had no time to lose.

I would find out until May what was really going on. But for the reader to better understand it, a bit of context is necessary.

### **A dutiful Trustee**

As I have said before, Mr Henry Eliot was one of the new Trustees who had joined the Committee that year. He struck me as an intelligent, talented and ambitious young man, who brought exciting projects to the Blake Society. He was a close friend of Mr and Mrs Vinall's family. It is important to establish here the context in which Mr Eliot started working on the Cottage appeal, because, though his official involvement in it was brief, his covert participation later, prompted by the Chair, was crucial to the secrecy and dishonesty that brought down the Cottage project.

Mr Eliot and I had some work disagreements from very early on. Most were minor, though they became more serious around what was supposedly going to be the 2014 Blake Society's Annual Lecture, an event proposed by myself that was to be called, quoting Blake, "War is Energy Enslav'd", and that would commemorate the centenary of the Great War, reflecting on what Blake meant by that and why it was relevant in our times. This event never took place – it was relentlessly boycotted by Mr Heath, who would later blame me for its failure. Mr Eliot interfered in its organization as well, though he was not even part of the subcommittee responsible for it. I won't distract the reader with the details, since we're talking about the Cottage here, but it is important to know that the dynamics then established between Mr Heath and Mr Eliot set a precedent for the way the latter worked on the Cottage appeal from the onset. I believe that, had he been more thoughtful, he might have not

colluded with the Chair in his tactics of secrecy and division, and the Cottage appeal might have had a greater chance of transparency within the Blake Society Committee.

As it was, I started to notice that whatever disagreement Mr Eliot and I were having, however minor, the Chair would immediately support him. That support came usually in the form of terse emails in which what I was saying was ignored or undermined. It happened the other way around as well. For instance, Mr Heath started to disparage even the speakers I invited for the Annual Lecture, and then Mr Eliot would echo him. I tried hard for us to reflect on *why* we were working on our events and the need for all of us to get together and have a true dialogue, to no avail. I soon noticed that if the Chair chose to ignore my emails, Mr Eliot would do so too, and would only express an opinion if the Chair did, invariably the same as his.

To be fair, there were some moments in our correspondence in which both Mr Eliot and myself tried to dissolve our differences, but they were short-lived, since the dynamics described above were rife. The tension between us was palpable, and it became clear to me that the Chair was using it, trying to polarize our positions further; this was not an issue anymore of what our work was supposed to be as the Blake Society, but one of power, as Mr Heath would later confirm to me himself.

This was happening precisely at the time that the first instance of secrecy and unprofessional work practice within a team, to say the least, was taking place at the hands of them both around the Blake Cottage appeal. That is to say, it was happening while the odd vacuum in our progress with the campaign continued, and while I kept on asking the Chair what was going on and when would we be moving forward, as can be seen in the following emails:

**Email of 14 April 2014 to the Chair:**

I feel that with the bad news from [ . . . ] we need to devise a new strategy soon. Has anything new happened? Please let us know if you need us to research some other avenue precisely. I am a bit confused as to where we're standing now.

**Email of 17 April 2014 to the Chair:**

"Has anything new developed regarding the Cottage after the LHF news?"

I thought we might get some advice from Sandham Memorial Chapel --which leads us to the National Trust.  
"[Comments and research about a possible connection with the NT followed]"

**From the Chair to me on 23 April 2014:**

"Thank you for this research that I am pondering over. [ . . . ] Will try to meet up with you over coffee at the weekend to explore this."

It never happened, we didn't get together and the seeming standstill persisted. On the same day, I wrote to him with some serious reflections about the direction we wanted for the project, and ended saying, "But we need to make decisions, for time is not stopping for us." Yet days kept on passing by without any clear work moving forward, so I wrote on 26 April, in an email where I was also asking about other matters concerning the Blake society:

"Any thoughts about the Cottage and what's the next step?"

The Chair responded only regarding my other BS questions and ignored my question about work on the Cottage. So I insisted:

What do you think regarding the National Trust and other avenues for the Cottage? You said you were pondering on it. I think we need to have some direction clearer probably even before we make commitments with . . . I'm happy to discuss this with you,

I received no response so I wrote again, **on 1 May 2014:**

Have you thought anything more regarding the Cottage, and where are we standing there? You said you were pondering on my suggestions. I am concerned about time running...

The Chair responded that we would “try to have a meeting on the Cottage next week”, but still, nothing happened. Meanwhile I kept on writing letters to potential donors and supporters for the appeal, that the Mr Heath read and approved of.

As it transpired, Mr Heath and Mr Eliot *were* moving forward already, and had been doing so all along. While Mr Heath made a pretence of a dialogue with me about our future work for the campaign, using the suggestions I made that he found convenient, he and Mr Eliot were embarked on that work on their own. There isn't a subtle way to express the fact that they were doing so hiding away from me. The extent of what they did, who were they seeing and talking to, including the original team gathered in that our first meeting, I don't know and I will never know – that is the result after all of things being done in hiding.

I found out that this was going on because Mr Heath and Mr Eliot seem to have realised that they did need my help after all: on 26 May Mr Heath sent me first an email with two versions for flyers that he wanted me to look at, and later on the email with that odd sentence about me being “the conscience of the Blake Society” referred to in Chapter I, asking me to look at a Second Draft of a flyer that he described thus:

“The first draft I put together for design purposes with a narrow vision, in the second draft Henry redacted the text and I then laid out the imagery around the expanded text.”

The flyers had typos and required heavy editing. The second draft that they had been trying to put together was a dull, clumsy document, in which, curiously enough, the Chair was already mentioning what would become one of his mottos after the Cottage was acquired: he told of the many things that could happen in the Cottage, then adding, “and couples can sleep in Blake's bed”.

I told him my opinion:

“I find the second draft problematic, like cut ideas put together in not a particularly coherent order--it doesn't seem to have a natural flow to me, and I don't find it inspiring because it reads a bit like ordinary publicity (“This is an exciting opportunity not to be missed; if successfully acquired, Blake's Cottage would be an extraordinary asset for the nation”), or has sentences that sound to me a bit both forced and vague such as “released from ignoble constraints” so I think it still needs much editing.”

But by now it was clear to me that Mr Heath and Mr Eliot were doing much more on their own than I was aware of. I wanted to make sure, so I called Mr Heath and asked. His response in that telephone conversation couldn't have been clearer: he admitted to having been working with Mr Eliot behind my back, because the latter was “a good administrator”. He also told me that he had “left me out of the loop” because I was talking about leaving the Blake Society, therefore I could not be trusted – and extraordinary statement when he knew quite well the reason for my leaving: the toxicity in the Committee that I have mentioned before, provoked by the Chair and that the reader will have the chance to look at closely in the following chapters. In any case, Mr Heath explained that if I said I would leave, this was what happened, and I had to learn the tactics of politics and power within a Committee.

I responded to this information with a **letter to Mr Heath on 29 May 2014**, some excerpts of which appear below:

"I am trying to digest the conversation we had today, calmly, without being carried away by all too human reactions –one of which would of course be anger.

To know that while I kept on asking about developments with the Cottage, concerned because it seemed stopped, you and Henry had been working on everything without saying a word to me is very hard to take in wisely.

I try to understand your reasons. Yet I think that the ethical thing would have been for you to say, "I am worried about the future of our work on this if you're leaving the Committee. Let's talk and see how we can make the best of your work now and find the best solution for your involvement."

The ethical tends to be the practical too: clarity and fairness prevent the awkward situations that follow when a person realises she has been excluded from a project without her knowing.

In more humane terms, the generous thing would have been, since you know why it is that I am leaving the Committee, for you to acknowledge how difficult this is for me, how committed I am to my work, and try to work out with me how we could do this in a way that did not jeopardize the project and was the best for all.

Instead, you resorted to the two principles that you invoked in our conversation today: politics and power. Even before our conversation I have been seeing their subtle mesh developing. But I am not in the Blake Society because I want power. Power is not my motivation neither in my work nor in my personal relationships. My passion and dedication have other sources; maybe that is precisely why I have brought so much that is of value to the Society.

As I told you on the phone, I am trying to finish my work well in the projects that I committed myself to before deciding to go. One of those is the Cottage --an ambitious and beautiful project that owes the very fact that it is now a possibility to you. I believe that the nobility of your initial intention could benefit from other forms of vision and talents apart from those, indispensable too, of good administrators.

Why not make the best use of what I have to give to the project, and the Society, while I am still there? We have squandered enough the potential of what I can do, and it is a pity. Now, in doing all the work you have done with Henry and other people without including me, my input has been lost, what I may contribute in work and ideas that can bear fruit in the future, no matter if I am not there anymore: that is the point Tim, to offer what we can while we can, with an ideal for this project, with enthusiasm and care, so that the fruits are many and infinite, regardless the individual persons (or egos) who plant the seeds. That would be true generous work to make of the Cottage a living legacy of Blake that belongs to all.

When you questioned my commitment today, my capacity for work and reliability, I could not even get angry – it was so senseless. You will be hard put to find a more committed, enthusiastic and loyal Trustee for the Blake Society, and you know it.

[ . . . ]

I am doing all in my power to finish my work for the BS responsibly, joyfully, and in peace . . . We are in the Cottage working group, because we care. You cannot have forgotten how much I care about a place that I have not even visited (just think about that!). Ever since I joined the Committee I have proposed things to turn attention to it, urged you to consider how the BS could help preserve it when you were doing it all on your own and no one in the Committee showed any interest. When the Committee made the old decision that this would not be a BS project, I disagreed and kept on telling you that I believed that decision was wrong, that we should pull together and involve the Society in the effort to save both the House and the Cottage.

My commitment is beyond doubt, and if we are generous we may find ways in which we make the best of that commitment in this my last year in the Committee, give it a chance to sow seeds –for the future of the project, the seeds that grow when people who love an artist and poet passionately devote themselves to try to keep his legacy alive. [ . . . ]

The project is just starting, that is part of the excitement -- that it will grow in ways that we can trace but not fully foresee or even control. More people will be involved, further projects born within it and I am hoping to find there a space where I can work near Blake while breathing freely from all that is harmful to me in the Committee of the Blake Society. And if I don't find that space, so be it, but at least I will have the joy and satisfaction of having contributed to the beginning of what it may become. As Chairman, you cannot deny that to me, because I am in the Society still and every single day I show my commitment through hard work and endless thinking about how we can do things better, in spite of the isolation into which I keep on being constantly pushed. It is my duty to be part of the projects I have committed myself to, and it is my right: I have earned it with my steadfast work.

As simply Tim, a man who happens to love and hopefully understand Blake, the language of power and politics should not apply in this conflict. [ . . . ]

Can we try to be generous instead? [ . . . ] I think we both deserve it, and so does the Blake Society. Not to talk about Blake.

### Mr Heath's response was curt:

Dear Adriana - too long a letter - could you please give me an abstract, say 25 words, many thanks, Tim

### This was my response:

First, I'd recommend you to read the letter, even if it takes you long. It is important for our future work together and I took all care to be clear and fair.

It is long because you have done something highly unethical in a complex situation, and I have tried to make you see what is being jeopardised by behaving like that and find a way for us to sort it out, kindly and with civility.

Second, we need to get together and talk, decide what we're going to do. I won't repeat what I say in my letter regarding how I'm trying to do my work well in this last year in the Committee.

Your response, of even more sarcasm and bullying, endangers that work. There are projects and quite a lot of the Blake Society that need me at the moment [ . . . ] Let us meet and discuss things civilly, wisely. So tell me when and where can we meet.

Otherwise, I will have to resign at our next meeting, and tell the Committee why it is that I am doing so.

Around those days, I made a work suggestion to both Mr Heath and Mr Eliot for the appeal. Mr Eliot didn't respond, while Mr Heath regaled me with yet another terse reply, so I wrote to both **on 30 May**:

Dear Tim and Henry,

I am asking you because the three of us, lest you forget, are the sub-Committee for the Cottage project, so what I have to say goes first to you, not to the high court of the Committee.

May I remind you both that underhand politics are not, should not be the ways of the Blake Society, and that I will certainly raise at the meeting how the two of you have excluded me from work in this project.

None of them responded. I found it odd that Mr Eliot didn't even ask what I was talking about or why did a colleague talk to him that way. However, I reflected and thought that it might be unfair to him, newly arrived in the Committee, perhaps unaware of the Chair's power games, to be so harsh, so I apologized on **30 May 2015**, with copy to the Chair:

Dear Henry,

I want to apologise for my harsh email this morning, that probably took you by surprise.

The context is, my shock at finding out everything that has been done for the Cottage project, something that I have cared about indeed for years and to which subcommittee now I belong, without my knowing.

But I should not have let frustration get the best of me.

You are new in the Committee and it is likely that you don't have a full grasp yet of all the projects and how we work, which can admittedly be chaotic sometimes. I fear too that you may have been caught in problems of communication among other people. The fault is on our side –we should make always sure that we help integrate new Trustees properly.

We are all overworked, there is a lot going on (which on the other hand is of course good news, and exciting). Therefore we make mistakes. I have tried very hard for all of us to work together, as I'm sure you have noticed, to share our enthusiasm and be direct and clear towards each other. There has been some lack of communication, a problem that has to be redressed.

I believe firmly that the work we all do deserves respect, but it is for the Principals to set the example.

As I have told you already on a few occasions, you have brought great work, energy and enthusiasm to the Blake Society, for which we are all grateful, and I'm sure your work will go on bearing fruits that would make Blake happy.

I hope we will all learn to communicate in a way that is open and transparent in the future. Our work in the Blake Society is certainly something to be enjoyed. If you ever feel the need to comment, ask or clarify anything with me, I am here, and I am sure that applies to all the Trustees.

Please accept my sincere apologies,

Mr Eliot didn't respond to this email either, which I found rude and not auguring well at all for any improvement in communication. The Chair didn't respond either but he did change his attitude and from then on, the three of us were working together again.

I won't exhaust the reader's patience here with the dozens of emails that show the energy and enthusiasm with which I kept on working, leaving the former apprehensions behind and with unquestionable good will, but they exist, and the Committee of the Blake Society should remember that before slandering me with the suggestion that I am exposing their lack of professionalism and ethics because I am "resentful".

There exists a vast evidence as well showing how indefatigably I was working on the campaign, so Mr Heath should be very careful too when he claims that I was just an assistant.

On 7 July, we launched the Blake Cottage appeal in Parliament, hosted by Mr Barry Sheerman MP. It was a joyful affair. My notes for what I said on that occasion can be read in the About and Documents section in this webpage: <https://blakecottage.files.wordpress.com/2016/07/4-presentation-launch-campaign.pdf>. Our guests were very enthusiastic. Several of them talked about my passion for this project, and I am sure that none of the persons attending had any doubt whatsoever of just how much I was an essential part of its leadership.

Though Mr Eliot helped organize the launch and was present there, it would be his last official work on Blake's Cottage appeal: by mid-June he had already decided to leave, due to his many commitments. Talking about it after the Society's July event, Mr Heath told me that Mr Eliot had left because "his heart was not in it". I agreed: Mr Eliot did his work for the campaign efficiently, with the efficiency one devotes to career-making assignments. Nothing wrong about that, and he did

show to be a good organizer, but it was evident to me that he didn't have a personal devotion for the project, or indeed a vision for what Blake's Cottage should be.

However, this was not the last of his involvement in the appeal. He would reappear several times, while still, officially, having nothing to do with it, and always acting covertly with the Chair, as a loyal assistant, it seemed to me, for Mr Heath's prevalent practice of secrecy. The reader will read about all these murky dealings in due time as my testimony continues.

I am trying to understand what Mr Eliot thought he was doing. What I believe is that, having just joined the Committee, he must have felt flattered because the Chair seemed to be taking him under his wing. That he also backed him through our work disagreements, big and small, must have made Mr Eliot feel empowered. I fear that he didn't realize Mr Heath was simply using him to vent his anger at me because I had just decided to leave the Blake Society.

I ignore what the Chair told Mr Eliot to justify the secrecy, the keeping me "out of the loop", all that business of politics and power that they were engaged in. I ignore whether if Mr Eliot ever asked why that was happening, or cared. I assume that he believed that his loyalty should be not so much with the Blake Society, but with its Chair, something he himself seemed to confirm in a conversation we had in December 2015. I can understand that – it would have been difficult for a young man in whom inexperience and ambition met to resist the temptation, the flattery. And yet, you don't behave like that in a working place. You don't collude with secrecy. A Trustee is there to serve the public and should make all in his power to communicate openly with all his colleagues. Having failed to understand that is I think what Mr Eliot must answer for, but I also believe that he must have been entangled by Mr Heath's tactics of division, and that it is very likely that he was, to some extent, manipulated.

Which is something I can hardly blame him for, since we all were – and by "we all" I mean the Blake Society Committee, fellow campaigners in the Big Blake Project, donors, supporters and the public. Mr Heath excels at manipulation.

In that conversation Mr Eliot and I had on December 2015, about which the reader will know more in due time, we seemed to agree on many things, including the fact that there had certainly been lack of communication and transparency in the whole of the Blake Cottage appeal. He apologized to me for what he called his lack of tact. He seemed sincere. It was a good conversation. We had never talked so openly in the time we worked together as Trustees. I was on my guard though about some things he said that I found implausible, but all in all I preferred to give him the benefit of the doubt, and made sure that it was clear to him that I thought him sincere.

In view of what happened afterwards, I don't know anymore. It's been a while since I stopped wondering what exactly is going through the heads of each Trustee of the Blake Society. It is sad, however, that the enormous potential of the Committee as it was in 2014 was squandered because of lack of, precisely, sincerity, petty ambitions and the Chair's efforts at turning people against each other, that would soon take another dimension, as we will see in the following chapters.

Since January 2017, Mr Eliot is no longer a Blake Society Trustee.

