

BlakeFest 2019 – Where Imaginations Ran Wild

Reviews and quotes

WriteOutLoud

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Visions of Blake: tigers on loose and burning bright beside the sea at Bognor

by Greg Freeman

Sunday 29th September 2019 8:22 pm

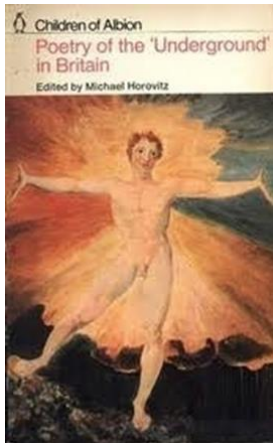


The visionary poet and painter William Blake only lived in the Sussex village of Felpham for a couple of years - just enough time to begin writing Jerusalem and to be cleared at Chichester assizes of assaulting a soldier and uttering seditious expressions against the king. But it was quite long enough for the arts community of nearby Bognor Regis to commemorate him in the 21st century with a festival featuring art, music and poetry in the seaside town.

William Blake was a committed Christian who was nevertheless hostile to almost all forms of organised religion; he was influenced by the ideals and ambitions of the French and American revolutions, but later disowned many of his earlier political beliefs; he was critical of the marriage laws of his day, and more generally of traditional

Christian notions of chastity as a virtue. The least that most people know about him is that the words to England's unofficial and inspirational national anthem Jerusalem are his, and he also wrote the poem 'The Tyger'.

Blake said he saw visions throughout his life. In a letter dated 21 September 1800, he wrote: "Felpham is a sweet place for Study, because it is more spiritual than London. Heaven opens here on all sides her golden Gates; her windows are not obstructed by vapours; voices of Celestial inhabitants are more distinctly heard, & their forms more distinctly seen."



Poets in the late 20th century revered Blake as a seer and revolutionary. In 1969 the American Beat poet Allen Ginsberg recorded an album titled *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, on which he sang sections of Blake's illustrated poetry collection of the same name and set them to musical accompaniment, performed with jazz musicians. That same year the English Beat poet Michael Horovitz published *Children of Albion: Poetry of the 'Underground' in Britain*, with its cover illustration a detail of William Blake's painting known as *Albion Rose or Glad Day*. Horovitz introduced a long Afterwords section at the end of the anthology with a description of how discovering Blake "turned my displaced and under-graduating scholar gipsy's head".

All this background and more was covered by Dr Luke Walker in one of three talks at the Blakefest 2019 festival. In *Blake & British Counterculture: Poetry, Politics and the Children of Albion*, he showed how much William Blake chimed in with the spirit of British 1960s radicalism. Later in the day at the festival there was a fine example of 21st century radical poetry, delivered by longstanding political poet Alan Morrison.



Morrison was introduced by compere and fellow poet Barry Smith as "the Bard of Bognor Regis". He may or may not relish this title, or indeed being linked by me to another South Coast radical poet Attila the Stockbroker, who hails from Southwick, near Shoreham, not far away. What is it about living by the Channel that makes poets so angry?

Not too hard to find the answer these days, perhaps. I've been aware of Morrison's poetry and stance, ever since I reviewed his anti-austerity but pre-Brexit anthology *The Robin Hood Book* some years ago for Write Out Loud. It's a measure of the current manic political climate that today his passionate if sometimes lengthy poems do not sound very radical at all, but eminently sensible and reasonable. The title poem of his new collection *Shabbigentile* has a particularly recognisable voter bang to rights. I'll say no more. No, I will. Morrison often delivers interesting and quoteable lines, such as his examination of "the tipple of the proletariat", where "baristas and Corbynistas rub shoulders" ... "Whoever would have

thought that a bitter brown brew, / Arabic ambrosia, could come to undermine / Democracy, make us accommodate complacency?" If we do have to be out on the streets soon, book Morrison for a few readings.

Saturday's poetry was organised by the South Downs Poetry Festival, of which Barry Smith is director. It provides a rolling programme of poetry events throughout the year. Smith's own poetry contribution involved a fine collaboration with Charlotte Glasson's jazz trio, which included veteran



guitarist Chris Spedding. His poems included one about a clowns' convention in Bognor - "it's just a bit of fun. Although now I wonder about its political overtones." The fusion of poetry and jazz was often near-perfect, particularly in poems about legendary bassist Herbie Flowers' role in Lou Reed's *Walk on the Wild Side*, and another about a Paul Klee painting that transmuted into powerful and moving lines about the Holocaust.

The half-Romany poet Raine Geoghegan provided a fresh perspective, with her poems of eating and cooking hedgehogs, memories of the hop fields, being moved on by police, a blackthorn stick traditionally held by someone dying and their youngest relative, moving into a new council house, and a horse called Mad Alf that had been employed on the battlefields of the first world war. At the end of her reading she said passionately: "The Romany language is so beautiful." Flicking through her

collection *Apple Water: Povel Panni*, I constantly came across words that I was familiar with, but had not appreciated where they originally came from.

There were other, enjoyable readings from poets Mandy Pannett, Andy Brown, and James Simpson during the afternoon, with Barry Smith and James Simpson rounding up the poetry proceedings with a joint reading of 'The Tyger'. A fluffy tiger had kept vigil, lying beside the microphone stand throughout. Other music acts at the festival were Song Box, Lucy Kitchen, Noah's House Band, and Sirens of Titan.

And there were tigers everywhere. The message of Blakefest 2019 (all events "made possible by the Bognor Regis Business Improvement District") was "Let Your Imagination Run Wild!" That included lines from 'The Tyger' in shops windows around the town, for children to track down. In Studio 1 of the Regis Centre, close to Bognor's seafront, there was an exhibition of impressive tiger art created



by those attending creative art classes organised by the Aldingbourne Centre, a local charity. And later in the day body artist Elissa Barrett's live installation of the big jungle cat certainly turned heads.

There is a determined campaign to provide a lasting memorial to William Blake in Bognor. Vincent Gray, who has already sculpted a life-size statue of John Keats in Chichester, is keen to erect a statue depicting Blake's Albion Rose/ Glad Day – see the *Children of Albion* cover -

on the resort's seafront. That would be a fine thing to see, in the town where I spent the summer holidays of my early childhood, as it happens.

[See more BlakeFest pictures](#)

<https://blakefest.co.uk>

Where else can you see the best
 Tyger - in the world but deep
 painted on a beautiful girl at
 Blakefest - see bands playing
 or Tygers in shops in the
 waves Blakefest is a dynamic
 tribute in what group of minds
 who love Blake's jazz & rock
 music - who love art and want
 to celebrate success & great
 people who lived by the sea at
 Felpham ~~in~~ in the North
 he ran ~~the~~ in the North
 Downs over Hurst, a fair
 funeral in his garden in Milton
 Descend into his garden jointly
 with his last foot. Blakefest is
 the best kept secret festival
 in Britain today. An annual
 weekly exploration into the mind
 making a man's eyes of Blake.
 The Blakefest Circus is a joy
 of entertainment in learning
 the Blakefest Tyger will roar!

Excerpt: 'BlakeFest, the best kept secret festival in Britain today'

Dear Editor,

I am writing to say how much I enjoyed Blakefest in Bognor Regis recently, **pictured here.**

While the body art was truly amazing, the music and poetry in Studio 1 was well worth the ticket price of £8 for the whole afternoon and evening.

The music got off to a good start with Song Box playing country folk-blues.

We then had a feast of moving poetry and the beautiful voice of Lucy Kitchen to take us to the evening.

Jazz instrumentalist Charlotte Glasson has so much talent she makes the music sing.

Noah's House band lightened the mood. Then we finished by dancing in the aisles to Sirens of Titan.

Blakefest is a wonderful family friendly event for the town and deserves our support.

Well done to all artists and organisers. Many thanks.

**Cllr Alison Sharples,
Marine Drive West,
Bognor Regis**

From Bognor Regis Post

'Blakefest went brilliantly this year.....it just seemed to flow from one exciting thing to the next. Everyone seems to have thoroughly enjoyed it. And so good to have the boost of that Arts Council support'

'The whole day was an absolute joy and made more so by you (Charlotte) and your wonderful co-musicians. Feedback has been 100% positive, with many complimentary comments.

Barry Smith South Downs Poets

From Facebook, Dr Naomi Foyle

Congratulations Rachel Searle, Olivia Stevens and all who co-created another marvelous Blakefest!

As the winds roared along Bognor seafront, fiery Tygers prowled through the forest of our minds . . . thank you to Fiona Price, Luke Walker and David Fallon for the fascinating talks on Blake, revolution and counterculture, to Beatnik Barry Smith for his properly jazzed up poems, performed with Charlotte Glasson and her band, and for curating compelling readings from Alan Morrison, Raine Geoghegan, Mandy Pannett, James Simpson, and Andy Brown, spanning radical politics, Roma histories, South Downs discoveries, illness and eco-apocalyptic folktales; to artist Julie Goldsmith for her fabulous fairyland figurines, sculptor Vincent Grey for his vision of a 15 foot tall bronze 'Glad Day - Albion Rose on Felpham's shore, and finally to poets and Blakean guides Stephen Micalef for bringing the Blakean banner 'Everything that Lives is Holy' into Extinction Rebellion, and Niall McDevitt for illuminating Blake's contrariness in his view of 'Nature as Devil' . . . Yet 'without contraries is no progression' and at a time when children are forced to weaponise their innocence, and XR is fuelled by our collective creativity, Blake is a prophet for our times, as much as for his own and for the sixties.

Blakefest is now deservedly in receipt of Arts Council funding, and I look forward to seeing it continue to grow, brightly asserting the role of the arts in regenerating and re-enchanting our sick rose of a world.

Bognor Regis residents celebrate yet another successful Blakefest

Lotte Pegler
lotte.pegler@sussexpost.co.uk

A COMBINATION of music, art and poetry was the perfect way for people to celebrate the life and works of William Blake.

Residents from across Bognor Regis have been celebrating his life, reaching a climax on Sunday with an entire day for people to show off their work.

The annual Blakefest has been officially running since 2016, getting bigger and more popular each year.

Rachel Searle, Blake fan and organiser of the event, said: "I'm really happy that it's gone so well. We're trying to celebrate and showcase the creatives that live here or in the wider community of William Blake."

"I've had so much incredibly positive feedback. We are very excited about the reception to the two sculptures from Vincent Gray that we've had outside."

"Children have been going up to them and interacting with them. They've been incredibly popular."

"I'm very happy with the art gallery and how the Adlingbourne Trust has responded to the theme of the tiger."

With more than 500 people attending the event on Saturday, there were poets and artists from across the country who came down to display their work.

An art exhibition was open to the public in Studio 2 at The Regis Centre, displaying the work of Julie Goldsmith and people from the trust.

Rachel particularly praised the poem

from James Simpson which was performed on Saturday. "He read *The Reddeman's Daughter*, which turned out to be a tale of a world becoming barren and desperate based on his daughter's dream."

"Everyone was saved by a tiger which started to walk across the ground. Where his footprints were he started to grow new life in the world. It was so interesting to see how that tied in with everything, capturing so many aspects of Blake."

Saturday's event was just one of the many parts of Blakefest that took place around Bognor Regis over the course of the week.

"On Friday night the granddads gig was packed out. We raised £400 through people paying for entry as well as additional donations. The music was stunning and we had such fantastic generosity from the musicians. Everybody came together to just give. That was really thrilling."

"Unpacking Blake was so full, people were having to stand in the hallway to listen to it. It's so fulfilling to see how many people have gone out of their way to come together to appreciate Blake."

A walk in Felpham with Niall McDevitt has become a popular and regular part of the week's festivities. On Sunday, the poet and psychogeographer led a wandering lecture through Felpham, exploring the path of William Blake.

He said: "In London I have been following Blakean trails for about 20 years and became very interested in Blake."

"I do five different Blake walks in London. It's great for me to come down to Bognor Regis and Felpham and continue the

exploration of Blakean terrain, especially by the sea."

"I've loved every part of the festival, particularly my partner, Julie's show, I'm biased but I think it's really beautiful."

Julie Goldsmith is an artist who works with ceramic, bronze and found objects, forming them into animals or mythical creatures.

She said: "I like to tell stories. For this show I have made works that are inspired by Blake's belief in the imagination, and his visions of fairies in his garden."

Julie has many influences including literature, music and the gothic. Based in London, her work is widely exhibited, last month appearing on the front cover of the *International Times*.

"Unlike Niall, this is the first year I've helped out," she said. "Rachel invited me because she knew my work. She's seen me in a couple of other shows."

"It's been really brilliant, there's so much lovely poetry and art - it's really inspiring."

"My work is quite gothic. When Rachel invited me I looked at the work I'd got and

looked at how Blake inspired me. Some of it is directly inspired by him, and some of it embodies his spirit."

"I like that his work is quite romantic but at the same time quite dark and gothic. It's been such a lovely, flowing event."

"I really enjoyed quite a few of the talks and the poetry was of course beautiful. I would love to come back again next year."

There was something for everyone



Elissa Barrett transformed a live model into a tiger as part of the Fringe events



The Songbox band was one of many acts playing during the event



Rachel Searle with John Keates' statue

SEDGE SEYMOUR – Review for Felpham Village Conservation Society

Prior to the musical performance, viewers were able to, while enjoying freshly made tea, coffee, cakes and scones, examine representations of some of Blake's art and to experience speaker/Artist Dr. Mikey Georgeson's 'Aesthetic Machines' immersive exhibition. This is a varied collection of, often, interactive installations (two of which have graced previous BlakeFests). Screens and sounds, a childhood bathing memory, a giant egg, a character called Kimey Peckpo, 'Actual Occasion' and 'the nonbifurcated man', among others, captivated and intrigued the curious and appreciative throng also foreshadowing Mikey's upcoming panel presentation, more of which later.

With around 120 people in attendance, the Hall ran out of seating so it was standing room only at the back with people still in the entrance hall when Across The Sea began their live music performance. A combination of textured acoustic guitar effects/ambience of Pete Ferguson with the angelic, expressive voice of Hannah Katy Lewis, Across The Sea best described their style as "Prog/Folk", building landscapes of sound with clever effects-pedal treatment from a single acoustic guitar allowing Hannah's voice to swoop and storytell over the sonic surface intertwining with the inventive shifts in rhythm and harmonic structure. This truly magical duo echoed the transportative and transformative spirit of Blake's work and even performed a spellbinding version of Jerusalem especially put together for this audience.

The four panellists all Unpacked different aspects of the impact of William Blake on our society. Dr Luke Walker spoke about Blake's work and his influence on British counter culture and radical politics in the 1960s and 1970s. Blake was 'rediscovered' and reassessed around 150 years after his death, after remaining virtually unknown and unappreciated during his own lifetime, by the likes of Ginsberg (famously pictured outside Blake's Felpham cottage, uncharacteristically beardless) and Dylan. Blake was finally given his true status as a visionary genius and influencing a shift in creative thought and art.

Dr Simon Mouatt covered how Blake and the Romantics challenged the Enlightenment ideals and informed contemporary psychology, neuroscience and philosophy. Very well-illustrated, this talk delved into Blake's understanding of the Mind, showing a deeper understanding, through his works, than was the accepted wisdom of the time. Far-reaching thoughts and illuminating another facet of Blake's visionary insight.

Dr Mikey Georgeson gave a talk which evolved into an aesthetic poetic performance demonstrating how Blake's thought and mysticism has inspired the philosophy that underpins the practice and dissemination of contemporary art. Captivating the audience with a talk explaining the aesthetic aspects of Blake which, as the presentation developed, backed by a video/audio experience, built to a half-ennunciated/recited/sung crescendo exemplifying the effect and provoking spontaneous audience applause.

The panel talks were rounded off perfectly by Cultural Historian author John Higgs on why Blake matters now; a constant presence from video games to novels, from sporting events to political rallies and from horror films to designer fashions. Covering the emergence of Generation Z, a leap forward in society, social mobilisation and access to a whole internet of knowledge, Blake has now become deeply ingrained in our culture. One of the most surprising aspects of John's talk were clips of current video games featuring Blake's direct influence, one of which has a character which will verbally quote Blake at any given time.

There followed a 'Question & Answer' session which involved mainly local residents giving their perspectives of the QDs and opinions on some of the comments made during the talks. Some of

these were so un-questionlike that they inspired present poet/Blakehead Stephen Micallef to write a poem entitled "Is that a question". After three hours of art, music, talks and highly-engaged discussion we closed the event and after uninstalling the artworks we adjourned to nearby Blake-era pub The Fox to unravel "Unpacking Blake" and hailing it a well-attended success and a positive, uplifting start to BlakeFest 2019.

From Participants

From John Higgs – academic speaker

'Blakefest is a local celebration for a national hero of eternal importance. It's a gathering of creative, inspired and enthralling writers, artists and performers, and Blake would have loved it.'

Mikey Georgeson, poet and artist -

It seems apt that my route into professional fine art came through my response to Blake, as he is now a figure that has given shape to the context of my professional output, in particular with my work for Blakefest.

It was a fantastic experience to be able to perform my poetry with your soundscapes.....it gave them another dimension.

Alan Morrison -

'Really appreciate you including me in the event, especially since I've not read for a long time (not since 2017). It's also now boosted my confidence more with regards to my book and I'm certainly up for other readings as and when they might transpire. Having read from the book I felt that it does need to be put out there more.'

Elissa Barrett, Body Artist

'Just want to say a huge thank you for having us join you at Blakefest fest. We had such a wonderful time, it really was such a Great and inspiring event to be a part of. It seemed to be a great success. I hope we can do it all again in the future!'

And one response on, Bognor Regis Matters Facebook:



(This Reynolds store is a furniture shop, the company are also a local Funeral Directors)

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BlakeFest2019 in Pictures



“Unpacking Blake” a well-attended mixture of Art Installations by Dr Mikey Georgeson. Live Music and Academic Panel talks with a Q&A session.



Across The Sea performing their atmospheric prog-folk with a backdrop of Mikey Georgeson’s “An Actual Occasion” Installation.



Dr Simon Mouatt, one of our 4 engaging academic speakers Unpacking Blake.



Sedge, from our Committee, performing for BlakeFest in support of local Community Hub, Grandads Front Room.



Local Punk tribute band, Crash Course helping us to raise over £400 for Grandads Front Room



The Boy Wonders topped the bill, performing an hour and a half of original songs, captivating the audience.



Our striking poster, advertising the main event at our local Theatre facility.



On the main day our programme included a Children's Drama Workshop...



...and free Tiger facepainting for children who completed the Tiger Trail quiz around the town...



This example of a Body Art Tiger was on display in the window of a High Street shop throughout the whole painting process by artist Elissa Barrett.

We also ran a mid-week Open Mic Poetry and music event featuring Punk-Poet Stephen Micallef.



...more Academic talks about the impact of William Blake...



...leading to some fierce-looking wildlife!



More in-depth examination of Blake from Dr Luke Walker.



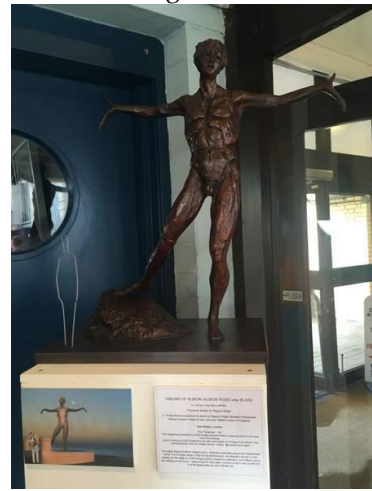
Song Box entertained musically with folk-tinged tunes.



Award-winning Julie Goldsmith's ceramic art was inspired by Blake's understanding of the Imagination.



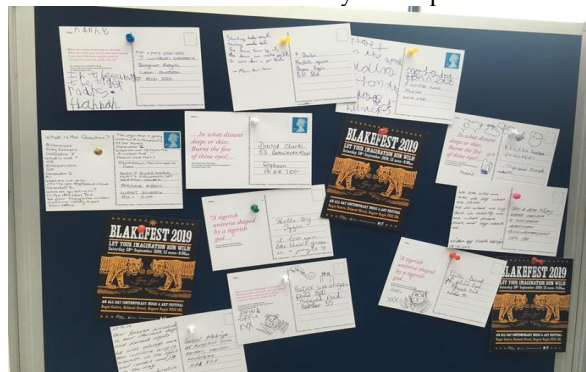
Lucy Kitchen provided a sensitive singer-songwriter set with her pet tiger.



Sculptor Vincent Gray's Albion maquette displayed close to the seafront where its full-sized version may end up.



Lots of locally-sourced interpretations of Tigers were on display...



...and the public were invited to "Post-a-poem"!



Throughout the day lots of people interacted with Vincent Gray's statue of Keats.



The winning Tiger, created by a local Aldingbourne Centre attendee.



James Simpson, one of a wide range of performing poets covering many topics.



Headlining Multi-Instrumentalist Charlotte Glasson with her combo featuring legendary guitarist, Chris Spedding.



Our final day brought a Psychogeographic walk with Niall McDevitt featuring Blake's Cottage...



...and The Fox public house which included a dramatic historical re-enactment followed by a talk on "The Heads of The Poets".



Some of this year's BlakeFest team with our BodyArt Tyger

Planning for planning

Rachel Searle, Lucy Anderson Jones, Will Murphy discussed and agreed by full committee

This is an outline of what we think that we need leading to a 3 year action (rather than business plan) Essentially, it is a series of questions that we need to ask ourselves about how we to develop, and the steps for doing so between April 2020 – and March 23. None of the actual discussion has taken place yet.

- Explain the structure BBP
 - How will links between the section be emphasised and reinforced
- Take stock of what we have achieved so far – largely without funding
 - History
 - Volunteers
 - Quality of trail, sculpture commission and festival.
 - Community involvement
- Revisit Mission check it is still appropriate (it probably is)
- Ambitions for the festival:
 - Size – how to stay niche and manageable
 - Length – how many days
 - Pace of growth
 - What is missing artistically? Do we want to include it?
 - Wellbeing of all those involved in festival – time to enjoy, celebrate and reflect on growth
 - Actively reflection on practise to improve practise
 - Quality rather than quantity
 - Increased community penetration
 - Target communities – demographic, deprivation, etc
 - Celebrate Bognor Regis
 - Tight focus?
 - Cultural attraction
 - Local regeneration
 - Development opportunities for local artists
 - Training and development for committee, staff and volunteers
 - Partnership working
 - Chosen partners eg South Down Poets, Kinetika, BID, Chichester University, railway station, Aldborough Trust
 - Openness to working with range of other cultural groups, schools
 - Develop new partnerships/reinvigorate those with other venues, local cultural groups, artists, Local councils
 - Develop geographical links with similar organisations – peer learning and sharing
 - Sharing festival ownership within committee and partners
- Marketing and Branding
 - Right structure for audiences
 - How to provide space to absorb and reflect
 - How to provide affordability, value, agency and choice.
 - Develop coherent branding drawing strands of BBP together
 - Complete integrated website development

- Archiving
- Year-round brand presence – community and standalone events
- Building a marketing strategy
 - Revue pricing structure
 - Marketing using social media as the primary channel
 - Feeding the strategy
- Monitoring and evaluation
- Policies and practise handbook - risk assessments, safe-guarding, equalities etc.
- Identify responsibilities and roles
- Identify outside advice and practical input to be bought in
- Identify roles that remain unfilled – paid, volunteer?