

Celebrating Blake – A Bognor-based project

I started the Big Blake Project 3 years ago in response to the meagre celebration of Blake in Felpham, Bognor Regis, in stark contrast to Blake's eternal vision for the area. Blake walked along the "banks of the ocean" and rode across the downs of Beulah. A place somewhere between Eden and Heaven from which that which is infinite could be seen more clearly. Our plan was to make Blake's imagination more plainly seen through: an art trail, annual festival, poetry prize, and eventually a Centre of the Imagination to replace the boxy unimaginative plans being pushed to "regenerate" Bognor Regis. A vision of a school without walls to: raise aspiration, improve cultural well-being, innovative identity and jump-start the limp tourism offer. A year later the Owner of Blake's cottage expressed a desire to me to sell it and urged us to join forces with the Blake Society to secure the property. Not wanting the cottage opportunity to pass us by we have been running in an accelerated state and are very grateful to those that have understood the vision and helped us keep sprinting. A particular thank you is due to Professor Simon Barker whose small grant from the English Department at the University of Chichester made the Felpham Blake Festival last September possible. We are very hopeful now the Cottage will in fact soon be secured by a Trust.

We have had particular success in promoting poetry with the setting up of the William Blake Poetry Prize. The Judge this year will be George Szirtes. This summer BBP is running 3 exciting fund-raising Poetry Events for Blake's Cottage. The first two will be in St Mary's Church, Felpham near Bognor Regis, 18 July highly-acclaimed Poets: Richard Skinner (Faber Academy), Iain Duhig and Martin Malone join with award winning writers (incl: Rowan Coleman) to read from original works (being written now) inspired by Blake, alongside Blake's own work. The second event is a 50-minute unique performance by Ruth Rosen who has mesmerised audiences around the world with her readings of extracts from every one of Blake's poems, letters and prose. The third is London where Richard and Ian will be joined by George Szirtes and Kate Tempest (Hip-Hop). We would like this original poetry collection to be on sale at each event and even included in the higher priced ticket. Waterstones are supporting the London event but we do need help with the expenses of the Felpham event and the publication of "Ecchoing Green".

We are looking for two or three community partners to help us advance to the next stage. Lord Egremont has been particularly helpful as have West Sussex who would also like us to explore working with the University of Chichester much more. This is regarding the events, festival, schools work and the Centre of the Imagination. WSCC are planning to host an event at Eden House for Blake's Cottage and help with the guest list would be greatly appreciated.

Finally, our plans for the exhibition based Centre of Imagination in Bognor Regis. This would be an iconic building to display the premier output of the cottage, works of Blake & other cultural exhibits of international interest and a school projects area. BUT, because Blake was such a radical innovator we also want to exhibit creative technologies (hopefully Google and Rolls Royce) but linked to 'live' technological pilot projects within the town. Michael Da'costa Babb is a key member of our

committee and very keen to support this side of the project. Michael has worked within the creative industries for over twenty years. As VP of ATTIC which consults to technology companies and works within the areas of innovation and creativity and has worked with PlayStation, Nike, X Box, MTV, Diageo, Cockspur Rum, BMW, Tate Modern, Channel 4, SONAR, Nokia. He also has a significant media track record having worked for City Limits, RPM (MIRO), Generator, Tank Girl, Deadline, Observer Life magazine, Art & Architecture Journal. In 2009 Michael was appointed founder CEO of Creative Industries Portugal which was funded by the Ministry of Economy.

Rachel Searle , Chair of the Blake Project