

Minutes of The Blake Society AGM at 7.30 pm on January 29th 2025

[Trustees present: Sibylle Erle (Chair), Stephen Pritchard (Secretary), Jason Whittaker (Treasurer), Annise Rogers (Membership Secretary), John Riordan, Tamsin Rosewell, Camila Oliveira Querino, Roger Burston. Apologies: None]

We are recording this event, and it will be posted on YouTube: please DO NOT make unauthorised recordings or transcripts of this AGM. Thank you.

Agenda (Displayed for Members)

1. Apologies
2. Minutes of the 2024 AGM
3. Chair's report
4. Treasurer's report
5. Secretary's report
6. Election of Honorary Officers
7. AOB

Sibylle:

The Chair opens the AGM, and the Agenda is displayed on-screen.

Good morning, good afternoon, good evening.

Welcome to the Annual General Meeting of The Blake Society at St. James's. My name is Sibylle Erle and I am the Chair of The Blake Society as well as Editor of VALA, the Journal of The Blake Society.

The AGM is a formal meeting of the serving Honorary Officers and Trustees of The Blake Society.

The Blake Society is a registered charity and we run our AGM according to our Constitution, which is published on a page linked from the Society page of our website. This meeting is only open to Members to speak and also to vote, if required: all others may only observe.

The Agenda is as follows:

1. Apologies
2. Minutes of the 2024 AGM
3. Chair's report
4. Treasurer's report
5. Secretary's report
6. Election of Honorary Officers
7. AOB

Minutes of The Blake Society AGM at 7.30 pm on January 29th 2025

Present -- *today* -- are members as well as non-members and the Honorary Officers and Trustees of the Executive Committee:

Roger Burston (recently co-opted)
Camila Oliveira
Stephen Pritchard
John Riordan
Annise Rogers
Tamsin Rosewell
Jason Whittaker

Allow me to say something about House Keeping:

Those *attending* have their cameras switched off. The chat, however, is open. During the meeting, there will be opportunities to ask questions.

Our Secretary, Stephen Pritchard, will invite questions from *members* after the report.

If you are a member, you can put your question into the chat at any point; or – ask, when invited by the Secretary, with your camera on.

After the AGM and for the second part of the evening, our Secretary Stephen Pritchard, will hand over to John Riordan and Tamsin Rosewell, Trustees of The Blake Society, who will talk about Blake's Notebook.

I am delighted to introduce and hand over to our Secretary, Stephen Pritchard, who will chair today's meeting:

Stephen:

The Agenda:

Item 1: Apologies

I have received no apologies, and unless there are any in the room, let's move to Item 2.

Item 2: Minutes of the 2024 AGM

A copy can be found on a link at the foot of The Society page of the Website. It may be difficult to remember any event from a year ago, so unless there are any particular matters arising from these published Minutes let's move swiftly onto Item 3.

Item 3: Chair's report

Sibylle:

By tradition, early each year we – the Executive Committee of The Blake Society - hold the AGM to reflect on outcomes and developments of the preceding year and report the accounts of the Charity. After the Chair's report comes the Treasurer's report, followed by the Secretary's report. At the end, the Honorary Officers will be elected. Only then can the Society's business officially commence for 2025.

I, Chair of The Blake Society, will reflect on our achievements, projects and vision. The treasurer will report on the finances and the Secretary will report on the events hosted, created and organised by the Society during the past year.

As you will know, we rewrote some of the texts on our website in order to position The Blake Society in relation to the other Blake groups and to clarify our connections, collaborations and allegiances.

Our three intentions in the run up of the bicentenary of Blake's death remain the same:

Minutes of The Blake Society AGM at 7.30 pm on January 29th 2025

- We want to work towards the bi-centenary of Blake's death in 1827 – #Blake200 – to prove that Blake is more relevant than ever.
- We want to prioritise collaboration, be bold, and engage with the public, including young people who will encounter Blake for the first time.
- We want to think creatively as equal partners, so that we can collectively imagine the role that Blake can play.

2025 is the year in which we can turn to the future. We will focus on Blake200 and how we want to celebrate together - with the other Blake groups but first of all our *Members* - the bi-centenary of Blake's death in 2027.

2024 has been another important year in the history of The Blake Society. In 2024 we consolidated what we started in 2023. In some ways and in my opinion, we – a new and young team of Trustees - have navigated and now mastered the transition from the past and into the present so that we can now turn to the future – Blake200.

Last year, I was happy to report that the Corporation of London agreed to engage with our plan to create a permanent memorial for Catherine Blake in Bunhill Fields Burial Ground in the City of London. This plan is to symbolically connect the final resting places of William and Catherine Blake and to place a stone to mark the resting place of Catherine. We are grateful to Tamsin Rosewell, who leads on the Catherine Blake Memorial Project, as well as Penny Chrimes, a member who support this project and helps Tamsin, and, of course, Joan Digby, who has donated a substantial sum for this permanent memorial. Joan Digby has been incredibly patient. Thank you, Joan. Progress has been slow. It is important for us to note here that it will be part of Joan's legacy that Catherine Blake's contribution to the work and life and William Blake will be acknowledged. We have been in close communication about the Catherine Blake Project.

Thank you, Joan. Thank you, Tamsin. Thank you, Penny.

What can I report for 2024?

More progress. A proposal specifically for a flat granite grave marker, at the precise location of Catherine's grave was submitted to Historic England with the support and information from The Corporation of London. Even if Historic England is generally supportive of it, we still need then to submit a planning application through Islington Council, which will be hard because a lot of what is required in a planning application is not at all our responsibility or management - for example how this will fit in with future plans for pathways and structural work within Bunhill Fields. We will continue to review and reflect on our progress with Joan in the course of the year.

Our other news is:

Presidency

There has been a major change: we have new Presidents. On Blake's birthday in November we announced that Juliet and Mark Rylance are joint presidents of The Blake Society. We have Stephen Pritchard and Jason Wright to thank for this.

Membership

The Society has grown and gained in strength through numbers: we are grateful to Annise Rogers, our Membership Secretary who many of you will have met on email. Annise has been welcoming new members and working hard. She has been sending out copies of VALA,

Minutes of The Blake Society AGM at 7.30 pm on January 29th 2025

in addition to the copies posted to members directly at the beginning of the year by the publisher. Thank you, thank you Annise for your hard work.

Policy & Governance

We turn to 2025 with an updated diversity policy and the written-up Blake and Race Project, both of which you can find on our website. I am grateful to those who participated in this consultation and to those who advised us on how best to proceed.

VALA

In **2024**, The Blake Society published the fifth number of its journal *VALA* (thank you – Jason Whittaker and John Riordan), we also published many Emanations on our website (thank you, John) and we continue to send out our revamped Newsletter, which includes information about our monthly events as well as events organised by our members and the other Blake groups (thank you – Tamsin). I can report that double our membership has signed up for this Newsletter.

Again, *VALA* has been very well-received and we are grateful to the many contributors. *VALA* has grown to 142 pages in 2024. You may remember or have watched the recording of the launch event last November, when Jason, John and I chatted about the making of *VALA* and two contributors, Susanne Sklar and Mark Vernon, spoke about “God” and their essays on this topic.

You can download the *VALA* pdf for free from our website.

As you will learn from the Treasurer’s report, *VALA* is by far the highest cost. This year, to send physical copies of *VALA*#5 will cost more because of its size and because of higher subscription numbers. We are advised to split *VALA* in two, and send part 1 this year and send part 2 next year - in order to stay financially shipshape and have money in reserve. We will send *VALA* to members and extra copies can be ordered online via our website.

HOWEVER, it takes a little time to turn the online version into a print version. Please bear with us – we haven’t forgotten. We are busy working behind the scenes: we will communicate and confirm via our Newsletter about *how* and *when* we will send out *VALA*. I have already written to the contributors. We will be in touch later in the spring.

We want to throw all our energy into preparing for Blake200.

In 2025, we are going to focus on Blake200 and the growing momentum for the celebrations of the bicentenary of Blake’s death in 2027.

We all ‘do’ things and we are trying to involve more members.

In AOB, Stephen Pritchard, our Secretary, will ask you – *all* if you have any feedback and tell you how to make your voice heard:

- What can we do better?
- What can we do more of?

In a moment, you will hear about last year’s events, their scope and richness. Thank you, Stephen, for coordinating and putting together such an exciting and marvellous programme. Through the range of these events we have explored and celebrated Blake in 2024.

In the final part of my report, I going to announce the names of the Honorary Members of The Blake Society and thank the Committee.

In my role as Chair and speaking for the Executive Committee, I am delighted to announce that four members of the Society – for their extraordinary services - have been voted on to The Blake Society’s Honors List of 2025:

- Jason Whittaker

Minutes of The Blake Society AGM at 7.30 pm on January 29th 2025

- Jason Wright
- Andy Wilson
- Penny Chrimes

Thank you for what you have done for the Society in 2024.

I end thanking all Trustees for their time, expertise and service they have given to the Society, its members. THANK YOU for keeping the Blakes' legacy alive.

THANK YOU:

Roger Burston
Camila Oliveira
Stephen Pritchard
John Riordan
Annise Rogers
Tamsin Rosewell
Jason Whittaker

My final words are for Jason Whittaker who is stepping down as Treasurer of The Blake Society.

[ALL] I have to admit that we've struggled to find the words – and find a way that expresses deeply enough what we owe to Jason for his work and friendship. The difference he has made to the outputs and profile of The Blake Society is so rich and broad that any few sentences would really only skim the surface of what he has achieved for the Society. Jason is an important Blake Scholar who has pioneered much of what is now referred to as the study of the Reception of William Blake. He originated the idea that The Blake Society should resurrect its journal but do it differently. And so, we did and so he did. We are forever grateful for his expertise not only as a Blake Scholar but for his knowledge of publishing, his flair for design, and his interest in how Blake links to our own world and lived experience in every aspect: from children's illustration, film, theatre classic fiction, the fields of science and philosophy and music. We are incredibly sad to see him leave because we like him so much. As Treasurer he kept us on track and as a Trustee he gave us direction. As he a friend he gave us his heart.

[ME] I will miss Jason for his encyclopaedic brain, sharp wit and most welcome wisdom. In our monthly meetings, I could always tell from his face, when there was something crucial that we had missed about why Blake matters and is relevant today. Thank you for all that you gave. I will miss spending Blake Society time with you, Jason.

Stephen: Thank you Sibylle. Are there any questions? None.

Item 4: Treasurer's report

Accounts 2023-24 (spreadsheets are displayed on screen)

Jason: Over the past year, our charity has experienced a significant increase in memberships, rising nearly 20 percent year on year. This growth has had a positive result on our financial situation, resulting in a much better picture than the previous year. The increased memberships have contributed to our funds, allowing us to achieve a small surplus of

Minutes of The Blake Society AGM at 7.30 pm on January 29th 2025

approximately £2,000. This surplus is a testament to the support and engagement of our members, and it provides a solid foundation for our future activities.

Despite this positive outcome, it is important to note that we remain a small organisation with an income far below the required reporting cap of £25,000. While the surplus is encouraging, we must continue to manage our finances prudently.

Budget 2024

In line with our responsibilities as a charity, I have proposed a cautious budget for the coming year. This budget does not assume the same levels of membership growth, to ensure we are prepared for any potential fluctuations. However, even with a conservative approach, the budget is designed to break even and potentially provide another surplus if membership levels remain optimal.

One of the key expenses for our Society is the publication of VALA, which represents a significant cost but also offers substantial benefits to our members. Given its importance, my recommendation is to publish the current issue of VALA in two parts to manage costs effectively. However, this decision will ultimately rest with the trustees. By carefully balancing our expenses and income, we can continue to provide valuable services to our members while maintaining financial stability.

Stephen: Thank you, Jason. Are there any questions? None.

Item 5: Secretary's report

In January at our last AGM, David Mullin gave us a wonderful talk on Blake and the Ancients titled *In Search of Paradise*, about Blake's young circle of admirers, including Samuel Palmer and John Linnell.

In February Jason Wright told us about his extraordinary book, *Blake's Illustrations for the Book of Job: a Healing Journey* detailing how, over 30 years, he had used Blake's last complete work, the sequence of 22 engravings, in the healing of addiction: which Jason considers to be the symptom of our age.

In March we went live and streaming for the first time with our friends at Swedenborg house, with *Ah! Sunflower: the Blake-inspired artist Linda Landers* in conversation with our vice president Keri Davies

In April that extraordinary thinker, writer and speaker Timothy Morton brought us the *Marriage of Religion and the Biosphere*. Timothy brought us THEIR new book *Hell: in search of a Christian Ecology* – a completely mind-blowing talk.

In May we were *In the Deserts Wild*, with Blake and Maurice Sendak, presented by our Trustees Tamsin Rosewell and Jason Whittaker. I hadn't known that Sendak had been influenced by Blake until their excellent presentation.

In June Dr. Sarah Walton's *Soul Writing*, had us all writing from imagination in a highly impressive online workshop that produced some surprising and outstanding results from members.

Also in June, the Blake Society was represented at the Bradford Literary Festival with two live events: Jason Wright and myself talking about his work with Blake's *Book of Job* and *Two Prophets*, in which John Siddique and I presented parallel treatments of themes from the work of Blake and Kahlil Gibran.

Minutes of The Blake Society AGM at 7.30 pm on January 29th 2025

In July writer and psychotherapist Marc Vernon gave us a fascinating talk on *Jesus the Imagination: Exploring Blake's use of Christian imagery* and encouraging us to take Blake's Christianity seriously.

In August we met at Blake's grave in Bunhill fields as we do every year on the anniversary of William's death. We were treated to readings by Trustees and Members as well as musical interludes from the very talented musician and singer, Katy Carr.

In September we joined Jake Elliott in considering Blake's depiction of Los, and its connection to the changing face of policing in Blake's time, in the figure of the watchman. In October we had music and exposition of *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* with me and Katie Carr at Saint Bartholomew's church which was attended by 150 people: wonderful to see and talk to so many Members of the Society there. In all four live events this year it has been an absolute delight to meet so many Members and potential Members face-to-face and to have the opportunity to talk to them in-person. It's clear that Members and ourselves are all very excited about the possibilities of Blake 200 in 2027.

In November for *Blake's Birthday Bash*, we had the launch of the very beautiful *Vala 5* and the announcement of the new presidency of Juliet and Mark Rylance. We were very sad to learn of the death of Claire, Juliet's mother and Mark's wife just over a week ago. All our love goes out to them.

Stephen: Are there any questions?

Item 6: Election of Honorary Officers

Jason Whittaker is stepping down from the role of Treasurer and we shall miss him greatly.

We have received one nomination for each of the Honorary Officers and as no other nominations have been received, Roger Burston is duly elected as Treasurer, to serve for a period of one year, ending at the next AGM.

Stephen Pritchard is duly elected as Secretary, to serve for a period of one year, ending at the next AGM.

Sibylle Erle is duly elected as Chair, to serve for a period of one year, ending at the next AGM.

We have four nominations for the election of the Executive Committee of Trustees and as places exceed nominations, (we may have up to 7), they are duly elected to serve for a period of one year, ending at the next AGM:

John Riordan

Camila Oliveira Querino

Tamsin Rosewell

Annise Rogers (Membership Secretary)

Stephen: Roger was co-opted to the Committee last year and will, no doubt, make a great success of the demanding role of Treasurer. Would you like to introduce yourself to those members who may not have met you yet Roger?

Roger: Thank you, Stephen. I'm Roger; I'm the new Treasurer. I have something here that I have written about myself, as Stephen told me, very kindly, that I was going to do this in advance.

Stephen: Thank you, Roger. That's excellent! Roger has clearly had a great deal of previous experience in Finance and business.

Item 7: AOB

Minutes of The Blake Society AGM at 7.30 pm on January 29th 2025

Stephen: Is there any other business?

Are there any suggestions for what Members would like the Society to do?

What could we do better? Please email me your thoughts, questions and suggestions and I guarantee that we will discuss and consider every single one of them.

The AGM is concluded.

Blake Society AGM 7.30 pm Wednesday January 29th, 2025

Stephen Pritchard

Secretary