

DR SIBYLLE ERLE

Good morning, good evening, good afternoon.

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

The Agenda is as follows:

1. Apologies
2. Minutes of the 2025 AGM
3. Chair's report
4. Treasurer's report
5. Secretary's report
6. Election of Honorary Officers
7. AOB

Allow me to say something about House Keeping first:

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

I will invite questions from *Members* after each of the reports.

So, if you are a Member, you can put your questions into the chat.

After the AGM and for the second part of the evening, I will introduce Dr Camila Oliveira (of the University of Lisbon), who will talk about “**1927: The Centenary of Blake's Death and its resonances**”.

During the second part of the evening, all can ask questions. I will invite you to switch on your cameras and microphones.

First on the agenda:

1. **APOLOGIES**: We have had no apologies.
2. The **MINUTES** have been on the website for the past year. We will pick up matters arising in due course (*no matters arising*).

3. CHAIR'S REPORT – DR SIBYLLE ERLE

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.

At the end, the Honorary Officers will be elected. Only then can the Society's business officially commence for 2026.

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 and organised by the Society during the past year.

My highlights:

My absolute favourite was Blakety Blake, created by John Riordan. It was a delightful evening with challenging questions as well as opportunity to meet new people. This event introduced Tamsin Rosewell as Secretary of The Blake Society.

We have had excellent reports about The Westbrook Blake, a concert by Mike and Kate Westbrook – patrons of the Society. The Westbrooks have shown the Society a lot of support. Thank you.

Another favourite was Ramazan Saral's paper on John Milton's influence on *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, which Dr Camila Oliveira chaired. While I am talking about Camila: I want to stress how important Camila's work and contribution is. Camila is also a trustee of the Blake Cottage Trust and we find this connection immensely valuable for going forward and for finalizing our plans for the bi-centenary of William Blake's death in 2027.

What can I report?

About the Catherine Blake Memorial Project: we spoke with Lida Cardoza (of Stone Mason's Yard in Cambridge) about the requirements, costings and best options for the flat stone to be placed on Catherine Blake's resting place in Bunhill Fields. We will need to agree the exact wording before a final costing can be put together. Many of you will remember from the placing of William Blake's stone the complexity of working with two planning departments and frequently changing representatives. The process is ongoing.

Thank you Penny Chrimes for your support of the Catherine Blake Project.

Our other news are:

Presidency

We – Tamsin Rosewell, Jason Whittaker and I - co-wrote the introduction to Tate Britain's most recent publication of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. Sir Mark and Juliet Rylance, our co-presidents, wrote the foreword. I am very proud of "our" pink book. The book will be launched at Swedenborg House and in conversation with Stephen McNeilly (director at Swedenborg House) and Ian Sinclair (president of the Swedenborg Society) later in the spring.

Governance

Having updated our diversity policy and uploaded the "Blake and Race Project" onto our website, we had a mid-day Saturday even in 2025t: Li Hui Tsai's talk on "The Little Black Boy".

Professor Tsai is based in Taiwan; events are usually recorded but we wanted to accommodate the different time zones our speakers and members inhabit and enable them to share in a live event.

We have successfully implemented a number of sub committees to further and facilitate discussion at our board meetings, the most recent being the Merchandise and Membership sub committee. We are grateful to Lucy Valentine whose professional knowledge on design and merchandise is remarkable and adds significantly to what we can become as a Society. This sub committee will meet for the first time in March. Thank you, Lucy.

This year we were able to make huge progress thanks to the tireless efforts of Matt Goddard whose knowledge and expertise has helped us manage our increasingly complicated technology as the Society grows. If you want to pay for membership you can now do so via the website, using your credit card. Thank you, Matt.

Another big – unimaginably huge – Thank you goes to Roger Burston, the Society's treasurer, who has resolved our Banking problems. It took a lot of determination to get through the red tape and paperwork. Thank you, Roger.

Membership

The Society has grown and gained in strength through numbers: we are grateful to Annise Rogers, who stepped down as Membership Secretary. Annise, you will remember, gave excellent talks on the Urizen Cycle and also on Blake and Tolkien. Annise, who did her PhD at Lincoln University, is now working on her first monograph.

Publications

In **2025**, members received a printed copy of *VALA*, issue 5, part 1 and I take great pleasure in telling you that part 2 of *VALA* 5 will be going to the printers at the end of February. Part 2 has a new introduction as well as new reviews. Thank you, John for your dedication and hard work.

We publish *Emanations* on our website – Thank you, John- and continue to send out a Newsletter, which includes our monthly events as well as events organised by members and the other Blake groups. Thank you, Tamsin.

VALA

We split issue 5, which we launched on 28 November 2024, into two parts because of the size of this issue: 142 pages. As you will learn from the Treasurer's report, *VALA* is by far the highest cost. For 2026, our plan is to commission articles for a book that will be published in 2027.

Blake200

Before we move to on the Treasurer's report, I'm so pleased to announce that we have been working away behind the scenes to create a new web page for Blake200- the bicentenary of William Blake's death, which will be next year. As always, our approach has been collaborative and inclusive- it recognises that there is an entire Blake community across the world, not just in the UK. Our hope is that this page will become a central resource for all of us, worldwide, so that events and celebrations of Blake's life and works can be found in one place- whether these events and celebrations are a small group of followers hosting a reading, or an internationally acclaimed museum curating an exhibition or an university organising a academic conference.

We will explain how this works in a newsletter, so please look out for our Blake Society Newsletter email.

Thank you Matt, for your work to enable technology to happen, and thank you Lucy for your design knowledge and input.

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:

- Ian Frampton – the wizard and friend of the Society without whom nothing would work as well as it does.
- Stephen Pritchard – secretary of The Blake Society (2022-2025)
- Annise Rogers – membership secretary of The Blake Society (2023-2026)
- Nicholas Jeeves- Cambridge School of Art (at Anglia Ruskin University), who helped us with our Logo for Blake200 and with whom we enjoyed working on *Auguries of Innocence*, a printing project Nick undertook with his MA students. Thank you for your expertise and generosity.

I end by thanking all Trustees for their time and the service they have given to the Society and its members.

We are all volunteers and what is done voluntarily often exceeds what can be expected.
THANK YOU.

My concluding remarks are for Stephen Pritchard and Annise Rogers:

Annise has taken great care of our members, answering questions and packing VALAs to be sent around the world. Her continuous effort required a significant amount of diligence and time. The "system", which is looking after our membership data, has not always made her work easier, and has taken a considerable toll. Annise accomplished all of this while completing her PhD.

I dare to say that not everything has come to an end; Annise, we look forward to seeing your developing scholarship and hope very much that we get to work with you again.

Thank you Annise for all that you have done for the Society.

Stephen was tireless. As we began sharing ideas for Blake200, the events and celebrations for the anniversary in 2027, countless emails landed in his inbox. He received countless phone calls. Stephen was always prompt in his responses, generously giving his time to numerous meetings and conversations. He delivered many, excellent lectures and through his public outreach, the Blake Society became more well-known and gained more members.

Writing and delivering lectures requires a significant amount of time and effort, and Stephen was very generous with both. Stephen was always present, highly motivated, and had a keen eye for potential.

Thank you, Stephen, thank you for everything that you have done for the Society.

Are there any questions?

Please put your questions into the chat. *(no questions received)*

I will now hand over to Roger Burston, our Treasurer, for his report

4. TREASURER'S REPORT- ROGER BURSTON

Thank you Sibylle, first let's look at receipts and payments accounts

On screen (*Accounts and budget attached as a separate PDF*) are the accounts for the past financial year. During the year we made the decision to align the reporting period to the Society's financial year (ending 31 October 2025) so the comparative figures shown on this occasion are for the calendar year ended 31 December 2024. As a result, the comparative figures are not directly comparable with those for the current period.

It has been a challenging year obtaining access to bank accounts in order to change the mandates for signatures. While much of this is now done online, the processes were unnecessarily complicated, and it was a matter of some months before the process was concluded.

Our membership has continued to grow steadily as in previous years which indicates that the Society continues to attract members from all parts of the world and we warmly welcome new members that have joined during the year. It indicates that the Society provides value and exciting benefits provided by a small team of dedicated Trustees. As outlined by the Chair, our access to the bank accounts limited our ability to make payments during the first part of the year and this created much work processing certain bank payments outside of PayPal. We

are also extremely grateful to those who have donated to the Society during this and past years.

To highlight some key aspects of the accounts, in regards to membership, our income from subscriptions amounted to £12,404. The sum received from Donations and Courses includes the fascinating print workshop run by Michael Phillips whereby the participants paid fees covering all costs (shown under Other Events) leaving a small profit for the Society and demonstrating that we are able to run interesting events in a cost-effective manner.

We have maintained a prudent and conservative approach in our expenditure as can be seen by the amounts spent under these headings including travel. VALA has been a large part of the costs but substantially lower than in previous years due to the decision made last year to publish the current issue in two parts. The event costs are as referred to above.

The accounts show a surplus of £6,660 which will be added to our reserves as we lead up to Blake200, which now stand at £23,000. As before we have over £8,300 in restricted funds which was the very generous donation made by Joan Digby to be used for the Catherine Blake Project.

Budget 2026/7

In regard to the Budget for the coming year, as a charity we have to handle our expenditure conservatively and I propose a cautious budget for the coming year as has been the past practice. The budget section presents a guide of our expected revenue and expenditure for the period 2025/26, rather than a prescribed financial course. We present it here in the interests of openness and transparency.

I am not assuming the same levels of increases to membership and our expenditure will again reflect the reduced costs of VALA as previously mentioned.

I am proposing to increase the IT/ website costs now that we have the opportunity to sort out and adapt our current systems or potentially new IT solutions with our new trustee, Matt Goddard on board who has excellent skills in this area.

I have increased the travel budget to anticipate participation in more meetings relating to organisation of Blake200 events.

The projected budget would add a further 17% to our Unrestricted Funds, ready for an exciting 2027.

5. SECRETARY'S REPORT- TAMSIN ROSEWELL

Thank you Roger, thank you Sibylle and hello all – It has been a pleasure to take over the role of Secretary; the moment coincided with our discussions with Daniel N Birnbaum, who has now joined us as a Patron – so that was a very welcome and exciting start to my time in this role. It also gives me this opportunity to reflect and talk with some pride about the events that we've done over the last year.

Before I give you all an overview of the discussion we've enabled this year, let me just remind you all that the majority of our events are recorded, if you would like to go back and find anything you missed or would like to look at again, just go to our website (a beautiful construction, held up by those pillars of gold – John Riordan and Matt Goddard – thank you both), find the event - under events! – and click on 'view event'. Let me also acknowledge again the contribution of Ian Frampton, who Sibylle mentioned, without whom our events would be a lesser and more chaotic thing.

In 2025 we examined many aspects of Blake's work from fine art, to science, race, philosophy, music and identity. We used our AGM last year to consider his influence on the Pre-Raphaelite artists and writers with a deep dive into the book known as **the Rossetti Manuscript**, Blake's own notebook, bought and added to by Dante Gabriel Rossetti. We also considered how we can think about his missing paintings – with our event from Dr Rebecca Marks whose PhD on Blake and Michelangelo led her to explore – using her own knowledge and technology – what **Blake's lost painting of The Last Judgement** might actually have looked like. Among our members (and indeed our trustees) are many practicing artists and illustrators – so we were delighted to welcome **Christopher Bucklow**, whose artwork can be seen in museum and gallery collections around the world, to talk candidly about his own use of Blake, and seeking to use Blake's tactics in the mental fight of the human psyche. We spoke to writers too, acclaimed author, Philip Hoare, joined us to discuss his new book, **William Blake and the Sea Monsters Of Love**; indeed at the heart of his book is the way that Blake seems to reach out of his own time and into ours; firing up 20th century artists, film makers, poets, writers and musicians with his radical promise of imaginative freedom. Part of the reason our events are recorded and available to watch again is that our growing membership is international and time zones need to be considered; we're aware that small changes can ensure our work remains inclusive so we stepped away from our traditional evening event and hosted a live, weekend, daytime event on a Saturday to celebrate the large study project about Blake and Race – this was **a close reading of The Little Black Boy** led by Li Hui Tsai, assistant professor at St John's University in Taiwan. You can see that event too, and also read the Blake, Race and Racism study on our website.

We've explored how Blake reaches in and touches those thinking about science: Matthew Leporati's presentation '**The Urizen-Haunted world**' allowed us to step away from Carl Sagan's pervading perception of Blake as someone who thought of science and a narrowing and constraining force, and find a more nuanced approach. We explored philosophy too: in **Infinite Liberty**, Stuart Kendall considered post-War philosopher Georges Bataille, who sought to find a system of morality and visual culture in a world shaped by the violence of Auschwitz and Hiroshima, but less well known is the extent to which Blake's work informed and supported Bataille.

We took time to understand the latest thinking about Blake's own work as well as his influence on subsequent generations of thinkers: our own Dr Annise Rogers discussed Blake's central character, Urizen and suggested **The Urizen Cycle**, as opposed to The Orc Cycle proposed by Northrop Frye, as a new way of understanding his mythological system – we can see how one of Blake's oldest characters influences his work right up to his death. Not long after the news broke of the discovery in Oxford of Blake's earliest engraved art, we had a wonderful presentation from Mark Crosby, splendidly entitled '**Some Mornings Blake Drank his Coffee by the tomb of Edward the Confessor**', about Blake's formative years apprenticed to master engraver James Basire. Here we met the teenage Blake and his life at 31 Queen Street. We also welcomed Dr Ramazan Saral who explored **the Influence of Milton's L'alegro and Il Penseroso on Songs of Innocence and of Experience**. Milton's companion poems are reflections of mirth and melancholy, as two contrary states of the human soul. Focusing on the cadence, imagery and musicality inherent in Blake's poems Ramazan gave us a talk about the first study of this comparison.

We hold in-person events too; our gathering at Blake's Graveside in Bunhill Fields Burial Ground, to celebrate his life and work and mark the anniversary of his death is always well attended; we also supported our Patrons Mike and Kate Westbrook in a rare opportunity to see a live performance of The Westbrook Blake.

My personal favourite event was also the fun but fiendishly difficult quiz Blakety Blake – which started our year's events. And to come this year we can promise you more art, more scholarship, more music, more discussion of literature and poetry. Next month we will be welcoming artist and Blake scholar Anthony Apesos who will look at Blake's illustrations of VALA manuscript.

5. ELECTION OF OFFICERS

As Secretary it also falls to me to organise the AGM and the election of The Blake Society's Trustees for 2026. We have no more nominees than we have places – so I hope that this can

be a formality. Five of us are continuing as trustees, one is returning after a break, two are joining formally having been co-opted last year, and two are joining us for the first time. The nominees are (in alphabetical order)

Roger Burston (who we nominate as treasurer) *Returning*

Dr Sibylle Erle (who we nominate as Chair) *Returning*

Matt Goddard *Previously co-opted*

Alan McDonagh *Newly nominated*

Dr Camila Oliveira *Returning*

Diane Pacitti *Newly nominated*

John Riordan *Returning*

Tamsin Rosewell (who we nominate as Secretary) *Returning*

Lucy Valentine *Previously co-opted*

Professor Jason Whittaker *Returning after a break*

Information about all of these people has been on our website since before Christmas and circulated in our newsletter. If there is no objection to any of the nominees (pause here) then I am delighted to declare them all formally elected to serve as Trustees of The Blake Society for 2026.

No objections were received, all those named above were duly elected to serve as trustees for The Blake Society in 2026.

Thank you! I will now hand back to The Chair of the Blake Society, Dr Sibylle Erle, who will introduce our event and speaker for tonight.