

Resting place of Protestant 'renegades' is 300-year-old gift of religious tolerance



James Bone Rome

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It is the final resting place of the poet John Keats, whose nameless gravestone bears the epitaph: "Here lies One Whose Name was writ in Water."

Percy Bysshe Shelley's ashes are also interred at the site, brought to Rome after the poet drowned in a storm while sailing his yacht off the Italian Riviera. His grave is inscribed: "Cor cordium" ("Heart of hearts") with Shakespeare's lines from *The Tempest*: "Nothing of him that doth fade / But doth suffer a sea-change / Into something rich and strange."

The celebrated Protestant Cemetery in Rome, now officially known as the Non-Catholic Cemetery, has long been seen as the resting place for renegades in the citadel of the Catholic Church.

But research published today by *The Times* shows that the cemetery is not only older than previously thought, but was also established with the explicit approval of the Pope.

"The big point in all of this is religious toleration," said Edward Corp, Emeritus Professor of British history at the University of Toulouse in France, who made the discovery.

The cemetery lies next to the Pyramid of Cestius, the tomb of a Roman magistrate who died in the 1st century BC.

The marble-tiled pyramid, which was considered by Catholics a pagan burial site, was later incorporated in Rome's fortifications. Significantly, the Protestant cemetery is just inside, not outside, the city walls.

During excavations in 1930, archaeologists discovered the oldest burial site yet known in the cemetery.

Latin inscriptions on a lead shield covering the corpse identified it as George Langton, a former student at Magdalen College, Oxford, who studied law at Lincoln's Inn but died in Rome in 1738 at the age of 25 while on a grand tour of Europe.

A Roman diarist chronicled the earlier burial of a man named Ellis in 1732, but no remains have been found.

Now Mr Corp has found a letter in the Stuart archives at Windsor Castle recording the burial of a Scottish physician named Dr Arthur in October 1716 with the permission of Pope Clement XI, who then ruled the Papal States. Dr Arthur was a Protestant follower of the Catholic pretender James III, whose Stuart court established itself in Rome after the "Glorious Revolution" overthrew his father, King James II. In the letter, a friend of Dr Arthur named Roger Kenyon said: "We had permission to bury him by the sepulchre of Cestius ... within the walls, which is esteemed a favour to us sort of people."

Mr Corp said the letter made clear that the cemetery was established by the Pope for Protestants in the exiled Stuart court in Rome, displaying a degree of religious toleration not previously understood.

"It was created quite specifically for British Protestants who were Anglicans or Episcopalian," he said.

Amanda Thursfield, the cemetery director, said that the discovery had rewritten history. "Suddenly we find out we are actually a little bit older than we thought. In 2016 we will be celebrating our 300th anniversary, which is pretty incredible for an organised cemetery," she said.

The Protestant Cemetery is renowned as the resting place of "renegades"
Alessia Pierdomenico