

So sweet a resting place

The Non-Catholic Cemetery in Rome is both a place of pilgrimage and an active burial ground



The Non-Catholic Cemetery (commonly referred to as the Protestant cemetery) in Rome behind the Cestius pyramid at Porta S. Paolo has been described in rapturous terms by eminent visitors over the two-and-a-half centuries of its existence. H.V. Morton described it as “the most beautiful cemetery in the world” in his classic book *A Traveller in Rome*. The American humanist Clara Woolson Benedict called it “the only joyous cemetery I know of”. And, of course, there is the poet Shelley’s celebrated and much-quoted accolade: “It might make one in love with death, to be buried in so sweet a place”.

Modern visitors, too, inevitably fall under the spell of this unique graveyard, filled with the tombstones of poets, artists, diplomats, heroes and aristocrats of many different nationalities.

The cemetery is a recognised national monument, listed as a UNESCO world heritage site, but what few people realise is that it is a working burial ground.

“We are happy to accept requests for burials here – though mostly we can accommodate only cinerary urns. Interments depend on space in an existing family plot,” explains cemetery director Amanda Thursfield.

According to present rules, in order to qualify for burial in the cemetery you have to be a foreign citizen, a non-Roman Catholic and resident in Italy at the time of death. There are some exceptions to these rules. For instance, in certain cases, close family members of a deceased person can be buried in the same tomb, even if they are Italian citizens and Catholics. Costs vary, but Thursfield stresses that the expense of a last resting place in this very special setting is not exorbitant and quite comparable with burial fees in many other normal cemeteries. For example, the minimum burial fee for one cinerary urn is ?1,700, plus IVA, though families have to take into account the additional 30-year maintenance charge (a ?7,000 minimum plus IVA, payable at the time of burial). There are also a few national tombs in the cemetery where collective burials can be arranged.

The Non-Catholic Cemetery is private and self-supporting. It is managed by an association of 14 foreign embassies in Rome which have nationals buried there. It relies therefore on the fees for the concession and maintenance of burial plots as well as private contributions from the Friends of the Non-Catholic Cemetery in Rome organisation, which anyone can join (see contact details below). Private donations also give precious support. In the 1960s, for instance, the cemetery received a conspicuous legacy from the wealthy American Benedict family, which has helped tide it over a difficult period. Upkeep is onerous. Well over 400 trees grow in the cemetery grounds and in May 2007 falling branches in the so-called Zona Vecchia forced the cemetery to close for a month. In March this year, 24 trees had to be felled because they had been certified as dangerous. These trees

will be replaced and the cemetery is appealing for anyone who may wish to dedicate one of these new trees to the memory of a friend or relative to get in touch.

Because of the fame attached to the tombs of the Romantic English poets Keats and Shelley, many people think that most of the graves are British, but in fact the 2,500 tombs spread over the five areas, known as the Parte Antica (where Keats is buried), the Zona Vecchia (where Shelley and his friend Trelawny lie) and the three divisions referred to as Zona Prima, Seconda and Terza, cover a wide spectrum of nationalities and faiths.

There are many Russian and Greek Orthodox tombs, Masonic and Jewish tombs, as well as Muslim, Japanese and Chinese burials. The cemetery has its own inter-denominational chapel, built in 1898, which can be hired for all types of funeral services.

Many of the funerary monuments are authentic works of art and their maintenance is a constant headache. The cemetery now employs its own art restorer, Rita Galluccio, who deals almost single-handedly with the mammoth task of cleaning away black incrustations and staunching decay. She has just completed work on the bronze portrait medallion of German artist August Reidel, who died in 1883, and has now started working on her next job: the monumental tomb of 19th-century Russian artist Carolus Bruloff, best known for his epic painting *The Last Day of Pompeii* in the Hermitage museum in St Petersburg.

Visitors to the cemetery today have the pleasant impression of a place that is beautiful, dignified and well cared-for, but only a few years ago it was in serious financial difficulties. It had fallen into a state of neglect and was in danger of being closed. In 2005 the group of ambassadors responsible for the cemetery management turned to Catherine Payling, curator of the Keats Shelley Memorial House on the Spanish Steps, for help. Payling applied her management and accountancy skills to trim costs and reduce losses dramatically. The cemetery now employs only two full-time gardeners against the previous four. Additional work has been outsourced to a garden maintenance cooperative, *Il Trattore*, while burials and funeral arrangements are now handled by Zega, an old Rome undertaker's business. The visitors' centre to the left of the entrance, which had been unmanned, was re-opened, this time with the help of a team of 25 volunteers – mostly drawn from the ex-pat community of Rome. In February 2007, Thursfield, an ex-employee of the British Council, was appointed cemetery director to deal with the day-to-day running of the cemetery, a job which she does with enthusiasm and dedication. Like all those who come here, she has fallen under its spell: "I've always loved this cemetery, ever since I first visited it when I was 18," she confesses.