

of the Non-Catholic Cemetery in Rome



NEWSLETTER

Still keeping it green: an interview with Il Trattore

For many people the Cemetery is an oasis of greenery and quiet in the midst of the busy city. For the past five years Il Trattore, a social co-operative, has been maintaining the garden. Amanda Thursfield spoke to Sandro Babolin who heads the team working at the Cemetery.



Photo: N. Stanley-Price



Photo: N. Stanley-Price

Paolo Mancarella clearing leaves

AT. What have been the most rewarding aspects of your work here?

SB. We are proud to work in such a historic site and to be part of a team working to keep the place beautiful. From a professional point of view we appreciate the huge variety and wealth of vegetation which means there is always something flowering and needing care. But this is also a challenge because we have to be vigilant at all times – there is no “quiet period”. With the various micro-climates, hot and dry in the upper parts, shadowy and damp in the Zona Terza, we are constantly having to make decisions – there is never a dull moment! From a human point of view we like the fact that we interact with visitors – they talk to us, ask for information and we try to be receptive to their needs.

AT. What are the most difficult aspects?

SB. The greenery is growing around tombstones, some of them very old and all of them valuable! Our gardeners are trained to remove plants or leaves that are touching stones. All our gardening operations – weeding, spraying, planting, pruning and watering – are done carefully to avoid damaging the stones. We have to choose products that are soluble and as natural as possible whilst also being effective. And we mustn't forget the cats: all chemical operations are carefully monitored so they do not threaten their health.

Summer is a difficult time, particularly as recent summers seem to be longer and hotter. We have mechanical sprinklers only in the Parte Antica. The rest of the Cemetery is watered daily by hand. This is very time-consuming and labour-intensive: most of our time in summer is dedicated to watering.

AT: How does the Cemetery's garden compare with other parks in Rome?

SB. In a public park we do our duty, but people don't really notice or contribute to what we do. Here the clients really seem to appreciate our work and it encourages us not just to “honour a contract” but to try to do better. I was myself on duty on 1 November, the day when people traditionally visit their family members buried in cemeteries, and it was a delight to greet people and help them to arrange plants on the tombs, all as part of our service.

Because of the small size of the garden and the tombstones, we cannot mechanize many of our operations so most of our gardening is done by hand. The direct contact with the vegetation is



Photo: N. Stanley-Price

Luca Koller at work

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particularly beneficial for people who are disadvantaged in some way – our work involves manual skills and this gives a certain satisfaction to our staff.

AT. How old are the oldest surviving pine trees and cypresses in the Cemetery?

SB. The last pines that we took out in the Zona Terza we calculated to be 95 years old, but the pines and cypresses in the Parte Antica are even older, well over a century.

AT. Do we have any species of plant that are rarely found in other parks or gardens in Rome?

SB. The whole ensemble of the garden is unique: it is an example of northern taste meeting Mediterranean. To have so many ancient trees in a city site is also quite uncommon. In the Zona Terza we have a tree peony, which is unusual. We have a rich range of camellias of both Japanese and Chinese varieties: they flourish in the Cemetery since the conifers make the soil acid and that mixed with the semi-shade makes an ideal environment for this species.

AT. What do you see as the most urgent task for the future?

SB. One of our main pre-occupations is protruding tree roots which might be dangerous for visitors and staff. If we cut them too dramatically, the tree may fall or become diseased, but we can reduce them without hurting the tree and also build up the area



Photo: N. Stanley-Price

around the root with sand, soil and gravel.

Another concern is that some of the cypresses were deformed by the snowfall of 2012 and, no longer being elastic because of their age, they have not straightened as would normally happen. We may have to prune the tops if they don't straighten soon.

Some tips for plants on graves (SB)

We are compiling a list of plants that are recommended and plants that are better avoided for putting on graves. In the meantime, here are some tips:

Everyone loves a rose, but they are not ideal here as the humidity

To avoid: Yucca (they grow too fast and break up the tombs); cacti (they get mildew from the damp); mimosa (its slender trunk and shallow roots make it vulnerable to spring winds). We have beautiful wisteria around the Visitors' Centre but small wisteria plants on tombs grow very fast and we have to keep them rigorously pruned, so they don't get enough chance to flower.

and lack of ventilation make them prone to fungal infection. We'll recommend some more resistant varieties that could flourish here. Some plants grow well in Zones 1 and 2 of the Cemetery which receive direct sunlight but not in the Zona Terza which is cool and damp, and vice-versa. Hydrangea love the damp, acidic soil of the Zona Terza but are quickly killed by the direct sunlight of the upper Zona Vecchia.

Recommended: Camellias, polygala and lantana all grow well but not too fast and are very pretty. Agapanthus also flourishes here – it flowers for most of the summer and has attractive green leaves even when it isn't flowering. We'll make available our list soon to concession-holders.

An amateur gardener's year in the Cemetery

From a gardening perspective, things are never dull in the cemetery. From the heat of summer to the cold and sometimes snowy winters, a great diversity of plants from different corners of the world live happily side by side. In summer, southern Mediterranean succulents thrive alongside hydrangeas, which are very much at home in northern Europe. During winter, the citrus trees come into their own and camellias, which love the acid soil under the



Photo: Mick Phillips



Photo: Katy Memhinick

pinces and cypresses, start flowering as early as November. Spring sees the marvellous wisteria in full bloom, and the Parte Antica becomes a carpet of daisies, so beloved by John Keats. This part of the cemetery has hardly changed over the centuries, and spring-time sees wild violets and iris in flower.

Let me take you through a year in the cemetery, pointing out some of my favourites.

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Summer is the season for the Mediterranean plants to come into their own. Bougainvillea, several varieties of lavender, plumbago and *albizia* add spectacular colour to different parts of the cemetery, and jasmine adds an exotic perfume of the Middle East. Lemon verbena, a new addition in our herb pots, flourishes together with sage, thyme and rosemary. Summer also sees lavender and geraniums in full flower, and if you look carefully you can find wild strawberries.

After the heat of summer many plants breathe a sigh of relief, and continue flowering until late autumn. The pomegranates are plump and red, and lemons and oranges start to ripen.

Winter is never without colour in the cemetery. The citrus trees are now full of ripe fruit and are quite a sight for some visitors, some of whom may never have seen a lemon on a tree before. There are kumquats, sweet and bitter oranges, mandarins and lemons. Red, pink, white and variegated camellias frequently start to flower at the beginning of winter, and are often at their best in February. They do particularly well in the cemetery, and over the last few years several new shrubs have been planted: we now have varieties that give a flowering season from November until early May. Wild cyclamen have found their way on to many of the older graves, and many people leave cultivated cyclamen on graves during the Christmas period, providing a major splash of colour.

Spring usually arrives early in Rome, and from March until June there is a spectacular flowering of plants that make it the most colourful time of the year. There are wild daisies, violets and bluebells, and the Judas trees and the magnificent wisteria come



Photo: Katy Menhinick

into their own. One of my favourite shrubs is the tree peony, of which there are several bushes dotted about the cemetery; one of the most spectacular is by Keats' grave – a "wealth of globéd peonies". They produce enormous blooms, which unfortunately only last for a short time, especially if there is rain.

I have mentioned only a few plants but we have a sequoia, black bamboo, Japanese maples, olives – the list goes on. Pay a visit to the cemetery and see for yourself!

Contributed by Katy Menhinick, a volunteer at the Cemetery



Photo: N. Stanley-Price

Why do the trees have numbers on them?

Many visitors ask this question. The answer is "so as to be able to identify them", as part of a vegetation control strategy. The numbers go back to the surveys done in 2004 and 2007 by the tree specialist Gian Pietro Cantiani (see *Newsletter* 4). He inventoried some 450 trees in the Cemetery, of which 340 were cypress (*Cupressus sempervirens* L.) and 23 umbrella pines (*Pinus pinea* L.). The others included palm species (*Trachycarpus* sp. and *Phoenix canariensis*), laurel, fir and the Judas tree (*Cercis siliquastrum*).

On the whole the trees were in good condition but, so as to reduce risk, several trees were felled. The gardeners keep the trees under review and carry out work as needed. This year they pruned a number of pines in the Parte Antica. Pruning work can be done there by specialist tree climbers using ropes and pulleys. But among the densely packed tombs of the other zones, we usually have to hire cranes that operate from outside the walls. This is very expensive but tree monitoring is essential for our own safety and for avoiding damage to the tombs.



HOW OTHERS SEE THE CEMETERY

"Every thing about it is kept with that exquisite neatness which makes it look like a bit of England transplanted to Rome. The turf, even in the heart of winter, is freshly green, and there is a profusion of flowers, both wild and cultivated. The common monthly rose of our conservatories grows here with great luxuriance, and is always in bloom, hanging its flowers over the monuments, and filling the air with a delicate and spiritual fragrance. The sun lies long and warm upon its southern slope, and the hum of insects and the chirp of birds lend to the silence a pulse of life; while over it the blue sky of Rome bends like a benediction." (George Stillman Hillard, *Six months in Italy*, 1853)

"Camellias glisten in sombre splendour amidst the laurel and the honeysuckle, the myrtle is in bloom, and fair roses twine garlands round the stems of cypress trees. Narcissi and lilies rise from the high grass, and overhead the thrush sings the summer evening's shimmering farewell to the dying day." (Axel Munthe, *Porta San Paolo in Memories and Vagaries*, 1930)



Photo: N. Stanley-Price

WHO THEY WERE...

Mary Elizabeth Chapman (1810–1874)



This albumen photograph, the first of Mary Elizabeth Chapman to be published, was taken in 1873, months prior to her death, by her son John Linton Chapman (private collection)

By all historical accounts, Mary Elizabeth Chapman lived happily in the shadow of her famous husband, the painter, etcher, and sculptor John Gadsby Chapman (1808–1889). Spending more than half of her married life abroad, she remained a proud Virginian, doting mother, and supportive wife and friend. Her father, Captain Fielder Luckett, was an intimate friend of Charles Thomas Chapman, and the two men's children probably grew up together. When Charles's son John Gadsby returned home in August 1831 after three years of artistic improvement in Italy, his renewed acquaintance with Mary led to the couple being married on 20 November 1832.

Chapman's career flourished and he emerged as the foremost graphic illustrator of his generation in the United States, notably for his 1,400 designs in the much-loved *Illuminated Bible* (Harper, 1846). Mary was often depicted in it, though few people realized that his favourite model was in fact his wife [fig. 2]. Professional success did not, however, lead to a stable household, as Chapman mismanaged his resources and the couple had to move frequently, often starting completely anew. Personal tragedy also marred the early years of the marriage, with their first three children all dying between 1837 and 1838. Happily, their next three children, John Linton (1839–1905), Conrad Wise (1842–1910), and Mary (1844–1909), were all born healthy.

In early 1848 Mary lost another newborn son and this calamity, combined with renewed financial difficulties, caused her husband to suffer a nervous breakdown. Despondent and on the verge of abandoning his vocation, Chapman seized upon the idea of a life in Rome as the ideal cure for his woes, offering a mild climate, picturesque scenery, and unconstrained lifestyle that suited his artistic temperament. The Chapman family therefore sailed from New York in April 1848, but were forced by the revolutions on the Continent to spend a year in Paris, where Mary miscarried yet another baby girl.

By autumn 1849 the Chapmans had reached Florence, where they remained one year before establishing what would be their home in

Rome for the following 34 years at Via del Babuino, 135. Over the next decade they prospered financially and socially. They counted among their dearest friends the Welsh sculptor John Gibson, the Scottish painter and photographer Robert Macpherson and his wife Gerardine, and three New York couples: the painter James Edward Freeman and his wife Augusta, the sculptor Thomas Crawford and his wife Louisa, and the sculptor Randolph Rogers and his wife Rosa. Mary was known as the consummate hostess, maintaining a traditional Southern household, entertaining visiting dignitaries, and taking young Southerners under her wing. Both Chapman sons trained under their father and became accomplished painters in their own right, while daughter Mary was a fixture of fashionable Roman society, and mingled with Italian nobility.

While Chapman sold his Italian landscapes and genre scenes to cultivated patrons visiting Rome from all over the United States, the family fervently allied itself with the Confederacy when the American Civil War broke out in April 1861. The passion of the parents for their native Virginia would have dire consequences when their youngest son Conrad ran away that August to fight in the Confederate Army. He sustained a head wound at the Battle of Shiloh in 1862 and eventually returned safely to Rome. But from 1871 to 1874 Conrad was institutionalized for mental derangement outside London and never saw his mother again.

After the war, the family had to subsist on diminished resources and Mary, suffering ill health and bitterly resenting the South's defeat and Reconstruction, lived as a recluse for the remainder of her life [fig. 1]. She died of grief at home after a prolonged sickness on 19 January 1874 (her grave is at Zona 1.10.50). Although Mary's husband and sons eventually returned to America, her daughter Mary married an Italian, Count Spiridione Sirovich, and their descendants live in Rome and its environs to this day.



John Gadsby Chapman, *The Deserted Wife*, engraving, from *The Opal: A Pure Gift for the Holy Days*, ed. Nathaniel Parker Willis (New York: John C. Riker, 1844), opposite 203

Contributed by John McGuigan, independent art historian



Photos of the tombs now on our website!

Our Burials Database (for a guide to our databases, see *Newsletter* 12) is now even more useful since you will find photos of all exist-

ing tombs that pre-date 1950. Many thanks to Doug Jenkinson for volunteering his time to take all these photos, and to Tony Fachechi for putting them online.

HOW TO BECOME A FRIEND

This Newsletter is made possible by the contributions of the Friends of the Cemetery.

The Friends also help fund the care of the trees in the cemetery and the restoration of tombs. Please can you help us by becoming a Friend? You can find a membership form at:

www.cemeteryrome.it

THE NON-CATHOLIC CEMETERY IN ROME

via Caio Cestio, 6, 00153, Roma

Director: Amanda Thursfield

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Monday to Saturday 9:00am - 5:00pm
(last entrance 4.30pm)

Sunday & Public Holidays: 9.00am -1.00pm
(last entrance 12.30pm)

Tel 06.5741900, Fax 06.5741320
mail@cemeteryrome.it

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Nicholas Stanley-Price, EDITOR
Anka Serbu, GRAPHIC DESIGN
Grafica Di Marcotullio, PRINTER
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Contact: nstanleyprice@tiscali.it
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