

of the Non-Catholic Cemetery in Rome

NEWSLETTER

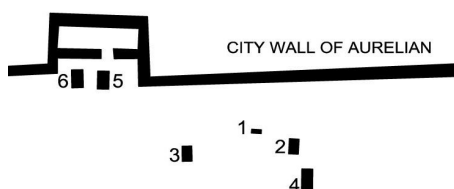
THE BICENTENARY OF PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY'S DEATH

Why is Shelley buried where he is?

Percy Bysshe Shelley drowned in the summer of 1822 in the Gulf of La Spezia off the coast of Liguria. His remains eventually joined those in Rome of his fellow-Romantic poet, John Keats; but it took nine months before his final-resting-place, the goal of so many visitors today, was settled.

His widow, Mary Wollstonecraft, wished his ashes to be deposited in the grave of their little boy, William, who had died while they were all in Rome in 1819. But, unknown to her, in the meantime the Papacy had forbidden further burials in the Old Cemetery where William's grave was. Shelley would have to be buried in the recently opened New Cemetery. Various delays meant that not until January 1823 was he interred, the third burial to take place there.

But the saga did not stop at that point. In April there arrived in Rome Edward Trelawny who had overseen Shelley's cremation on the beach. Seeking Shelley's grave, he was 'most indignant at finding him confusedly mingled in a heap with five or six common vagabonds', as he wrote to Mary Shelley. Our records and the surviving gravestones reveal how much Trelawny was exaggerating. The first to be buried in the new burial-ground was Robert French (no. 1 on the map), whose epitaph states that for 27 years he was the faithful manservant of the Earl of Rochford. The others (nos. 2, 3 and 4) were all members of landed gentry families in Britain, hardly 'common vagabonds'. The original grave of Shelley, who came from a similar background to theirs, must have been nearby. Nevertheless, Trelawny proceeded to have the ashes moved to what he considered 'the only interesting spot' and there they remain today (no. 5; no. 6 is Trelawny's own grave (d. 1882)).



The earliest burials in the New Cemetery



J.L. Chapman, *Grave of Shelley*, 1862 (detail)

Rennell Rodd and Shelley's grave



Edward Onslow Ford, *Shelley Memorial*, 1892 (detail)

Shelley's grave would have looked very different if Onslow Ford's graphic sculpture of the dead Shelley (installed instead in University College, Oxford) had been set upon it in 1891. It was James Rennell Rodd, a diplomat at the British Embassy in Rome, who negotiated an

agreement with the descendants of Shelley and Trelawny that his grave should remain in its present state. Last November there came on the art market in Rome a fine portrait of Rodd by the noted artist Arturo Mancini (1852-1930). Dated 1885, while Rodd was posted to Berlin, it shows him as a young man of 27, a few years younger than Mancini. His diplomatic career brought him three times to Rome, a city he loved and wrote about in *Rome of the*



Antonio Mancini, *James Rennell Rodd*, 1885 (photo: Colasanti)

continues on page 2

continued from page 1

Renaissance and today (1932). The longest posting was as British Ambassador for as much as eleven years (1908-1919), when he played a leading diplomatic role as Italy decided eventually to join the Allies during the First World War.

For more information see the Editor's recent book 'The graves in Rome of John Keats and Percy Bysshe Shelley' (2020) and his article 'Shelley's grave revisited' posted at <https://www.cemeteryrome.it/books/reading.html>



The bronze wreath for his birth's bicentenary, 1893



Wreaths for the centenary of his death, 1922



Shelley's grave today

The grave of little William 'Willmo' Shelley

It is often stated that little William's grave does not survive. Is this so? At the time of Shelley's burial, Joseph Severn received permission to exhume William's remains and to transfer them to his father's grave. The excavation revealed instead the remains of a fully-grown man. Severn's conclusion at the time, that 'some mistake must have been made in placing the Stone', still seems valid today. William's grave lies undisturbed in the vicinity of his stone.

Via Marmorata or Via Shelley?

John Keats has a street in Rome named after him, in the Laurentino area. There are streets named for Percy Bysshe Shelley in Genoa and Naples and, in Rome, the plaque on Palazzo Verospi at Via del Corso, 374 commemorates the Shelleys' stay there in 1819. On the centenary of Shelley's death in 1922, the editor of the newspaper *La Tribuna* published a letter from a Livingstone Phillips suggesting that Via Marmorata, used by all those who visited the Cemetery, should be re-named Via Shelley. But nothing came of the idea.



Willmo's gravestone

The 'spirt' in Gregory Corso's epitaph: was it a typo?

The Beat poet Gregory Corso (1930-2001) is buried right across the path from Shelley. He visited the Cemetery for the first time in 1958, plucked clover leaves from the poet's grave and sent them to his fellow-Beat Allen Ginsberg in San Francisco. Ginsberg himself had taken a souvenir clover-leaf the year before. The beautiful epitaph on Corso's gravestone is from one of his poems: 'Spirit . . . It flows through the death of me / Endlessly, / Like a river unafraid of becoming the sea.' But the first word is engraved as 'Spirt'. Was this intentional?

Arendt Speser (*Newsletter* 40) thought it might have been, citing obscure earlier spellings of 'spirt'. In fact, it seems it was a secretarial typo. In an interview in 2013, the lawyer Robert Yarra, who arranged for Corso's burial in Rome, confessed that he had not noticed the typo

when submitting the transcription of the poem. The stonemason had evidently followed the script. The inserted apostrophe that you can see today was Yarra's attempt to correct the typo.

My thanks to Ian Reynolds for alerting me to Yarra's interview.

The violets at Shelley's grave

Many are the published descriptions of visitors' reactions to the poets' graves. One who was struck in particular by the flowers at Shelley's grave was the horticulturist and garden writer Maria Theresa Earle (1836-1925) who wrote in her *Memoirs and memories* (1911): 'I insisted on going to see Shelley's grave; it was the month of March, and I never saw anything so lovely as the single violets; they stood up above their leaves, making the ground a sheet of blue, totally different to anything I have seen violets do in England.'

NEWS FROM THE CEMETERY

We have welcomed as the new President of the Assembly of Ambassadors H.E. Lord Llewellyn, the British Ambassador to Italy. He takes over the position from H.E. Jill Morris who served us very well, as Ambassador when formally opening our Tercentenary Exhibition in 2016 (*Newsletter 37*), and then continuing to support us strongly after becoming President in 2019 (*Newsletter 48*).

Many of the ledgers (horizontal gravestones at ground-level) in the Old Cemetery have been cleaned and conserved. In some cases, their inscriptions are legible again for the first time in many years. Gianfranco Malorgio and Sara Toscan of Sinope srls carried out this work in 2020, only to have to repeat it following the infestation of scale insects in the pine trees (*Newsletter 52*).

As always, we are indebted to the Friends for their contributions that have made possible work on the trees and the monuments following the lockdowns of the past two years.



The stolen sculpture of Josephine Plowden: still missing but now identified

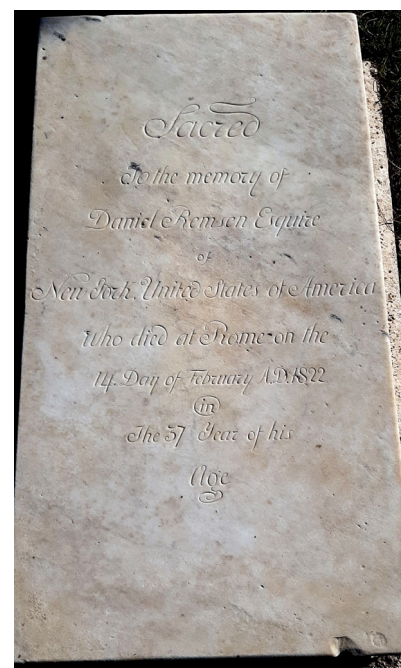
In March 1982, Remo Morbidelli, director of the Cemetery, reported to the police the theft the previous night of sculptures or ornaments from six different graves. Much the largest was a marble bust of Josephine Plowden (1853-1924; Zone 3.3.5.16). The head-and-shoulders bust sat on a decorative marble base which in turn rested on a half-column of variegated marble with its own base. The thieves abandoned the decorative base nearby but today only the half-column resting on the tomb survives. For its unusual scale and design, the bright-white sculpture stood out among the modest monuments of the Zona Terza.

In England in 1878 Josephine Senior, a Protestant, married Charles Plowden of a leading Catholic family long known to the British in Italy for its banks in Florence and Rome. Josephine's husband managed the family bank in Via della Mercede in Rome whose customers included the Keats-Shelley Memorial Association. It seems that she never converted and so on her death was buried in the Cemetery.

Who was responsible for this astonishing sculpture? Alberto Riccoboni's inventory of public sculptures in Rome (*Roma nell'arte* (1942) includes the Cemetery's principal works of art. He attributes the Plowden sculpture to 'A.E. Harnisch' with a date of 1878. Albert Harnisch (1843-1918) from Philadelphia had a strange career. He moved to Rome in 1869 and earned a reputation in particular for his excellent portrait busts in bronze and marble. He was a close friend of William Wetmore Story and his wife Emelyn and was a well-known figure in artistic circles. In 1879 he won a commission for a bronze monument to the anti-abolitionist John C. Calhoun in the city of Charleston, South Carolina. Delivered to the city in 1884, the result was career-changing for Harnisch. Judging it to be badly cast and inaccurate in its depiction of dress, the city soon replaced it. In despair at the criticism of his work, Harnisch closed his studio in Rome and



The tomb of Josephine Plowden, soon after installation (photo: M. Piermattei)



The gravestone of the American William Remsen (1785-1822) in the Old Cemetery

moved to Florence where he became a senior manager for the art dealer Stefano Bardini. In addition to attracting new clients for the business, he was soon producing 'Italian Renaissance' sculptures for the market.

The coincidence of 1878 as Josephine's wedding-year and the date of the bust suggests that it was commissioned to mark her marriage. Installing it on her tomb was perhaps an unusual decision but, for nearly sixty years, it was a visually striking memorial to Josephine Plowden.

Nicholas Stanley-Price, with thanks for help to Francis Plowden, her great-nephew



The Plowden tomb, restored in 2015

WHO THEY WERE

W.G. Coesvelt, international banker and art dealer

Early in 1844 William Gordon Coesvelt left his home in Florence, the Palazzo Spinelli in the Via Ghibellina, for a trip to Rome. Unfortunately, he fell ill and died there on 8 March. He was buried in the Cemetery, his grave marked by a massive tomb in Greek Revival style (Zone V.8.21). It is an exact copy, but larger, of the monument in Montpellier, France, to his son who had died there in 1839.

Who was William Gordon Coesvelt? A banker who witnessed the end of Amsterdam as a financial centre when the French invaded in 1795; a financier of important art deals with the Russian Tsars; and a collector himself whose collection was sold at Christie's in 1836.

He was born illegitimate on 1 October 1767 on Sint Eustatius, then governed by the Dutch West Indian Company and where his grandfather was the island's commander. Marriage to Maria Helene Kortright took him to the neighbouring island of St. Croix which in 1725 had been bought by the Danish from France (it was sold to the United States in 1916). On St. Croix Coesvelt was entrusted with the West Indian interests of the Hope Bank of Amsterdam. The Hopes from Scotland had settled first in Rotterdam and then branched out to Amsterdam, at that time the financial centre of the world with the Hopes its most important bankers. The French invasion of 1795 put an end to all this. Henry Hope had by then already left The Netherlands and settled in England, taking his art collection (372 paintings) and the three orphan boys of his cousin; one of them, Thomas Hope (1769-

1831) became the famous collector, designer and advocate of the Greek Revival.

Hope left the business in Amsterdam in the hands of Pierre Labouchère, later joined by William Coesvelt who, having arrived from the Caribbean, was sent first to solve the Bank's problems in the Iberian peninsula. From Amsterdam, since the French forbade such contacts, he made secret business trips on fishing-boats to England, where he kept houses in London and in the country.



The Coesvelt tomb

After the French occupation of much of the Continent, many aristocratic families suffered from Napoleon's tax laws. In order to raise cash they were forced to sell their art treasures, mainly paintings. The money to buy was available in England and dealers started to invade the mainland of Europe. Because Coesvelt was familiar with the situation in both The Netherlands and Spain and as a banker could arrange for funds, he became involved in art dealing. Two important groups of paintings, of 17th-century Dutch and Spanish Masters, were in this way sold to the Russian Tsars for the Hermitage. In 1820 Coesvelt bought the *Alba Madonna* by Raphael which he sold on to Tsar Nicholas I. In 1931 the Soviets sold it to Andrew Mellon and he in 1937 donated it to the National Gallery in Washington DC.

In the meantime, Coesvelt had become a British citizen and a member of the Athenaeum Club in London. But he decided to move to Florence with his second wife who was Spanish, María Dolores Martina Gómez. There on 31 May 1842 he made his final will, naming as executors Guglielmo (William) Beckford, Giovanni (John Peter) Labouchère, a partner in Hope & Co., and Giovanni (John) Bramstone, Dean of Winchester. Witnesses included Edward Erskine of the British Legation and Charles Plowden, the Florence banker.

A Dutchman by birth and an Englishman by adoption, but buried in Rome.

Contributed by Herbert Jan Hijmersma, Trevignano



Raphael's *Alba Madonna* (National Gallery of Art, Washington DC)

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

OPENING HOURS

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

NEWSLETTER of the Friends of the Non-Catholic Cemetery in Rome

Nicholas Stanley-Price, EDITOR
Anka Serbu, GRAPHIC DESIGN
Grafica Di Marcotullio, PRINTER
ROME, 2022

Contact: nstanleyprice@tiscali.it
Disponibile anche in versione italiana
www.cemeteryrome.it