

of the Non-Catholic Cemetery in Rome

NEWSLETTER



In memory of Clara Benedict (1844-1923): a plaque, a low wall and a dusty road

Many visitors catch sight of the plaque to the right of the entrance gate. In memory of Clara Benedict (see *Newsletter* 13), it was erected a hundred years ago by her daughter Clare. The most generous of our benefactors, Clare made many donations and on her death in 1961 left the Cemetery a very large bequest. She, her mother Clara and her aunt, the writer Constance Fenimore Woolson, share a grave at Zone V.13.12. The plaque to her mother records that 'as a protection to the sacred and historic place which she loved so dearly and where she now rests, this wall was raised to its present height by her only child and second self'. Why did the wall need to be raised?



The low wall along the dirt road, c. 1907



The Benedict plaque

The cemetery director was then Marcello Piermattei, commemorated in a plaque to the left of the gate similar to the Benedict one. In 1923 he requested permission from the Comune di Roma to heighten the wall along what was then a dirt road connecting Via Marmorata with the newly completed Via Zabaglia. In places the level of Via Caio Cestio was 2-3 metres higher than the paths inside the Cemetery. Giving it a hard surface would risk destabilising the low Cemetery wall. Truck drivers used the road at night, removing any barriers that the Comune installed to block it. The dust raised by road traffic crossed the wall and covered the vegetation and the tombs. Moreover, youths using the public playing-field across the road (from 1929, the home of the A.S. Roma football team) would throw stones at visitors to the Cemetery.

Piermattei submitted two alternative designs for a higher wall to Antonio Muñoz, Director of Monuments in Rome. The approved project, which involved essentially rebuilding the entire wall with deeper foundations, is what we see today. The rounded internal abutments support the wall. The towers were decorative, to break the monotony of a continuous wall while echoing the profile of the Aurelian Wall. The crenellation was a compromise for raising the height while still allowing sun and light into the Cemetery. It imitated the existing crenellation on the entrance-gate and the chapel, both built in the 1890s thanks to German funding; but it did not prevent dust spreading from the road. Only sealing Via Caio Cestio with asphalt solved this problem. The project funded by Clara Benedict 100 years ago has secured the Cemetery along the public road ever since.

Nicholas Stanley-Price



An abutment with tower and crenellation



A tower with crenellation

German artists in the Cemetery: two unknown views from 1853 and 1873



Gustavo Witting, *Cemetery in Rome*, 1851



Julius Zielke, *The Protestant Cemetery, Rome, with the grave of Ludwig Siemerling*, pencil on brownish paper, 44 x 58 cm

The German artist Julius Zielke (1826-1907) died in Rome after 55 years, one of the longest stays of a foreign artist not born in the city (his grave is at Zone 3.3.9.7). He led a quiet life while travelling around Italy and producing beautiful, romantic landscapes (see *Newsletter* 34). These proved popular: for instance, his oil painting of the Palatine reproduced here was a Christmas present from King Wilhelm I and Queen Augusta to their daughter-in-law, the Crown Princess Victoria of Prussia. More insights into his work will result from a recent gift from the heirs of Zielke to the Casa di Goethe in Rome, namely a portfolio of his drawings. Among them is a striking view of the New Cemetery (above).

To make this drawing, Zielke placed himself just to the right of the entrance gate. His position was similar to Gustavo Witting's when painting his own watercolour of April 1851 (*Newsletter* 56). Both show on the left the cypresses along the path climbing towards Shelley's grave, the diagonal path which led much later to the family tomb (1917) of Hendrik Andersen, and several gravestones that are identifiable today. Both show the fenced monument to Eliza Hankey (1786-1850; Zone 1.4.2). But they differ especially in how the artists depicted the burial-mounds. Unlike Witting, Zielke emphasized, even exaggerated, the numerous mounds, many of them topped by wooden 'crosses'. In reality these were stakes with numbered plaques that identified the burials. Zielke also shows that the graves had spread further down the slope since Witting's visit in 1851. When did he make this drawing?

Prominent in the foreground is a large sarcophagus-style monument with a cross in relief on its lid. On it the word 'Siemerling' is legible. We know that Ludwig Siemerling (1791-1853) who died on 23 November 1853 was buried in this location. Zielke had arrived the previous year and had possibly met the much older Siemerling who came from a long line of pharmacists and businessmen in Neubrandenburg in Germany. (Since 1994 there has been awarded annually the Siemerling Social Prize, founded in recognition of the family's commitment to social activities.) The Siemerling burial was exhumed long ago but, as was sometimes the custom, that part of the monument recording name, origin, and dates was saved. Today it is in the lapidarium in the Zona Terza. Zielke's drawing of the new monument, possibly a commission from the Siemerling family, dates probably from late 1853 or early 1854.

In contrast to Zielke's 55 years in Rome, the painter Ludwig Friedrich (1827-1916) made a single visit to Italy of four months in 1873, which resulted in some 30 watercolours and drawings. A graduate of the Dresden Art Academy, he spent most of his life in that city and is known especially for his copper engravings and etchings of paintings in Dresden collections. Earlier this year the dealer H.W. Fichter put on the market this watercolour by Friedrich which is an evocative view of the upper Zona Seconda. It is inscribed lower left 'Camposanto dei Protestanti, Rom 8 März 1873'. But above it, in a different hand, has been faintly pencilled 'Müller Augusto' and this gives a clue to the significance of the painting.

At the far left is recognisable the marble obelisk to P.A. Munch (d. 1863; Zone 2.19.15). The tomb in the foreground, ostensibly the



Ludwig Friedrich, *View of the Protestant Cemetery in Rome*, 1873, watercolour (H.W. Fichter Kunsthandel)



Julius Zielke, *The Palatine hill* (Christie's, London, 2015)

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focus of the watercolour, is that of an English painter, Edward Thomson Davis (1833-1867; Zone 2.19.26) (Friedrich sketched Davis's name on the headstone). Davis had spent his short life in England before travelling to Rome in 1866, only to die in the cholera epidemic in June 1867. It is improbable that the two painters, one living in Dresden and the other in Worcestershire, had known each other. But August Müller (c. 1797-1867), whose name was added to the inscription, was also a painter from Dresden. The guidebook author Augustus Hare mentioned 'the painter Müller and his child' among the cholera victims. Müller died three weeks after Davis – his burial was registered as Tumulus 273. This is the number on the wooden 'cross' to the right of

Davis's monument. Either Friedrich had known him personally in Dresden or Müller's family had commissioned him, six years after Müller's death, to make a record of the tumulus even in the absence of any stone monument to him.

Nicholas Stanley-Price. My thanks to Gregor Lersch, Director of the Casa di Goethe, for permission to publish the Zielke drawing and to Claudia Nordhoff and Gabriele Gioni for their help; also, to John McGuigan Jr for alerting me to the Friedrich work and to Aurelio Fichter for allowing its reproduction here.



A survey of the flourishing bird-life in the Cemetery

Urban cemeteries, like protected historic sites, often preserve wildlife and plant species that are now rare or endangered. This is true of our Cemetery, a walled enclosure of slightly less than two hectares surrounded by the intense traffic of a capital city. The contrast in ecology between the Old and New Cemeteries adds to its variety. Following an earlier study of its vegetation (see *Newsletters* 41, 42, 44, 46 and 51), Amanda Thursfield commissioned a survey of the Cemetery's bird life from the Società Cooperativa *Fauna Urbis*.

Fauna Urbis used standard procedures to assess bird biodiversity, making one survey in winter and another in spring and concentrating on species that were overwintering and nest-building. In winter, one hour after dawn, the team made a linear transect across the Cemetery, recording all species, and in their night-time study, using the 'playback' method of bird calls, found a Little Owl (*Athene noctua*). In this period there were fewer species, presumably for lack of the resources required for nest-building. The dominant ones were the Rose-ringed Parakeet (*Psittacula krameri*), the Hooded Crow (*Corvus cornix*), the Common Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*), the European Robin (*Erithacus rubecula*) and the Black Redstart (*Phoenicurus ochruros*). In spring, on the other hand, there were present nest-building species favouring bush environments, such as the European Serin (*Serinus serinus*), the Short-toed Treecreeper (*Certhia brachydactyla*), the Firecrest (*Regulus ignicapilla*) and the Common Starling, and others using trees, such as the Sardinian Warbler (*Sylvia melanocephala*) and the Blackcap (*Sylvia atricapilla*). Birds flying overhead included the Common House-Martin (*Delichon urbicum*), the Barn Swallow (*Hirundo rustica*) and a pair of Peregrine Falcons.



European Robin



A male Common Blackbird



Great Tit

Overall, the surveys counted 376 individuals belonging to 29 different species. A similar study made at Père Lachaise cemetery in Paris recorded 40 species in its 44 hectares, an area twenty times larger than our Cemetery. The high number of nest-building species in our urban environment is encouraging. *Fauna Urbis* noted that the cats present no threat to the birds and that respectful behaviour by visitors also favours birdlife. It made suggestions about possibly installing facilities such as bird-boxes and water-containers – but out of reach of the cats! In short, this survey has been informative and helpful in documenting the Cemetery's importance as a jewel-case of biodiversity.

All photos taken by Marianna Di Santo e Gaia De Luca of Fauna Urbis during their surveys.

WHO THEY WERE

Murder in Sardinia: the tragic fate of Edmund and Vera Townley



Orgosolo in Sardinia (photo: paesonline)



The Townley family house (photo: Town Head estate)

In October 1962 the British couple, Edmund and Vera Townley, both aged 50, were shot dead in a meadow a little way outside the small town of Orgosolo in central Sardinia. They were there on holiday, travelling in a rented Fiat, and had stopped to have a picnic lunch in the meadow. The killing was immediately the subject of speculation in the press, Italian, British and international, as to the motive behind it. Theories ranged widely from a suicide pact to a local attempt to deter tourists – this was the year that the Costa Smeralda development started on the island's northeast coast. However, persistent enquiries by Italian journalists concluded that the Townleys had been innocently caught up in a local feud between the Muscau and Mesina families of Orgosolo. A dreadful case of being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

The town in the wild mountainous Barbagia area of Sardinia was notorious for its conservative, traditional culture. The anthropologist Franco Cagnotta had studied the 'bandits' of Orgosolo in the early 1950s and Vittorio De Seta's documentary film, *Banditi a Orgosolo* (1961), had won an award for 'Best first work' at the Venice Film Festival. The murder of the Townleys brought the Barbagia even further into the public eye. Among those intrigued by the incident was the English travel writer Norman Lewis who was about to publish his study of the Sicilian mafia, *The Honoured Society* (1964). According to his biographer, Julian Evans, the idea that banditry still existed in Europe and the savage landscape of central Sardinia appealed to Lewis's instincts as a writer. After visiting Orgosolo in 1966, he published an article about the murders that was later included in his collected essays, *A view of the world* (1986). It reached a larger Italian audience when translated (by M. Sartori) into Italian (*I banditi di Orgosolo*, EDT, 2015.)

But who were the Townleys? Lewis's enquiries found that they lived in Nakuru in Kenya. Townley was one of those all-rounders among European expatriates in Kenya, with varied experience in farming, mining and road-building. He had been working in an import-export business, and had an interest in an apiary. They were thinking of leaving, however: Townley had previously been active in the Mau-Mau emergency and learned that his name was now on the insurgents' black-list (Kenya became independent the following year). The couple decided to explore possible places to retire, perhaps to start a bee-keeping business, and this had brought them to Sardinia on their holiday (Vera spoke fluent Italian).

Lewis suggested that they may have been hesitant, after their years in Kenya, about returning to a colder, wetter England. In fact, though not mentioned by Lewis, Townley was due to inherit a beautiful house in the English Lake District (one of the wettest regions of the country). Since around 1800 the house had been owned by this branch of the Townley family, who were Protestant. (To another, Catholic, branch belonged the antiquarian and connoisseur Charles Townley (1737-1805) who visited Italy three times in pursuit of antiquities, and whose collection of marble sculptures is one of the British Museum's highlights.) On the Townleys' gravestone in the Cemetery (Zone 2.18.7), Edmund's birthplace is inscribed as 'Stavyn Carteml – Kenya'. This should read 'Staveley-in-Cartmel', a village near the southern end of Lake Windermere. It was his father's house nearby that Townley would have inherited if the Orgosolo picnic had not been so brutally interrupted.

Nicholas Stanley-Price

Opportunities available for volunteers!
Please apply to Tatiana Morici tatiana.morici@cemeteryrome.it

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

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