

# The Landmark Trust

## CASA GUIDI History Album



*The Drawing Room at Casa Guidi* by George Mignaty, 1861

**Updated by Caroline Stanford  
& Elena Capolini in 2022**

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## KEY FACTS

<b>Date of Palazzo Guidi</b>	<b>15<sup>th</sup> century, built by the Ridolfi di Piazzì</b>
<b>Subsequent owners</b>	<b>Palazzo acquired by the Guidi family in the 18<sup>th</sup> and divided into apartments in the 1840s.</b> <b>The Barrett Brownings rented one of the apartments, so-called Casa Guidi, between 1847-1861.</b> <b>In 1893, the whole building acquired by their son, Pen Browning but then sold as separate apartments after his death in 1912.</b> <b>In 1971, the Browning Institute of New York was formed to purchase and preserve the Brownings' Casa Guidi.</b>
<b>Management by Landmark Trust</b>	<b>In 1992, Casa Guidi, by now partially restored, was transferred to Eton College. In 1993, Landmark entered into an agreement with Eton to complete the restoration and manage Casa Guidi for holiday letting.</b>
<b>Architects for the restoration</b>	<b>Boninsegna Crociani</b>
<b>Contractors</b>	<b>Lorenzini</b>
<b>Opened as a Landmark</b>	<b>1995</b>

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**The drawing room (top) and Browning's study at Casa Guidi today. The Brownings' added the room to the apartment beyond the double doors in 1856 as a bigger study, but this reverted to separate ownership in 1913.**

## Sintesi

Dal 1847 al 1861 i poeti Robert Browning (1812-1889) ed Elizabeth Barrett (1806-1861) abitarono al primo piano di Palazzo Guidi. Elizabeth diede il nome "Casa Guidi" al loro appartamento, ed in queste stanze i coniugi scrissero alcune delle loro più belle poesie.

Il corteggiamento ed il successivo matrimonio, avvenuti segretamente per l'opposizione del padre inflessibile di Elizabeth, fu una delle grandi storie d'amore del XIX secolo ("How do I love thee? Let me count the ways", "In quanti modi ti amo? Fammeli contare", scrisse Elizabeth nel Sonetto 43 dei Sonetti dal portoghese). Subito dopo il matrimonio avvenuto nel 1846, la coppia partì per l'Italia per sfuggire alla furia del padre di lei, mantenendosi grazie ad una rendita personale di 350 sterline l'anno, ereditate dal nonno Edward Barrett. La ricchezza del nonno provenivano dalla proprietà di piantagioni in Giamaica dove era d'uso comune sfruttare gli schiavi. Elizabeth era ossessionata dalle sue origini e divenne un'accanita avvocatessa dei diritti degli ex schiavi (in Inghilterra furono emancipati nel 1833).

La poesia, gli scritti, l'epistolario dei Browning sono apprezzati non solo per il loro lirismo ma anche per i commenti vivaci e a volte scottanti sulle vicende politiche contemporanee. Elizabeth, invalida per quasi tutta la sua vita, fu profondamente rispettata dai fiorentini perché grande fautrice del Risorgimento. Con la sua scomparsa nel 1861, all'età di 55 anni, Casa Guidi divenne un santuario alla sua memoria.

Il Palazzo Guidi, posto all'estremità sud di Via Maggio, fu costruito nel XV secolo per una illustre famiglia, i Ridolfi di Piazza, il cui stemma – una corona e delle palme incrociate – è ancora visibile sull'angolo del Palazzo.

Intorno al 1840 il Palazzo Guidi fu diviso in appartamenti e nel luglio 1847 uno dei due appartamenti ammobiliati del piano nobile, splendidamente arredato, venne preso in affitto dai Browning, inizialmente per tre mesi. Nel maggio del 1848, anno di moti rivoluzionari scoppiati in diverse zone d'Europa, i Browning riaffittarono le stesse stanze, non ammobiliate, per 25 ghinee l'anno, e dedicarono i due anni successivi all'acquisto di mobili, di tendaggi ed in generale alla sistemazione della loro dimora. Il figlio Pen nacque nel 1849 e crebbe in questa casa, imparando a suonare il pianoforte che fu disposto nella sala da pranzo, ed allevando conigli sul terrazzo.

Malgrado i Browning spendessero parte del loro tempo lontano da Casa Guidi, durante i loro viaggi in Inghilterra, a Parigi, a Siena durante l'estate o a Roma in inverno, questa fu senza dubbio il cuore della loro felice vita familiare. Quando Elizabeth morì nel 1861, Robert commissionò a George Mignaty un dipinto del salone, considerato il rifugio letterario in cui ella aveva lavorato.

Dopo la morte di Elizabeth, Robert lasciò Casa Guidi e tornò a Londra con il figlio Pen. Morì a Venezia nel 1889 a Ca' Rezzonico, il palazzo veneziano che Pen aveva acquistato insieme alla moglie ereditiera Fannie Coddington.

Venduta Ca' Rezzonico nel 1893, Pen Browning acquistò il Palazzo Guidi con l'intenzione di ricreare l'ambiente di Casa Guidi in memoria dei suoi genitori. Purtroppo, quando nel 1912 Pen morì, il palazzo fu venduto. La ristrutturazione degli ambienti avvenne soltanto dopo il 1971, anno in cui l'appartamento (esclusa una stanza) fu acquistato dal Browning Institute di New York. L'Ente, fondato per "incoraggiare e sviluppare lo studio della letteratura e delle arti liberali, dando particolare enfasi agli scritti ed alle vite di Robert ed Elizabeth Barrett Browning", iniziò un'opera di restauro del salone e della camera da letto, cercando di riprodurre il più possibile quanto era esistito al tempo dei Browning, aprì la Casa al pubblico ed organizzò conferenze e mostre.

Nel 1993 il Browning Institute cedette Casa Guidi all'ente britannico Eton College, nella speranza che questo potesse proseguire l'opera di restauro, in particolare della sala da pranzo. Eton custodisce un'importante collezione di materiale appartenuto ai Browning. Landmark Trust fu interpellato per sostenere l'opera di ristrutturazione ed occuparsi della successiva gestione della struttura. Il coinvolgimento di Landmark avrebbe inoltre favorito l'accesso al pubblico rendendo l'appartamento disponibile per vacanze ed aprendolo alle visite per gran parte dell'anno.

A seguito di un'attenta attività di pianificazione ed un dettagliato lavoro di ricerca, l'appartamento venne ammobiliato cercando di ricreare il più fedelmente possibile la sua configurazione originale, descritta nel dipinto di Mignaty, nelle lettere di famiglia e nel catalogo, datato 1913, delle vendite dei beni posseduti da Pen. La mobilia include la chaise longue proveniente dalla stanza di Elizabeth a Wimpole street (Londra), la scrivania, il cassetto e due sedie di Pen, lo specchio dorato del salone, i busti di Elizabeth e Robert, copie del quadro di Mignaty, del quadro raffigurante San Girolamo, del ritratto di Pen, di un medaglione bronzeo rappresentante Eschilo, le tende di broccato ricreate secondo quanto descrive Elizabeth nelle sue lettere, ed alcuni altri oggetti a loro appartenuti.

Il restauro di Casa Guidi fu concluso nel 1995. Le stanze principali sono aperte al pubblico i pomeriggi di lunedì, mercoledì, venerdì dalle 15:00 alle 18:00, da aprile a novembre.

## Summary

From 1847 to 1861, the suite of rooms on the first floor of Palazzo Guidi was the home of poets Robert Browning (1812-1889) and Elizabeth Barrett (1806-1861). Elizabeth christened the apartment 'Casa Guidi' and in these rooms the couple wrote some of their finest poetry.

Their secret courtship and marriage, in the face of the disapproval of Elizabeth's stern father, was one of the great love affairs of the nineteenth century ('How do I love thee? Let me count the ways', wrote Elizabeth in *Sonnet 43*). After their marriage in 1846, the couple fled to Italy to escape Elizabeth's father's wrath, able to survive financially only through her independent income of £350 a year. This she drew from an inheritance deriving from her grandfather Edward Barrett's wealth from his ownership of Jamaican plantations worked by the enslaved. Elizabeth was haunted by the source of her comfortable background and became an outspoken advocate for the rights of the formerly enslaved.

The couple's acclaimed poetry, writing and letters are valued not just for their lyricism but also, especially Elizabeth's, for their vivid and occasionally biting commentary on contemporary politics and issues. An invalid for most of her life, Elizabeth became revered by the Florentines for her support of the Italian Risorgimento (the movement for Italian unification and nationhood). After her death in 1861 at the age of 55, Casa Guidi rightly became something of a shrine to her memory.

Palazzo Guidi stands at the southern end of Via Maggio and dates from the fifteenth century. It was built for a prominent Florentine family, the Ridolfi di Piazza, whose coat of arms - a coronet and crossed palms - can be seen on the corner house of the Palazzo.

In the 1840s the palazzo was divided into apartments and in July 1847, the Brownings rented one of the two furnished apartments on the *piano nobile*, initially for three months. In May 1848, a year of populist uprisings across Europe, the Brownings rented the same rooms unfurnished, at 25 guineas a year. They spent the next two years buying furniture, having curtains made and generally setting up home. Their son, Pen, was born in 1849 and grew up here, learning to play the piano which was moved into the dining room and keeping rabbits on the terrace outside.

Although the Brownings spent time away from Casa Guidi - visiting England, Paris and Siena, and spending their summers in Bagni di Lucca and their winters in Rome - Casa Guidi was undoubtedly their happy family home. When Elizabeth Browning died in 1861, Robert commissioned a painting of the drawing room by George Mignaty, to record the literary sanctum in which she worked.

After Elizabeth's death, Robert left Casa Guidi and returned to London. He died in Venice in 1889 at Ca' Rezzonico, the Venetian palazzo Pen had bought with his wife, the American heiress Fannie Coddington.

Having sold Ca' Rezzonico in 1893, Pen Browning bought Palazzo Guidi with the intention that Casa Guidi should be recreated in his parents' memory. However, when he died in 1912, the palazzo was sold. Recreation of Casa Guidi only began after 1971, when most of the apartment was purchased by the Browning Institute of New York. The Institute, which was founded to "*encourage and develop the study of literature and the liberal arts, with particular emphasis on the writings and lives of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning*", restored the appearance of the drawing room and the bedroom as closely as possible to that which existed during the Brownings' day, opening the apartment to visitors and arranging lectures and exhibitions.

Hoping for restoration of the dining room, in 1993 the Browning Institute transferred Casa Guidi to Eton College, which has a body of expertise based on an extensive collection of Browning material. Eton then approached the Landmark Trust for help with the restoration and onward management. By letting the apartment for holidays and opening it weekly through the summer to the general public, Landmark's involvement also enables and enhances public access.

After much careful planning and considerable research, the apartment was then furnished as closely as possible to how it had been in the Brownings' time, based on the Mignaty painting and as described in family letters and the 1913 sale catalogue of Pen Browning's possessions. The furnishings include Elizabeth Barrett's chaise longue from her former home in Wimpole Street; Pen Browning's desk; his chest of drawers and two chairs; busts of Elizabeth and Robert Browning; copies of the Mignaty painting, the painting of St Jerome and the portrait of Pen; the original drawing room mirror; a copy of a bronze plaque featuring the head of Aeschilus; brocade curtains which match as nearly as possible those described in Elizabeth's letters, and other belongings of the Brownings.

The restoration of Casa Guidi was completed in 1995. The principal rooms are open to visitors on Monday, Wednesday and Friday afternoons, 3-6 pm, from April to November.



## Introduction

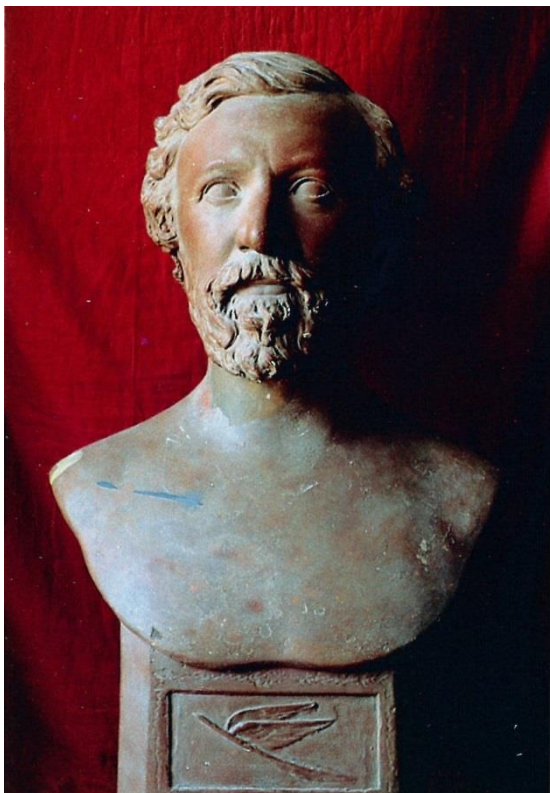
Casa Guidi is a place of many layers. The richest one is because from 1848 until 1861 its tenants were the poets Elizabeth and Robert Browning; and while they spent long periods away from it, it was the place they regarded as home.

Disentangling the threads of inspiration is a risky business, but one can safely say that in these rooms they conceived and wrote some of their finest poetry. Here, too, you can glimpse them at a most intimate and personal level, sharing through the letters they wrote (many of them since published) and the happiness of their marriage, alongside the concerns of a couple setting out to furnish a home, living in a foreign country and bringing up a child in a flat without a garden.

Another layer is Casa Guidi's existence as part of Palazzo Guidi and of Florentine history, in a minor way - something of which Elizabeth in particular was acutely aware. One Count Guidi was Secretary of State to the Medici and helped arrange the marriage between Maria de' Medici and King Henry IV of France in 1600. Another married one of 'Dante's Udolfini of Pisa'.

The Brownings were also part of the English, and latterly American, circle, which has formed a strand in Florentine life for centuries, but was especially active in the 19th. At Casa Guidi you have the chance of partaking briefly in this life, and looking back with an insider's eye.

Another layer of Casa Guidi lies in its history since the Brownings. The story of successive attempts to establish a memorial here, and the final achievement of this aim, is one which acquires a special significance seen from the rooms in which lived the two small people who have inspired so much effort and devotion.



**Plaster busts of Robert and Elizabeth by W.W. Story, at present in the drawing room of Casa Guidi**

Many people will want to pursue these strands for themselves but a brief summary of the Brownings' lives follows next. These, and their writings, can be explored in detail in the books and articles in the collection of books in the bookshelves at Casa Guidi. Edward McAleer's *Brownings of Casa Guidi* in particular provides in a picture of their lives together at Casa Guidi almost in diary form, drawing on the most illuminating source of all, Elizabeth's letters to her family and friends, sparkling letters in which the full richness of her personality appears as it seems it seldom did in her social conversation.

The aim of this album is simply to whet the appetite by providing a guide and a summary of the main themes. It also brings the story up to date, with an account of what has happened since 1971 and in particular since 1990, when discussions between the Browning Institute, Eton and Landmark began, leading to the restoration of the apartment, completed in April 1995.



**The commemorative plaque on the street wall of Casa Guidi recognises Elizabeth Barrett's vocal support of the Risorgimento movement for a united Italy in the 1850s and 60s.**





**Elizabeth Barrett Browning 1861, and with her son Pen 1860**



*Robert Browning, 1856*

## Brief lives for the Barrett Brownings

Elizabeth Barrett (1806-1861) was born to a comfortable background in County Durham, the eldest of twelve children. In 1809, the family moved to Hope End, a 500-acre (200 ha) estate near the Malvern Hills in Ledbury, Herefordshire.

Her parents, Edward Barrett Moulton Barrett and Mary Graham Clarke both had connections with the Caribbean. Her maternal grandparents were John and Arabella Graham-Clarke of Newcastle upon Tyne. Graham-Clarke owned Jamaican sugar plantations, ships trading between Newcastle and Jamaica, a brewery, flax spinning mills, and glassworks. Elizabeth's father's fortune came chiefly from his maternal grandfather, Edward Barrett (1734-1798), who owned more than 10,000 acres across Cinnamon Hill, Cornwall, Cambridge, and Oxford plantations work be enslaved labour on Jamaica's north side. From this, Edward Moulton-Barrett's income was 'fifty thousand a year', Elizabeth told Robert Browning during their courtship. As an adult, these origins of her comfortable existence troubled her and she became an outspoken advocate for the emancipation of enslaved Africans. In 1855 she wrote to John Ruskin that, 'I belong to a family of West Indian slaveholders, and if I believed in curses, I should be afraid'.

Edward Barrett's three sons had all predeceased by the time of his own death in 1798, and so his two grandsons (one being Elizabeth's father) became his principal male heirs. The legacies of the Jamaican plantations were conditional upon their adding and bearing 'the Surname of Barrett' on turning twenty-one. In 1798 they successfully obtained a royal licence to do so. Elizabeth herself retained the name Barrett and dropped Moulton, using her full name of Elizabeth Barrett Moulton Barrett only for legal documents like her marriage certificate. In the two-volume *Poems* (1844) that established her international fame and first prompted Robert Browning to write to her on 10 January 1845, she identified herself as 'Elizabeth Barrett Barrett'.



**50 Wimpole Street, Marylebone in London, where Elizabeth and Robert conducted their courtship.**



As the courtship progressed, Browning happily noted that, in marrying him, she would remain 'EBB'.

Elizabeth was a studious and precocious child, educated at home. She was much influenced by early feminist Mary Woollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women* and was a passionate advocate for women's rights from an early age.

By her mid teens, she had become ill with a mysterious condition that caused headaches and spinal pain and turned her into an invalid. She began to take laudanum and morphine to ease the pain according to standard practice at the time, upon which she became dependent in later life, her health always frail. Following lawsuits and the abolition of slavery, Edward Barrett incurred great financial and investment losses and was forced to sell Hope End to satisfy his creditors. However, the family were never poor; they moved briefly to Sidmouth and then to 50 Wimpole Street in London.

In 1837, by now 21, Elizabeth was again struck with illness, this time a tuberculosis-related lung condition. The death of two of her brothers, one from fever and the other from drowning, further affected damaged her health. She took to spending most of her time in her upstairs room at 50 Wimpole Street. A friend gave her a beloved spaniel, Flush, to keep her company, and for whom Virginia Woolf later wrote a fictionalised biography.

By now Elizabeth was writing prolifically in both poetry and prose, and became widely published in periodicals and collections. She developed a distinctive and radical voice, helped by a stimulating circle of intellectual friends and acquaintances. She also campaigned politically through her pen, condemning child labour and indeed helping to bring about its reform by raising support in 1844 for the Ten Hours Bill (passed as the Factories Act in 1847). Her health improved somewhat in the early 1840s, although she maintained the persona of an invalid.

Her volume *Poems*, published in 1844, made her one of the most popular writers in the country and moved the aspiring poet, Robert Browning (1812-1889) to write her a fan letter. Robert, then 32, also came from a comfortable background, also largely funded by his grandparents' holdings and slave ownership in the sugar plantations of the West Indies. However, Robert's father, sent at first to work on St Kitts, became an abolitionist and a literary collector with a library of some 6,000 books. Robert therefore grew up in a household with significant literary resources but initially struggled to find acclaim as a writer.

Elizabeth had praised Browning's poetry in a journal article in 1842 and did so again in one of these newly published poems. Browning was full of gratitude and posted a letter to her on 10 January 1845 telling her that 'I love your verses with all my heart, dear Miss Barrett.' He praised their 'fresh strange music, the affluent language, the exquisite pathos and true new brave thought...and I love you too' (Brownings' Correspondence, 10.17). She replied the next day thanking him for his letter and proclaiming herself 'a devout admirer & student' of his works (ibid, 10.19). Thereafter they began to exchange letters every few days.

Elizabeth put off Browning's requests to visit her for some time, fearing his reaction to her as a mostly sofa-bound invalid some six years his senior. He persisted, and she finally allowed him to come to 50 Wimpole Street on 20 May 1845, whereupon he fell in love with her almost at first sight. Elizabeth soon reciprocated but was terrified that her tyrannical father, who had forbidden his children to marry, would learn about her admirer and she told none of her friends or family of her feelings. When her father eventually became suspicious of Robert's visits, she finally recognized him as the despot he was and agreed to discuss marriage with Robert.

Money was one obstacle to marriage as Browning was completely financially dependent on his parents, but Elizabeth had inherited a fortune that yielded about £350 annually. At first Browning would not hear of taking any money from her, but they finally agreed to live on her income in Italy, a country chosen in

part with her health in mind. He insisted, however, that she write a will bequeathing her property to her brothers and sisters.

After a private marriage at St Marylebone Parish Church, they fled Elizabeth's father's disapproval to Paris before moving to Italy in September 1846, which became their home almost continuously until her death. Elizabeth's loyal maid Elizabeth Wilson witnessed the marriage and accompanied the couple to Italy, where they first stayed briefly in Pisa.

Edward Barrett immediately disinherited Elizabeth, as he did each of his children who married. However, the couple still could live fairly comfortably in Italy on Elizabeth's income. In spring 1848, they fixed upon Casa Guidi as their main residence. Elizabeth grew stronger and in 1849, at the age of 43 and after several miscarriages, she gave birth to a son at Casa Guidi, also Robert, whom they nicknamed Pen, shortened from Penini.

Elizabeth's experience of motherhood, and her belief in the liberation of the Italian city states from the yoke of Austro- Hungarian rule and in the need for their unification as one nation soon prompted a new kind of poetry. Late in 1847 she began work on *Casa Guidi Windows* (finally published in 1851), a lyrical epic about the Florentine struggle for independence as experienced from her rooms at Casa Guidi. For anyone who has sat upon the balcony at Casa Guidi, as Elizabeth so often did, the scene in its opening stanzas is easy to imagine:

I HEARD last night a little child so singing  
    'Neath Casa Guidi windows, by the church,  
O bella libertà, O bella! - stringing  
    The same words still on notes he went in search  
So high for, you concluded the upspringing  
    Of such a nimble bird to sky from perch  
Must leave the whole bush in a tremble green,  
    And that the heart of Italy must beat,  
While such a voice had leave to rise serene  
    'Twixt church and palace of a Florence street:  
A little child, too, who not long had been  
    By mother's finger steadied on his feet,  
And still O bella libertà he sang.

1,999 lines in length, *Casa Guidi Windows* is written in two parts, the first completed by 1848 and the second by 1851, the year both were published as one work. The first part is a joyful and hopeful response to the celebrations that filled the streets of Florence on the September 12 1847, when Grand Duke Leopold II restored civil liberties to its citizens. The second was written after this venture failed, its bitterness inspired by the march of the re-conquering Austrian army through the city in March 1849. Both parts of the poem capture the contrasting mood and expectations: the first breathes optimism and excitement:

For the heart of man beat higher  
That day in Florence, flooding all her streets  
And piazzas with a tumult and desire.

But this poem about political events is shot through with very personal symbolism. Elizabeth identifies her own re-cast life with Robert with Italy's attempt at a rebirth of its own. Florence's political hopes mirror the optimism of her marriage and her attempt to cast off the moribund and claustrophobic life she had been living in London. Elizabeth was about to give birth to her son Pen at the age of 42, an immensely dangerous venture for a Victorian woman. In the poem, Italy's fight for independence is juxtaposed with her own struggle to regain an authentic hold on a full life. This earned her both gratitude and admiration from the Florentines.

This personal identification with their travails makes the second part a fascinating and moving read. On one level it is a stirring outcry against political failure. But it is also a celebration of personal triumph – Elizabeth has survived her own jeopardy and her description of the Austrian army marching through the city's streets is preceded by an image of her sleeping son. Pen is also invoked as the poem draws to a close:

The sun strikes, through the windows, up the floor:  
Stand out in it, my own young Florentine,  
Not two years old ...

The family made extended journeys to France and England in 1851–2 and 1855–6, but Casa Guidi was their main home. They enjoyed the company and correspondence of a wide range of literary and cultural figures, including George Sand, John Ruskin, Alfred Lord Tennyson, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, William Makepeace Thackeray and Harriet Beecher Stowe. During these years, Elizabeth wrote her next epic poem, *Aurora Leigh*, which she described in its dedication as the 'most mature' of her works, expressing her 'highest convictions upon Life and Art'. It was an immediate success. It addressed women's rights to education and work, battered wives, and prostitution, simultaneously the threat of class conflict and of the reforms it precipitated.

During the hot summer months the Brownings retreated to Bagni di Lucca in Tuscany, or to Siena. 1858 brought a change in this pattern as Elizabeth's health declined. From July to September 1858 they stayed in Paris and Le Havre. In 1853–4 and from 1858 to 1861 they passed the winters in Rome.

In 1859 Elizabeth again became intensely absorbed in Italian politics, as the French monarch Louis Napoleon, now self-proclaimed as Emperor Napoleon III, intervened in Italian affairs. Her next collection, *Poems before Congress* (1860), provoked an outcry in England because reviewers assumed the thundering concluding poem, 'A Curse for a Nation', was the poet's curse on her own country. In reality, it was a previously published anti-slavery poem. Elizabeth was denounced as a fanatic by conservative English critics who thought that a woman's role was to bless, not to curse.

Elizabeth's health was by now in serious decline. After wintering in Rome, the family returned to Florence in June 1861. She died in Robert's arms at Casa Guidi near dawn on 29th June. She was buried two days later in the Protestant Cemetery in Florence. She had lived to see Victor Emmanuel II of Sardinia proclaimed the King of all Italy in March 1861, though full unification of the Italian peninsula would take another five years. Out of respect, the shops in the neighbourhood were closed for her funeral, and a crowd followed the coffin to

burial in the protestant cemetery. Later, a memorial tablet was erected at Casa Guidi by 'Grateful Florence', paying tribute to the poet and the scholar 'whose poems forged a golden ring / Between Italy and England'.

Throughout her life and ever since, Elizabeth Barrett Browning has inspired and divided commentators in equal measure, a towering literary figure from an era when many thought no female had the right to aspire to such things. Praise for her letters has been unanimous, as much for their ideas as their value as a window on her times. Her poetry, with its combination of debates about the nature of women, political issue and aesthetic preference, has always provoked admiration and controversy in equal measure. Elizabeth was one of the most influential and distinctive poets of her time, an author whose daring experiments with poetic conventions and subject matter extended the possibilities for all writers who succeeded her, male as well as female.

Popular stereotypes still tend to cast Elizabeth as the passive heroine of Wimpole Street. Robert knew better. In his novel in verse *The Ring and the Book*, he linked his own work to the 'golden ring' of Elizabeth's achievement, paying tribute to her as '[b]oldest of hearts that ever braved the sun'. Theirs was one of the greatest love affairs of the nineteenth century, and Casa Guidi was where it played out.

After Elizabeth's funeral, Robert immediately made plans to reorder his life. He had Pen's long curls cut and changed the boy's girlish clothing, which Robert had always considered too fussy. In his grief, he wanted his future life to resemble his past fifteen years of Italian exile as little as possible.





The memorial plaque erected on the wall of Casa Guidi to mark Elizabeth's death by 'grateful Florence' in 1862. 'Her verses forged a golden ring between Italy and England.'



Elizabeth's tomb in the Protestant Cemetery in Florence.

Robert and Pen left Florence on 1st August 1851, and Robert never returned to the city again. They went to London, where Robert lived at 19 Warwick Crescent for the next twenty five years, as he became recognised as one of the greatest poets of his generation in his own right. He fended off marriage proposals from other women, claiming his heart was buried in Florence. His younger sister Sarianna became his companion, confidante and housekeeper, and they travelled often to Italy especially Venice, but never to Florence.

Meanwhile Robert Barrett Browning, or Pen, studied at Oxford but showed little appetite for academic study and instead became a painter. His active love life caused his father distress but eventually he married Fannie Coddington, an American heiress. They bought and restored Palazzo Rezzonico, one of the great palaces on the Grand Canal in Venice (and today a museum of eighteenth-century Venice). It was while visiting them there in December 1889 that Robert contracted bronchitis, and died. Pen had hoped to bury his father alongside his mother in Florence, but was told that the cemetery was closed. A message from the Dean of Westminster offered burial in Westminster Abbey, and this was accepted. A preliminary funeral service was held in Venice in the great hall of the Palazzo Rezzonico, followed by a cortège of funeral gondolas down the Grand Canal out to the island of San Michele. From there the body was returned to London by train. A splendid funeral was held in Westminster Abbey on 31st December 1889, ending with Robert's burial in Poets' Corner.





**Ca' Rezzonico, bought by Pen and his heiress wife and where Robert died in 1889, is one of the most magnificent palaces on the Grand Canal. Today, its sumptuous interiors house a museum of eighteenth-century Venice.**

## Historical Outline of Palazzo Guidi

Casa Guidi was the name given by Elizabeth Browning to the apartment she and her husband Robert rented within Palazzo Guidi, thus turning 'a palace into a home'. Palazzo Guidi itself began as two not especially grand houses of the fifteenth century at the southern end of Via Maggio, where it opens into Piazza San Felice. The smaller and more architecturally distinctive occupied the corner with Via Mazzetta.

The other, in which the rooms of Casa Guidi in fact lie, opened onto both Piazza San Felice and Via Mazzetta. In the words of Leonardo Ginori Lischi in his *Palazzi Of Florence* (1985) this second house 'adjoins the two inner sides of the former and could be said to embrace it'.

Both houses were built by members of a prominent Florentine family, the Ridolfi di Piazza. They owned other houses on Via Maggio too, notably Number 7 (which later became Palazzo Ricasoli) and Numbers 13 and 15, where Marchese Cosimo Ridolfi lived in the nineteenth century. A painted shield on the latter house bears the family's coat of arms awarded them by the King of Naples in 1415, which includes a coronet and crossed palms. The same arms can be seen on the corner house of Palazzo Guidi.

The Ridolfi were one of the families from whom the members of the three leading offices or committees of the medieval Florentine Republic were drawn by lot. In this intensely political city, a man's standing rested as much on the tradition of public service within his family as on his wealth. The Ridolfi certainly qualified for respect, no less than 19 of them holding the supreme office of Gonfalonier of Justice in the 14th and 15th centuries. After the Medici

became hereditary rulers in 1532, the Ridolfi continued to serve as Senators and also produced two Cardinals.

The Ridolfi's greatest fame and success, however, came in the fifteenth century, when they built their new houses close to the far wealthier and mightier Pitti. Their confidence can be seen in the bold use of rusticated masonry on the corner house. While in the height of Florentine fashion, this could also be seen as a flattering echo of the splendid new palace being built almost opposite, the attempt by the Pitti to outshine the Medici.

This attempt was unsuccessful. In 1550, the Medici acquired Palazzo Pitti by marriage and made it their official residence. In 1575, Piero di Lorenzo Ridolfi, owner of the second house, was found guilty of an attempt to assassinate Grand Duke Francesco I de' Medici and his property was confiscated. The Grand Duke then granted the house to the Military Order of St. Stephen, a crusading knighthood founded by his father to fight the Turks.

The Order in turn granted the house to its High Constable and Admiral, a junior Medici named Tommaso di Antonio who, in the course of a distinguished career, commanded a galley, La Firenze, and fought in the Battle of Lepanto in 1571, when Don Juan of Austria trounced the Turkish navy.

The Ridolfi were soon to part with the corner house as well. In 1618, Lorenzo Ridolfi, son of Senator Rafaello, sold it to Cavaliere Camillo Guidi, Secretary of State to the Medici Grand Dukes Ferdinando I and his son Cosimo II.



**The palazzo built by the Ridolfi family in the 15th century**



The Guidi were encouraged to come to Florence from the surrounding region in the mid-16th century by Duke Cosimo I, who relied heavily on such outsiders when forming a network of loyal permanent officials and secretaries around himself and his family. They came from Volterra, and in the next generation were busy securing their position in the city's political and social life.

With the Medici court now at the Pitti, the surrounding area had become very fashionable, with the Via Maggio as the most exclusive street. The corner site at its southern end must have been one of the most prestigious, and this the Guidi now owned. They acquired other houses as well, but the importance of this one is indicated by the fact that succeeding Guidi always referred to it as *'the house of the first-born'*.

The first-born were soon joined by cousins. In 1650, after the death of a second Tommaso di Antonio, the adjoining house was granted to another Admiral of the Order of St. Stephen, Camillo Guidi, who was Cav. Camillo Guidi's nephew. It was perhaps no coincidence, therefore, that by the eighteenth century the Guidi were firmly established as the owners of both houses, and turned them into one - thus making a home into a palace. A new entrance and staircase were made in the larger house, and a suite of grand reception rooms was formed on the *piano nobile* (where there are seventeen rooms in all), some of them richly decorated with frescoes. The floor of what became the Brownings' bedroom was once emblazoned with the Guidi arms in *scagliola* (a plaster technique that imitates marble).

The Guidi had other houses, however, and decided in the 1840s to divide this building into apartments for rent. Two of these were on the *piano nobile*, where the Guidi furniture remained. It is thought that one of these apartments was originally intended for the family, but soon afterwards their agent made it too available to rent, along with its companion overlooking Piazza San Felice.

## The Brownings at Casa Guidi

The Brownings rented one of the two furnished apartments on the *piano nobile* of Palazzo Guidi in 1847, for one guinea a week, initially for three months. They succeeded a Russian prince, and found the furniture equally regal, with much marble and gilding and satin. The apartment's main attraction lay in the fact its high ceilings meant the rooms could be kept cool, while in the evenings they could walk or sit on the little balcony above the street.

In May 1848 they rented the same rooms unfurnished at 25 guineas for the year. They spent the next month or two buying a great deal of furniture of their own, having curtains made and generally setting up house. The household at that time consisted of Elizabeth and Robert, and Elizabeth's maid Elizabeth Wilson. Soon afterwards a man-servant was appointed, who combined general duties with those of cook. Alessandro was the first of these, followed by Vincenzo and eventually Ferdinando, who became Wilson's husband.

It took the Brownings nearly two years to furnish Casa Guidi fully. They bought a few expensive pieces, such as a baroque mirror for the drawing room, but most items came from scouring the Florentine antique shops for inexpensive sofas, chairs and pictures. In 1848, the main rooms were arranged as now, with the dining room opening out of the little hall, the drawing room in the middle and the Brownings' bedroom at the end. What is now the study was a little sitting room, the bathroom behind the Brownings' bedroom was the kitchen cum pantry, and the present kitchen was divided into a bedroom and little parlour for their maid. The last room, reached presumably from the inner terrace, was Robert's dressing room. The manservant slept on an earlier mezzanine where

the two bunks now are. In those days, that was above the kitchen and reached by a rope ladder.

Change came in 1849 with the arrival of the baby Pen. Wilson now had to share her quarters with a wet-nurse and Robert had to give up his dressing room, which became the nursery. He now dressed instead in the little sitting room, which doubled as his study.

Although they renewed the lease of Casa Guidi annually until Elizabeth's death in June 1861, the Brownings spent long periods away from it. Between 1851 and 1856, they twice left it, and sub-let it, for stretches of over a year, while they visited England and Paris. Even when based in Italy, they tended to spend the summer at Bagni di Lucca or Siena, and the winters in Rome.

For much of 1856-7 they were at home, however, and Casa Guidi seems to have benefitted from their attention. A large room beyond Robert's study, which had been added to the lease in 1856, was now furnished as his dressing room, study and studio. Pen graduated to a bed in his parents' room, with his nursery for day-time use. He kept rabbits on the *cortile* terrace, while on the street front terrace there were now lemon and datura trees. Ferdinando, now Wilson's husband, briefly shared her quarters, but must have returned to his old ones when in 1857 she moved next door but one to run her own boarding house, and her place as maid was taken by Annunziata.

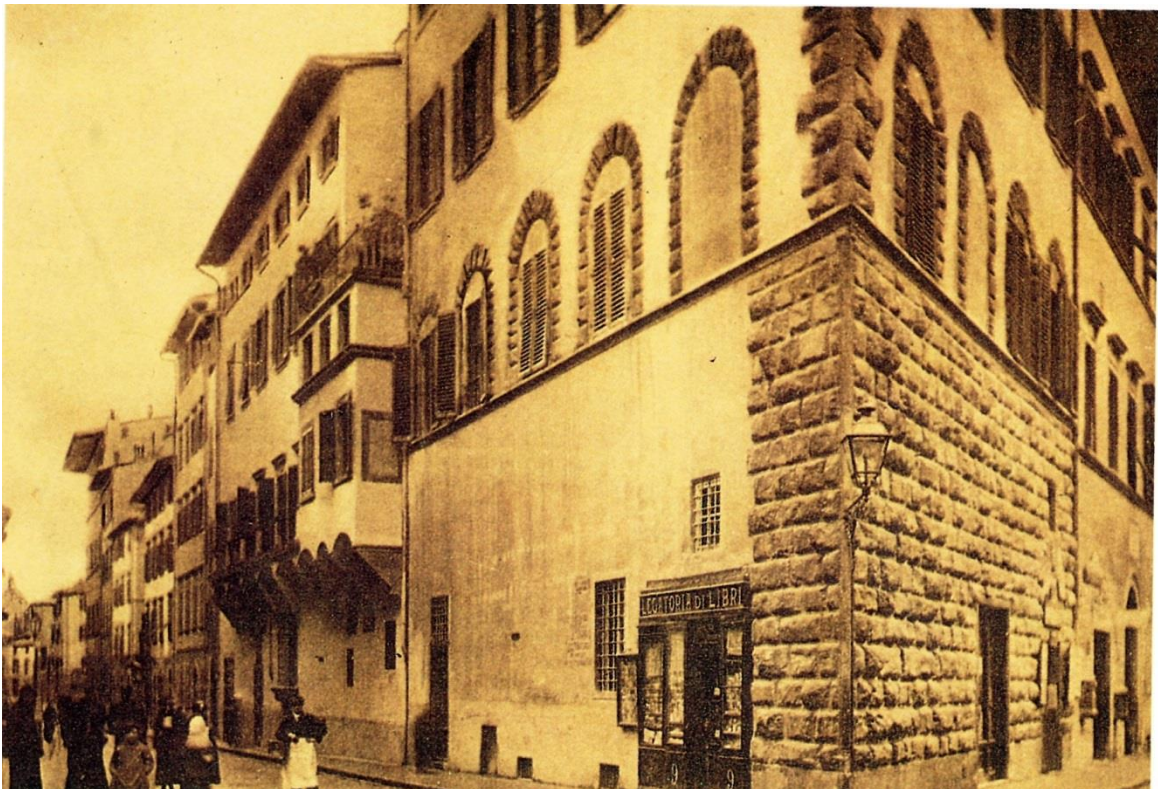
For their last few years at Casa Guidi, the family were only at home for a month in summer and autumn. Pen was growing up and learning the piano, which was accordingly moved into the dining room. This now acted as an ante-room, in which callers waited to be received, while meals were eaten in Robert's former

study. The drawing room and the bedroom remained unchanged, however, and it was in the latter that Elizabeth died in June 1861. Before Robert left for good a month, he commissioned George Mignaty to paint the drawing room as it stood at Elizabeth's death. In 1862, a memorial was placed over the entrance by the Florentines: *'Here wrote and died Elizabeth Barret Browning'*.





**Oil painting of the drawing room by George Mignaty, a copy of which hangs in the room today.**



**Casa Guidi in 1913**

## Enshrining a memory

In 1893, Elizabeth and Robert's son, Pen Browning, bought the whole of Palazzo Guidi. After the sale of Palazzo Rezzonico in Venice, where Robert Browning had died in 1889, Pen took most of his parents' furniture back to Casa Guidi, with the supposed intention of creating a memorial to them there. After his death in 1912, however, everything was sold.

The palazzo's new owner was an American married to an Italian. Signora Centaro and her husband restored the palazzo, but plans to create a museum on the lines of the Keats-Shelley Memorial recently founded in Rome were foiled by the First World War, and then by Signora Centaro's early death in 1919. In 1916, she put up the second inscription, a quotation from *Casa Guidi Windows*, under those very same windows.

Signor Centaro lived in Casa Guidi from 1921 until his death in 1936. In 1969, his heirs began to sell off the apartments within the Palazzo. One of the first of these to come up was Casa Guidi. The threat that it might be converted into offices led, in 1971, to the founding of the Browning Institute in New York, and the raising of the money to buy all but one room of the Brownings' original apartment.

The Institute was founded "*to encourage and develop the study of literature and the liberal arts, with particular emphasis on the writings and lives of Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and to acquire and preserve their apartment known as Casa Guidi as a memorial to them*". Over the next twenty years the Institute did much to fulfil this aim. Casa Guidi was opened to visitors, and educational lectures and exhibitions were arranged.



The most notable achievement of the Institute was to restore the decoration of the drawing room and bedroom as closely as possible to that which existed during the Browning's occupation. With the support of the Friends of Casa Guidi money was raised for this, and for other projects such as the reproduction of the Mignaty painting of the drawing room and of another painting of St Jerome which hung in this room. The cost of realising their eventual aim of recreating the drawing room in full proved too high, however, and eventually the Institute came to recognize that "*the restoration, preservation and use of Casa Guidi as originally envisioned*" was beyond its resources.



**The restored drawing room awaiting furniture.**



**The dining room as set up for opening by the Browning Institute.**

## A new venture

In late 1990, the Browning Institute was considering passing on its ownership of Casa Guidi to Eton College. Eton holds a collection of Barrett Browning material that is of national importance. Its librarian, Michael Meredith, is a Browning scholar, and has known Casa Guidi since boyhood. It was largely thanks to him that this new arrangement came about. Eton undertook to uphold the Browning Institute's aims for Casa Guidi, to encourage interest in the Brownings' work and ensure public access. They would also take parties of boys there for reading weeks. But Eton was cautious of taking on responsibility for the building without a plan for the future and it was for this reason that the Headmaster approached Landmark. In addition to running Casa Guidi, Eton needed help with completing the restoration, with furnishing the drawing room and with ongoing operation and maintenance. Landmark's involvement could also widen public access.

There was little doubt of the answer when the Landmark trustees considered the question. Here was a foreign building with the most direct and distinguished British connections, which would make a most rewarding place to stay, both for itself and for its literary associations. It also perfectly complemented the flat in Keats' House in Rome, managed by Landmark since 1982. Despite a limited budget for any work to be carried out, Landmark was keen to help both Eton and the Browning Institute.

Fortunately, the Browning Institute was able to contribute some funds for furniture, and further sums were raised for particular pieces by the Friends of Casa Guidi. Eton College was also able to contribute, so that the final result is very much the result of collaboration.

The original proposal was for the drawing room and the Brownings' bedroom to be arranged purely for public use, with Landmark visitors using the dining room as their living room, the study as the main bedroom and the two courtyard rooms for kitchen, bathrooms and sleeping gallery. There would be another bathroom with a small bedroom above behind the Brownings' bedroom.

Landmark suggested a slightly different arrangement. Instead of a rigid division between public and private areas, all the main rooms would be usable by those staying at Casa Guidi, but the dining room would also contain some museum displays. The study would be just that, since with its thin walls over-hanging the street, it was not an ideal bedroom. The drawing room would indeed be furnished as in the Mignaty painting, but with pieces people could sit upon, and not just admire. These three rooms would be shown to the public on certain afternoons, but the rest of the time would be for Landmark use. The Brownings' bedroom would be the main Landmark bedroom, to which, with the two back rooms, people could retreat on the afternoons that Casa Guidi was open.





**Elizabeth's bedroom, after its decoration was restored by the Browning Institute, before furnishing.**

## The restoration

Reaching preliminary agreement was one thing. Having it officially signed and sealed was another. The transfer to Eton was completed in January 1992, and the agreement with Landmark in 1993. Plans were then agreed with the architects Boninsegna Crociani and submitted to the authorities for approval, which came in November 1994.

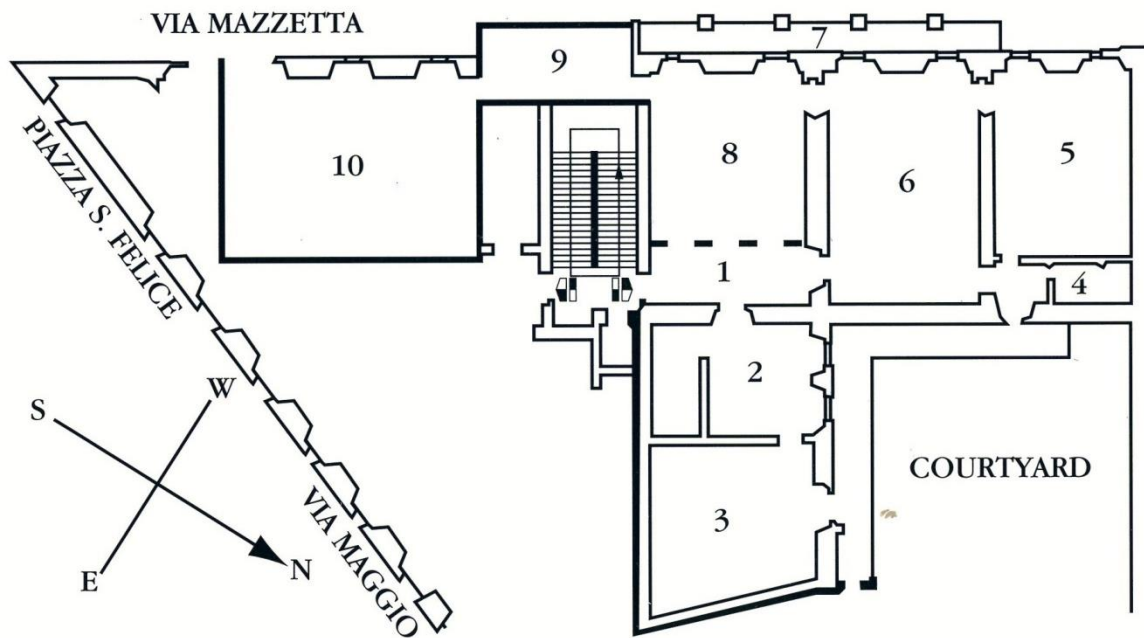
Meanwhile, in September, Lorenzini the builder had made a start with work not affected by the approvals, such as the overhaul of the original shutters and windows throughout the apartment, to return them to full working order. They were repainted, and the old graining, paint brushed to resemble wood, was renewed. The brick floors were made good where small areas had worked loose. Doors and fireplaces are also all original.

The overhaul of services was an important part of the work. The wiring in the front rooms was left undisturbed, with just some additional points for lighting, but in the two back rooms, new circuits were installed. A complete fire alarm system was also fitted. The existing heating seemed adequate, but air conditioning was introduced for the summer. By following the local practice of closing shutters during the day, these tall rooms can be additionally be kept reasonably cool, as Elizabeth Browning discovered.

The bathroom behind the Brownings' bedroom was renewed, as was the stair leading up to the room above. The kitchen was rebuilt, as was the gallery in the room beyond, to make it fully fireproof, with new shower rooms beneath.

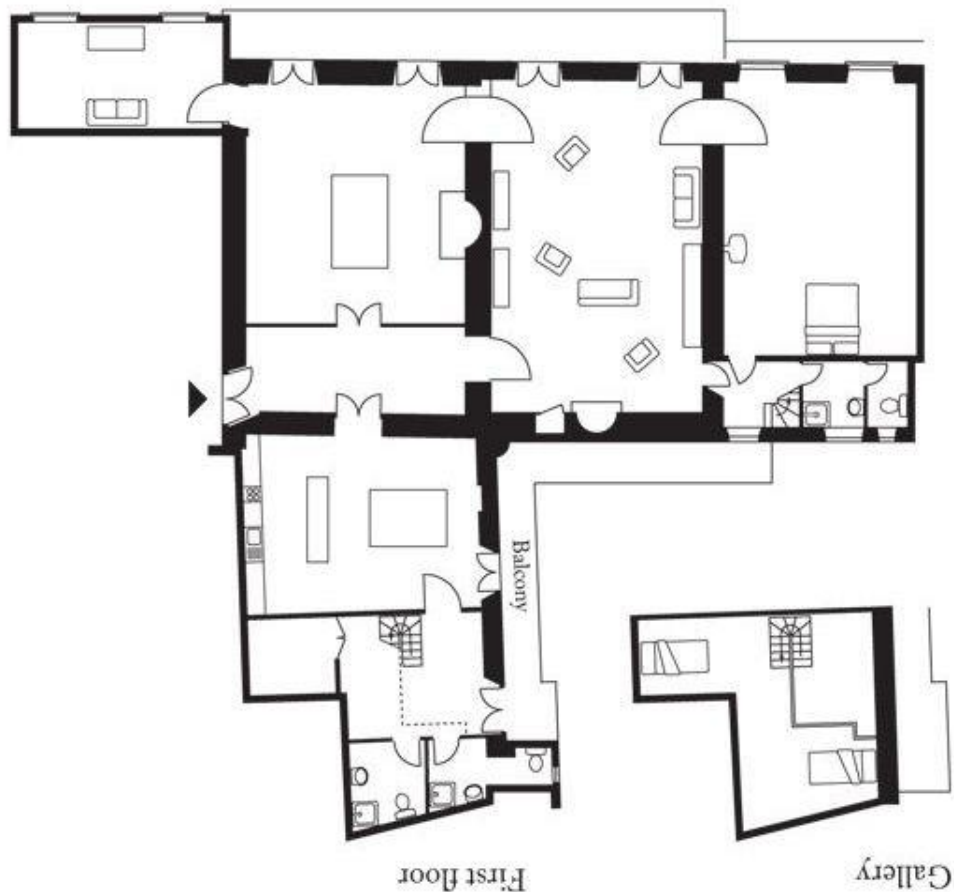
Two side openings in the partition between dining room and hall, which dated from last century, have been blanked in.

Walls and ceilings in the drawing room and bedroom and the ceiling in Robert's study have all been returned to the colour they were in the Brownings' day. In the dining room some exploratory scrapes had been made which revealed earlier fresco decoration, which perhaps one day can be revealed if funds become available. The same goes for the walls in Robert's study. Until then, the rooms have been repainted with water-based *tempera* allowing the walls to breathe.



**Original floor plan**

- |                       |                                 |
|-----------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1. Entrance           | 6. Drawing room                 |
| 2. The maid's room    | 7. Balcony                      |
| 3. Nursery            | 8. Dining room                  |
| 4. Kitchen            | 9. Robert's study               |
| 5. Brownings' bedroom | 10. Robert's study (after 1856) |



**Floorplan after restoration**

### (Re)furnishing a home

Recreation of the Brownings' drawing room was part of the original agreement with Eton and the Browning Institute, predating Landmark's involvement. The other main rooms were also to be furnished in a way that was historically correct, but more loosely so; to retain the atmosphere but not attempt exact recreation. Even in the drawing room, not every piece of furniture could be matched exactly. One school of thought was to have reproductions made of key pieces, and two Italian tables with inlaid ebony and ivory tops and spiral fluted legs had indeed already been made for the Browning Institute by Peter Biss.

Rather than such reproduction pieces, Landmark prefers to find objects of similar period and style which, when assembled, create the same impression. This is doubly so for the paintings, since the Renaissance works originally hung by Robert Browning are now mainly in museums, and the funds of a far richer organisation would be needed to buy replacements. One reproduction has been made, of St Jerome by Toscani, and sympathetic companions have been found to hang with it.

The chief sources of information besides the Mignaty painting were the 1913 sale catalogue of Pen Browning's possessions, and some unpublished letters written by Elizabeth to her sisters to which Philip Kelley of the Browning Institute had access. These described in great detail the furniture she and Robert bought in the first months of their tenancy, and where they put it, sometimes accompanied by rough sketches.

In **the bedroom**, we know that Elizabeth and Robert's bed was of ducal size, hung with white muslin curtains that could be closed against summer



mosquitoes. In this room, Pen was born and Elizabeth died. When Pen was seven, he was brought in from the nursery to sleep in a bed of his own in his parents' room. In addition to a wardrobe, there were chests of drawers and sofas. At the foot of her bed, Elizabeth hung the portrait of her father, Edward Moulton Barrett, who never forgave her for her runaway marriage and whose face she feared to look upon, but whom duty still compelled her to revere. This portrait, by H.W. Pickersgill, now hangs on the wall again. The wood burning stove is also original.

The tiny room behind the bedroom formed **the original kitchen**, then accessed from the *cortile* side. Here the Brownings' cook Ferdinando Romagnoli and his successors prepared simple meals for the Brownings. The food was carried through the door onto the inner *cortile* balcony and from there to the dining room. Ferdinando lived in a loft above the kitchen, which he reached by a rope ladder.

In **the dining room**, we know there was a richly carved sideboard. The Brownings covered the dining room walls with tapestries; now instead hang two group portraits of the Barrett children, painted by William Artaud for their grandmother, Elizabeth Moulton, in 1818. One shows Charles-John, Arabella, George and Samuel; the other Elizabeth, Edward and Henrietta. These did not hang here originally, of course, but were given to Casa Guidi by descendants and fit in well. Other donations of Browning furniture that are not original to Casa Guidi are two chairs in the study and a desk and chest of drawers in the drawing room. These came from Palazzo Rezzonico in Venice, where Robert Browning stayed with Pen in his last years, and he could well have used the desk at least.

**The drawing room** was the centre of the Brownings' activities, where they entertained their guests and also where Elizabeth wrote, including *Casa Guidi Windows*, *Aurora Leigh* and *Poems before Congress*. The shutters were kept fastened in the day, keeping the room in cool shadow. After her death in 1861, most of the furniture was shipped back to London and absorbed into Robert's house on Warwick Crescent. The success of the re-presented drawing room hinged around three items: the carpet, the Venetian chandelier and the gold baroque mirror. The size and colour of the carpet were known from Elizabeth's letters, but its design was difficult to make out from the Mignaty painting. Christian Smith, who at the time sought out the carpets and fabrics for all Landmarks, eventually tracked down a Turkish carpet of the right size and colour, whose design dated from 1860. The Venetian chandelier was more easily found (though it cost rather more than the £2 paid for his by Robert Browning) but a suitable mirror was nowhere to be found. Then came a miracle: Philip Kelley traced and bought the original mirror. This has now been bought from him in turn and has returned to its original position over the fireplace. On one of the bookcases stand the original plaster busts of Robert and Elizabeth by their friend the American sculptor, William Wentmore Story. Robert was modelled in Rome in 1861; Elizabeth was done posthumously and given to Browning as a tribute to his wife by Story in 1864.

One more stroke of luck occurred while furnishing was actually in progress. In the foreground of the Mignaty painting is a reclining steamer chair. Nothing similar had been found but, finding themselves with a spare moment, Landmark's furnishing's manager John Evetts and Christian Smith decided to visit the market in Piazza S. Spirito. There on a stall was a steamer chair, waiting to be transferred as speedily as possible to Casa Guidi.

Another important element in a successful recreation was the curtains. These were described by Elizabeth as a combination of white muslin (expensively

brought from England) and a crimson satin damask with yellow flowers, bought like the mirror from the French Chargé d'Affaires. A photograph existed of the damask, on the covering of a chair, which enabled a close match to be made. In the bedroom, the curtains were of muslin alone, as were Elizabeth's bed curtains, and this scheme has been reproduced. In the dining room and drawing room they were of both muslin and damask, crossed and looped. Here, a simplified version has been followed, using the damask alone.

No room is complete without books, however, especially this one. These, and the contents of the display cases in the dining room, have come from collections inherited from the Browning Institute, alongside the collection of relevant holiday reading always provided for its visitors by the Landmark Trust.

In the Brownings' day, **the terrace** overlooking the street that runs the length of the dining and drawing rooms was filled with pot plants and lemon trees, used for entertainment in the evenings and as a place for Elizabeth to sit on cooler days. It was from this balcony in 1847 that Elizabeth heard the child's song that inspired *Casa Guidi Windows*, and the following year witnessed the silent return of the Austrians, as also described in the poem.

In their early years until 1856, Robert wrote in the small antechamber adjacent to the dining room, while Pen, his wet nurse and the maid Elizabeth Wilson occupied two small rooms formed in today's kitchen. In 1856 the Brownings were able to incorporate the larger room beyond into their apartment and it became a sitting room and study for Robert, and sometimes a dining room. When the palazzo was sold after Pen's death in 1913, this room reverted to the adjacent apartment. In 2011, the yellow upholstered, cane chaise longue, upon which Elizabeth used to recline at 50 Wimpole Street, was donated to Eton by a

member of the Moulton Barrett family. Now re-covered and repaired, it is currently in Robert's study. The marble bust in this room is of Eliza Ogilvy, a Scotswoman who lived with her husband and children on the floor above from 1850. She too was a poet and Elizabeth corresponded with her when away; their letters were published in 1973 and Eliza also wrote a memoir about the Brownings.

The furnishings of Casa Guidi continue to evolve, just as they did during the Brownings' fourteen years of occupancy. New pieces are found that are a closer equivalent to the original, perhaps, and others may yet be given by generous Browning enthusiasts.

Extracts from Elizabeth's letters to her sisters on furnishing Casa Guidi (written in 1848-9 unless stated otherwise)

General - drawing room and dining room

'I reproach Robert you know with a drawer-plague - he was so fond of raining down drawers upon us - but when we came to compare my sofa-plague, and see which evil grew fastest - it was found the other day that we had eight sofas, and only six pairs of drawers. So now I have nothing to say. It's a comfort to have sofas everywhere - three spring ones in the drawing room, a little spring one in the bookroom - a large spring one in my bedroom - and others of an ordinary fashion sprinkled here and there. Three spring arm chairs to boot. So if you sit down anywhere, you drop into soft air.'

'And with it [the sideboard for the dining room] came a seat of carved wood ... for the drawing room [sketch]. Let your fancy set a crimson velvet cushion in it and a band of crimson velvet for the back behind ... no wood, observe, but just the velvet ... The two new sofas are not stuffed yet ... we mean to fill them with springs and cover them with crimson satin [bought by Robert from the cardinal's beds].'

'All arranged in the `graceful disorder' that Elizabeth loved in a room. 'We ... have the chimneypieces covered with crimson velvet, (which is everywhere done on the continent).'

'Why, Arabel, what made you think of sending me this splendid cushion? What it must have cost, in time, worsted and satin! Though it agrees so well with our room and looks so beautiful on the carved wood throne-sofa, still I can hardly keep from scolding you.'



'The clock [sent with other things from London and the `picture part' damaged en route] ... we shall have it repaired and hung in the dining room eventually. [Other things sent were her father's portrait, Arabel's cushion, `Henrietta's pretty inkstand ... just the thing wanted for the table'; `Trippy's butter stand, so pretty and useful'; Mr Kenyon's table `injured in the rail work' and another from Arabel `intact and has been close to my elbow ever since with the customary desk.'

[1857] 'Fanny Haworth sent me such a dear gift for new year's day ... a portrait of him [Pen] in oils, small size, - like him really, & very graceful. It is in an ornamental frame, and I have hung it over my particular table at the corner of the fireplace.'

### Curtains

'Ordered untold yards of English white mull muslin, enough to curtain the ten enormous windows and the bed. The new imported muslin was expensive (£10).'

[The tops of all the windows were of `crimson imitation of damask' bought from Baron de Poillet. Each dining-room window had also a red curtain crossed with another of white muslin [sketch]/ For the drawing room windows they used their cardinal's crimson satin with yellow flowers, the crimson curtains crossed by white muslin. The curtains in the bedrooms were all of white muslin with the crimson damask window tops.]

### Carpets

'A carpet is bought for this drawing room ... 31 feet long by 20 broad.'

'The carpet is down in the drawing room and looks very well. The walls are green, the chairs crimson, with white and gold frames, and the carpet mixes up all colours.'

#### E.B.'s bedroom

'My bedroom is really growing to perfection. You never saw a more comfortable and spacious one ... although I do still want a washstand, and the sofa, which belongs to the room, in from the drawing room.'

'For Papa's picture, that is to go to my bedroom without delay, as soon as the upholster comes ... though a little I tremble to look at the dear face again.'

'Also [in 1856] we have bought a new little bed for Penini (placed in our room) and a large glass, and a new wardrobe for me.'

#### Robert's dressing room

'If we want a `nursery' we shall want the room which Robert now uses for his dressing room, a delightful room with communication through to Wilson's sitting room, but inconvenient for him on account of the distance from me - the only inconvenience of the house. Our present kitchen is up a sort of ladder staircase (so narrow the steps are & Alessandro complains of the dimensions altogether). It would be the very thing for a dressing room - & then Alessandro might have his kitchen down stairs ... still this is not settled. For the present we shall manage as we are. I had rather planned to get Robert to dress in the little sitting room at the end of the suite of room. In London, you know, gentlemen often use the library as a dressing room, even though on a lower floor - but he is fond of the little sitting room, which is very prettily furnished, & doesn't like to throw coats & waistcoats about in it. '

'Since our return [in 1856] we have furnishing our large extra drawing room, [beyond the little sitting room, added to the lease in May 1850], which Robert uses and has used uncomfortably hitherto as a dressing room, and which he may now use besides, as a working-room & be at his ease. So that afterwards (when we let the house) there is a large bedroom in addition, to enable us to raise the rent.'

### Beds

'My bed is not come home yet. The framework we bought of Count Cottrell himself (he had bought it for himself & then preferred another for £1 10s.) - and he has ordered at the manufactory the mattresses, that we may have the best & with springs. So in the meantime a borrowed bed is put in my room. Wilson's bed is bought, curtains and all.'

'We have an iron bedstead ... besides Wilson's. But Robert wants a ducal bed for my room - all gilding and carving - we shall see.'

'Robert bought another bed, three days ago: - it was a necessity, as we had only Wilson's and our own ... and in case of illness, what were we to do, I wonder?... an iron bedstead as large as the large one provided already, including spring and other mattress, pillows, quilt, two blankets, and muslin curtains ... mull muslin ... and gilt ornaments for the top of the bed and the bedposts.

Altogether I really prefer it to our own bed - it is handsomer and better in every respect, except the pillows which are not of down nor as large - and perhaps you will remember that for our mattresses only, with the pillows, we paid about six pounds - they being manufactured for us & we grumbling a little at the price in spite of Count Cottrell's representations. .... Iron bedsteads are necessities here,

unless you have brass ... because wood is a harbour for things unclean, the very idea of which makes you uncomfortable. ' [This bed went into Robert's dressing room, which soon became Pen's nursery, so it probably moved to the final dressing room - would have been too large for the small sitting room which he used as a dressing room only for a short time]

### Balcony

'In our rooms we keep it [the temperature] at seventy-one or two, by shutting the green blinds, the windows and the shutters - all three quite close.'

[Then in the evening they would open the windows and sprinkle the terrace with cold water.]

[later 1850s] '... the splendid Datura on our terrace - trees covered with great white lilies, almost like the Victoria lily - and a lemon-tree with two ripening lemons - which Pen threatens to take for lemonade.'

Kate Field's description of Casa Guidi in an obituary in *Atlantic Monthly* 1861

Those who have known Casa Guidi as it was could hardly enter the loved rooms now and speak above a whisper. They who have been so favoured can never forget the square ante-room with its great picture and piano-forte, at which the boy Browning passed many an hour, - the little dining-room covered with tapestry, and where hung medallions of Tennyson, Carlyle and Robert Browning, - the long room filled with plaster casts and studies, which was Mr. Browning's retreat, - and dearest of all, the large drawing-room, where she always sat. It opens upon a balcony filled with plants, and looks out upon the old iron-grey church of Santa Felice. There was something about this room that seemed to make it a proper and especial haunt for poets. The dark shadows and subdued light gave it a dreamy look, which was enhanced by the tapestry covered walls and the old pictures of saints that looked out sadly from their carved frames of black wood. Large book-cases, constructed of specimens of Florentine wood-carving selected by Mr Browning, were brimming over with wise-looking books. Tables were covered with more gayly bound volumes, the gifts of brother authors. Dante's grave profile, a cast of Keats's face and brow taken after death, a pen-and-ink sketch of Tennyson, the genial face of John Kenyon, Mrs Browning's good friend and relative, little paintings of the boy Browning, all attracted the eye in turn, and gave rise to a thousand musings. A quaint mirror, easy-chairs and sofas, and a hundred nothings that always add an indescribable charm, were all massed in this room. But the glory of all, and that which sanctified all, was seated in a low arm-chair near the door. A small table, strewn with writing materials, books, and newspapers, was always by her side.