

# The Landmark Trust

## CASA GUIDI, PIAZZA SAN FELICE, FLORENCE

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, as well as of women and of children.

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.

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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 the public on Monday, Wednesday and Friday afternoons, 3-6 pm, from April to November.