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CASA GUIDI (FLORENCE, ITALY)

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In Florence, a few steps from Palazzo Pitti, a plaque signals the place where the English poets Elizabeth Barrett (1806-1861) and Robert Browning (1812-1889) lived for fourteen years, from 1847 to 1861, in a suite on the main floor of Palazzo Ridolfi Guidi. It is an exemplary house museum that integrates heritage preservation with literary tourism. Eton College owns it and has been managed in collaboration with the Browning Institute and the Landmark Trust since 1995.

Palazzo Ridolfi Guidi, located in Piazza San Felice 8, consists of two buildings erected in the 15th century. In the 17th century, they both came under the ownership of Admiral Camillo Guidi (c. 1635-1717), and in the late 18th century, they were renovated and merged into a single property. In the 1840s, the Guidi family divided the "piano nobile" (main floor) into two apartments. One of these, consisting of eight rooms, was leased by the Browning couple in 1847.

Following their secret marriage in St Marylebone Church, London, on September 12, 1846, and their daring escape from England, where her father opposed the wedding, poets Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning reached Italy on October 12, travelling by ship from Marseille to Genoa, accompanied by her maid Elizabeth Wilson and her cocker spaniel Flush. After a brief sojourn in Pisa, they arrived in Florence in April 1847 and initially lodged in a building at the corner of Via delle Belle Donne and Via dei Banchi (Paolini, 2013). In July 1847, they rented the apartment on the piano nobile of Palazzo Guidi (Sampson, 2021). But, apart from their extended travelling periods – including summer stays in Bagni di Lucca, winter stays in Rome, and trips to France and England – the Florentine apartment was always their home. Elizabeth renamed it "Casa Guidi" to imbue it with a sense of familiarity and warmth.

By her mid-teens, Elizabeth had endured a mysterious illness that caused her headaches and spinal pain, confining her to a state of disability and isolation in her London room on Wimpole Street. In the absence of effective treatment, she had been reliant on palliatives such as laudanum and morphine. However, Elizabeth's health improved in Italy thanks to the mild climate and newfound freedom.



After several miscarriages, she gave birth to a son in 1849 at the age of 43, a significant event given her condition. The boy was christened Robert Wiedemann Barrett (1849-1912) but was commonly known as "Pen".

When the Brownings resided in Florence, Casa Guidi became a focal point for the English community, the largest and most populous among the foreign communities that settled in Florence from the 1830s onward (Paolini, 2013). The gatherings were lively, with discussions on art, poetry, spiritualism and the Risorgimento movement. As authors of some of the most renowned poetic works of the 19th century, the Brownings attracted notable visitors, including Margaret Fuller, Jessie White Mario, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Frederick Tennyson, and the Trollopes. William Wetmore Story and Hiram Powers were also frequent guests. Elizabeth, in particular, formed a close friendship with Isa Blagden (c. 1816-1873), a prominent figure among the Anglo-Americans in Florence, whom they often visited at Villa Bellosguardo, located in the southwestern outskirts of Florence.

During their years at Casa Guidi, both Brownings developed an interest in Italian politics, advocating for Italian independence. However, while Robert did not incorporate this theme into his poetry (Whiting, 1911), Elizabeth articulated her support through her work *Casa Guidi Windows*. The poem (written 1848-49, published in 1951) endorsed the Risorgimento cause and was inspired by historical events she observed from her terrace at Casa Guidi. The first part of the poem refers to September 12, 1846, when Grand Duke Leopold II promised to support the Florentine civic guard, while the second part refers to May 2, 1849, when the Austrian army occupied Florence after Leopold II fled the city (Barnes, 2012).

Other intellectual accomplishments that flourished during her stay at Casa Guidi include the poem *Aurora Leigh* (1856), which addresses women's rights, while Robert composed various lyrics that appeared in the collection *Men and Women* (1855).

In 1861, Elizabeth's health deteriorated drastically, leading to her death on June 29. She was buried two days later in the Protestant English cemetery of Florence.

Following Elizabeth's death, Robert permanently left Florence, returning to London before relocating to Venice. Later, in 1893, their son Pen purchased Casa Guidi to transform it into a memorial for his parents. However, he passed away in 1912 before accomplishing this project. The establishment of a house museum was not achieved until 1971 when the New York Browning Society acquired the property from the then-owner, Laura Ellen Centaro née Hutchinson, an American admirer of the Brownings. The Browning Institute, a nonprofit organization, was founded to oversee the property's management. Seven of the original eight rooms were preserved. Although the original furniture was no longer present, the rooms, particularly the drawing room and the bedroom, were restored and refurnished based on descriptions and the detailed oil painting *Salon at Casa Guidi* (1861) that Robert commissioned from his friend George Mignaty following Elizabeth's death.

The house museum opened in the 1970s and hosted various events. In 1993, the necessity to attract additional funds led to its acquisition by Eton College, which involved the Landmark Trust, a British charity dedicated to the preservation of buildings of historic significance, to undertake the necessary



restoration work and onward management. Utilizing Mignaty's painting, the Brownings' correspondence, and the 1913 sale catalogue of Pen Browning's possessions, the four Victorian-style rooms were meticulously restored, alongside the addition of a modern kitchen and some bedrooms in the former servants' quarters. The restored furnishings included some original pieces, such as Pen's desk and drawers, busts of Elizabeth and Robert by William Wetmore Story, the gilt mirror in the drawing room, and the chaise longue Elizabeth had in her London home on Wimpole Street. Additionally, reproductions, including a copy of Mignaty's painting and brocade curtains closely matching those described by Elizabeth in her letters, were incorporated.

Since 1995, Eton College, the Landmark Trust, and the Browning Institute, have jointly managed Casa Guidi. The apartment is regularly open to visitors and admission is free. Of the seven rooms, visitors can tour the dining room, the drawing room, the bedroom, and Robert's study. The apartment is also available as a vacation home for short stays throughout the year. The Landmark Trust is responsible for opening to visitors and renting apartment rooms. Casa Guidi is an excellent example of its business model: taking over historic buildings at risk of dereliction, sensitively restoring them and then leasing them as vacation residences.

Two plaques on the façade of Palazzo Guidi commemorate the Brownings' residence, particularly Elizabeth's. The first plaque, affixed to the Via Maggio side in 1861, shortly after the poet's death and written by Niccolò Tommaseo (Blanchard Hope, 1973), references the "golden ring" ("aureo anello") forged between the English and Florentine communities. The plaque, written in Italian, reads: "Qui scrisse e morì / Elisabetta Barrett Browning / che in cuore di donna conciliava / scienza di dotto e spirito di poeta / e fece del suo verso aureo anello / fra Italia e Inghilterra. / Pone questa lapide / Firenze grata / 1861". (Translation: Here wrote and died / Elizabeth Barrett Browning / who combined in her woman's heart / the learning of a scholar and the spirit of a poet / and made of her poetry a golden ring / between Italy and England. / Grateful Florence / places this plaque / 1861).

A second plaque, commissioned by the then-owner Laura Ellen Centaro, was affixed to the Via Mazzetta side and unveiled on March 10, 1916 (Blanchard Hope, 1973). It features verses from *Casa Guidi Windows*.

Due to its association with the Brownings, Casa Guidi emerged as a significant backdrop in various 20th-century works of fiction, enhancing its status as a literary site. The most prominent example is *Flush. A Biography* (1933) by Virginia Woolf (1882-1941): a short novel that chronicles the life of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's cocker spaniel, interweaving its experiences with the poet's. Additionally, the English author Magdalen Nabb (1947-2007) subtly evoked Casa Guidi in *Death of an Englishman* (1981); without explicit mention, it is identifiable through its specific geographic location and the reference to a museum dedicated to an English poet (Mastroleo, 2021). Magdalen Nabb, who lived in Florence and set many of her novels there, was also one of the curators of Casa Guidi.

How to cite this dictionary entry: Mastroleo, A. (2024). Casa Guidi. In R. Baleiro, G. Capecchi & J. Arcos-Pumarola (Eds.). *E-Dictionary of Literary Tourism*. University for Foreigners of Perugia.

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