

## No 26 PIAZZA DI SPAGNA & THE BUILDING OF THE SPANISH STEPS

The building known today as 26 Piazza di Spagna was built around 1600, and so predates the construction of the Spanish Steps. It stands at the foot of the Pincio hill and in the late 16th century occupied an important position as Pope Sixtus V's urban planning created when new thoroughfares and this underdeveloped quarter underwent a building boom.

From the beginning the area was popular with artists and tourists. Many of the tall houses which gradually filled up the gaps in the grid plan of streets from about 1650 were either built as, or quickly became, *pensionari*, containing sets of apartments to be let out as lodgings. In 1627, Bernini redesigned the stone boat fountain, known as the Barcaccia, in the middle of the piazza.

In the 17th century, the Piazza di Spagna was most obviously the territory of the two countries which owned land around it: the Spanish ambassador to the Vatican ruled over one side from his Palazzo, and the French religious order of the Minims held jurisdiction over the other from the Convent of Trinità dei Monti, above the Piazza, and through them, so did the French ambassador. The Steps were built in 1723-6 to a design by Francesco de Sanctis, to link the convent with the square itself, as much because of to French ambitions to dominate the square, as to other more practical and aesthetic considerations. But it was Spanish that ultimately won supremacy, giving their country's name to the square and therefore to the Steps as well. The fact that the Steps were paid for by a Frenchman is usually forgotten. The Romans themselves referred to the Steps simply as La Scalinata. The Steps' triplicate repetitions are in deliberate reference to the Holy Trinity and the convent above.

Francesco de Sanctis redesigned the façades of Nos 25 and 26 at about the same time as the Steps were built, introducing the royal fleur-de-lys of France to the exterior and sunbursts on the plasterwork around the windows facing the Steps, in an assertion of French interests. However, inside No.26 the open boarded ceilings with their blue and white rosettes are a survival of the original house of c.1600 and after.

In the 18th and 19th centuries the Piazza di Spagna was equally often associated with the English, so much so that it was nicknamed the English Ghetto. In the 1740s a famous inn in the Piazza, Lo Scudo di Francia, actually changed its name to La Villa di Londra in the hope of attracting wealthy Grand Tourists (as the Hotel de Londre, it remained one of the best in Rome until it closed in the 1930s). By the 1820s, the English traveller could find the English Church, the Consul and the English bank no more than a few minutes' walk away, with a choice of English doctors and two 'English' grocers in the square itself.

By the early 1700s the two premises at Piazza di Spagna 26 were used as a tailor's and a coffee-shop. The first landlady who can definitely be associated with the house was Signora Angeletti. In 1815 the Rev. Robert Finch took rooms at No 26, paying 19 shillings a week for four elegantly furnished rooms. Signora Angeletti kept in touch with Mr Finch for a short time, and in 1816 informed him that rooms on the second floor were also to let and would suit two friends or a family. It was to this second floor apartment that the poet John Keats and his friend Joseph Severn came in November 1820. Keats, aged just 25, was terminally ill with tuberculosis and he died the same apartment in February 1821.

Later tenants included Dr Axel Munthe, the Swedish-born physician and psychiatrist who let the first floor and part of third floor for several years from 1892.

The Keats-Shelley Memorial Association bought 26 Piazza di Spagna in 1906 to preserve Keats' last lodgings. The museum dedicated to the life of the Romantic poets opened in 1909 in the second floor apartment in which Keats had died. Other flats in the building were let. In 1973, however, a law was passed freezing all rents in Rome. This meant that the letting income from the flats in the house would, before very long, fail to cover the running costs of this ancient building. In 1977, an appeal was launched to raise money for an endowment to give the Association a sound and independent financial base.

The Association approached the Landmark Trust, a British building preservation charity set up by Sir John Smith, who suggested that Landmark take on the Curator's flat on the third floor that was about to become empty. Landmark has leased the flat ever since, letting it for holidays and so contributing to the Keats-Shelley Memorial Association's maintenance costs for the building, as well as increasing public access.

### **Restoration by the Landmark Trust**

Landmark altered very little in the flat, apart from moving the bathroom partition to protect the painted ceiling above it from moisture. Plans were drawn up for this work in 1979 and permission was granted two years later, when work started under the guidance of the architect Enrico Gentiloni Silverj. Other work involved mainly renewing services, relaying floors, repairing windows, improving the kitchen and redecorating. The painted ceilings, which were flaking and stained in places by damp, were carefully restored by a very old and skilful craftsman, who also painted the trompe l'oeil panelling for the dados.

In the hall, some existing hexagonal tiles were relaid, with new cotto floors elsewhere. Finally, the flat was carefully furnished with Italian furniture, but with an eye to English comfort, rather in the manner of an Englishman who has lived all his life in Italy.

More recently, in 2002 the house's exterior was returned to the pale, lime-based colours of 18th-century Rome by the architect Roberto Einaudi.

*The Landmark Trust is a building preservation charity that rescues historic buildings at risk and lets them for holidays to pay for their future maintenance. The apartment at Piazza di Spagna sleeps up to 4 people. To book this or any other Landmark property for a holiday, please visit [www.landmarktrust.org.uk](http://www.landmarktrust.org.uk)*