

Re-Opening of The Browning Room at St Marylebone Parish Church

On 19th November 2022, St Marylebone Parish Church was able to reopen its newly refurbished Browning Room with a pair of lectures by Professor Danny Karlin, FBA, and Dr Sue Brown. Professor Karlin spoke about *The Ring and the Book* and Dr Brown about *Julia Wedgwood, the Unexpected Victorian* and Julia's relationship with Robert Browning.

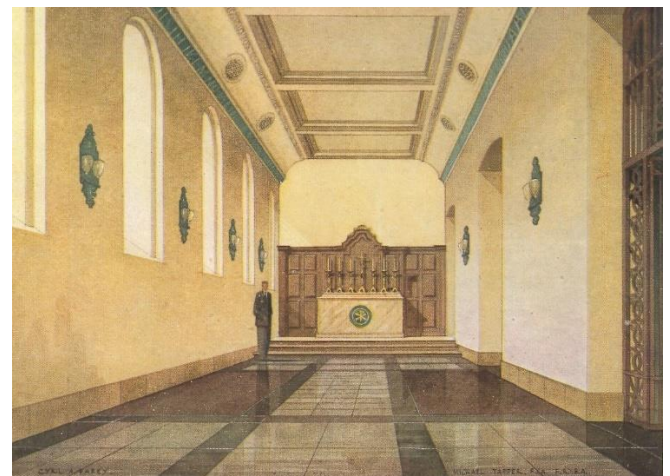
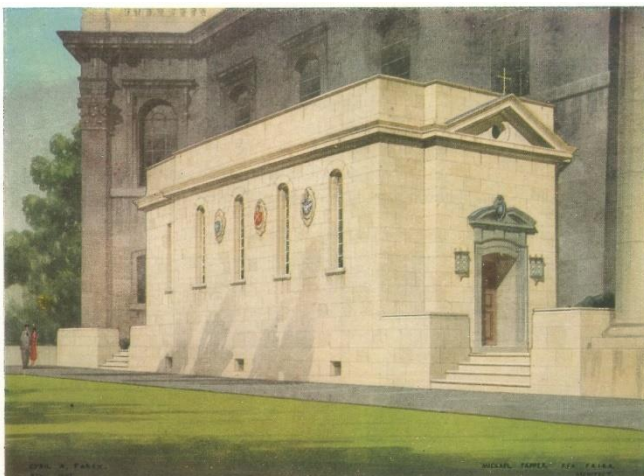


Lunch before the Launch

Professor Danny Karlin, FBA & DR Sue Brown

The Browning Room had been set up after the Second World War, by partitioning the north end of the parish church, to commemorate the marriage of Robert Browning to Elizabeth Moulton Barrett on 12th September 1846.

During the later 1930s, an ambitious scheme to erect a large Portland stone chapel in memory of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning to a design by Michael Tapper, FSA, FRIBA, had been proposed.



This is Tapper's text included in a fund-raising book in 1941.

St Marylebone Parish Church being on a north and south axis instead of the normal east and west, it is proposed to place the Browning Memorial Chapel on the east side as an addition to the main fabric.

Three of the lower windows of the east aisle of the Church would be opened up down to the floor level and filled in with wrought iron grilles, coloured and decorated, gates being formed in the northernmost giving access to the Chapel. The effect of this arrangement would permit a view of the Chapel through the grilles from the Church, whilst the church would be flooded with light from the Chapel windows, adding considerable interest to the Church itself.

Externally, the treatment of the chapel is in the traditional classical manner in order to conform with Hardwicke's classical church, with Portland stone as the building material. The only enrichment suggested is three shields bearing the arms or emblem emblazoned, as the case may be, of the Diocese of Canterbury, London, and the Patron Saint, which would be placed on the side wall between the windows.

Internally the walls would be plastered and coloured with a cream wash except the east end behind the altar, which would be panelled. The floor would be of light and darker brown marble laid to a pattern. The altar would be of marble.

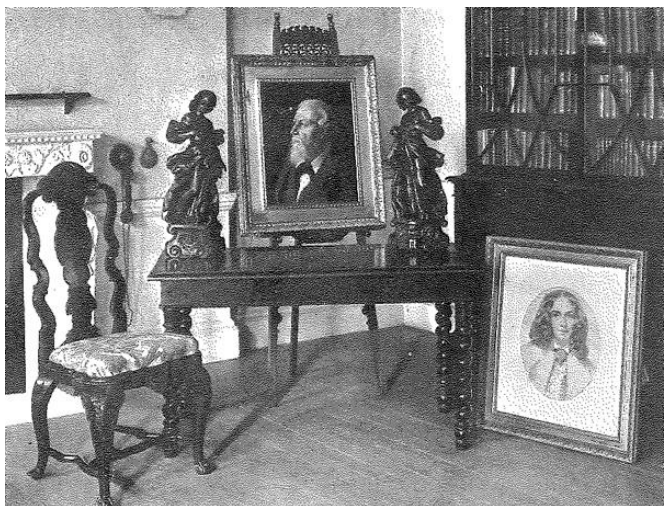
Suitable inscriptions from the poems of both Robert and Elizabeth Browning should be placed internally on each side of the Chapel and running the whole length. If these were executed in raised letters gilt on a blue ground, a touch of colour would be introduced which would be of extreme value against the cream-coloured walls and would give a very rich effect.

The cost of the proposed chapel as designed by Mr. Michael Tapper to commemorate the centenary of the marriage of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett was estimated at £15,000 and the scheme was sponsored by Mr. John Masefield (Poet Laureate); the Poetry Society, with the approval of the President General, His Excellency Field Marshal Viscount Wavell; the Earl of Lytton, President of the Royal Society of Literature; Lord Howard de Walden, the Crown Churchwarden of St. Marylebone; Lord Kennet, the PCC Treasurer; Sir Frederic Kenyon, Secretary of the British Academy; Sir Stanley Marchant, Principal of the Royal Academy of Music; Sir Vincent Baddeley, a kinsman of Robert Browning; Mr. Henry Souttar and Mr. R. J. M. Collins, Churchwardens of St. Marylebone. The Hon. John G. Winant, the American Ambassador to the Court of St. James was also a patron.

It was hoped that people all over the world who were lovers of the Brownings' poetry might have taken a share in setting up this permanent memorial, and that many who had married at St. Marylebone would also have contributed. Supporters of the scheme were asked to send their donations to Lord Kennet, the Parochial Church Council Treasurer, c/o The Midland Bank, 19 Marylebone High Street, London, W.1..

After the war, during which the Borough of St Marylebone, including the parish church and the surrounding area, had suffered enormous damage, the overly-ambitious scheme was doomed.

Instead, once the parish church had been repaired and reopened, a Browning Chapel was established in what is now the Browning Room.



In this room, in addition to an altar and communion rails, one could find several pieces of furniture which had belonged to the Brownings including, a table from Casa Guidi, a chair from Little Venice, and carved wooden figures from Ca' Rezzonico, Pen Browning's Palazzo in Venice. Also housed in the new chapel were a pair of Venetian majolica (Bassanese majolica) plaques, a gift from Robert Browning to Professor Furnivall (with an accompanying letter) dated 1884. Sadly all the furniture, apart from the two majolica plaques was stolen in the mid-1980s and remains unrecovered.

The 1887 Bronze medallion of Robert Browning by Gusatv Natorp (1836 – 1908), which had been exhibited at The Royal Academy, still hangs in The Browning Room and is accompanied by a plaque of Elizabeth by Nicholas Dimpleby, who also created the nearby Bronze medallion of the prolific poet and hymn writer Charles Wesley. The east window was the gift of The Browning Society of Winipeg and is in *Festival of Britain* style. It was designed and executed by Harry Stammers (1902 - 1969) and represents the figures of Life and Death (holding a poppy the symbol of death together with a daisy, the symbol of resurrection), the Holy Spirit, in the form of a dove (the music of poetry), and a wedding ring.

Also hanging in the Browning are two watercolour paintings of the parish church, contemporary with the Brownings, a facsimile of the Browning's marriage certificate (the original is still in the possession of the parish church), a watercolour by Euphrasia Fanny Haworth (1802 – 1883) of 'Pen', the Browning's only child, and a presentation photographic copy of the portrait of 1859 of Elizabeth by Field Talfourd (1815 - 1874) made by James Anderson in Rome in 1859. Both pictures are the gift of Elizabeth Jordan, a descendant of Henry Moulton Barrett.

In the nave of the parish church the altar before which Robert and Elizabeth were married can be seen at the south end of the east aisle. The altar and the accompanying painting by Benjamin West, PRA, were reunited and restored in 2012.

