

THE BROWNING ROOM ST MARYLEBONE PARISH CHURCH

The present church was designed by Thomas Hardwicke and consecrated in 1817. It has many literary associations, including Lord Byron, who was baptised in the church, as was Charles Dickens' son (described in his novel *Dombey and Son*) and, of course, the marriage of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett, who lived in nearby Wimpole Street with her father and siblings.

Owing to Mr Barrett's opposition to his children marrying, the service was held in secret, witnessed only by Robert's cousin and Elizabeth's maid, on 12 September 1846. After the ceremony, the couple did not meet again until a week later when they left for Italy to begin a new life together. To her sister Arabella, Elizabeth described her and Robert's parting at the church door: "Always it does make us laugh, for instance to think of the official's (the man with the wand in the church) attitude and gesture of astonishment, as he stood at the church door and saw bride and bridegroom part on the best terms possible and go off in separate flies."

Extensive alterations were made to the church in 1885 and, owing to bomb damage during the Second World War, in 1949. It was during this later period that a section of the back of the church was used to create the Browning Chapel to commemorate the Brownings' marriage. (The marriage register is preserved in the church archives). The stained glass window, symbolising the love and marriage of the two poets, was presented by the Browning Society of Winnipeg, Canada. The Browning Room is now used for meetings and social activities.

BAS RELIEFS

The bronze bas relief of **Robert Browning** was sculpted by his friend, the artist Gustav Natorp, in 1887/8; it was cast in Paris by M.F. Liard. Browning wrote to Natorp in 1888:

"My dear Natorp, - I am happy to be able to inform you that your Medallion – Portrait is accepted by the Royal Academy: I heard this good news which I never doubted of hearing sooner or later, from Mr Boehm (Joseph Edgar Boehm, Sculptor), whom I met at dinner last evening. He spoke of it in high terms of praise both as a portrait and a work of art, - and art of peculiarly difficult character. As you are aware, this opinion agrees entirely with my own; for I regard the likeness – so far as I can judge of it – as one of the best hitherto taken; while the execution strikes me as singularly good.

I hope the work will be well placed, and in a favourable light – all that will be required to ensure the success you deserve. Yours truly ever, Robert Browning”

It was exhibited in the Salon of Paris as well as in the Royal Academy, London. Several bas reliefs were cast. The present example was given to the church by Mrs Isabel Smith, the daughter of Browning’s publisher, George Murray Smith, around the time of the centenary of the poets’ marriage.

To commemorate the 200th anniversary of her birth (1806), the Browning Society and St Marylebone Parish Church commissioned Nicholas Dimbleby to sculpt a bronze bas relief of **Elizabeth Barrett Browning** as a companion piece to her husband’s portrait. It was dedicated at a special service in the church on 12 September 2006, the 160th anniversary of their marriage.

For further information, please visit:

www.browningsociety.org

www.stmarylebone.org