

VILLA ROSEBERY – THE PARK

Villa Rosebery extends over a surface of 66,056 sq m and stretches down a declining gradient towards the sea, with a maximum height difference of 40 metres.

The lower part of the park hosts the two buildings facing the little port called "Casina a mare" ("Beach Lodge") and "Piccola foresteria" ("Small Guest House"). The higher part of the park instead hosts the "Grande foresteria" ("Large Guest House"). In the northernmost part of the park stands the Palazzina Borbonica, the oldest building on the grounds featuring several state rooms.

The rest of the premises is formed by a park divided by roads lined with centuries-old pine trees and monumental cypress trees, intertwined with flower beds and hedges mainly consisting of aromatic plants typical of the Mediterranean maquis like laurel, boxwood, myrtle, mastic and Phyllirea. The flower beds are rich with palm trees of different species, Washingtonia, Phoenix and Chamaerops and beautiful specimens of *cycas revoluta*. Also succulent plants are numerous with different types of aloe and *Agave Americana*, as well as exotic plants like the philodendron selloum and the *Strelitzia Nicolai*, with its very particular white flowers.

The seafront walk from the "Peschiera" (fish pond) to the border with the Barraco Estate is livened up with the delightfully perfumed flowers of the *pittosporum tobira*, espaliered bougainvillea, oleanders, hibiscus and other multi-coloured flowering plants that well adapt to the mild Neapolitan climate.

The Villa Rosebery Park has significantly changed over the decades. Its originally rigid layout, due to the presence of cultivated plots, was gradually replaced with a more freely designed composition thanks to the creation of a grandly elaborate garden during the reign of the Bourbon dynasty.

It was subsequently redesigned in the fashion of English gardens, removing all geometric patterns and further characterising the park's architecture, especially in the layout of the flower beds, which included a mixed border of shrubs, herbaceous perennials and annual plants planted along the edges of lawns according to a more harmoniously natural style.

The flower beds around the *Palazzina Borbonica* unfold in sinuous shapes and feature camellias and strawberry bushes against a backdrop of centuries-old holm oaks. The park's romantic atmosphere is heightened by the neoclassical temple that was erected in the background.

The History

The blue-ribbon real estate on Capo Posillipo originated in the beginning of the 19th Century and was acquired the name of "Villa Rosebery" in 1897. The estate was created by Joseph von Thurn, a brigadier in the Bourbon dynasty's fleet of the Austrian Navy, when he purchased and merged several adjacent plots of land in 1801. Count von Thurn had a little residence with a private chapel and garden built in the higher and most panoramic plot of land and designated the rest of the estate for agricultural use, with vast vineyards and orchards leased to tenant farmers. In the decade from 1806 to 1816, Count von Thurn's estate was confiscated by the French administration during the temporary destitution of the Bourbon reign of Naples by Napoleonic troops. It was subsequently acquired by the House of Bourbon, once it was re-instated to power, and returned to the Count in 1817.

After having received compensation for the economic damage caused by the requisition, Count von Thurn decided to sell the Villa in 1820.

The value of the estate was growing in those days because of the long road that was being built on the Posillipo Hill, connecting Mergellina to Bagnoli. The new road was designed to provide ease of access, also to horse-drawn carriages, to an impervious area which was mainly reached by sea.

The new road was also in line with the plan to facilitate the extension of the city of Naples westward, originally developed by Ferdinand IV of Bourbon, most of which was implemented by Joachim Murat. When the Princess of Gerace and her son Agostino Serra di Terranova purchased the Capo Posillipo estate, the area was already well-equipped to be transformed from a primarily agricultural estate into a residential villa.

In fact, the agricultural use of the land, which could yield a sizable yearly income, was not completely abandoned although some of the facilities that had been exclusively used by the farmers up to then were refurbished to become a residential villa. The restructuring work on the estate, which was renamed "Villa Serra Marina", was entrusted to the twin architects Stefano and Luigi Gasse, who focused their renovation work on the Belvedere manor (now called "Palazzina Borbonica"), transforming it into an elegant residence for the new owners, and on the so-called "Casino Gaudioso", a small country house located at the southernmost border of the estate, which was adequately enlarged and refurbished to accommodate a large guest house. More limited renovation work was carried out on the two little houses near the beach, which continued to be let to tenant farmers. Therefore the present-day layout of the estate is mainly owed to the Serra di Terranova family. When the Princess and her son Agostino died, in 1857 their heirs sold the property to Luigi of Bourbon, a commander of the Neapolitan Navy, and from that time on

the villa was renamed "la Brasiliana" ("The Brazilian") in honour of Luigi's wife who was the sister of the Emperor of Brazil.

The new owner decided to fence off the whole estate, as it was often used as a trysting place. This definitely put an end to its original agricultural use and most of the farmland was turned into a tree-lined park fitted with a little sea port. In the summer of 1860, Luigi of Bourbon's ambiguous behaviour in the face of Garibaldi's encroachment got him exiled to France and the "Brasiliana" was sold.

It was purchased by Gustavo Delahante, an extremely wealthy businessman, who kept it until 1897 without doing much work on it. In 1897, bearing testimony to the great interest shown by foreigners, and especially Englishmen, for the villas on Posillipo Hill, the estate was purchased by Lord Rosebery, an eminent British politician who had been appointed prime minister of Britain between 1894 and 1895. He purchased the villa after temporarily retiring from political life in order to dedicate his time to the study of history and literature. Villa Rosebery thus became a secluded and private place, closed to the Neapolitan high society and open to scholars and to a handful of the English lord's close friends. However, having been long deprived of the income from its agricultural activities, the upkeep of the villa started to become a great burden for the English lord, especially after he decided to return to active politics, and therefore he decided to sell it. Being the gentleman he was, he agreed to donate it to the British government in 1909.

The villa was then only sporadically used as a holiday resort for British ambassadors to Italy, which convinced the British government to give it away to the Italian State after a few years had passed.

The gift deed sanctioning the transfer of the property to the Italian State was signed in 1932 by the Ambassador of the United Kingdom and by Benito Mussolini. Several proposals were made to destine the villa for public use but they were never pursued so the villa was finally made available to the royal family of Italy for their summer holidays.

So in 1934, at the birth of Crown Prince Umberto's first baby, the residence was renamed "Villa Maria Pia" after the new-born princess. When Umberto was appointed lieutenant of the Realm in June 1944, Victor Emmanuel III settled in the villa with his wife Elena and lived there until he abdicated and was exiled to Egypt on 9 May 1946. The villa was subsequently shortly confiscated by the allied forces in 1946 and then recovered by the Italian State and given for use to the Air Force Academy until 1949. It was then left empty and in a state of abandonment for several years until a law passed in 1957 included it among the real-estate property of the Presidency of the Republic, restoring it to a new life.