



Villa Borghi: *how* it all began



Villa Borghi's many centuries of history are intimately bound up with the story of the family which made it one of the most beautiful villas in the Varese area in its day. With its setting at the top of the town, it was built on the ruins of an older settlement whose presence is documented as far back as the 12th century. It owes its present appearance to renovation work by the Borghi family in the second half of the 19th century. Work commissioned to engineer Paolo Cesa Bianchi started from the pre-existing manor house to create an Eclectic style building in a double-T shaped plan, giving it a timeless monumental charm

The fascinating history of the Borghi family and its monumental Varese villa began, like every good fairy tale, a long time ago.

We know that the Varano fief passed through the hands of the archbishop of Milan and changed hands many times over the centuries until it was acquired by Marquis Trecchi of Cremona.

In 1744 Manfredo Antonio Trecchi sold the villa to Giulio Visconti Borromeo Arese and its new owners then sold it to Zaccaria Borgo, a wealthy merchant from Gallarate and once Marquis Pompeo Litta Visconti Arese's land concessionaire.

Zaccaria obtained the estate on a permanent lease. This meant that he could use the land on payment of a rent but with the potential to buy it for a sum of money amounting to the yearly rent multiplied by fifteen. This is how the property came into Zaccaria's hands

Zaccaria had considerable business flair. His career began with an apothecary's workshop in Gallarate which he soon supplemented with a wholesale silk shop. This made him rich enough to be able to afford to send his son Antonio Maria to study law at the University of Pavia and after graduation the latter then worked as a lawyer.

Varano town council's land survey, kept in the Varese State archive, confirms that Zaccaria was the owner of a manor house built from an earlier

Trecchi family house in 1760. He had use of the land whose rent he paid. This estate comprised the manor house, the park, the bailiff's house and a further rented building, a total of 204 hectares.

At the time Varano was a modest rural town. Its inhabitants lived from farming and fishing. Its name, from the Celtic 'Var' (meaning water in English, wasser in German) marks it out as a place near water and numerous finds from the Brabbia marsh area confirm the site's prehistoric origins.

Zaccaria was already rich, as owner of the Boffalora farmhouse, Cuirone mill, the Brabbia marshes, and the adjoining rural contracts including lake fishing rights.

Varese state land transfer registers enable us to retrace events after Zaccaria's death.

The head of the family left around 204 hectares of land worth 10,860 scudi to two groups of heirs, i.e. his son from his first marriage,

Fedele, by then a rich man in his own right having made money in

business and from a flourishing company he set up making and selling silk on the land left him by his father, and Antonio, his son from his second marriage to Giulia Cane.

When he died on 5 December 1795 Fedele left his heirs a legacy of 150,000 Milanese lire and a consolidated profitable business. His six sons retained shared ownership of this until 1806 when diverging interests led them to divide up the estate.

How it all began.



Portrait of Zaccaria Borgo with his young son, Fedele (work conserved at Villa Borghi).

Three of Fedele's sons - Carlo, Francesco and Pasquale (1781-1836) - followed in their father's footsteps, dividing up the bulk of the Varano real estate between them while the heirs of Antonio, Zaccaria's other heir, legally represented by Luigi Borgo, inherited a smaller land estate measuring 965 perticas. But this latter estate played an especially important role in Varano's history, as we will see. Count Vincenzo Dandolo, friend to Napoleon Bonaparte, came onto the scene in the first two decades of the 19th century, having taken refuge in Varese after the return of the Austrians in 1815, following on from the Treaty of Vienna.

The count had a great deal of money to invest and used some of it to buy up the share of Antonio's descendants. All these events were closely interwoven with the part of the estate which remained with the other group of heirs, Fedele's descendants. The estate bought by Vincenzo Dandolo probably comprised part of the area the villa was later built on, though we cannot be certain of this, given the difficulties involved in making sense of the documents of the day.

In any case it made very little difference, because 21 years later the whole estate ended up in the lands of the Borghi family. It was Tullio Dandolo, Vincenzo's son, who sold the Varano lands to Francesco Borghi fu Fedele. The family's surname was now recorded as Borghi rather than Borgo. The deed in question dates to 3 July 1838.

If it was Zaccaria who began building the family's assets, buying up houses and land, and his son

Fedele who expanded the family silk business abroad,

it was his grandson Pasquale who realised that the time was ripe to convert the family's industrial interests from silk to cotton.

This significant change took place in the decade from 1806 to 1817, partly as a result of crisis in the silk sector and partly because of the Napoleonic blockade which stopped English goods being imported and generated interesting market opportunities. He founded what was to become Italy's second mechanical cotton spinning plant, in chronological terms, with the only earlier business in this sector being a satin and corduroy factory set up in 1780 by the Ponti family.

Factory aside, together with his brothers Pasquale owned vegetable gardens, fields, woods and houses in the area of the modern day Villa Borghi park including considerable meadowland descending to Lake Comabbio and farms in Ternate, Biandronno and Corgeno. All this land served to ensure the family a supply of peat from its marshes and a constant supply of timber to supply the heat the factory needed.

Pasquale, together with his brothers Carlo (1779 -1827) and Francesco (1781-1851) continued their father's work in the cotton factory,

dividing up the various responsibilities. Carlo lived in Milan and managed the firm's

financial affairs, Francesco was its business manager

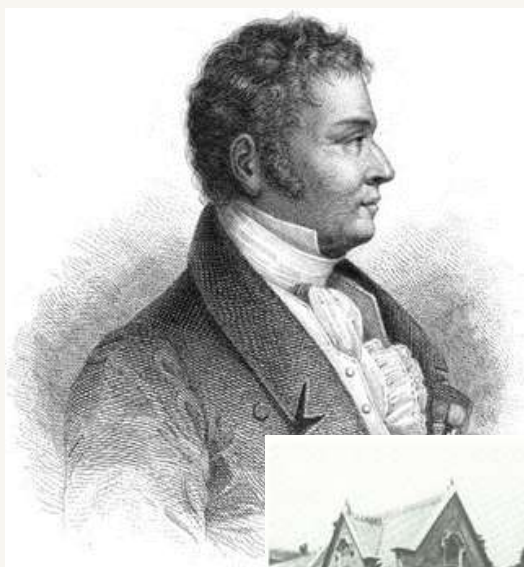
responsible for everything from buying raw materials to sales of the yarn and Pasquale

supervised manufacturing developments. The other brothers went into alternative work.

Pasquale died in 1836, two years after his only son Zaccaria. In 1838 his brother Francesco brought the assets divided up by the heirs together, buying up again nearly one thousand perticas of land that the Luigi Borgo branch of the family had sold off twenty one years earlier. In 1836 Pasquale's widow Giuseppina Mazzucchelli summoned her nephew Luigi, son of her uncle Carlo Borghi and Rosa Alberti, to help her manage the firm.

In the early years of the 19th century the Lombard cotton industry was still largely based on piece work at home, with peasant farmers working on hand looms kept in their homes in the breaks in their farm work.

Luigi had a clear vision of the potential of this small factory and began modernising its spinning machinery with looms bought specially in Alsace. He also bought one of the first Self-Acting looms from England to perform a two-fold role, both stretching the yarn and twisting it at the same time. In 1841 Mechanical spinning was introduced to the factory: the first in Italy.



Above, Count Vincenzo Dandolo (1758-1819); below the Borghi villa, in via Moscova in Milan.



Luigi Borghi was born on 27 June 1812 in Gallarate to Maria Rosa Alberti, from an eminent Gallarate family, and Carlo Borghi, Ricettoria assistant and brother of Pasquale, the pioneer who converted the family business from silk to cotton, setting up a new factory in Varano.

Luigi had five sons but one of these, Fedele, had already died and he was the family member who possessed the entrepreneurial talent. Giuseppe (1801-1855) was a lawyer, Paolo (1817-1876) an engineer,

Giovanni (1814-1864) a philanthropist who took no part in the business and Giulio (1810-1873) was pursuing a political career and later became the first member of parliament for Gavirate for the Kingdom of Sardinia and representative of the Milan provincial council for the Gallarate district. His uncle Francesco, on the other hand, despite having brought the family's assets together, had retired from the business after narrowly escaping an assassination attempt.

Luigi's was a clear vision and his character a strong one, since childhood.

In 1833 he was accused of plotting and high treason on the grounds of his part in spreading word of the insurrectionist ideas of the Giovine Italia movement - founded in Marseilles in 1891 by Mazzini - in Busto Arsizio and Gallarate and arrested on 5 October at his Gallarate home by lieutenant gendarme Pavesi.

Interrogated by the commissar who hoped to make him give up the names of his friends, he held out with incredible courage and denied everything: "I'm 22 years old, my father Carlo works in finance, my mother is called Rosa Alberti and I work in marking in my family business.

I know neither Albera nor Mozzoni nor Bono." Luigi protested his innocence, then, and was released without punishment but he was a true hothead and had solemnly promised to foment rebellion against Austria in the area above Milan. He was a young dreamer whose story is closely bound up with those of the other patriots who worked as Mazzini's intermediaries in Lombardy.

With the Austrians occupying their homeland these were restless and dangerous years for the Lombards.

Luigi detested foreign occupation and was, together with his friend Guenzati, cousin of that Bono who had already got him into serious trouble once before, one of the first to join Mazzini's Giovine Italia. He thus joined the ranks of the plotters working for Lombard rebellion.

Luigi Borghi was luckier than most of his friends and one of very few of them to be freed. He got away with a requirement not to leave the Gallarate-Milan-Varano area, a miracle, as the trial ended with nineteen death sentences and one life sentence.

After the 1838 armistice Luigi was elected to important political office. But after the provisional government parenthesis and the end of the

first war of independence marked by Piedmontese defeat in Novara in March 1849 and the return of the Austrians under Marshal Radetzky, Luigi went into exile. A cruel twist of fate had the Austrian command taking up residence in the house of the Borghi brothers in Gallarate.



Left, Luigi Borghi; right his brother, Giulio Borghi, member of parliament.

In 1849 Luigi was living abroad, in France and England, with his brother-in-law Andrea Ponti who shared his business interests and progressive creed. He took advantage of his time abroad to find out more about new textile developments and bought a forty-horsepower steam engine at the London exhibition, a technical gem. He had it sent to the Varano factory where it replaced the company's hydraulic energy plant in 1851.

On his return to Italy after the armistice he worked to modernise the firm. with a view to reducing its energy costs

He increased peat extraction from the Brabbia marshes and set up a firm to import raw cotton directly from New Orleans, one of the main production hubs, in conjunction with other sector firms such as Candiani, Sioli and Dell'Acqua.

But his political troubles were by no means over. In 1853 the military command published an edict summoning forty three people to appear before a war tribunal within three months on a charge of high treason. The names of brothers Luigi and Giuseppe Borghi were both on the list and both naturally had to leave the country once again.

It is not known how Luigi managed to return home the following year, with these charges hanging over him, but he was indeed in Gallarate in 1854 and by 1858 he was performing public office in the town council at precisely the moment at which Fieldmarshal Radetsky was ruling Lombardy with an iron fist.

Perhaps the family's good name helped in some way, the fact that the firm employed a great many workers. At any rate the imperial authorities did not pursue this young hothead.

In 1859 Luigi was one of those who worked to help Giuseppe Garibaldi land in Sesto Calende. He made his carriage available to commissar Giuseppe La Farina and took him to a number of meetings, supplying the troops with board and lodging. He may even have put the general himself and some of his Alpine hunters up at his villa.

A spring full of hope was followed by a bleak winter: on 23 December 1859 Luigi suddenly fell ill

and died. He was only 47. It was an unexpected end

to a short, adventurous, anti-establishment life.



Left, Andrea Ponti (1821-1888), portrait conserved in Ville Ponti di Biumo Sup. (Varese); right, the Borghi factory, during 19th century enlargement work



Like a comet Luigi's life left a trail of light in its wake with its alternating daring escapes abroad, captured by Radetsky's police and periods of feverish activity at the Varano factory.

The Lombard textile industry's golden age was characterised by 'domestic' capitalism which regenerated via kinship bonds. Its business families were careful to intermarry, forming full-blown clans such as those of the Ponti, Turati, Borghi and Cantoni families.

Multi-branched families recur in the stories of these clans, with the lives of their sons, grandsons and sons-in-law being stories of rapid success, shrewd business dealings,

lengthy apprenticeships leading to experience abroad before they rose through the ranks, became partners and took over firms.

Theirs was visible, sometimes ostentatious, wealth and social status. The riches of these mid-19th century Lombard industrial families were often prodigious. Some of them bought shares in rival firms, such as the Borghi, Ponti and Turati families who bought into the Cantoni cotton factory.

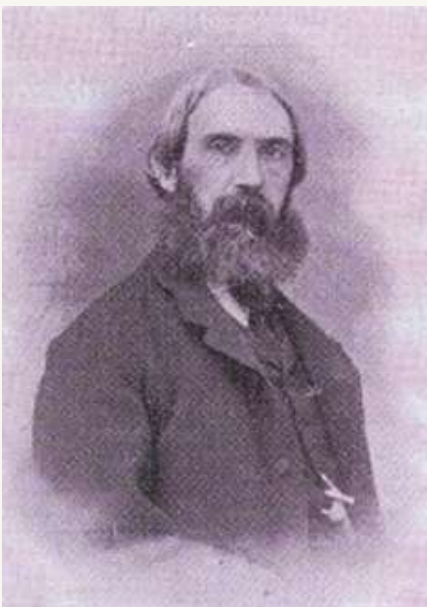
Textile entrepreneurs of this sort also often invested their money in emerging firms in sectors which promised high profits, such as Pirelli in the embryonic rubber sector.

The family system was consolidated. Kinship bonds branched out and interwove. And this was when a totally new phenomenon emerged: many entrepreneurs felt duty-bound to guarantee a future for dozens of their workers with families to support. Their aim was to give them stability in the family industrial tradition. In Crespi d'Adda and Varano paternalism took the form of complex workers' housing projects built near factories, full-blown worker citadels equipped with nurseries, orphanages and charitable bodies for the local council's social services and skilled staff. It was obviously not a matter of social responsibility alone. Ensuring loyal workers was also a motivating factor in such decisions. The Borghis also frequented the English club, *Unione*, set up in 1841 together with the era's industrial and financial elite, including the Amman, Mylius,

Cantoni, Ponti, Binda, Bocconi, Falck, Feltrinelli and Lepetit families, where they contributed to creating a capitalist system in which powerful entrepreneurial families changed the face of whole regions with their investments.

The family now wanted to increase the social status which went along with its power and set to work on the Varano villa, commissioning engineer Paolo Cesa Bianchi to work on adapting it to its changed circumstances with radical work in the 1860 -79 period. Work on its Milan villa was commissioned to architect Emilio Alemagna.

After Luigi Borghi's sudden death in 1859, his brothers Paolo, Giulio and Giovanni were obliged to take over the company and set to work reclaiming the marsh lands. With a deed dating to 22 August 1864, the Pasquale e Fratelli Borghi firm bought up lakes Ternate and Monate from Duke Antonio Litta Visconti Arese who also sold Lake Biandronno to engineer Giuseppe Quaglia (30 November 1864) and Lake Varese to Cavaliere Andrea Ponti (8 August 1865) at almost the same time.



Engineer. Paolo Borghi (1817-1876)

A family story

Luigi's generation began to thin out. Giovanni Borghi died on 19 February 1864 in Milan. He was fifty and, as Giovanni Caprotti wrote in an obituary published on the 25th of February in Gazzetta di Milano "he is the third brother to die before his time in a family devoted to business and charity". The company thus passed to his brother Paolo, engineer and the town's mayor.

Then, when Paolo died in 1876, the family business was inherited by his nephews Napoleone,

Antonio and Pio, the three sons of patriotic Luigi and Orsola Maria Ponti.

Napoleone (Milan 1845-1882) studied at Milan Polytechnic and was a promising young man: polite, affable, with noble ideals and a strong character. His family and friends called him Napo. He inherited his father's patriotic spirit and, at the age of just twenty, in 1866, broke off his studies to enlist with Garibaldi's army. Ten years later he

took over the Varano factory with his brother

Pio.

The third brother, Antonio, was a talented architect but he died young, in 1877, leaving a collection of amphorae, Imperial and Republican era Roman coins and prehistoric finds unearthed during rebuilding work at the villa and reclamation work at the Brabbia marshes.

Napoleone showed entrepreneurial flair and energy right away, extending the factory, equipping it with modern machines and turning a profit even in the face of the financial crisis then threatening Italian manufacturing. He also continued reclamation work in the areas around the town to improve the lives of its inhabitants. This was now one of the family's key principles.

In 1874 he married the beautiful Giulia Minonzio, with whom he had two children, Maria and Luigi. Giulia (Castellanza 1848 - Milan 1933) was the daughter of Carlo Minonzio and Virginia Cantoni, descendant of one of the Lombard textile industry's most powerful families.

In 1881 he agreed to act as Chairman of the Board of Directors of the new Cantoni cotton factory, investing a founding sum of one hundred thousand lire in it and acting as advisor to a national linen and hemp factory and other industrial firms. Everything seemed to be going well when, on the evening of 1 November 1882, incredible news shocked Milan. There had been a terrible hunting accident.

Napoleone Borghi had accidentally shot himself with his own gun as he was travelling by carriage. The bullet hit him in the hand and face and although Napo fought determinedly for life, he died seven days later.

The following year another eminent member of the family died early, a man known not only for his entrepreneurial skills but also for his artistic talent. Carlo Borghi (1851-1883), son of lawyer Giulio, member of parliament in the Kingdom of Sardinia, and Margherita Rosnati. He was Napoleone and Pio's cousin, like them grandson of the company's founder Pasquale and his brother was Fedele, who we will meet later in this family saga. Carlo was an unusual man. In line with family tradition he had started life with law studies at Pavia University but a precocious poetic talent had led him to prefer the world of journalism and the Scapigliatura intellectual circle which revolved around Cletto Arrighi and Emilio Praga. He helped to found two newspapers in 1882, Guerin Meschino with Luigi Conconi, Alberto Carlo Pisani Dossi and Luca Beltrami and the moderate newspaper, Italia.



Left, Carlo Minonzio in a portrait dating to the mid-19th century; right Napoleone Borghi (1845-1882).

Shortly before his death he was immortalised in an original portrait by Luigi Conconi and a bronze bust by Giuseppe Grandi di Ganna.

After Napoleone's death it was the turn of his brother Pio, two years younger than him (Gallarate 1847- Milan 1900) to transform the Varano factory by mechanising it, earning him the epithet, the 'moderniser'. At Napo's tomb Pio promised to look after his family and, true to his word, he married his brother's widow Giulia Minonzio in 1885 and devoted himself to bringing up their children Luigino and Maria (future Marchioness of Soragna) as if they were his own.

In his free time Pio liked to paint bucolic rural scenes on his own in the park with his brushes and palette and he also spent a great deal of time on his preferred hobby, numismatics. He was a good amateur photographer and a skilled oenologist and planted American vines on his land. A now consolidated family tradition has it that he also worked on the town's urban plan,

giving Varano's town plan a better organised feel. The expansion of the factory transformed the town. Pio had a hostel built for the Sacra Famiglia sisters, to accommodate female workers, and a dormitory for male workers working at the plant the whole week. In the face of more rapid expansion of the cotton factory, at a later date, he also built detached houses for office staff and department heads and spacious housing for workers.

In 1864 the family bought up lakes Ternate and Monate and made them into further economic resources, setting up fish farms there in 1898, and thus repopulating them. He entrusted engineer Cesare Besana with managing these and the latter introduced new European and American fish species to the lakes: largemouth bass, carp and coregone in addition to species already present such as tench, perch, eel, whitefish, pike and trout.

They also traded in sea fish. Stylish leaflets printed in Milan advertise aquatic plants, ornamental goldfish and fine jams. Work on reclaiming the marshes continued with water being removed from the basin and the reclaimed land being turned over to pasture and crops.

After a long illness Pio died of pneumonia on 3 February 1900 at his villa in Via Moscova in Milan.

From the capable hands of Pio Borghi the factory passed to his nephew Luigi junior (Varano 1878-Saint Moritz 1947), son of Giulia Minonzio's first marriage to the unfortunate Napoleone.



Left, Carlo Borghi (1851-1883) in a bronze bust by Giuseppe Grandi di Ganna; above Pio Borghi (1847-1900)



An advertising leaflet from the Borghi fish farm.

In 1903 “El Sciuir Luisin”, as the people of Varano affectionately called him bought a 1300-horsepower Tosi four-cylinder triple-expansion engine, the most powerful of any of the Lombard cotton factories of its day, and eight Cornish boilers with Focs furnaces equipped with superheaters and economisers. The Borghi name was now a famous one both in Italy and abroad and constantly in the news. For the inauguration of the company’s innovative production machine ,in 1904, *Monitore Tecnico* published a monograph on Varano industry, illustrating its admirable modernity and attention to progress and safety. But all was not sweetness and light. The rapid development of the cotton industry had triggered serious social conflict. Tensions were rising, with trade union protests, rallies, strikes and lengthy bargaining getting the Varese and Gallarate Camere del Lavoro involved. The company tried to negotiate and then turned up the volume and threatened lockouts.

On 9th March 1907 the deadlock was finally broken and the managing director resigned. On the 10th of March the dispute was resolved with total victory for the workers. A heartfelt appeal by Sciuir Luisin hit the mark and the workforce finally voted to end the strike. Other problems arose in the months which followed, from the peasant farmers working in the family's lands in Varano, Ternate, Biandronno and Corgeno who demanded the abolition of the old contracts in favour of cash rents based on land value. A further strike of the peasants who cut the hay broke out in June 1907 at the Brabbia marshes, which the owners responded to by calling in labour from the lower Po valley as strikebreakers. On 4 June 1909 Mrs Bice Borghi Amman, Sciuir Luisin’s wife, died in Milan at the age of just 26 and two funerals were held, one in the capital where she lived and the other in Varano.

Bice was born in Milan in 1883, the second child of Edoardo Amman and Countess Fanny Prinetti, leading figures in the Milanese business bourgeoisie in the post-unification era. Amateur painter and talented embroiderer Bice married Luigi Borghi in 1904, a year of great changes in the Varano plant and their marriage produced two children, Napoleone (Varano 1905-1951) and Edoarda (Milan 1908-1981). Bice’s cousin was Marchioness Luisa Casati, born Luisa Adele Rosa Maria Amman (Milan, 23 January 1881 – London, 1 June 1957), wife of Marquis Camillo Casati Stampa, remembered for her eccentricities and for having been the muse of a great many artists of her day including d’Annunzio, with whom she had a turbulent and scandalous relationship.

The final years of the Pasquale e F.lli Borghi firm took place against the backdrop of bankruptcy and court-ordered seizure requested by Società Textiloses & Textiles with whom the company was now bound by intricate share holding relationships and a system of sureties and guarantees. When, in 1913, the firm was bought up by the Italo-French firm Textiloses et Textiles the bulk of its agricultural assets passed into the hands of lawyer Alessandro Above, who had been managing the Borghi assets for some time. The fish farming business went to the Crespi family of Milan who bought a holiday home from lawyer Above after World War One. The huge estate was broken up into plots which were sold separately.

Right Luigi Borghi jr. (1878-1947); left, Marchioness Luisa Casati, born Luisa Adele Rosa Maria Amman (Milan, 23 January 1881– London, 1 June 1957).



In 1920 the building was bought up by Commendator Fedele Borghi (1854-1928), Sciu' Luisin's uncle and son of

Giulio, member of parliament and brother of art collector and patron Carlo Borghi. Fedele could not bear to see his family memories fall into rack and ruin as well and he thus intervened in Luigi's disastrous finances, buying up the villa with its farm buildings, porter's lodge and garden. On the strength of a degree in engineering he also bought up the Amman plant in Legnano, thereby setting up in the cotton business himself under the name F. Borghi & Co. including a retail outlet.

He was mayor of Legnano and provincial councillor and many Legnano and Gallarate squares and streets were ultimately named after him. On 9th September 1878 he married Adele Pigni in Milan and the couple had two daughters, Marherita, called Rita in the family, and Emilia, the younger of the two, nicknamed Mimi, with an interest in the arts. Mimi (1882- 1965) was a talented designer and amused herself with fashion illustrations inspired by Parisian newspapers.

She painted watercolours of the elegant outfits she saw on the catwalks and which she herself bought in the 1901 to 1911 period, the year she married Count Alberto Lupi di Moirano, second cavalry lieutenant and knight of the Order of Malta. With the birth of their two daughters Adele and Clementina she abandoned her artistic career to look after her children. The only leisure pursuit left her was embroidery. She also painted small porcelain items and miniatures illustrating her talent and technical skill.

The years passed and Mimi divided her time between the city and the great Varano villa, growing old with her beloved second lieutenant who had, in the meantime, risen to the rank of colonel. In the town everyone referred to her affectionately as 'the countess'. A visitor noted "the aristocratic couple live an austere and simple life in the midst of splendid memories of the past" and the manor house itself was also beginning to show signs of age.

Count Albert died right herein Varano on 10 August 1958. An anonymous chronicler wrote: "Now the colonel is dead it is up to Emilia to show visitors the history of the sumptuous palace whose treasures comprise an interesting collection of pretty ivory miniatures painted by her in her youth, including the inevitable figure of Napoleon and his Hapsburg consort." Mimi survived her husband by seven years, dying on 17 June 1965 in Genoa. The Varano estate passed to her daughters, sisters Adele and Clementina Lupi di Moirano, who continued to live in Genoa, however. The vast Varano villa was increasingly silent and empty and a long period of neglect began. Adele and Clementina used the villa as their summer holiday home and in the winter it remained closed and deserted, apart from the odd weekend.

And they all
lived
happily
ever after

Like all the best fairy tales, the villa managed to do what it had done many times over its history and waited silently for the right moment to relive its past and its still intact charm. As if by magic certain dreamers fell in love with it, drawn to its romantic timeless potential. And it is thanks to this dream that, in the 21st century, Villa Borghi has returned to its former glories, like a courteous and affable, elegant and friendly hostess welcoming visitors, both busy and romantic, thus testifying to the world that 'beauty belongs to everyone'.



Photograph of the villa's exteriors and salons in the early-20th century.