

From [Newsletter 28](#) (Autumn 2023)

by Robert Fowler

The Herculaneum Society was incorporated on 15 June 2004, so next year we celebrate our 20th anniversary.

How did it all begin? On 22 November 2001 the legendary Marcello Gigante died (b. 1923). He was Professor of Greek at the University of Naples, and founded the International Centre for the Study of the Herculaneum Papyri ([CISPE](#)). Before him, the papyri, disorganised and massively under-researched, languished; through his efforts, CISPE became one of the leading centres in the world for papyrology. Scores of outstanding scholars have trained there, and new editions of the papyri tumble off the presses every year. Specialists from all over the world can be found poring over the microscopes and working on the scanners in the *Officina dei Papiri*; Gigante was also responsible for putting the *Officina* on a proper footing within the National Library. The journal he founded, [Cronache Ercolanesi](#), is now in its 52nd year.

Gigante's most spectacular achievement was arguably instigating the excavation of the [Villa of the Papyri](#), whose precise location had been re-discovered in the 1980s. This was controversial from the start, given the impact on the local area and the counterargument that the more crying need was for conservation of the crumbling main site. These two considerations are, of course, still a central part of the debate about whether further excavation should be conducted. Gigante pressed on, securing the necessary funds from Rome, and the excavation proceeded. An enormous access trench was sunk from the *Via Mare* just north of the main site, uncovering some hitherto unknown structures including a bathhouse. At its far end, part of the atrium quarter of the Villa was excavated to the extent still visible today; astonishingly, it turned out that there were at least two lower levels in the Villa. Also found were a seaside pavilion, swimming pool and landing facilities.

Changes in government led to the overnight end of funding, and the excavation was stopped in its tracks. When Gigante died, some of us were worried about the Villa's parlous state, and concerned about conservation as well as the future of the excavation. As a gesture of homage to our departed friend, we wrote a letter to *The Times* (what else?). It was published on 13 March 2002. It was signed by the present author, Albert Henrichs, Richard Janko, Mary Lefkowitz, Hugh Lloyd-Jones, Dirk Obbink, Peter Parsons and Nigel Wilson. We or at least I thought that would be the end of it, but it touched off a minor storm; the phone kept ringing, the emails kept coming, people wanted interviews and copy. The letter was waved in the face of the minister by the opposition in the Italian parliament.

The most unexpected consequence was a summons from the Prince of Wales (as was) to tell him all about it. His interest in history and archaeology (in which he has a degree) is well known. I duly presented myself at Highgrove, where I spent an hour in the Prince's study outlining the history and current state of the problem. The legendary garden was visible through the windows, and at times it was hard not to allow one's gaze to wander. At the end of the meeting it emerged that the Prince was actually going to Herculaneum the following week, and could I meet him there? It was in fact very inconvenient in view of other commitments, but when the heir to the throne says "I say, do you think you could meet me next week," you don't say "hang on let me consult my diary." So I went.

His idea had been to arrange a debate on the ground, overlooking the Villa, between me and the Superintendent, Pier Giovanni Guzzo, about the pros and cons of digging. Unfortunately there

was little time, since everywhere Charles had gone there were speeches, more speeches, and presentations. We did manage a kind of discussion, and in the wake of it I wrote to the Prince telling him what I'd found out on the day. He then wrote to the President of Campania, Antonio Bassolino, saying that in his opinion the excavation should proceed. Which was enough to earn him my vote for King.

An amusing aside was the extreme anxiety of the security people. The short walk along Via Mare to the Villa gave them nightmares—a narrow street, crowds on both sides, balconies loaded with people. During the procession a teenaged girl launched herself at the Prince and planted a kiss on the royal cheek. The next day, the local paper ran a headline in tabloid-sized letters, not about the pros and cons of digging or anything like that, but about the kiss: “Ho baciato Principe Carlo!” I kissed Prince Charles!

Anyhow, such was the fuss that we thought, we're on to something here, let's found a Society. In the early days many people thought we were a pressure group for the excavation of the Villa. This was certainly the earnest desire of many of us, but not all; there were Friends who held the opposite view, and anyway you can't be registered as a charity if your sole purpose is lobbying. The Society's line has always been that excavation and conservation must, and can, go together.

We promote research, education, and public awareness of a World Heritage Site with a view to its beneficial and proper development. Since our foundation, we have pursued our aims in many ways: first and foremost, through public [membership](#) (global in its reach); through [scholarships and grants](#); scholarly publications; [events](#) (talks, conferences, visits to sites including the biennial trip to Herculaneum); our website, social media accounts, [YouTube channel](#), [newsletters](#) and [e-bulletins](#). Our two largest fundraising successes have been supporting a season of the [Ancient Graffiti Project's](#) work, and the restoration and development of the [Custodian's Room](#), on which work is starting as I write. We have also been proud to assist the University of Kentucky in the administration of its [Mellon Foundation grant](#) for the imaging of all Herculaneum papyri. This is an enviable record; may it continue for another score of years, and scores after that.

(PS: For a complete list of our achievements in the first twenty years, follow [this link](#).)