

THE HISTORY OF LA CHIESA DI SANTO STEFANO

It is believed that there has been a property at the current location of La Chiesa di Santo Stefano since Roman times. The reasons for thinking this are based on the prominent position of the house, and the 'importance' of the house locally. Its proximity to the original site of the town of Treia, which was 2 kilometres outside the walls of the current town and just 3 kilometres from Santo Stefano, is another indicator which is further supported by the fact that parts of a



Lines of tiles kept the stone straight, and bars at the windows kept the animals safe.

Roman column were found during the renovation of the property. When properties were built in this part of Italy in the middle ages, they would be constructed from any materials the builders could find on or near the site. Typically, the walls were constructed of a single layer of terracotta tile (to keep the lines straight), followed by a layer of miscellaneous stone found around in the fields. It could therefore be assumed that the parts of the Roman column which were found embedded into the walls during the renovation of the property had been used because they were available in the vicinity.

More recently, though, we know that the house was a small monastery during the 15th and possibly the 14th century. When the renovation was taking place, very old nails were found, together with evidence of building techniques known to have been used during this period.

The monks would have worshipped in the Chiesa (the chapel), and used the Oratorio (Oratory) for more informal praying and other religious duties. They would have lived in the upstairs part of the Granaio (Granary) – the oldest part of the house to be still standing (the Chiesa has been rebuilt on several occasions, apparently – the most recently being 1872). The downstairs of the Granaio would have been used to prepare their wine and oil, and perhaps to store their salami and hams.

The Stalla (Stalls) is a fairly recent addition – although not as new as we originally thought. Although the outer bricks were quite new when we bought the house, it appears that the internal bricks were much older. There was evidence of sleeping accommodation on the upper floor, but the ground floor still held the feeding troughs for the animals. Traditionally in this area, all of the downstairs windows had bars. Many people believe that this is a security decision – but that is absolutely not the case. When the downstairs areas of houses were used for animals, there were no windows – and the bars were put in place to keep the animals inside. When renovations take place, the bars are often replaced for authenticity.



The original bell tower was rebuilt during the restoration, and a new bell commissioned.



One of two stone 'faces' found during the renovation.

We had always assumed that the monks would have farmed the land around Santo Stefano in order to exist, but apparently in this part of Italy the monks would have been fed by the local people providing them with all their needs. I understand this still happens to some degree! We do know for a fact that when we take our olives to be pressed to make oil, there is always a container available for the monks at the local monastery for the good people of the town to donate some of their own oil.

Maybe the most interesting legend that we know of Santo Stefano relates to the last group of monks who lived here – perhaps in the 18th or early 19th century. The oldest monk used to sing at night to ward off evil spirits, and to protect the brothers. As the old monk was dying, the other monks were very worried that after his death, they would no longer be protected. The old monk told them not to worry – he would always sing at Santo Stefano to keep evil away. Local people say that they still hear him sometimes!

When work was progressing with the restoration, an old stone was found that looked just like a face with a wide open mouth – singing! This has been embedded into the wall next to the front door of the Oratorio.

Perhaps the air of complete peace and tranquillity that surrounds La Chiesa di Santo Stefano is due in no small part to the help of the old monk.