

7 *The ninth generation*

Giuseppe Antonio is the most prominent member of the 9th generation (which by this time had taken firm root in Valmadrera); through him the red line continues and it is from him that all the Gavazzis studied here descend. For the first time, in this generation we have some information regarding the women of the Gavazzi family and their husbands. The Gavazzis had by this time attained considerable financial prosperity and an important social position.

CARLO GAVAZZI (1761-1832)

Carlo Gavazzi was the son of Pietro Antonio Gavazzi and Teresa Rocca. He was born in Ospedaletto Lodigiano on May 3, 1761.

From the very beginning of their silk manufacturing business, the Gavazzis were aware of the fundamental role of Milan in the extending of their business beyond provincial limits. To this end Carlo Gavazzi, who had no wife and children, moved to the city of Milan, in order to look after the family business there.

He was, in fact, the first Gavazzi to move to Milan, where he lived first in the house of his married sister Anna Maria (married name Prina), at no. 2247 (at the time, Milanese addresses were not determined by the street name but by the number of the house – consequently the house numbers were very high); later, he lived alone at the following numbers: 965, 1824, 2377, 2341 e 2374¹.

The role of Carlo Gavazzi was extremely important in the history of the family, even though he has unjustly been eclipsed by his brother Giuseppe Antonio. Carlo was an excellent businessman, and contributed enormously to the financial power of the dynasty.

The Bignami Bank

Carlo Gavazzi, still a very young man, almost certainly served an apprenticeship in the Bignami Brothers' Bank of Milan², owned by brothers Carlo, Lorenzo and Francesco

¹ This data is taken from the Napoleonic census registers relating to the population of 1811, which shows that Carlo Gavazzi was already living in Milan.

² The Bank of the Bignami brothers in Milan was, without the slightest doubt, the most important and respected Milanese credit institute in the period between the 18th and 19th Centuries, as well as one of the most renowned in all Napoleonic Italy. Brothers Carlo, Lorenzo and Francesco Bignami – the sons of Vitale Bignami and Maria Bignamini – bankers in Milan, were originally from Codogno (Milan), where they owned a fair amount of property. Today their descendants on the female side, the Biancardi family, still own a villa there.

Bignami, which was the most prestigious Milanese bank during the years straddling the 18th and 19th Centuries, as well as one of the most reputable in Italy and Napoleonic Europe. Besides their banking business the Bignami family were also wealthy silk merchants. They were, in fact, what in those days were known as banking and silk dealers – and extremely prominent in their field.

The Bignami Bank of Milan rode the Napoleonic conquests with growing success, but fell disastrously in the crash of 1813, a terrible year of great economic crisis that rippled throughout Bonaparte's empire, shaking its financial foundations.

Carlo Gavazzi became a leading collaborator of this important bank, and his career reached its peak when, together with his brother Giuseppe Antonio, he became a partner. For the

A fourth Bignami brother, Giuseppe, was a priest and probably curate of Codogno.

The Bignami family was considered part of the group of 'cautious liberals' that animated Milanese city life.

The most prominent and well known of the Bignami brothers in Milan was the eldest, Carlo (1744-1831). A short biography on him, written by Professor Giorgio Rumi, can be found in the *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, published by Fondazione Treccani: «BIGNAMI, Carlo. – Born in Codogno (Milan) in 1744, Carlo Bignami was one of the most prominent bankers of Lombardy and also took part, if marginally, in active political life. Primarily, he was one of the sixteen Milanese commission members, appointed in May 1796 by Despinoy and Saliceti to replace the old city judges. Together with three other commissioners he had the task of dividing among the most well-to-do citizens an extraordinary war levy of 20 million Lira, imposed by the French occupiers. Later he was part of the legislative body of the Cisalpine Republic, with a seat on the Council of Elders from 1797-1798; during this time, however, he never had an opportunity to speak, and he resigned in October of 1798. He was then asked by the Council of Lyons to join the Board of Traders (*Chamber of Commerce*) for the department of Olona (1802) and, finally, was proposed as a candidate for the Italic Senate as a «reliable banker». He died in Milan in 1831.

Carlo Bignami enjoyed considerable prestige and influence in the financial world and made a great many interventions in favour of entrepreneurs and traders who found themselves in difficulty as a result of the economic situation, made worse by taxation, controls and the customs policies imposed by the Napoleonic administration as a result of the continental blockade.

The general slump of 1813 also struck the Bignami Bank, which, besides being an important financier of the imperial armies, had also advanced considerable sums to the Treasury. The consequential bankruptcy resulted in the suicide of one of the Bignami brothers, Lorenzo, and caused a great scandal, with the public's faith already shaken due to a succession of bankruptcies among companies and banks in Milan, Venice, Mantua and Genoa, a symptom of the general crisis afflicting the kingdom.»

Carlo Bignami and his son Paolo survived the blow and the consequent economic upheaval and, even though no historian has ever confirmed this, struggled to achieve and, it seems, succeeded in achieving a degree of economic recovery. Of Francesco, the second brother of the first generation, all traces have been lost. For the third brother, Lorenzo Bignami, however, the shock proved too much and, as we read in Professor Rumi's biography, he committed suicide.

«When Lorenzo Bignami shot himself in the head on May 15th, 1813 the whole city of Milan reeled with shock and dismay. The economic crisis then accumulated all its disintegrated particles, touching the extremes of moral despondency and desperation – such desperation as leads to the voluntary self-destruction of the individual. The bankruptcies were made even worse, according to public opinion, by the suicide.

Lorenzo Bignami was a highly respected man, known for his honesty, integrity and circumspection, and his death aroused both sorrow and alarm. In this tragic act committed by such an honourable man all could see only too clearly the gravity of the current situation. His death, in fact, marked the break-up of the whole family.

Paolo Bignami fled, perhaps in order to avoid the storm of the bankruptcy. The Viceroy Prince Eugene of Beauharnais came upon him as he was fleeing and persuaded him to return.»

The Bignami Bank, as we have seen, was financially bound to the French government in Italy, having granted huge amounts of credit to the same. Prince Eugene also persuaded the Ministry of Finance to begin paying back part of the loans to the Bignami brothers and their clients.

«Yet this part was not enough to solve the crisis. It only served to create panic in the Stock Exchange and expose the general financial situation, as the collectors of the various departments were faced with a number of payment delays, which rebounded on the funds of the Treasury within the context of a general atmosphere of chaos.» (from *La Storia di Milano*, Fondazione Treccani, volume XIII, page 304).

The following is a commentary by Carlo Porta on the Bignami bankruptcy, taken from *The Letters of Carlo Porta and the friends of the 'Cameretta'*, published by Dante Isella.

The letter, dated May 14, 1813, the day before the suicide of Lorenzo Bignami, was sent by Carlo Porta to his friend, the abbot Giuseppe Nava of Carpesino (Erba), and reads: «Our Bignami Company is in the unhappy position of having to close its doors. Misfortune, and perhaps also a certain carelessness, have brought about this crash in circumstances that are terrible for the family, and especially in these times. Losses should be in the order of a couple of million to three million in profits, but today money is needed, and the funds and credit

Gavazzi family, just a few decades after the founding of the Pietro Gavazzi Company, this development represented a considerable success.

The recent discovery of a group of 36 letters, dating back to the first six months of the fateful year of 1813 and belonging to a series of documents from the original Bignami Bank Archive, conclusively proves the close ties between the Gavazzis of the 9th Generation and the Milanese bank, and provides evidence of the existence of a partnership between the two – what would be defined today as a ‘business investment partnership’.

This meant that the two companies, the Bignami Brothers’ Bank on one hand and the Pietro Gavazzi Company on the other, while carrying on their individual businesses of banking and silk trading, were also involved together in a long-standing financial business.

do not make up for the daily losses. I cannot tell you how sorry I am about this emergency that reflects so heavily on Carlo, who is an upright and honourable man, rightly respected by all of Milan. Pavolino [Paolo Bignami, son of Carlo] has disappeared, and no one knows where he has gone, not even his wife, who is desolate. Oh Christ! Christ! How much has happened in these few days!»

Carlo Bignami and his wife Teresa Busti had two sons, Giulio and Paolo, both bankers like their father and uncles.

Paolo Bignami was also a very well-known figure in Milan and much talked about, especially for his marital woes.

In 1804 Paolo, who at the time was one of the wealthiest and best matches in Milan, had married Maddalena (Lenina) Marliani, in a marriage of convenience, organised by the families of the couple.

Maddalena, who was only fourteen years old, was the daughter of Rocco Marliani, President of the Milan Court of Appeals and one of the most influential figures of Napoleonic Lombardy, later to be made senator and count by the Emperor.

In Erba Marliani had had built himself a luxurious villa, Villa Amalia, designed by Leopoldo Pollack, which he named after his wife Amalia Masera.

Marliani made of Villa Amalia a true literary haven, gathering together all the intelligentsia of the day. For years, the Bignami family also numbered among the regular guests at the villa of Erba.

Maddalena Bignami Marliani, the young wife of Paolo Bignami, was considered the most beautiful woman in Milan, and even the emperor Napoleon reserved for her and her great beauty several gallant remarks that were to go down in history.

In 1809, at the villa in Erba, Lenina Bignami Marliani met the poet Ugo Foscolo, there as a guest of Rocco and Amalia Marliani, and sparks flew: a spontaneous and passionate love affair had begun.

When the Marliani and Bignami families learned of the unfaithfulness of their relative they promptly sent Foscolo away, upon which Maddalena attempted suicide, causing a great scandal.

Foscolo never forgot the beautiful Lenina with her «large, irresistible eyes», and immortalised her in *Le Grazie*, his unfinished masterpiece, in which she lends her face and soul to one of the three famous protagonists – Dance. The delightful final canto of this work is in fact dedicated to her, Maddalena.

Foscolo imagines her in a moonlit summer night, in the highest part of the garden of the villa in Erba, the only spot from where the lake of Pusiano can be seen – perhaps the spot in which the two lovers used to meet. Maddalena, veiled in black, weeps for her family’s troubles and for her own broken heart, while a nightingale soothes the weeping girl with its song and the moon, in the distance, shines on the lake of Pusiano.

Maddalena Bignami Marliani, or *Lenina*, as she was known, refused to become a maid-of-honour at the court of Viceroy Eugenie, thus expressing her indignation at his discriminating attitude.

The Viceroy, a genuine marquis of the ancient French nobility, looked down on all middle class citizens, especially those who had been made noble by Napoleonic title.

Lenina, as we have said, was offended by this discriminating attitude, and when she was asked to join the court as a lady-in-waiting to Vicereine Amalia Augusta, boldly replied with a proud, determined ‘no’.

Various children were born of the Bignami-Marliani marriage, including Rocco, Carlo and Enea Bignami who, when still children, in 1813, after the crash of the Bignami Bank of Milan, fled with their parents to Bologna which, with the return of Austrian rule, had become part of the Papal States.

In fact, the Bignami Bank of Milan did manage in some way to survive the fateful year of 1813, and it appears that in the years to come it continued its business, though whether or not with the same success and the same universal respect of the Milanese we do not know. In Bologna Paolo Bignami opened a branch of his father’s bank, and a great many letters between father and son confirm the initiative and bear witness to the transactions between the Milanese parent company and its Bolognese branch.

One of these letters was written by Lenina, in Bologna, to her father-in-law Carlo in Milan, and testifies to the reconciliation of the couple. Their misfortunes and the Bolognese exile they shared must have brought Paolo and Maddalena together again. Paolo forgave his wife both for her affair with Foscolo and for the attempted suicide that had long made him the laughing-stock of Milan. Rocco, Enea and Carlo Bignami, the children of Paolo and Maddalena, were dedicated patriots during the Italian Risorgimento. They successfully carried on the family’s banking business and crowned their success by becoming the Italian representatives of the Rothschild Bank of London.



Maddalena (Lenina) Marliani.

Carlo and Giuseppe Antonio Gavazzi, powered by the initial success of the Pietro Gavazzi Company, had immediately aimed straight at the large exporters that would take their business not only out of Lombardy but even beyond the borders of Italy. However, they must also have understood that the Pietro Gavazzi Company was not yet ready to fly solo and needed solid financial backing to shoulder high-risk commercial and financial obligations in new and unexplored environments, such as that of large-scale exporting. The Gavazzis wisely chose to execute their work orders with the aid of their established partners, in order to ensure greater security in handling the economic affairs that were to guarantee the ascent of the dynasty. From the 10th Generation onwards, moreover, that of Pietro the Elder (1803–1875), these affairs were handled exclusively by members of the family.

The Bignami family had commercial relations with the most important banking institutes and the most renowned companies in Europe.

In this context, association with such prominent partners, who had established international contacts and done business with them for decades, was the best way for the Gavazzis to enter the world of large-scale commerce in Europe.

The fruits of this association, in fact, were immediately and notably evident. Letters that have come to light show that in 1813 Gavazzi silk was already being exported to France, Switzerland, Germany, Austria and even far-off England. Through agents in Vienna, the goods from the Valmadrera and Bellano factories reached markets as distant as Greece, Russia and the countries of Eastern Europe. Carlo Gavazzi, from the offices of the Bignami Bank in Milan, immediately launched the family silk on the markets of Europe; the European silk sector, meanwhile, which up until this time had been completely dominated by the merchants of Lyons, was gradually shifting its hub to Lombardy.

Carlo Gavazzi had set up the headquarters of his Milanese operations in the offices of the Bignami Bank, which was situated in the former Vassalli building, at no.905, in the district of San Pietro all'Orto. From here he handled not only the business of the Bignami Bank and the Bignami-Gavazzi company, but also that of the silk mills which the Gavazzis had gradually established on the outskirts of Milan and in the south of Lombardy. We read in old letters, for example, that he diligently supervised the mill in Parabiago that he ran together with his cousin Miro Gavazzi, and those of Casalbuttano and Camignano near Cremona, which he visited every week and from which he received reports almost daily.

The biography of Carlo Gavazzi is incomplete and full of gaps: for example, we do not know in detail how his life changed after the crash of the Bignami Bank, though it must have. We do know that he continued to live in Milan, however, and to look after the family interests both in the city and the surrounding area.

It is also unclear how the Gavazzi company was affected by the crash of the Bignami Bank, what losses it sustained and how it recovered from the enormous blow it undoubtedly suffered, as, in fact, was also true for the rest of the Italian financial world in that period.

The special relationship between the Bignami and Gavazzi families, which had guaranteed

both parties the possibility of conducting their own activities separately while devoting only a part of the company business to joint undertakings, was probably what saved Carlo Gavazzi and his brother Giuseppe Antonio from being completely ruined by the tempest of the Bignami bankruptcy.

The carrying on of the two strictly separate areas of business, their own and that conducted jointly, must have allowed the Gavazzis to partially offset the financial losses suffered and to maintain a certain amount of stability despite the situation. Thus, after the 1813 crisis, the Pietro Gavazzi Company was able to continue its social climb, despite a few initial difficulties that were, however, quickly overcome.

Fortunately, by 1813 the Gavazzi company must have been quite solid, for it survived a crisis that brought ruin to a great many silk dealers and merchants relatively unscathed.

Also extremely significant is the fact that the Gavazzi family accounts never contained any reference to this fateful year of economic disruption, a sure sign that the losses, which must have existed, cannot have been too disastrous. Even if they did suffer losses, moreover, the Gavazzis were immediately able to bounce back.

All things considered, in spite of the 1813 epilogue, the partnership with the Bignamis (with whom Carlo Gavazzi was probably the primary link) represented an important chapter in the evolution of the family business. Entering the orbit of the Bignami Bank was a highly strategic move for the Gavazzis. Thanks to the Bignami family, Carlo Gavazzi built up a considerable patrimony of acquaintances and business contacts scattered all over. These all came from the intricate net of high-level finance, relations and connections that the Milanese bank had throughout Europe and even, in some cases, in the Near East – and were all contacts that Carlo was to use for the purpose of furthering the family business.

The association with the Bignami family, therefore, was a very strategic step in the Gavazzi's rise to success.

In terms of comparison – and in the light of the shrewd and far-seeing policies of Carlo Gavazzi and his brother – the losses suffered through the Bignami bankruptcy, against the benefits gained by the company they set up together, must have been very minor, a mere deposit against the future success of the family businesses, a price to pay for the achievement of an important goal – the passage of the Gavazzi family from the provincial to the international stage.

His death

Carlo died in Vicenza in 1832, while he was attempting to launch new commercial initiatives in the Veneto region. The connections between Valmadrera and Vicenza passed through Lecco. In Lecco, in fact, the cocoons came from eggs supplied by a producer from Vicenza, Alberto Conti, and packed by the same company, which for years had a branch in Turkey, where silkworm eggs of excellent quality could be obtained, guaranteeing a harvest which was truly outstanding, both regarding the perfection of the cocoons and its overall abundance.

In Vicenza the silk industry had thrived until the end of the 18th Century, when it had fallen into decline due to the failure of local firms to keep pace with the mechanical improvements offered by the industrial revolution.

There were weaving mills in the city, nevertheless, in the 19th Century as well. Vicenza, in fact, made every attempt to improve the situation of its silk weaving mills, and in the second half of the 19th Century there was an eruption of new companies producing diapered and velvety fabrics, but a great reduction in the number of looms.

Carlo, perceiving that here the field was open and promising, had gone to Vicenza to sound out the possibilities of setting up a family business. Unfortunately, however, he suddenly fell ill and died, and the Gavazzi project for Vicenza was abandoned³.

The death of Carlo in Vicenza on May 12, 1832, was announced in the parish death register of Valmadrera as follows:

«Mr. Carlo Gavazzi, son of the late Pietro Gavazzi, 71 years of age, born in the nursing home of Ospitaletto di Lodi, resident in Milan, where he worked as a silk merchant, and having come to Vicenza for business, on May 10, 1832 was taken suddenly ill with a high fever which, after two days of illness brought him to his grave, passing away, that is, on the 12th of this month, at four o'clock in the afternoon.

His brother, Mr. Giuseppe Antonio, together with the son of the latter, Mr. Pietro, arrived in the city when their brother and uncle had already passed away.

The distance between Valmadrera and this city was too great to permit them to see him alive for the last time.

Mr. Carlo Gavazzi was a very religious man. Charitable towards the poor and generous, he was loved and respected by all, and in Valmadrera he is and will always be mourned as a great loss. May he be received, therefore, into the glory of heaven.

His nephew, Mr. Pietro Gavazzi, in the absence of the brother of the deceased, who was in Milan, ordered a Requiem Mass, which was attended by 36 priests and one of the R.R. Ospitalieri Fathers, each of whom received 5 Austrian lire».

In the family chapel in Valmadrera Carlo Gavazzi is commemorated by a large plaque, placed in a position of importance, alongside those of his brother Giuseppe Antonio and his sister-in-law Luigia Verza – three very prominent figures in the history of the family's economic growth.

GIUSEPPE ANTONIO GAVAZZI (1768-1835)

He was born in Ospedaletto Lodigiano on May 12, 1768. Concerning the man himself there is very little information available, while the financial success and the great initiatives of his company are widely acclaimed.

One of these initiatives was the extension of the silk mill in Valmadrera to include the

³ Later, but with little success, a certain Cattaneo from Como and other partners founded a company (the Orefice-Tedeschi-Cattaneo), which was still in operation at the end of the 19th Century.

throwing process. He was the founder of the Bellano complex, another important Gavazzi silk-manufacturing centre, which made a valuable contribution to the historical evolution of the family and the Lecco region.

Giuseppe Antonio was, then, an enlightened and capable man, whose children were raised to follow his example and carry on the progress of the silk industries, as well as embarking on the first initiatives in the banking world.

The profits from these first mills in Valmadrera⁴ must have been substantial, because in 1805 Giuseppe Antonio was able to open a silk mill and a spinning factory in Bellano, and later, in 1817, together with his brother Carlo, to purchase the enormous property of Countess Teresa Casati Confalonieri, niece and heiress of the Marquis Francesco Origoni (who had no children of his own). This property consisted of 1,858 Milanese poles, located mainly in the borough of Valmadrera and partly in those of Civate, Garlate and Oggiono. The restructuring of the property is described below.

Giuseppe Antonio thus put together a considerably large estate.

This period marked the beginning of the consolidation of the Gavazzi family's financial position which, within the space of twenty years, was to become a key element in the development of the silk industry in Lombardy and the Lecco region.

Giuseppe Antonio became, all the way back in the Napoleonic age, one of the greatest silk manufacturers of the region, and in 1820 his Valmadrera silk mill, defined by the experts as «magnificent», was in operation for three quarters of the year, using the advanced Gensoul-Bruni system of steam extraction.

In 1821, moreover, he founded, together with aristocratic silk mill owner Felice Quinterio and Baron Ippolito Gaetano Ciani, the «Gavazzi and Quinterio» company of «bankers and silk merchants». This was one of the richest and most active companies in Milan, and not only in the silk sector. From 1826 to 1836, in fact, through the «Privileged Steam-Boat Company», it organised sailing excursions on the lakes of Lombardy, especially on Lake Como⁵.

In 1819 Giuseppe Antonio was also the Mayor of Valmadrera⁶.



Giuseppe Antonio
Gavazzi (1768-1835).

⁴ See chapter VI, Pietro Antonio Gavazzi (1729-1797).

⁵ See chapter VIII, Pietro Gavazzi (1803-1875).

⁶ On January 27, 1819, as Mayor, he sent a letter to the Census Chancellor of Oggiono saying: «The ford crossing the valley of St. Antonio, close to the square that divides the two main parts of the borough, presents difficulties for the passage of wagons and carriages which continually travel back and forth carrying loads of lime and timber and other goods for trading. The frequent swelling of the river of this valley, in fact, completely blocks this traffic, as well as that of the inhabitants moving between the two parts of the borough; people have also been drowned during the flooding of the valley ... In view, therefore, of the unanimous wish expressed by these same inhabitants, the Delegation of the Municipal Administration has appealed to the above-mentioned Chancellor requesting that the Provincial Delegation be instructed to make plans immediately for the construction of a bridge, and a formal proposal be made for the subsequent qualification of its erection».

This letter had the desired effect and after a short time work commenced, so that in 1822 inspections were carried out. The bridge, partly constructed in stone, was built under the direction and with the workers of Domenico Canali of Tregolo. In the meantime, improvements were made on the road network.

Since in 1817 the Gavazzi brothers «became the sole owners of the buildings», «on March 10 work began on the construction of a main road in front of the house and with the encouragement of parish priest Ferdinando Erba and a concourse of people, and with the help of a donation of 200 Lira on the part of Mr. Piero Dell'Orto, known as «il Bravo» (the Good Man), the road was widened».

He was, therefore, the first banker of the dynasty, and introduced political, social and administrative involvement into the family – an involvement that was to become inseparable from the industrial enterprises of his future descendants.

He was also the first industrialist to join forces in business initiatives with rich and famous aristocrats, thus inaugurating the profitable alliance between the middle classes and the nobility that in the Lombardy region in particular enjoyed such great success, becoming the driving force of the economy, industrialisation and growth.

Valmadrera - the «People's Town»⁷

The land of Valmadrera, bounded on the North by Birone Peak and the peaks of Canzo and on the South by Mount Barro, is wedged between Lake Lecco, a few kilometres away, and Lake Annone. An area rich in rivers and springs, for centuries its economy had been based on agriculture and handicrafts. The local tanneries had become well-known, and exported hides to the Grigioni region as far as Zurich. With the onset of silkworm cultivation and the first weaving trades, alongside the cultivation of mulberry trees, there was also hemp, a raw material used by women, who in past centuries represented the main work force in the up-coming silk industry, which started slowly in the 17th century but picked up momentum in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Valmadrera also went through difficult times when the area became a mandatory thoroughfare for migrating populations and shifting armies. In the Middle Ages, the area found itself involved in rivalries between the Torrianis, supported by Lecco, and the Viscontis, and with the ultimate victory of the latter the village was frequently used as a refuge by the people of Lecco. The most prominent families in the period of the priestly visits of St. Carlo were those of Mandelli

Aerial view of the Gavazzi complex in Valmadrera.

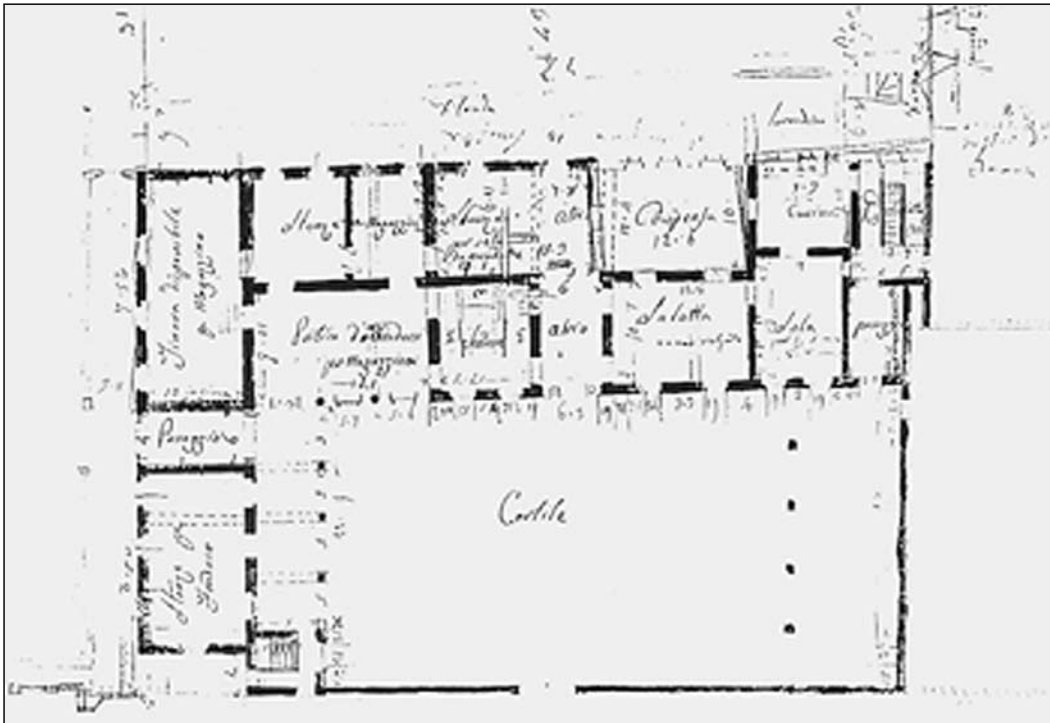


and Bonacina. The stately home of the Bonacina family was later to become one of the purchases made by Piero Antonio Gavazzi in his construction of the industrial and residential complex of 1772 – an initiative which was to ensure the fortunes of the family and especially of Valmadrera. «He transformed the village into a kind of *people's town*, inspired by the precepts of that industrial paternalism which, in the second half of the 19th Century, was the ideology espoused by the most advanced entrepreneurs».

In Valmadrera, Giuseppe Antonio owned the mill complex and the «filandone» and, on the road leading from the hamlet of Caserta to the Sanctuary of San Martino, a spinning mill⁸. The three manufacturing units had been bought, as

⁷ The text of this and the following paragraphs up to page xxx, is largely taken from *Archeologia industriale nel Lecchese. Le Filande*, by Barbara Cattaneo, Associazione Bovara, Lecco, 1982.

⁸ Later sold in 1889 by his descendants



Plan of the Gavazzi Villa in Valmadrera, attributed to Giuseppe Bovara. Undated (Belgiojoso Museum, Lecco).

we mentioned earlier, by his father Pietro Antonio. In Valmadrera the idea of extending the factory in the village to include dormitories, a nursery school and other social facilities was an expression of the theory of industrial paternalism.

The true protagonists of the Valmadrera «case» were Pietro Antonio and his sons. They did not limit themselves to merely building factories, in fact, but added to them a series of accommodations and social infrastructures, designed on one hand to provide the workers with living conditions that were decidedly better than those offered by other factories, and on the other hand to exercise a sort of control, or at least conditioning, of the lives of the workers inside and outside the factory.

In this way, the entire village revolved around the factory and factory life.

The complex included the manor house of the owners, the silk mill, the chapel, the workers' dormitories, a greenhouse and a big cistern for collecting water, all surrounded by a large park. Paternalism⁹ was by no means a sign of backwardness, but rather an indication of advanced thinking regarding the use of techniques for the control of the working classes. It was no coincidence that the standard-bearers of paternalism were the greatest industrialists (the Rossi, Cantoni, Gavazzi and Sella families) – those most concerned and consistent in giving a capitalist structure to their businesses.

It was not common practice, in fact, to use company funds to build houses for the workers, set up health insurance systems, pension funds, evening and summer schools, dowries for the girls to be married, etc. when the necessity of building up wealth was so urgent and pressing.

⁹ Roberto Romano, *Borghesia industriale in ascesa. Gli imprenditori tessili nella Inchiesta industriale del 1870-1874*, Franco Angeli, Milan, 1977.



Driveway of the Gavazzi Villa in Valmadrera.

The Gavazzi Villa of Valmadrera, in a photo dated 1923 (right).



Portrait in oils of the architect Giuseppe Bovera (1781-1873) by A. Fleissner (property of Barachetti, Parè).

None but the Gavazzis, however, had brought their wealth so far from their place of origin and become the owners of such a vast chain of silk mills and spinning factories.

The Gavazzi mills, apart from their functional structure, had elements that were undeniably decorative, characterised by a certain «classical» tone and dating from the end of the neoclassical period.

The Gavazzi silk mills were considered the most beautiful in the area.

Their design had been entrusted to an architect named Bovera¹⁰ with the intention of adding a certain dignity to the factories, so they might stand out from an architectural point of view as well.

Giuseppe Antonio and his son Pietro were the true authors of an impressive economic upturn. Gifted with initiative and foresight and always ready to adopt new processing techniques, they completely transformed the original economic and territorial structure of Valmadrera which, from a farming village, became in the space of a few years a modern «people's town», built according to the precepts of that industrial paternalism which only later, in the second half of the 1800s, was to represent the ideology of the most advanced Italian industrialists.

As the Rossis in Schio, the Crespis in Canonica d'Adda, the Pomas in Miagliano and the Marzottos in Valdagno later did, Giuseppe Antonio sought to create an «island of happiness» in Valmadrera, where class conflicts were settled in the apparent harmony of an «extended family», «in which all that counts is the supreme will of the Great Father, who is the sole guardian of the traditions, values and possibilities for growth of the community itself and where interests, sentiments and behaviour are modelled solely on his example and will».

¹⁰ Giuseppe Antonio Bovera (b. in Lecco on 12.6.1781, d. in Lecco on 2.12.1873) was the first cousin of the father of Luigia Verza, but her contemporary. For the relations between the Bovera and Gavazzi families, see also chapter VIII, Pietro Antonio Gavazzi (1729-1797).

The above-mentioned examples of the «people's town», however, refer to the creation of urban structures from nought, with the aim of producing one single organic and pre-designed unit, which meets clear instrumental and practical demands regarding the direct relationship within the organised space between productive and housing areas. In Valmadrera, instead, the new structures were integrated into the old farming village using stylistic and architectural modules that were completely different from those of the original conglomerate.

Through a detailed analysis of each building it can be seen that, while differing from the most common types, Valmadrera contained within itself all those elements that served to create the highly demanding world of the «people's town».

The villa

The Gavazzi Villa in Valmadrera is an architectural complex that includes, in a 30,000 m² area, the buildings along via Rocca, the ancient court of Bonacina House (the first nucleus of the villa), the ample patronal court, the St. Gaetano chapel and the rural complex behind it, with the spacious romantic garden.

Bonacina House, the oldest part of the Gavazzi Villa in Valmadrera (17th Century).

The chapel and the villa of the Gavazzi complex in Valmadrera (right).



The complex we see today is the result of multiple interventions made between Sixteenth and Eighteenth centuries.

The most ancient part consists of a portico, which today extends on two sides, that was part of the Bonacina residence - the family were rich leather dealers - that appears in Valmadrera during the Fifteenth century.

Toward the end of Sixteenth century, Maddalena, the last daughter of Bonacina's family, marries Giacinto Orrigoni, Milanese Marquess, bringing her house as inheritance. And it was his family that, during the Seventeenth century, enlarged the house, adding a big complex «U»-shape, originally in the Baroque style, next to the ancient one and opening onto the central court.

In 1817 the whole complex was purchased by the Gavazzis who, between 1817 and 1820, charged the Architect Giuseppe Bovara with refurbishing the villa. He changed the original

baroque shapes, giving the fronts a rectilinear outline, and opened a hall to give access to the silk storehouse; the other side of the hall contained the kitchens and service rooms.

In 1834 the chapel of San Gaetano was rebuilt in the same place in which in 1676 Maddalena Bonacina Orrigoni had had an octagonal oratory built; the chapel is now a neo-classic building, round with a lantern-shaped cupola, whose entrance door is preceded by an Ionic vestibule.

Between 1820 and 1840, Giuseppe Antonio Gavazzi and his sons Egidio and Antonio had an ample park built around the villa, which is now one of the most appreciated examples of a Romantic garden in Lecco.

The access to the park is through the portico on the left side of the patronal court, and beyond that a broad glade spreads out, surrounded by several centuries-old trees. From the path around the meadow, which, after a slow bend, leads back to the villa, a small path diverges to enter the wood and rises to the upper part of the garden.

The path then descends again, running along the small but elegant wood and glass building that in times past contained the villa's winter garden and greenhouse.

With the purchase of the manor and surrounding lands from Countess Teresa Casati Confalonieri (who had inherited the property from an uncle of the Origoni side of the family), Giuseppe Antonio became the largest landowner in Valmadrera and the surroundings area. Thus, to the two silk mills and the spinning factory in his possession he added also vast plots of land, rich in woodlands and cultivated with mulberry trees, numerous buildings and a good part of the water rights to the river Luera, indispensable for the operation of the factories.

This property continued to grow during the 1800s, guaranteeing an almost total monopoly over hydraulic power.

Once the control of a large part of the area's natural resources was secured, the greatest concern was to create a residence in keeping with the newly-acquired social position and a factory that might serve as a model to others.

To this end, where the Origoni manor house stood, surrounded by gardens, a well-integrated complex was built, with different parts destined for production (silk mill), for use as living quarters for the workers (orphans' dormitories) and the residence of the owner (villa), designed as part of the factory complex, over which it allowed direct control.

To these elements were added the chapel, the vast garden and the greenhouse, relative, respectively, to religious education and nature.

On the map of the period the house is the same as today, open towards the village, but having two side wings with porticoes. The right wing gave onto the courtyard of the Bonacina manor, which was probably the main residence, and the left wing included a passageway leading towards the silk mill and all the rooms, including the porticoes, used for storing and stocking the silk.

The «Filandone» complex, the result of the restructuring of a pre-existing nucleus dating back to the 17th or 18th Century, is characterised by a general Neo-classic style and integrates

strictly functional and stylistic standards which are uncommon in other silk-manufacturing complexes.

The design of such an important complex (the purpose of which was to epitomize the financial power of the family, and consequently the position of dependence that the village held towards it) was assigned to Bovara, the famous architect of the town and area of Lecco who, as we have seen, himself belonged to a dynasty of silk merchants and therefore was an expert in the field. Bovara blended together the different elements of the complex into a single style. His first intervention, carried out in the same year, 1817, consisted in the construction of a stretch of road whose purpose was to connect the entrance of the villa courtyard with the provincial road of Caserta. This, apart from connecting the village with the villa, served also to create an impressive perspective. At the end of the alterations, in fact, what was originally probably no more than a large provincial house took on the noble and grand form of an elegant country residence.

With the construction of this new stretch of road, therefore, those who approached the villa were presented with a view that emphasised the solemnity and importance already associated with an architectural complex that was so unusual for a small village like Valmadrera.

Between 1817 and 1820 Bovara completed his work on the villa. On the ground floor, he restored a rectilinear profile to the perspective and created an entrance to the rooms destined for the cleaning and storing of the silk made in the western sector. The kitchens and service rooms, meanwhile, were separate, and reached by means of a passageway situated under the eastern wing of the porch. He was also, perhaps, the author of the changes made to the doorways and other indoor restorations (mention is made of paintings dating back to 1820).

Later modifications obliterated all traces of these works, which testified to the total integration between the villa and the factory, where the villa was both the home of the owners and also, as we will see, of part of the workers, but above all, an integrating structure of the mill. Of the three floors of the villa, in fact, only one, the first floor, or *piano nobile*, where the private rooms of the family and the halls were situated, was reserved for use as living quarters and receiving guests, while the ground floor, as we have seen, was used for storage and the second floor, reserved for raising the cocoons, was called the *gallettera*. Bovara also created a cast-iron arcade leading towards the garden, a common feature found in the villas of Brianza built during the eclectic period.

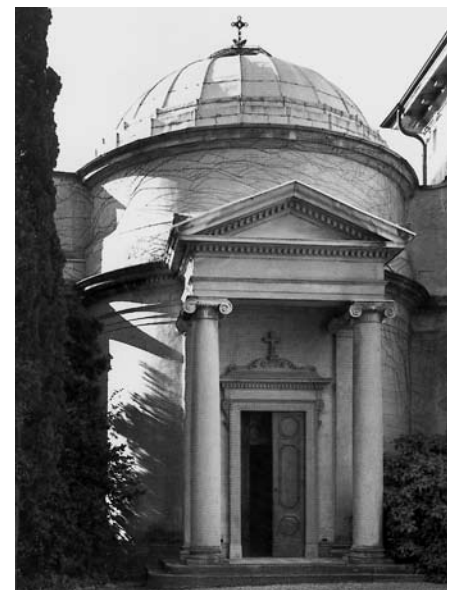
The mill, or «Filandone», as it was called, took immediate advantage of the most modern techniques of steam extraction, and represented, until the beginning of the 20th Century, a «perfect synthesis between form and function, a place of production, control, peace and piety».

The chapel

Lastly, Bovara rebuilt the chapel adjoining the villa, dedicated to St. Gaetano. Of 17th Century origin (built in 1676 by Marquise Maddalena Origoni Bonacina), the chapel was part of the property purchased from the Origoni. Its original octagonal layout was transformed by



The Gavazzi complex in Valmadrera: chimney and west side of silk mill.



Chapel of the Gavazzi Villa in Valmadrera, the work of architect Giuseppe Bovara.

Bovara into a circular plan of the Corinthian order, with a lantern-shaped dome; the front door is framed by an Ionic porch, which is contrasted by the short span of the presbytery, where the simple marble altarpiece contains a valuable painting by Giuseppe Sabatelli, entitled *St. Gaetano receives the Papal brief from Clement VII with the Instructions of his Order* (the Order of the Teatini, recognised by the Pope in 1524).

The church was consecrated in October 1834; on July 1, 1835 Giuseppe Antonio died and his son Pietro carried on the work of embellishment, commissioned to Cipriano Spinelli, who created the *scagliola* around the internal Corinthian columns and the friezes. In 1840, finally, he added a bas-relief by Benedetto Cacciatori in memory of his father, on behalf of the family of the deceased.

The silk mill (known as the «Filandone»)

It is possible that Bovara also modified the main structure of the silk mill, although we have no definite record of this.

In all likelihood, a small handicraft mill with few basins already existed in the 1700s; Giuseppe Antonio must have taken inspiration from this pre-existing structure, composed of a union between the mill and the Origoni manor, for his decision to create the new factory directly in the garden of the villa, in such a way that the long side of the mill faced that of the manor house.

The date of construction of this building (between 1817 and 1820) cannot be later than 1820, considering that the newspaper *Gazzetta di Milano* of February 17, 1820 mentions the «large silk mill of Valmadrera, whose great boiler has the capacity of 98 wine barrels, contains 80 burners or boilers of 22 to 24 Milanese jugfuls each. Both the silk mills work on a four-strand basis. In Valmadrera spinning is carried out for three quarters of the year and therefore for a great length of time at a very high temperature». Moreover, on December 16, 1819, a Commission of the I.R. Institute of Sciences, Literature and Art was sent to visit

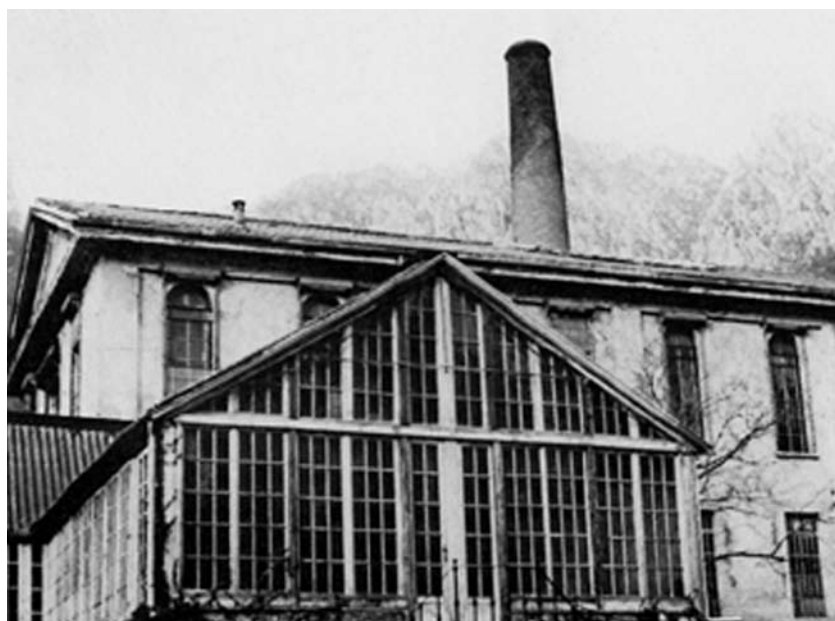
Valmadrera, a view of the Gavazzi spinning factory complex Il Mulino (from a brochure of the early 1900s).



two steam-operated silk mills, one in Azzate (province of Varese) and the other in Valmadrera, «owned by the Gavazzi brothers, to assess the condition of the machines made by Messrs. Bruni of Como»¹¹.

Giuseppe Antonio was a true innovator of silk-processing techniques, investing great energy in experiments and trials for the technological advance of his industries. The silk mill went out of operation around 1927; after a series of ups and downs, it was transformed into the Piero Gavazzi Italian Ribbon Manufacturing Company. Since 1951, in a structure that has managed to maintain its original appearance both internally and externally, it has been the headquarters of the Lariano Ribbon Manufacturing Company.

The elegant neoclassical building, in plaster-covered brick, has a rectangular layout and is arranged on two floors. The second floor has 20 large windows (originally 22) in the shape of semicircular rounded arches, evenly distributed along the long sides and set slightly inwards with respect to the pilasters, which are interspersed by a pair of windows each. On the second floor, undoubtedly as a result of subsequent layouts, is a similar window arrangement, corresponding to those on the floor above but rectangular and square rather than with rounded arches. The front of the building, facing the garden, is surmounted by a neoclassical gable, beneath which are three windows, the central and largest of which is used both for functional and decorative purposes. In the front, facing Via Volta, is the present-day entrance. The first floor is used for storing silk and cocoons, while on the second floor are situated the large rooms with the basins – approximately 70 metres long, it contained a total of around 150 basins, which in the year 1864 increased to 186.



Detail of tympanum of the Gavazzi silk mill in Valmadrera (top).

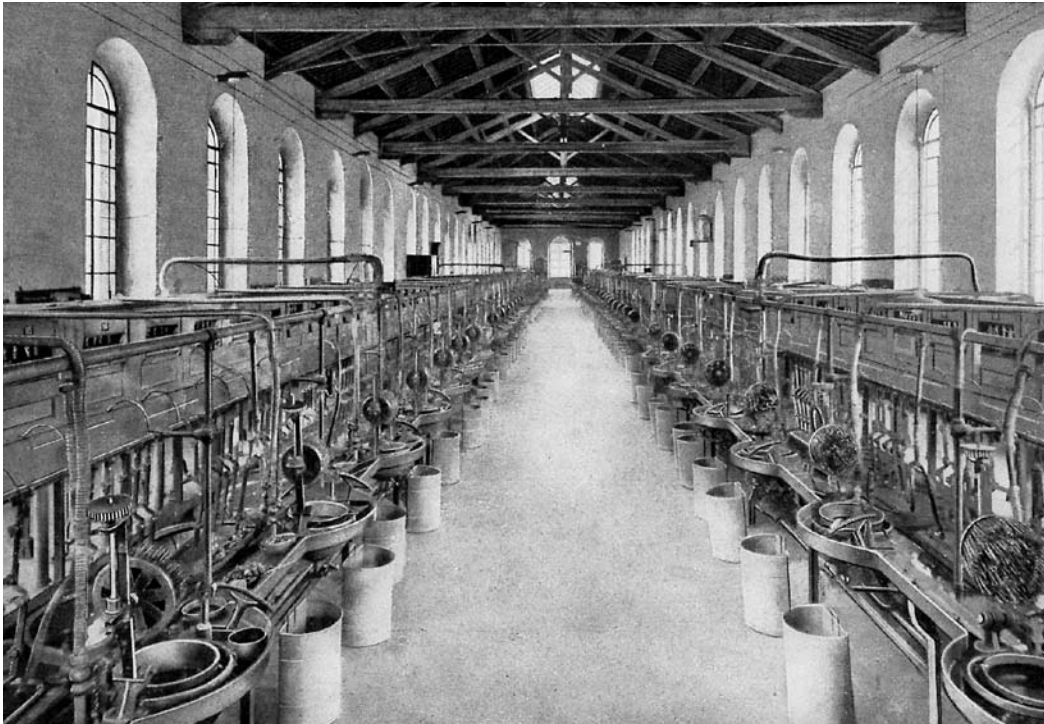
The greenhouse, situated inside the Gavazzi complex in Valmadrera. The structure mirrors that of the silk mill, from which the tympanum and the rectangular plan are copied (above).

¹¹ This was the steam machine patented in France by Ferdinand Gensoul (1805) for the steam-extraction of silk (for four-strand spinning), experimented in 1815 and patented by nobleman Luigi Porro Lambertenghi (appreciated for his skills also by Alessandro Volta) and perfected by means of «repeated experiments» by the brothers Giovanni and Agostino Bruni, mechanics. At the beginning of the 1800s there was a complete revolution in the methods of extracting silk from the cocoons, regarding the basins that were previously pre-heated over wood fires, and the movement of the spools, previously hand-operated. The «Gensoul» method of heating the water by means of one single boiler for all the basins quickly gained widespread popularity. The movement of the spools, meanwhile, began to be operated by an engine powered by running water, which set in motion aerial transmissions using belts.

The Bruni brothers, mechanics from Como's Quadra district (today Via Vittorio Emanuele), no. 568, held the patent for the «Gensoul» construction. They altered the system and were obliged to take legal action several times against imitators.

220 women and 90 children from the ages of 9 to 15 worked here, as well as 12 men in charge of the boilers and the materials.

The roof is trussed, with five large skylights to allow a maximum of light to enter the building, thus furnishing ample illumination for the difficult operation of extracting the silk. Although this floor is nowadays occupied by the machinery of the Lariano Ribbon-makers, the large basin room has retained the elements typical of the 19th Century mill



Interior of the Filandone, part of the Gavazzi complex in Valmadrera: the basin room (from a brochure of the Pietro Gavazzi joint-stock company, early 1900s).

unaltered, such as the long succession of windows, the trussed roof and the extraordinary length of the large room.

The mill was operated according to the most modern steam extraction techniques (already adopted in 1819), and was powered by water from the torrent Luera¹².

In this model factory new methods were tried out for improving silk processing. We are told by Brusadeloro that Pietro (1803–1875) was, in fact, the first to introduce Chinese and Japanese silk in Europe for transforming into twisted thread and to pack the spindles in heated boxes so

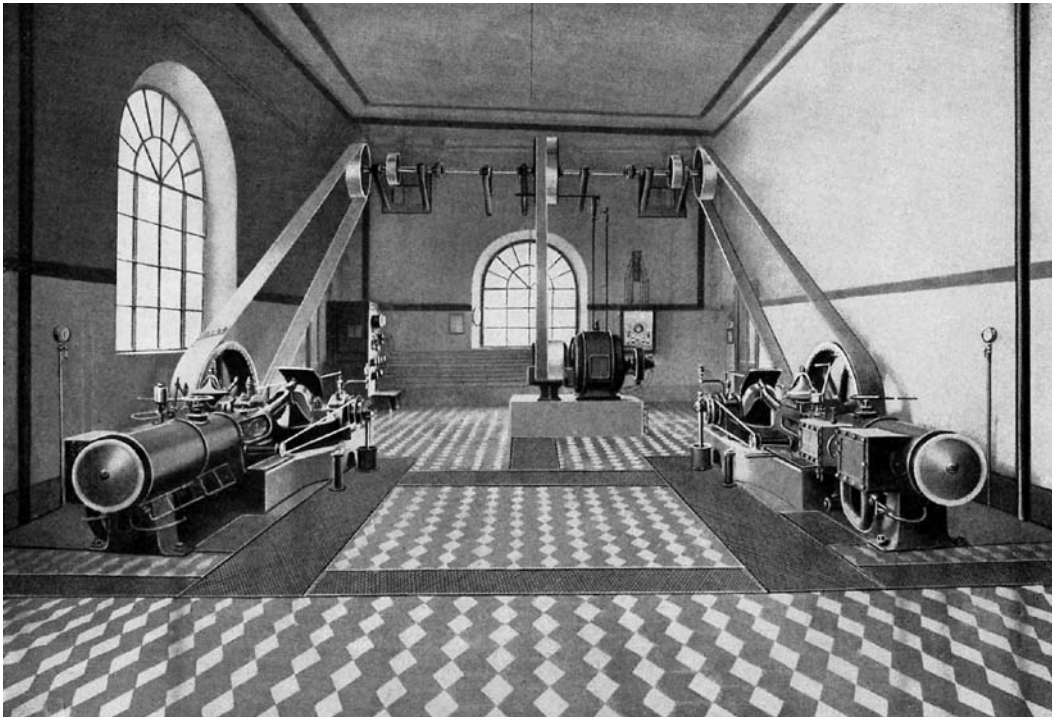
that extraction could be carried out also in the winter months.

In a letter of December 9, 1855 to the *Gazzetta Ufficiale*, regarding a dispute with professor Magrini, Pietro Gavazzi himself wrote: «Since the year 1825 in our silk mill at Valmadrera we have carried out studies in an effort to solve a problem which is of great concern to the silk industry in general – that of winter spinning. We made repeated attempts, sparing neither energy nor expenses, and only in 1849, by packing the spindles and heating the indoor working space, were we able to achieve our much-desired aim. This method is very different

¹² The waters to which the Gavazzis were entitled were 16/28, according to a water-sharing project of 1840, which also assigned 6/28 to the Valmadrera Town Council, 3/28 to Count Sambrunico and the same amount to the Fatebenefratelli Hospital.

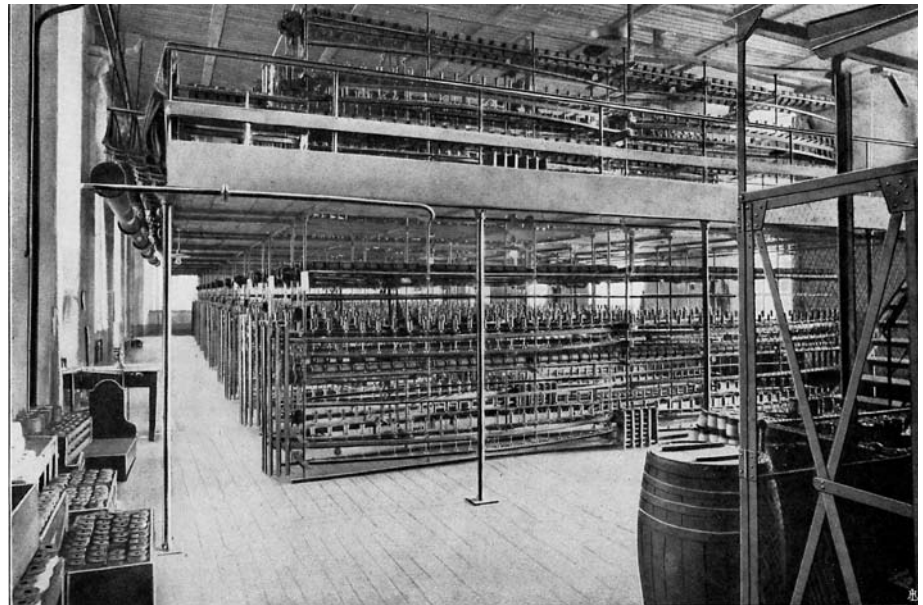
The question of the use of the mountain's water dragged on for forty years, with reports from engineers and experts, until finally, in 1838, a project was accepted by all the parties concerned, and ratified in 1840 by notary Pietro Mauri.

The river Luera originated in the pastures above the upper «Luera» valley, and was formed by the waters from the surrounding mountains and a small part from several natural springs that were found in these pastures. The river meandered until it reached a building known as the «Gianvacca» house, where there was an outlet for the extraction of water needed for a communal washhouse, built in 1932. The river then entered «the property of Messrs. Antonio and Egidio Gavazzi, brothers, in the place named Campogrande, where stands the building for the deviation from the aqueduct of the quantity of water to which the above-mentioned Messrs. Gavazzi are entitled». The aqueduct then went on to bring water to another communal washhouse in Valmadrera, at Piazza Fontana, built in 1823. Further down in the valley the aqueduct separated and its waters were directed to Count Sambrunico and Fatebenefratelli Hospital.



Interior of engine room of the Gavazzi complex in Valmadrera (from a brochure of the Pietro Gavazzi joint-stock company, early 1900s).

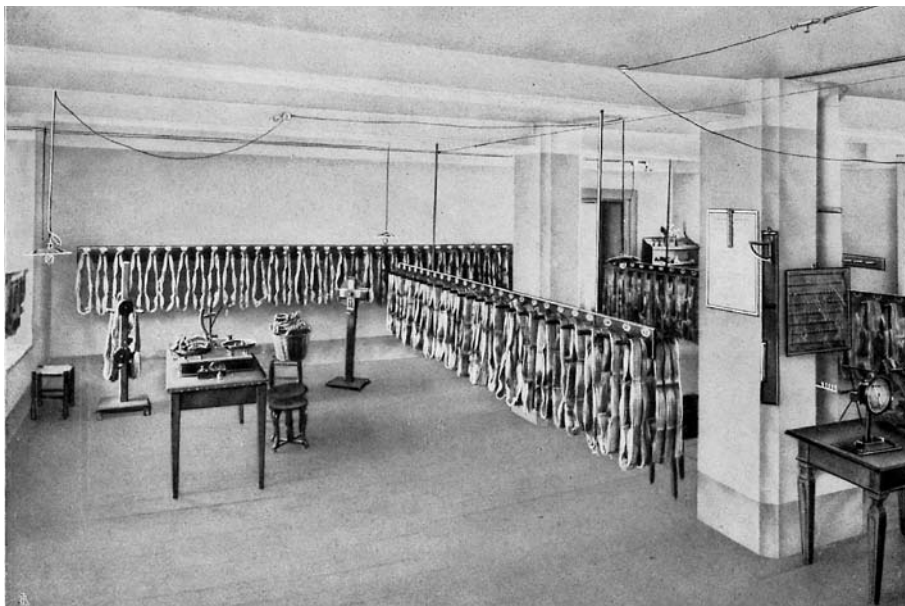
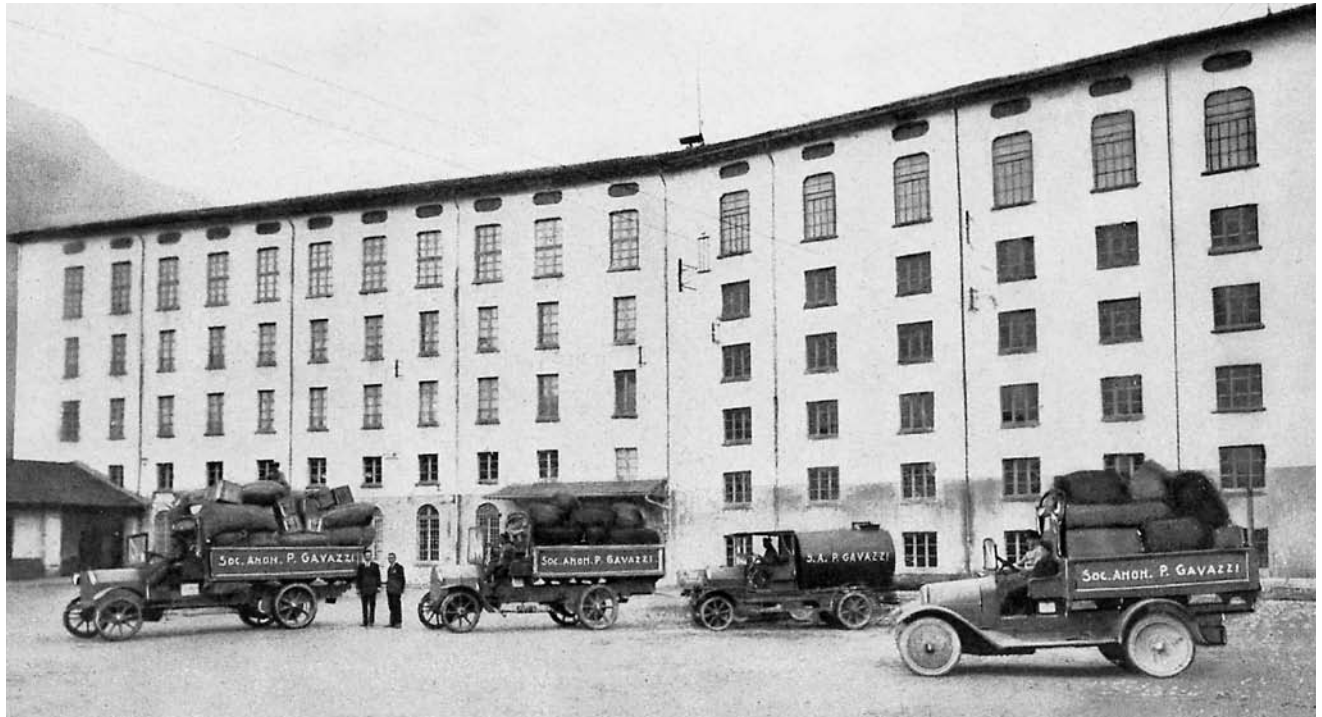
from that proposed by Mr. Bonnet, which consists in two longitudinal glass walls that divide the mill into three long sections - one in the centre, where the spinners and the basins are, and the other two placed laterally, somewhat like tunnels, in which the spindles are arranged. A good number of heaters are used to heat and dry these two large spaces (which need to be kept at a constant temperature of 18 to 20 degrees), especially when the outside temperature is below zero or humidity is especially high. In our system, on the other hand, in which the spindles alone are restricted in the smallest possible space, the air is heated and dried very quickly. Therefore, while the Bonnet method



Valmadrera, one of the areas of the silk mill.

has few imitators in France, in Lombardy there are very many. The most illustrious of the French silk mill owners, Chevalier Luigi Blanchu, who surely was acquainted with the Bonnet process, which has been in use since 1846, asked one of our family, who visited him in 1852, to supply him with our models, thus honouring him with their importation in that country and using them in his famous St. Julien factory».

The factory was also equipped, since the first half of the century, with a suction device for the steam from the basins, a heating system with wall-mounted cast iron heaters and, even before the year 1859, gas lighting, which was later extended to the whole town.



Valmadrera, the outer yard of the silk factory Il Mulino (top).

One of the interior areas in which skeins of silk were dried at a constant temperature of 18-20 °C (above).

The Bonacina House dormitories

A short distance from the silk mill stands the owner's villa, which consists of the integration of an older building of 17th Century origin (the Bonacina House) with the structure originating, as we have seen, from the extension works on the 18th Century Origoni villa.

This building was reserved for operations connected with the work of the silk mill.

On the first floor of Bonacina House, Giuseppe Antonio created a series of dormitories for the orphan and non-local girl workers who, in exchange for board and lodgings and a pay of 15-20 *centesimi* per day, worked in the adjoining silk

mill for 12-13 hours a day. These girls, who are mentioned by Giuseppe Antonio's son, Pietro, in his declaration for the industrial survey of 1870-74 (although this did not refer especially to Valmadrera), came to work mainly from out of town, when the local workers were on strike or insufficient in number. On this subject, he affirmed that «in Cernusco and Bellano there were never either strikes or attempted strikes. In Valmadrera there were many among the throwing process workers, who were part of the ill-famed Lecco Society. I decided to dismiss them all in April of 1869, replacing them with girls from other villages. This example worked very well».

It is not possible to know precisely how many these were, but they must have been fairly numerous if the rooms fitted out as dormitories were four, to which were added a large dining hall, a kitchen, a cloakroom and a washhouse.

Pietro also affirmed that «wherever the workers are most numerous, the threat of disturbances is greater – the girls are far from their families, and left to themselves fall easily into trouble [if] they are not properly watched over».

In fact, nuns from the order of the Daughters of Charity, who lived in the same lodgings as the orphans, but in specially-reserved rooms, were charged with their supervision.

According to verbal evidence, it appears that the orphans' dormitories were connected with the silk mill by means of an internal, obligatory passageway, thus linking the lives of the girls with the activity of the factory. At the same time, as the dormitories were an integral part of the villa, they could be controlled closely and at all times.

Today, very little remains of these separate interior spaces, since the building was later converted into a series of rented flats. The complex has, however, retained its original appearance and its architectural and structural characteristics – Bonacina House, in fact, still has its original courtyard, enclosed on three sides by a portico with stone columns, which communicates with that in front of the villa. The house itself is a large structure with a neoclassical, C-shaped layout. It has three floors, of which the first two have ten windows decorated with stuccoes and wrought iron railings; the edges on the side facing the garden have a covering of smooth ashlar.

The park

The park surrounding the Gavazzi villa was landscaped between 1820 and 1840 at the request of the Gavazzi brothers, who, just as with their factories, were eager to «modernise» their Valmadrera residence, in keeping with the trends of the time.

The result is considered one of the most remarkable examples of the romantic garden in Brianza and the Lecco area. From the viewpoint of style and architectural conception it appears evident that the designer placed great emphasis on space. The choice of tree species, the imposing landscape arrangements and the introduction of decorative and spectacular elements characteristic of the romantic, English-type garden all bespeak an approach developed through direct experience with European landscaping.

The park is situated within the monumental architectural complex of the Gavazzi villa, which, in an area of 30,000 sq. m., includes a variety of buildings and structures.

An entranceway with stone columns, probably built in the second half of the 1800s, leads into the large park. Created in around 1840 by an architect named Giuseppe Balzaretto (who, incidentally, also designed the Public Gardens of Milan), the park covers a much larger area than the previous gardens of the Bonacina-Origoni House and contains, as well as the villa and the silk mill, a pond and a greenhouse.

The cemented pond, at the western end of the estate, also served as a reservoir when water

The silk mill and the greenhouse of the Gavazzi complex in Valmadrera.



was scarce, ensuring a constant supply of water for the extraction process in all weather conditions; it was built towards the end of the 1800s.

The greenhouse was most likely built in 1859, when it was probably larger than it is now. It stood between the villa and the mill and was built in the same style, and the interior was kept warm by the runoff of hot water from the mill. In creating the park, which was situated at the foot of the mountain, immediately above the village, Balzaretto draped the rows of grapevine terraces on an undulating slope, tracing a route which began with the meandering stream above, followed by a little bridge, a cave and at the bottom a small lake – all hallmark ingredients of the romantic garden. The novelty here was that this park contained not only the manor house and its various agricultural annexes or outhouses but also the silk mill, the large water reservoir, the workers' dormitories, the warehouses and the chapel. Whereas originally the complex was undoubtedly surrounded by an unspoiled natural pre-Alpine environment, today the park's great number of venerable trees shield it from the view of what was once a small village but has now swelled into a large industrial town.

The family's prominence as industrialists later prevailed over the functional nature of the house, and thus the storehouses were converted into rooms and the passageway was opened with a larger portico, directly connecting the courtyard with the magnificent garden. The transformation of this building from the original Bonacina design, while retaining its relevance to the property, was emphasised by the addition of a long avenue lined with linden trees, which creates a view beyond the courtyard that draws together the central part of the villa and the ancient part of the village.

Today the greenhouse, which was altered at the end of the 1800s, is separate from the villa and abuts the short side of the mill, a kind of *avant-corps* stretching out towards the villa. Its

structure echoes that of the adjacent factory building, especially in the gable and the rectangular layout.

The final element in the villa complex is the private chapel, built both for the family and for the nuns and the orphans of the boarding school. Pietro himself sustained, in fact, that it was «impossible to obtain in anyone, especially in the lower classes, order and discipline, if the religious feeling of the masses is not encouraged».

Adjacent to the chapel stands a rectangular-shaped building, also of 18th Century origin (and probably restored in the 19th Century), which was used as a stable, barn and storehouse.

Each of these structures, from the greenhouse to the silk mill, was part of a detailed design, in which nothing was casual and everything was included in a comprehensive plan, designed to exert control over all aspects of life in and around the silk mill.

In 1861 the sons of the King paid a visit to Valmadrera, and were extremely taken not only with the famous establishment, but also with the garden and the greenhouse¹³. They were received by Egidio Gavazzi¹⁴.



Aerial view of the Gavazzi Villa with adjoining silk mill in Valmadrera.

¹³ From a guide of the Valmadrera Town Council in occasion of the opening to the public of the Garden, Sunday, June 17, 2001: «from the centre of the large courtyard of the manor house, we turn left in the direction of the portico leading to the garden itself.

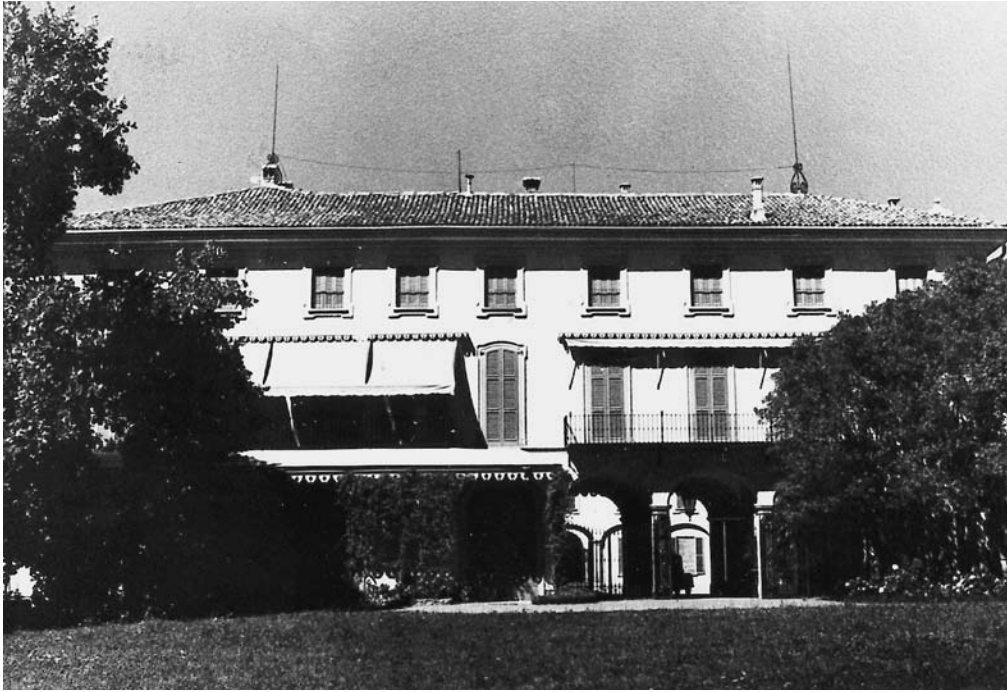
Once through the portico, we are faced with a view of a wide lawn surrounded by tall, stately trees, impressive in their size and variety of species. The perspective is remarkable – the large copses of trees, like stage scenery, together with the undulating terrain, create a succession of different levels which broaden the space and conceal its fixed boundaries.

Following on, we come to a small gravel path that follows the entire circumference of the lawn.

The winding road alters the visual axis of the visitor in rapid succession – the passage through shady areas alternated with wide open spaces, and the gigantic dimensions of the trees (horse chestnut, linden, tulip-trees, etc.) contrast with the tiny path, drawing the gaze now here, now there, in constant motion.

Gentle slopes and swells add harmony and a sinuous unity to this variegated and evocative area.

After the first small wood, we come to a long curve leading towards the villa, which unexpectedly appears before us at the end of the lawn. The large groups of trees to the right and the left and the tall tulip-tree placed at the corner of the building create an extremely impressive perspective, in which the villa fits very naturally. The monumental and perspective layout of the large



The Gavazzi Villa in Valmadrera.

The spinning mill

The building, constructed in the 18th Century and restored by the Gavazzi family in 1850, has seven floors lined with rows of mainly square parallel windows. On the east side is a stone water duct, which runs up the entire height of the building. The interior of the building has retained its original wooden framework, upon which the old wooden, square-shaped throwing machines rest; today these are almost completely in ruins. The structure, purely functional and therefore totally devoid of decoration, was similar to most of the other silk mills in operation during the 1800s in the Lecco area.

The spinning mill, even in its present state of abandon, is one of the very few remaining examples around Lecco illustrating the layout of the interior spaces with the original machinery still installed.

The spinning mill was owned by the Gavazzis until 1886. Three years later it was bought by the Orio family, who owned it until around 1930. Work continued until around 1950

courtyard is completely subverted here and replaced by a kind of perception in which volumes and masses play a dynamic role, as in stage choreography.

The play of colours created by the different tree species is also of great effect.

Every single species, in fact, has been placed according to its own particular transformations through the seasons, to create the effect of brush-strokes of colour on a canvas. The grass itself is of different shades; beneath the trees is a darker variety (Lily-of-the-Valley) to emphasise the natural contrasts brought about by the play of the shadows. In such a way, it is possible even on a dull day to simulate the effect of contrast and colour.

Veering off to the right around two-thirds of the way along the road encircling the lawn is a little path, which disappears into the wood and rises up towards the upper part of the garden.

Along this path we enter an area dense with vegetation. The impression is that of walking along a trail in a large, ancient wood on a mountainside. Here emphasis is placed on the fragrances, sounds and soft light of the undergrowth.

In the romantic Italian garden, which still shows traces of the great Baroque garden tradition, this is a place of mystery, of light and shadow, of the wild and magic aspect of nature. Various kinds of artifices were used to enhance and amplify this sensation. A bridge crosses a small but evocative ravine, through which in ancient times a stream flowed on its way to the little swan pool in the clearing below (today no longer present). Further on, after a seating area equipped with stone benches, the path continues, along the boundary wall, rendered almost imperceptible by the movement of earth and the thick vegetation. On the right, a hollow marks the ancient route of a stream which once proceeded from a small waterfall situated above the entrance to the artificial cave built at the top of the garden (a detail typical of this type of park).

Following on, the path begins to descend, bringing us to the lower part of the garden. Again, once out of the wood we find ourselves in a wide open space. The effects created by the perspective and the different levels of the tree masses, which here can be admired from a high position, serves to broaden and harmonise the space. The large tulip-tree at the corner of the villa is once again the focal point and the protagonist, together with the villa building, of the whole spatial layout of the park.

Moving downwards, beside the neoclassical head of the ancient silk mill, we pass the small but elegant building in wood and glass, which in the old days served as the villa's winter garden ...

All these elements, expertly planned and created, serve to give the visitor the impression of a casual environmental «naturalness». The romantic concept aimed, in fact, at a perceptive relationship which would enhance and, if necessary, artificially reconstruct the beauty of nature, in preference to a view dictated by the rules of rationality, measure and symmetry that were typical of classicism.

¹⁴ See chapter 8, Egidio Gavazzi (1818–1877).



Entrance of a second Gavazzi Villa in Valmadrera, the so-called "Civilian House", which was reserved for the second-born son (A. Bertarelli Public Prints Collection, Milan).

without any restoration on the building or technical improvements on the machinery. Today the spinning mill is the property of the SAFTI company.

The spinning mill, which for the entire 19th Century was water-operated, employed 88 workers in 1896.

The transformation of Valmadrera

Valmadrera therefore became, as described above, a kind of projection of the family, in the form of a «people's town», a planned community within the larger community. As described above, the village of Valmadrera became a sort of expanded family, a «people's town» whose growth reflected the social and urbanistic structure of its innermost nucleus, the self-sufficient complex that had been created around the villa.

The life of the small village¹⁵ was profoundly conditioned by the presence of the Gavazzis and their factories; they, in turn, tended to view the village as an extension of the housing-productive complex that they had built up around the villa. Consequently, the weight of their authority and their financial power was felt at all levels.

After the construction of the villa and the silk mill, the next works were aimed at ensuring almost exclusive use of the water necessary for the functioning of the factories. To this end Valmadrera was equipped, towards the middle of 1830, with a public wash-house in exchange for permission from the council to use almost all the waters of the river Luera;

¹⁵ 2,000 inhabitants at the end of the 1700s, 3,000 in the mid-1800s, 4,000 at the end of the century, 6,000 in around 1950 and over 10,000 today.

later, on September 15, 1862 (with confirmation on August 30, 1866), spurred once again by the need for greater water power, the brothers Egidio and Antonio Gavazzi, sons of Giuseppe Antonio, took upon themselves «the commitment to commission the works necessary for the channelling of the waters from the river Luera and for the construction of two fountains in the village of Valmadrera, and a drinking trough as well, and for the enlargement of the main square¹⁶ in exchange for the handing over by the council to the Gavazzis of all the rights to the waters of the river».

Once the monopoly of the water was secured, the Gavazzis, who in this period (1865-75) were enjoying a steady growth in production and income, dedicated themselves to the creation of important social infrastructures, indispensable for the development of their paternalistic policies. Principal among these was the institution of «daytime primary schools within the factory complexes, where the girls are taught every day in half-hour shifts during working hours». Where exactly these lessons were held is not known, but it is likely that the rooms adjoining the mill were used.

Moreover, in keeping with this policy of propagating basic literacy, a Sunday school was also created in the factories for the children of the village. This initiative secured the Gavazzi family a reputation as benefactors and leaders of the community, not only with their own workers but with the whole village.

In January 1867, the «Luigia Gavazzi» pre-school was founded, thanks to the financial contributions of brothers Pietro, Antonio and Egidio, who thus fulfilled the desire of their beloved mother and ensured a place for her in the memory of the people of Valmadrera. The school held 109 children and was initially located on the ground floor of the Town Hall building; it was later moved, in 1913, to an elegant building in a large area donated by the Gavazzis to the community, where it is still today, in Via Asilo no. 18. With the construction of this nursery school, Valmadrera, naturally enough, was looked upon as a model community in the Lecco area, in which importance was given even to ensuring the peace of mind of the working mother, who, knowing her children were in good hands, was better able to dedicate herself to production.

The nursery school, one of the first in the area, was often held up as an example to follow. In 1892 Adele Gavazzi Mazza left a substantial legacy to the school.

In 1866 (and therefore very much ahead of its time, even for Lecco) an organised fire brigade was formed within the factory, at the request not only of the Gavazzi family but also of the other main silk mill owners in the area, to fight the frequent fires in the mills. The Gavazzis, in particular, took upon themselves the teaching and training of the firemen.

In 1874 the Valmadrera band was established.

In 1879 the Gavazzis donated a home for the poor to the town council.

¹⁶ For the estimated sum of 3,357 lire, to be paid to the Gavazzi family, in seven equal annual instalments with the temporary handing over by the Gavazzis of a piece of land in Valmadrera, on map no. 823, known as the «Grassland of the houses».

In 1891 the first city gas lines were constructed. This basically consisted of an extension of the system the Gavazzis had been using since 1859 to power their factories. The lines were extended from the mill to the silk mill, as well as to the centre of the village, permitting local residents to connect to the system at their own expense.

The Gavazzi family sponsored numerous philanthropic initiatives and made many donations to the parish church and the nursery school.

In around 1814, Giuseppe Antonio served as vestryman in the Parish Church of Sant'Antonio Abate¹⁷.

In appreciation of these valuable contributions, the presence of the Gavazzi family in Valmadrera was celebrated with the creation of a fresco at the sides of the high altar of the parish church. Painted in 1866 by Raffaele Casnedi and entitled *Suffer the Little Children to Come Unto Me*, the fresco was made to commemorate in particular the construction of the nursery school and to express thanks to the benefactors, symbolically represented in the figure of Luigia Verza Gavazzi, perfectly recognisable (last figure on the right) behind Christ.

In 1892, moreover, Adele, a daughter of Pietro Gavazzi, donated a considerable sum of money to the school, along with a marble bust of her husband Simone Mazza, as a reminder that this particular social structure had also been donated to the village and its inhabitants thanks to the generosity of its benefactor.

We can see, however, that with the construction of these urban structures and infrastructures, whose purpose was to reproduce in the everyday life of the village those conditions of control which were characteristic of the «people's town», Valmadrera stands out among later models, such as Schio and Crespi, for example, where we find the creation of company towns with multi-family cottages or houses divided into several parts, created especially for the factory workers. In the Gavazzi's «town», on the other hand, there were only two examples of architecture designed expressly for the labourers – the previously-mentioned boarding school for the orphans and a house for the manager, situated in Via Volta, opposite the present entrance of the former silk mill.

Built in the same style as the villa, with semicircular windows on the second floor clearly echoing those of the factory and with decorations in stucco, the house must certainly have stood out among the neighbouring dwellings, of 18th Century origin, which were much smaller and plainer.

It is likely that a good number of mill workers lived here. There is no record of the construction of an actual workers' district, but it is sure that the Gavazzis owned already in 1817 (purchased together with the Origoni property) numerous houses with adjoining outhouses

¹⁷ Rebuilt in those years, from a project by Simone Cantoni with further modifications by the dedicated architect Bovara, who invariably worked for free. The church contains frescoes by Luigi Sabatelli of Florence, depicting the Vision of the Apocalypse; an ancient painting by Lomazzo, and sculptures by Benedetto Cacciatori of Christ and St. Anthony. The church, with a Greek cross, has Corinthian columns at each corner, supporting a hemispherical vault. The four columns, 2.5 m in diameter and 27 m in height, were hewn from an erratic block (30,000 cubic feet in size) of granite taken from the mountain of Valmadrera at a height of 1200 feet above the level of the lake of Lecco (1854 m a. s. l.).

for use as workshops, and others for habitation, situated in the village centre. To these were added a number of farmhouses scattered throughout the surrounding countryside, which were of fundamental value to the factory, as it was here that the silkworms were raised.

Here again, therefore, we can see how complete was this integration between the mill and the village where the Gavazzi family, from 1820 to 1850, came to own or control a large part of the natural and human resources of Valmadrera and its immediate surroundings.

However, in the second half of the 19th Century, at the end of this process of concentrating all productive activities in the hands of the Gavazzis, although Valmadrera had completely transformed its original farming community culture into that of a «people's town», its outward appearance remained more or less unaltered.

As we have seen, in fact, Valmadrera is not an urban conglomerate which has been totally re-built in an area predetermined and delimited «both in actual physical terms and as a condition of isolation due to the partial or total lack of roadways», neither is it the result of a planned workers' district, typically arranged at right-angles around the «main centre of production» (Crespi, Schio). Instead, in Valmadrera we have a factory that intrudes upon the existing urban structure, according to the traditional development model of any industrial city, where the presence of the factory gives rise to new contradictions and aggravates old ones, leading to the eruption of a series of different contrasts which, however, can be attributed to class differences.

Yet Valmadrera appears to have avoided this type of development, in that «here one does not encounter the direct violence of the intrusion and the breakdown of the existing harmony»; what is created here, instead, is a relationship first of co-operation and then interdependence between factory and village.

The reasons for this particular situation are to be found first of all in the unusual historical and economic position of the area, and secondly in the calculated circumspection and planning foresight with which the Gavazzis introduced the factory in the village.

We should keep in mind that in Valmadrera at the end of the 18th century, a series of processes for transforming the silk industry (already greatly advanced compared to the rest of the Lecco area) were already underway, with the Gavazzis both encouraging this development and exerting a good deal of control over the operations. Indeed, it was precisely through the creation of these structures and infrastructures that the Gavazzis intended to avoid the emergence of those class conflicts that were a natural part of the development of the factory system.

Thanks to the Gavazzi silk factories, Valmadrera was literally transformed in the space of a few years, radically modifying its economic and social structure and evolving from a farming village into the above-mentioned model of a «people's town».

Valmadrera is essentially, then, a «people's town», because, apart from its atypical development and its outward appearance, it is an expression of the ideology of the paternalistic organisation which used religion as an instrument of control. The integration of factory life with

the private lives of the villagers and, from a practical point of view, the creation of the villa complex and the silk mill as a model factory, differed from the others both in terms of the superior quality of the architecture and its advanced production and technology.

The high concentration of factories, many of which can still be seen today along Via Crucis del San Martino, is evidence of the fact that in the late 19th Century, of the whole Lecco area, the town of Valmadrera registered the highest percentage of workers in the silk industry, with 1,268 in 1881, distributed throughout six silk mills and three throwing factories. It was, therefore, an example of the process of the rationalisation and concentration of silk production that was typical of the second half of the century.

The economic boom in Lecco and the surrounding villages, whose strength lay first in the textile industry and later in the metal industry, was quite atypical.

The Valmadrera silk mill as described by Louis Blondel

Louis Blondel was born in Milan on May 2, 1818 and died near Trento on April 16, 1848. He was, in fact, shot by the Austrians at the young age of 29 as a deserter, after being imprisoned on Lake Toblino.

He was the son of Charles Blondel and Giovanna von Heinzelmann and brother to Enrichetta Blondel, the first wife of Alessandro Manzoni.

The Blondel family came from Cully on Lake Geneva, from where they moved to Bergamo in 1771 to work in the trading of valuables.

In the first half of the 19th Century they dealt mainly in silk yarn, working with several silk mills in Inzago, near Bergamo, and perhaps also in Casirate d'Adda.

In the summer of 1846 Blondel compiled a report after visiting a number of silk mills in the Lecco area, in the company of a certain Trentovius of Königsberg, in Eastern Prussia, who worked as a high school teacher in St. Petersburg¹⁸.

After a few visits to the Milanese mills, Trentovius was put in touch with Charles Blondel, and for Blondel there could not have been a better occasion to acquaint himself with the manufacturing secrets of rival factories! He therefore sent his son Louis to accompany the Prussian, and waited eagerly for the report.

The young Louis did not write only about the manufacturing techniques and machinery that he came across, but also about the beauty of the *fileuses*, the hotels he stayed in, the weather and the local cuisine. He wrote, as always, in a style that was intelligent and meticulous, at times somewhat frivolous, typical of the young, lively and open-minded gentleman that he was¹⁹.



Louis Blondel (1818-1848), brother-in-law of Alessandro Manzoni, wrote a report on a visit to the Gavazzi silk mills of Valmadrera and Bellano in 1846.

¹⁸ Trentovius had come to Italy in an attempt to cure his tuberculosis – which was quite common in those days – and to have a look at the silk mills, although why this particular business should interest people from a country so far to the north is not known.

¹⁹ The manuscript, although written very clearly and generally fairly legible, is not easy to understand, since the sentences follow one another with hardly any punctuation and with a great many spelling errors; the young Blondel, in fact, had never attended French schools, nor perhaps Italian institutions either. The translator of the report, moreover, was evidently also quite lacking in a knowledge of French, as a number of mistakes were left uncorrected and others were added!



Valmadrera, the Gavazzi Villa. On the left is the 17th Century Chapel of St. Gaetano.

Blondel was a great-uncle on the father's side of the person²⁰ who wrote these notes and transcribed the report of the journey – a fact that is certainly of interest to those studying the history of the silk industry in Lombardy, also because from a technical point of view it appears that there are few documents available. The following is the description, written after the death of Giuseppe Antonio (1851): «We set off for Valmadrera to visit the famous Gavazzi silk mill, which we had heard so much about. We introduced ourselves to the two younger Gavazzi brothers, Egidio and Antonio, who very kindly showed us in particular the machine for turning the spindles. Little by little they explained to us, though always with great discretion, how the machine worked.

This, therefore, is what I was able to understand, after having observed the process well: located in a vault is a cubbyhole full of water, connected to a machine by a tube.

This was all I was able to see, apart from an iron handle that turned in a semicircle on the tube. Turning this handle all the way to the left caused the spindles to stop; positioned half-way, they rotated at an average speed, and to the right they spun very quickly.

How the Devil was this made to happen, that by turning an iron handle 160 spindles could be set in motion or stopped in a single moment?

I realised, after seeing the machine stop for one or two seconds, that it consists simply of an S-shaped tube with a leather, air-filled ball in the centre of this «S». The air enters the ball with great force by means of mechanical bellows, inflating it and forcing the water inside the ball through the S-shaped tube. This causes the tube to spin at such a speed that it is not possible to distinguish whether it is a wheel or a tube.

The machine creates an effect similar to fireworks, but at twice the speed.

I was truly surprised to see that such a small machine could turn 160 spindles contemporarily. It was extremely ingenious, and one of the things I observed with the greatest interest. We stayed, to tell the truth, but little, but I was pleased to have seen the machine, because many people have visited the mill without being able to see it, as it remains closed and locked inside a large wooden chest, the keys of which are kept by Mr. Gavazzi himself.

Later we entered the silk mill, after climbing a dozen steps.

How great was my surprise on seeing this long hall, 180 strides in length, wide enough to allow 6 people to pass abreast, containing on the left 74 boilers and on the right another 74! How pleasant the sight of 74 women's heads in a straight line and close together! It was a journey in itself to walk beneath the arcades from one end of the mill to the other.

This is what I was able to see in the two walks I took. The boilers are very small. Positioned at every 30 boilers there are hollow, flat blocks of varying shapes, but all serving the same purpose, i.e. producing silk without any mess. The women sit facing the entrance of the mill,

²⁰ Alfredo Engelmann, January 1884.

as if in front of a table, and spin in the following manner: they take the cocoons, which have been soaking in water to the left of the spinner, then pass them through their fingers, picking out the end of the filament with the aid of an occasional little tug, and attach the strand to the spindle, which is painted green, round in shape and six inches wide. Onto this spindle the silk is wound in two «Z»-shapes ... almost imperceptible, and the rim, three «lines» high, is similar to the ones made by Locatelli of Paris, which I saw in use in the Delacchi factory in 1845.

The Verona cocoons are of exceptional quality, and are selected almost one by one. Each boiler had two hollow flat blocks, one for each strand.

After this short tour, we went inside their storehouse and saw the white and yellow silks, which stood out for their wonderful colour, excellent quality and fine workmanship. Four types of cocoon were processed in the mill. I was astounded by the silence, concentration and cleanliness that I found throughout the various parts of factory.

I must not forget to mention that the spindle is behind the spinner, who never lets go of the strand; while she brushes she spins at the same time, that is, while the block holds the strands, the spindle turns. When she brushes, she stops briefly to feed the necessary strands so that the cocoons are always correct.

Whenever a strand (passing through a small agate opening which is situated above the block at a distance of 5 fingers from the water) is soiled, the spinner must stop immediately, otherwise the speck of dirt prevents the strand from passing through the opening and the strand breaks, releasing a small spring that causes the spindle the stop.

The girl with the task of twisting the strands sits between the spindle and the back of the spinner. She performs the throwing process, attaching the strand to an iron nail every time. This produces continuous silk thread. After the girl has concluded the throwing, she touches the small spring that holds the spindle, which starts turning again.

I have seen that out of 148 burners, there were moments in which 8 or 10 were stopped. The spindles have at each end a mechanism by which halfway down a very strong leather strap rubs against a smooth iron roller. The slightest obstacle blocks the spring, stopping the spindle. The «Z» is very small, as the spindle is extremely straight, because when the weather is damp it is no longer possible to detach the silk from the spinning machine, as the eight ribs are very hard and large due to the great quantity of fabric.

The channels run beneath the burners, all the burners and the spindles are painted dark green and the knobs of the looms are red.

After having seen many different qualities of silk in the storehouse and enjoyed some beer which was kindly offered by Mr. Gavazzi, we observed the heaters that kill the silkworms and visited the spinning factory with its fine new machinery (that I wasn't able to see, like the large steam-operated machine situated beneath the mill). Mr. Egidio Gavazzi then gave us a letter of introduction to visit the Bordoni mechanised nail factory in Lecco, and another letter to visit Bellano, with its 160 fire-operated burners.



Valmadrera, the Gavazzi Villa complex with adjoining silk mill.

We entered the vehicle and asked the Crippas' obliging driver to take us to Lecco, where we gave him a generous sum and a jug of wine».

*Descriptions of the Gavazzi Villa in Valmadrera
by Cantù, Amati and Curti*

In 1859, Cesare Cantù wrote in the book *Grande Illustrazione del Lombardo Veneto*: «After having seen the wealth of a gentleman of the lowlands in the houses of the Turina, Bisleri and Vertua families, there is no finer example of a merchant's estate than the Gavazzi property. We shall dispense with the description of the comforts and the charms of the villa and mention only one hall, adjoining a

vast windowed gallery, at the end of which is a hothouse for flowers. When in the evening one is met here by refined luxury, splendid hospitality and lively friendliness, one feels to what extent the independence acquired through trade, that is, through individual strength, is preferable to the adorned beggary of those who seek from governments a hard-earned loaf of bread and an imaginary superiority, which, in the end, is no more than servility. Adjacent to the villa is a round chapel of the Corinthian order, also designed by Bovara, with the altarpiece painted by the younger Sabatelli, and the sarcophagus of Giuseppe M. Gavazzi with bas-reliefs by Cacciatori. The silk processing operations of doubling, winding, throwing, and the most excellent refining are the main point of interest, in addition to the silk mill, which, with the closed spindles and the little machines for regulating the twisted thread, and all the most modern finishings, contains 180 spinners in a small space. The factory buildings and the house are lit by gas lamps».

Amato Amati in the *Dizionario Corografico* of 1859 reports: «Of all the fine country manors in Valmadrera, the fairest is that of the distinguished Gavazzi family of Milan.

Worthy of special mention in the villa is the hall flanked by a windowed gallery, at one end of which is a hothouse for flowers, with a garden that is one of the most magnificent and well-kept in Lombardy.

(...) Adjoining the villa are a silk mill and a spinning factory equipped with the most modern systems, including doublers, winders and throwers. The house and the factory buildings are lit by gas».

Another interesting comment and description is found in the text *Il lago di Como e il Pian d'Erba* by Pier Ambrogio Curti, written in 1872: «The villa of the Gavazzi brothers is both interesting and unusual in a number of ways.

Besides the beautiful location, which must undoubtedly have cost its owners dearly, in order to overcome the difficulties presented by the rocks and the unevenness of the land, both the house (or rather, I should say, the magnificent villa) and the garden are of an incomparable charm.

Since, moreover, the mountain that serves as a background is not completely forested, displaying instead great expanses of bare rock, the whole delightful picture seems to have been ordered up by a fairy's magic wand, and the various elements highlight each other perfectly. The works of art in the added oratory, which is a round building of the Corinthian order, are a monument erected in memory of Giuseppe Maria Gavazzi, commendably executed by Benedetto Cacciatori, and an equally praiseworthy painting by Giuseppe Sabatelli.

The garden contains a charming little lake, since water nourishes the beauty of life. There are deep, wide caves, elegant summerhouses and simple shepherd's huts, copses of saplings, sandy footpaths, smooth lawns and exotic plants and flowers, all arranged with admirable astuteness and good taste.

Near the dining room (and visible from within the same, through a well-placed picture window) is the so-called winter garden, with plants and flowers that thrive even in harsh weather. I abandoned the idea of inspecting the various rare species of vegetation for fear of appearing a botanist, which I am not. I noted, in addition, the heaters conveniently mounted on the large windows, with the heating system designed by engineer Balzaretti, who is also a master landscape architect, and the beautiful fountain.

In short, if the reader genuinely wishes to travel to Valmadrera, before venturing into the nearby Plain of Erba, he will see that the villa of Messrs Gavazzi far exceeds the expectations that my poor and plain words may perhaps have inspired.

He should not leave that village, of course, without visiting the other villa²¹, owned by Mr. Pietro Gavazzi. From its *belvedere*, which overlooks the charming villa, one has a truly splendid view, altogether different from other panoramas we have admired from peaks we scaled together».

The Bellano silk mill

The Gavazzi silk mill in Bellano has an extremely ancient history.

It stood on the grounds of the ancient Umiliati monastery of St. Nicola, the earliest records of which date back to the 13th Century. The monks of the Umiliati order practised a time-honoured, traditional craft – they wove silk and made cloth of silk, gold and silver brocade. They owned a quarter of the lands around the village.

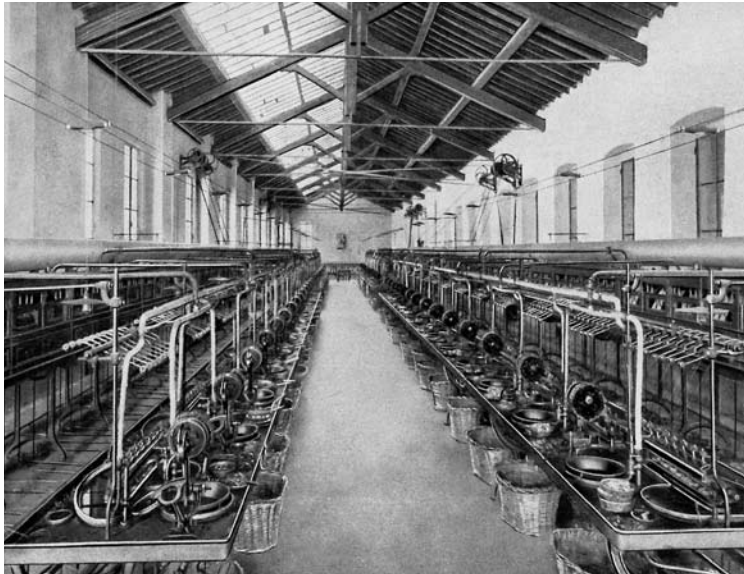
In 1344 the monastery was converted into a convent, with seven nuns and one friar, and later also a head priest. In Bellano these nuns perpetuated the ancient silk tradition by setting up a small school for the local women, thus providing training for future silk mill workers.

Bellano and the Gavazzi silk mill (first building on left) in a print dating back to 1820, taken from *Viaggio pittorico e storico ai tre laghi* (etching by Castellini and Roods, A. Bertarelli Public Prints Collection, Milan).



²¹ The same one that later belonged to senator Lodovico Gavazzi (1857-1941).

Bellano, the Gavazzi industrial buildings (later to become the Cantoni factories) on the Pioverna river in the early 1900s.



Interior of the Bellano silk mill: the basin room.

With the dissolution of the religious order, the convent became the property of the Lorla family, owners of a company that played a role of not little importance in the silk history of Milan and Lombardy²².

The Lorla family transformed the convent into a silk mill, which they sold to Giuseppe Antonio in 1805²³.

²² In the *Reports on Commerce, Manufacture and Agriculture* by General Inspector Count Marco Paolo Odescalchi, 1774, regarding Bellano, we read: «The village has approximately 1,150 inhabitants. They work the lands of the surrounding countryside, a livelihood which few opt out of to seek other professions or set up their own trades ... The village has a paper mill that is continually in operation; this paper is sent to Milan, Lecco, the Three Parishes and some also to Valtellina, with the payment of the royal rights ... Afterward, the silk harvested is spun in the factory owned by Messrs. Lorla and Pensa of Milan. It is said to contain 36 burners and as many boilers, which are tended by the women of the village, having been trained in the craft by the above-mentioned owners under the guidance of teachers from Piedmont, Chiavenna or Lugano.

Some of the local people claim that the silk is spun until the end of August, in quantities, however, depending on the abundance or scarcity of the cocoons harvested.

All the silk spun here goes to be worked in Lecco, into organzine, and is used in the fabric factory set up some time ago in the city of Milan (by the same Lorla family)».

The report of the Royal Commissioner and expert Gaetano De' Magistris on the visit to the silk mill in 1789 says: «... the next day, De' Magistris arrived in Bellano and, assisted by Royal Chancellor Greco, inspected the Pensa, Lorla and Co. factory of Milan, directed by head weaver Francesco Antonio Villa; he found the products of the 21 looms «well-fashioned throughout, composed of perfect silk [of] bright and resplendent colours, without having been touched by either water or wax, producing optimum results capable of competing with those of any foreign Market». The factory is short of manpower.» (from *L'industria serica comacina durante il dominio austriaco (1737-1859)*, by Dante Severin, Centro Lariano per gli Studi Economici, Como, 1960).

The abbot and «commendator» Don Carlo Sovico in 1779 nominated Mr. Giuseppe Lorla and Messrs. Carlo, Antonio and Domenico Conca as permanent leasers of the property of the Abbey of St. Nicolao of Bellano, in exchange for a yearly rent of 200 Milanese lira. The various clauses in the investiture included the following: «The said Messrs. Lorla and Conca [will] firmly commit themselves to the design of a suitable building for two silk spinning factory plans and the construction of those plans; in addition, they will do the same for a building to house the silk mill, using the Abbey House situated in Bellano».

As regards the Church of St. Nicolao, the Lorlas and the Concas undertook to ensure that three masses a week were celebrated, as well as the two holidays of St. Nicolao and All Saints' Day. Between 1795 and 1804, after the dissolution of the recommendation benefits, the Lorla family entered into possession of the property and the church. The church continued to be officiated until the middle of the 19th Century, when it was divested and converted into a storehouse of the nearby Gavazzi silk factory.

Since 1976 the church has been the property of the Bellano Town Council, which has carried out some partial restoration work, including portions of the frescoes.

²³ On August 14, 1805 Giuseppe Antonio and Carlo Gavazzi purchased the spinning factory, the silk mill (with annexed house) and an adjoining vineyard from Domenico Lorla, son of the late Bartolomeo, for the sum of 18,000 Milanese lira. On this land they later built other structures as part of the mill. In time, the Gavazzis also became the owners of the Bellano gorge and the entrance tower.



Bellano, the Gavazzi silk factory. From a photograph taken in the late 1800s.

Today, the only part of the ancient monastery that remains relatively intact is the church, which was transformed by the Gavazzis into a storehouse for cocoons.

The architect Giuseppe Bovara, in addition to his work in Valmadrera, also received commissions in Bellano²⁴.

The silk mill of Bellano as described by Louis Blondel

The silk mill of Bellano was described in interesting fashion by Luigi Blondel, who, as we have seen, had already visited Valmadrera.

The description, also from 1846, is quite different in tone from the enthusiasm with which he described Valmadrera.

The translation reads as follows: «Monday, August 3. At six o'clock in the morning we set off by boat for Bellano, again seeing Varenna to the right and Menaggio and Loreno to our left.

We arrived in Bellano, the birthplace of our friend Tommaso Grossi, a village known for the silk mill of the Gavazzi brothers of Valmadrera, which boasts 160 burners, 80 of which on the first floor and the other 80 on the ground floor.

With the help of our letter of introduction from Egidio Gavazzi we were allowed into the factory and very kindly received by the director and his assistant, who was rather a common man, frankly, but extremely courteous towards us.

²⁴ This is proved by the existence of sketches of mill territory, perhaps made for plans for an extension. Pietro, the son of Giuseppe Antonio, also had drawings made for the fascias and the moulding of his house in Bellano.

When we saw him from a distance, we at first mistook him for our old silk mill assistant Federico Ferrari, being of the same height, appearance and manner.

Mr. and Mrs. Pagani could not enter the factory. They took advantage of the occasion to go and see the gorge of Bellano, of which there is little left to see, having been spoiled the previous year by a fall of huge boulders from the nearby mountains. Later they went to wait for us in a café, after having visited the port, the small shops and the leather factories.

Here are some considerations that I was able to make during my short visit to the mill. It is old-fashioned and badly situated, with a low roof; the central isle is so narrow that it is difficult for two people to pass each other without nudging the baskets of cocoons. The building is extremely damp, very dirty, with old-fashioned burners, two on the right and two on the left. All the utensils are of plain iron and the containers of porcelain. I found that the appearance of the fine silk is $\frac{3}{4}$ good and even, of a somewhat pale, straw colour rather than the proper yellow. The spindles and the looms are old and I saw in general nothing particularly fine or interesting. The mill is full of women, all old and filthy. The girls have goitres on their skin and are frightfully dirty.

I emerged willingly from this foul den with its repulsive stench, and remarked to my friend that such a place did no honour to its owners, as it was all so dirty, even though the silk is apparently of fine quality. This was worth half its price and renown, since the owners are very fortunate to have such excellent lake water; the cocoons are magnificent, but regarding the rest I must be silent, because if a silk mill owner watched carefully when the spinner passes the strand for the second time he would be amazed to see the disorderliness of the work, neglecting to twist the strands for a long time, etc. Mr. Egidio Gavazzi is right to keep his fine mill well sealed and not admit any experienced and intelligent mill owner.

I believe he must be very jealous of his famous silk mill with its 160 burners. He could expect criticism on all points, and is glad to have a mill where the doors are always closed to the inquisitive and those who would see all the silk of Bellano as reject silk, unfit to be worked and thus sold raw and sent to London. How much deceit there was in this fine appearance by which I myself was deluded («appearances can be deceiving»)! I was weary, and disheartened to see my friend who continued to ask questions to the director (who eventually began to answer quite coldly, since he himself was also tired from such a long visit). Therefore, understanding that he had work to do, we took our leave of this assistant. He left us abruptly just outside the factory, and we heard the door of the building turn on its hinges and slam shut with a dreadful crash.

We went to the café, where Mr. Pagani, who was tired of waiting for us for so long, was reading the *Gazzetta di Milano*. We set off again in the boat at around mid-day, and after a wonderful boat ride we arrived at Bellagio. After stopping for a while to have lunch we put our belongings in order and took our leave of Mr. Pagani; a delightful boat met us and took us to the opposite shore of the lake to visit Villa Sommariva».

The Pioverna River and the Bellano Gorge

Both the Bellano Gorge and the Pioverna River were owned by the Gavazzi family.

The best description of the Bellano Gorge was made by Turinese writer Davide Bertolotti in 1821²⁵.

◀◀ In Bellano we first visited the factory of Messrs. Gavazzi, where a great number of spinners prepared to extract the silk from the cocoons, a trade which is thriving and enjoying great success in this village, thanks to the pureness of the water and, above all, the constantly fresh and thin air which, descending into the valley from the mountains, renders the climate of Bellano extremely mild.

The Pioverna torrent flows through Valsassina and has its source near Introbbio. Running between two different rock types fused together by a more assertive rock mass, this mountain stream has carved out its bed in gorges of great depth, whose steep and rocky banks make it almost impossible to cross.

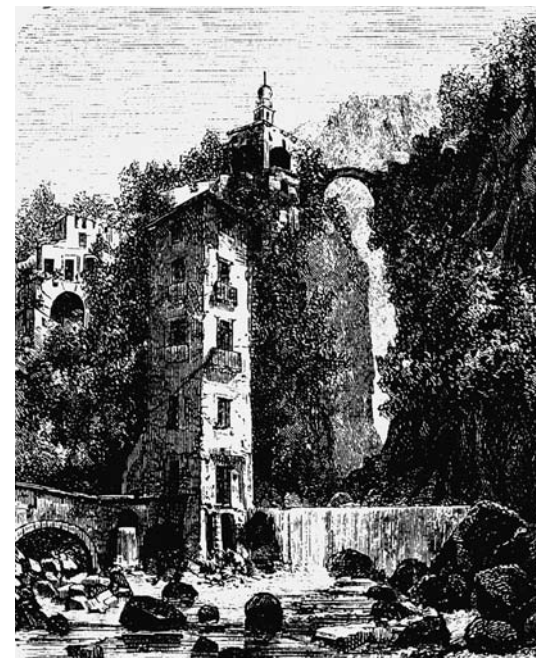
Above Bellano, however, the cliffs narrow until they almost meet, reducing the gorge to a cleft which measures, from top to bottom, around two hundred feet in depth; spanning this cleft from one side to the other is a small stone bridge which joins the two roads. The raging and violent erosive action of the water has cut into the tall rock to such an extent as to leave its great shoulders rugged and naked, except for the occasional green acanthus bush and the trailing clusters of pale ivy. The river, however, due to the cleft it opened in the rock, conceals in its depths many devious cavities and hidden caverns and dreadful pits, around which the waters whirl and howl so frightfully that one could imagine it to be the dwelling-place of Night, and the abode of Fear itself. Then the torrent bursts forth from these dismal abysses, plunging downwards with a great roar and, all foamy white from its descent, rushes to mix with the glassy waves of the lake.

This place, in all its wild majesty, solitary horror and picturesque charm, was reached by means of a wooden bridge, attached to the rock with an iron chain and suspended above the raging waters.

Crossing the torrent by this bridge, and climbing a few steps hewn in the rock, the curious wayfarer comes to a kind of loggia, also cut into the rock, which leads into the awesome bosom of those dark caves.

Here, if he looked upwards, he would see towering threateningly above his head the jagged, yellowish walls of the ravine, and a narrow opening through which he could just catch a glimpse of the brilliant blue sky.

If he looked downwards he could see the waters lit from above, swirling and crashing in proud turmoil, and gurgling in the horrendous chasms. Hence, both above



Print from the period depicting the Bellano Gorge.

²⁵ From *Viaggio al Lago di Como*, Valentina Edizioni, Milan, 1998.



Another print of the Bellano Gorge. Detail of bridge.

Picture of the Gorge from a brochure published by the Bellano Town Council.



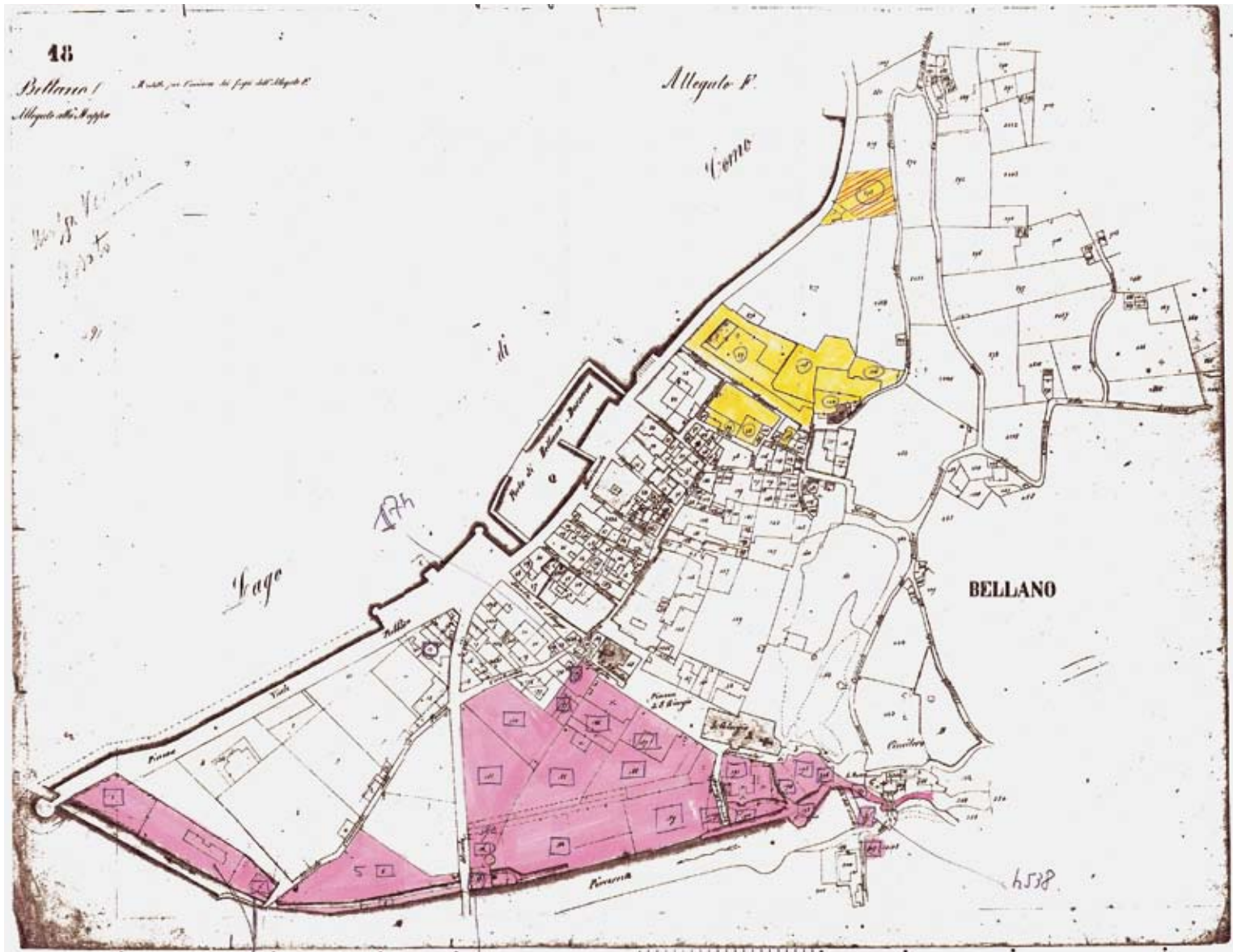
and below, the entire place burdened the soul with terror and dread – magnified, moreover, by the icy cold wind which, even in midsummer, blew from the depths of the dark caverns.

In the winter of 1816, however, an enormous fragment of rock broke off suddenly from the mountain and crashed down into the riverbed, crushing beneath it the little bridge which was attached to it, and the sunlight poured into the caverns created by the water, where before only darkness had reigned; due to this occurrence, the awesome magic and the fantastic appearance of the place were greatly reduced >>>.

In 1857 the waters of the Pioverna began to be used to power the Gavazzi silk plants.

«The well-known gorge is created by the Pioverna torrent, which descends from a height of 60 m. Over this roaring abyss once hung a bridge, suspended by chains and swaying in such a way that merely the sight of it sent shivers down one's spine; however, in the year 1816 a mass of rock broke the bridge, somewhat lessening the awe of the place. Now, with the coming of the new century, the waters of the gorge began to be put to use. Thanks to the enormous intervention works of Messrs. Gavazzi, the course of the river was intercepted at a distance of 13 m above the lake by digging an 80 m barrel in the earth, causing the river to alter its course and then to fall in a cascade, thus providing the power for the workshops and the silk factories, which are among the largest and best organised in all Lombardy, along with paper factories, mills and other plants»²⁶.

²⁶ From *Grande illustrazione del Lombardo-Veneto*, Volume III, Corona e Caimi Editori, Milan, 1858.



The tunnel which was constructed near the famous gorge for the production of huge amounts of motive power for «buildings in which the art of throwing silk is carried out to perfection, owned by the Gavazzi brothers» was inaugurated with a plaque dedicated to Tommaso Grossi.

«Those wishing to visit the gorge should go to the church square and ask the doorkeeper of the Gavazzi silk mill (the building on the right), who is quite willing to accompany visitors. The ravine is reached by climbing a large and ample wooden staircase, which leads to a landing across which pass the water pipes that bring motive power to the factory; from here the visitor crosses the Pioverna by bridge.

On the other side, one comes to a small doorway cut in the rock; on the other side of this doorway, between two very tall and sheer rock faces, is a kind of open cavern, inside which the waters rush with a deafening roar.

Map of Bellano, taken from the «Property Transfer Cadastre», approx. 1850 (National Archives of Como). In yellow, the property of the «Pietro Gavazzi» company (silk mill and villa), in red the property of Antonio (1815-1885) and Egidio Gavazzi (1818-1877).

A wooden corridor, suspended from the rock, leads to where one can see a grotto, dug in the right side, from which a huge jet of water emerges at a great speed and falls 15 metres down to the bottom of the cave. The cave is artificial and very long. Above the level of the waters that flow through it wooden boards have been placed with a small track.

Climbing into a little wagon, and after warnings to bend well down to avoid hitting one's head, the visitor is conducted quickly along the whole length of the corridor, which is divided into two branches – one, the straightest, leads to a wooden construction which closes the mouth of the cave; the other, which branches off to the left, leads out into the open and stops at a long staircase that rises up to a kind of balcony, from where one can see the continuation of the Pioverna gorge.

The little wagon, however, is not always available for travelling through the tunnel.

After having seen everything, the visitor should give a tip of 50 *centesimi* to the doorkeeper/guide»²⁷.

Other property of the Gavazzi family in Bellano

The Gavazzi property in Bellano increased over the century.

In the land registers of 1850, in addition to the famous gorge with its entrance tower, we find not only the property of Pietro Gavazzi, eldest son of Giuseppe Antonio, but also industrial buildings owned by Egidio and Antonio, the bachelor sons of Giuseppe Antonio²⁸.

Egidio and Antonio later leased their industrial property to the Cantoni Cotton Manufacturers.

Eugenio Cantoni, in a visit to Lake Como, was greatly impressed by the location of Bellano and by other circumstances which he judged favourable to the establishment of a spinning factory; the Gavazzi property, which was up for rent, he found ideal for industrial use, and he discovered also that the energy necessary for running the mill could be obtained from the river Pioverna. In short, there was everything he needed to set up a good cotton mill, and so he rented the factory buildings of Egidio and Antonio for a term of 19 years, and secured the right to deviate the waters of an already existing canal for a capacity of 820 litres a minute.

One of the Gavazzi silk mills, in Vendrogno, near Bellano.



²⁷ From *Guida per Como, il suo lago e i suoi monti*, Giorgetti, Como, 1858.

²⁸ Property of Pietro Gavazzi in Bellano (data obtained from the «Closing-down Registers», approx. 1850): m. no. 105/106/878 grassland, m. 87 house with water-operated silk-spinning mill, m. 88/1 portion of house, m. 89 house, m. 99/1 portion of house on ground floor, m. 101 house extending above m. 4515, m. 104 house, m. 4568 two «plots of land», m. 1366 walled terraces, m. 1375 «zerbo».

Property of Antonio and Egidio Gavazzi in Bellano (data obtained from the «Closing-down Registers», approx. 1850): m. 5 vineyards, m. 6 grassland, m. 180/181/182/184/185/188 vineyards, m. 190 «zerbo», m. 194/195 walled terraces, m. 197 rough stone, m. 205 grassland, m. 220 vineyards, m. 242 grassland, m. 282 «zerbo», m. 332 mixed copse, m. 343 walled terraces, m. 344 pasture, m. 345 «zerbo», m. 346 mixed copse, m. 348 pasture, m. 353 grassland, m. 4582 walled terraces, m. 4538 rough stone, m. 1 water-operated paper mill and «sanificio» building with house, m. 13 house, m. 76 storehouse, m. 174/178 house, m. 183 house with «rusca» millstone, m. 186 house for water-operated silk-spinning mill, m. 187 house, m. 189 house with iron water-hammer, m. 191 house with grain and paper mill, m. 193/196 house, m. 342 stable and barn, m. 347 stable and barn, m. 4537 storehouse.

The contract, stipulated by notarised deed by notary Tosi of Milan, bore the date of July 21, 1868.

After the year 1890 the Cantoni Cotton Manufacturers purchased from the Gavazzi heirs the lands and property previously leased in Bellano. With the ownership of this property, the Cantoni Cotton Manufacturers were granted full use of the waters deviated from the river Pioverna.

As we can see from the registry details, this property consisted of a mill for the spinning of cotton, storehouses, the director's houses and various courtyards; the property was registered, on land office map no. 189, as «house with iron water-hammer», as it was originally destined for such a use.

In conclusion, in Bellano there was a silk mill belonging to Pietro Gavazzi and another owned by Antonio and Egidio Gavazzi; in addition, there was a Gavazzi paper mill, leased to Mr. Giovanni Cima, and a Gavazzi grain mill, leased to a Mr. Denti.

Egidio and Antonio were also partners in the manufacturing company previously named Badoni, which they later leased to the Cantonis.

In the 1877 guidebook, *Como, il suo lago e le sue valli e le sue ville*, edited by Antonio Vagliani, we read the entry about Bellano, as well as the mention of the Gavazzi silk plant: «here are the two Esini, the upper with a population of 416, the lower 391, situated at a short distance from each other and renowned for the wide stretch of land composed entirely of fossilised snails, and favoured by the presence of a silk mill belonging to the Gavazzi brothers».

The Gavazzis held their land in Bellano until the 1960s.

The theatre of Lecco

October 1844 marked the inauguration of the «Lecco Theatre Company», the work of Lecco-born architect Giuseppe Bovara who, as we have seen, was a close friend, relative and business associate of the Gavazzis of Valmadrera.

The promoters of the construction of the Theatre were Lorenzo Agliati (lawyer), Cajo Gracco Ticozzi, Dr. Antonio Agliati (Lorenzo's cousin), Giuseppe Badoni (engineer) and the Gavazzi family (or, more correctly, Giuseppe Antonio and later his sons through their solicitor and accountant Giuseppe Badoni)²⁹.

«Many families and tradesmen participated willingly in this village initiative, based on learning and education, buying a great number of shares (all



The "Society Theatre" in Lecco, work of architect Giuseppe Bovara, constructed on the initiative of Giuseppe Antonio Gavazzi.

²⁹ Who, in fact, together with other citizens of Lecco, had formed on September 4, 1843 the «Theatre Construction Company».

In this notary deed we read «since various individual Gentlemen, with the honourable intention of contributing progressively to the prosperity and prestige of this Village of Lecco, have since the year 1835 proposed to form a Company of shareholders for the erection of a Theatre, there being at present no such existing institution, these, against the purchase of one of the boxes therein ...». Giuseppe Antonio pledged himself for a purchase voucher worth 2,600 lira for two second row boxes.



Portrait of Luigia Verza Gavazzi (Carlo Gerosa, 1845) Oils on canvas, 34 x 28.5 cm. Private collection.

«Luigia Verza is depicted while preparing to sign a donation to charity, perhaps inspired by the memory of her husband, whose features are recognisable in the marble bust on the left, in a corner of the living room» (from Carlo Gerosa a Canzo, 1805-1878, edited by Sergio Reborà).

equal), and before long they reached the sum needed for the construction of the magnificent building which now stands in front of the Garibaldi monument in the square of the same name.

The project was created by the well-known engineer Bovara. The original decoration of the theatre was carried out by the Lecco-born carver Giacomo Mattarelli, while the later decorations and gilding were added by his nephew Giacomo Mattarelli. The vault was decorated by Milanese painter Mantegazza.

The theatre has a maximum capacity of 750 to 800. It contains 54 boxes, large stalls area and a gallery»³⁰.

Two months later, on December 22, Giuseppe Badoni, husband of Maria Gavazzi (1814-1866), assumed the post of director and president of the Theatre Company, having been a board member since its founding.

The company represented the most prominent families of Lecco and its surrounding territory, including the «Gavazzi brothers of Valmadrera, silk manufacturers».

The Gavazzis had box no. 25 in the second row and boxes no. 5 and 6 in the first row (Badoni had no. 31 in the second row)³¹.

The marriage with Luigia Verza

Giuseppe Antonio lived in Valmadrera and in Milan, in Via Palestro no. 7. In Canzo, on January 11, 1801, he married 16-year-old Luigia Verza (daughter of Carlo, silk mill owner of Canzo, and Giovanna Sormani of Canzo, herself the daughter of a silk mill owner)³².

The Verza family, together with the Sormanis, were the most important silk industrialists of Canzo and perhaps the most important silk merchant dynasties of the Como area in the 18th Century.

Around the mid-19th Century the silk mill of the Verza brothers, in particular, held a manufacturing role of such importance to the economy of Lombardy as to be considered by its

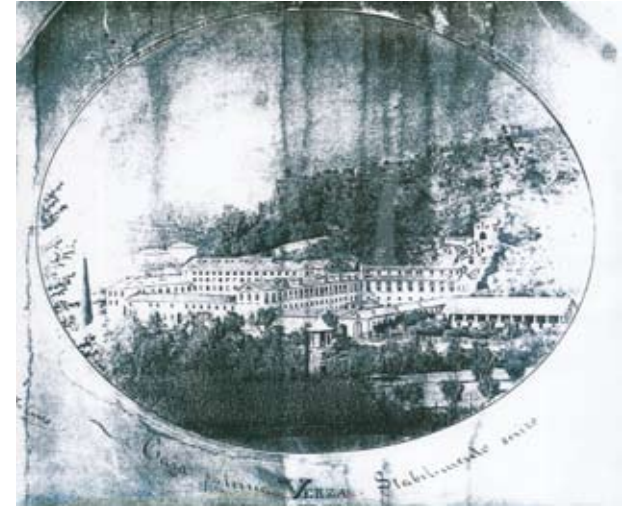
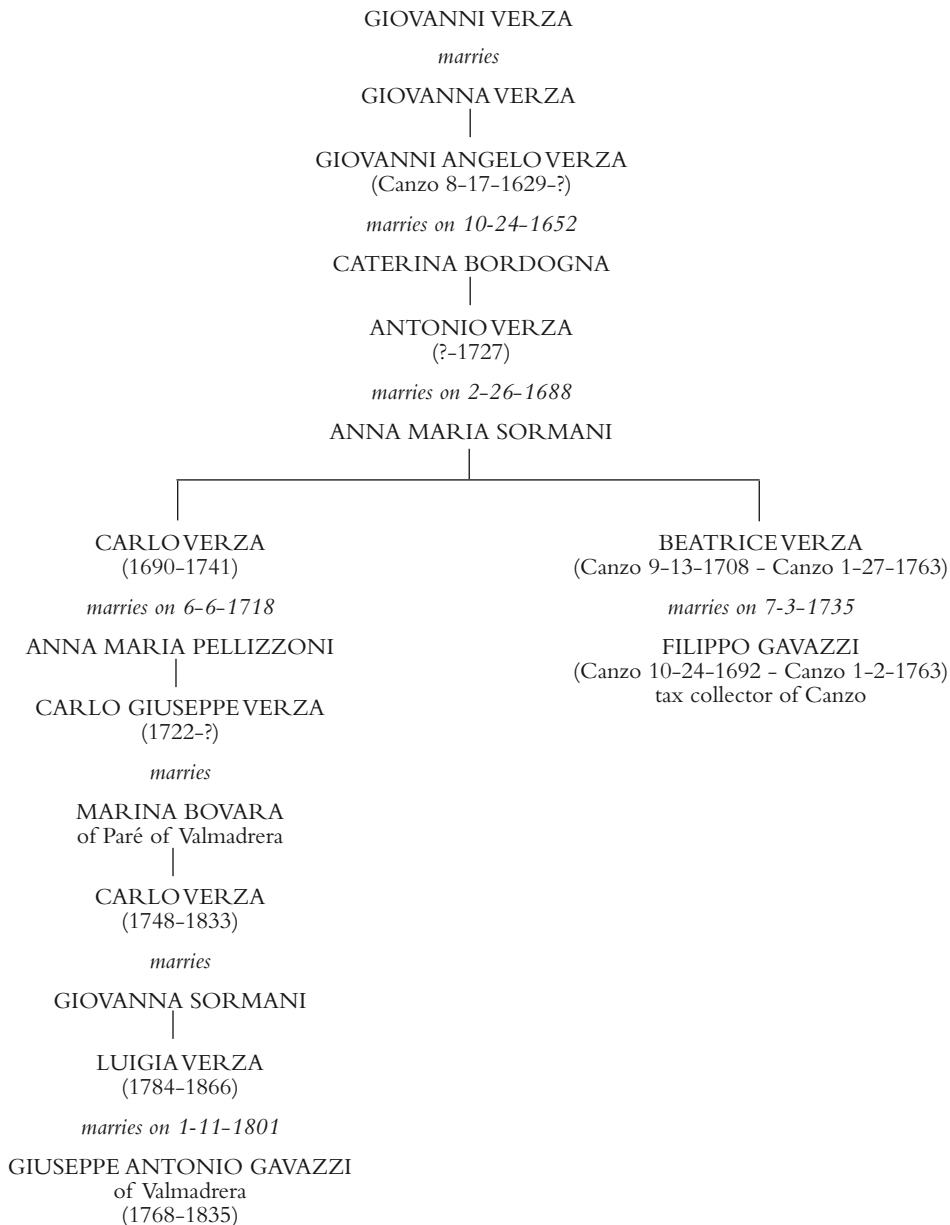
³⁰ From *Lecco e dintorni. Guida illustrata e territorio*, edited by Pro Loco, Tipografia Elli Grassi, Lecco, 1893.

³¹ Later, however, the boxes with their changes of ownership were as follows:

- the right-hand row, box no. 4: Pietro Gavazzi, son of the late Giuseppe Antonio from June 13, 1844. On March 22, 1877, by division, to Giuseppe Gavazzi, Esq. (until August 8, 1877);
- the right-hand row, boxes no. 5 and 6: Mr. Giuseppe Badoni, by exchange in 1843, to the Gavazzi brothers, sons of the late Giuseppe Antonio; until September 12, 1871;
- the right-hand, boxes no. 1 and 2: Egidio and Antonio Gavazzi from 1843 until March 22 1887, when they were sold to Giulio Fiocchi.

³² The two families had already in the past been united by a Verza-Gavazzi marriage (as we can see in the family tree on page xxx): on July 4th 1735, in Canzo, Filippo Gavazzi, the great-uncle of Giuseppe Antonio, had, in fact, married a sister of the great-grandfather of Luigia Verza, Beatrice Verza, who remained famous in the family for her kind-heartedness and her rare qualities.

The relationship between Luigia Verza Gavazzi and Beatrice Verza Gavazzi



The Verza house and mill in Canzo.



Luigia Verza Gavazzi (1784-1866).

contemporaries one of the first three silk industries of the region. «The silk factories or mills operating in Lombardy are numerous and of different levels of importance; of these we will mention three, which taken in relation to the quality of the product, the fineness of the work and the excellence of the manufacturing process, may be considered the most outstanding. These are the silk mill of Messrs. Gavazzi in Bellano, the silk mill of Messrs. Verza in Canzo and the silk mill of Messrs. Turina in Casalbuttano. The first two mentioned are those which generally produce the highest quality of silk, especially in the case of the Verza mill, which has in operation around two hundred reels served by all the other equipment. These two



Wing overlooking the second courtyard of the Verza silk mill, in Canzo.

factories, for the orderliness with which they are run and the perfection of their products, may be considered the best in the world of commerce»³³.

From a description in the expert's report of 1818 regarding the property of Carlo Verza, it is evident that the Verzas, even before 1818 and consequently a good deal earlier than the other industrialists of the Lecco area (with the exception of the Gavazzis and the Boveras), had built a completely self-sufficient manufacturing complex, in which the entire cycle of the processing of raw silk was carried out, from extraction to spinning. The Verzas, who thanks to the purchase in the second half of the 18th Century of numerous pieces of land cultivated with mulberry trees and rich in woodlands, controlled the natural

resources of the area, were undoubtedly aided in the creation of this advanced industrial complex by the experience the Boveras had already gained in the silk field. The Verzas, in fact, were cousins of the Boveras, and had originally learned their trade by working for them. In 1818, these latter still owned six doubling benches in the Verza silk mill.

If we consider, moreover, that this family had close family ties with the Gavazzis, it was clearly no coincidence that the three villages boasting the highest percentage of raw silk production and workers in the silk sector in the Lecco region at the end of the 18th Century and throughout the 19th Century were those in which these three families held, from the end of the 1700s until 1820, a kind of family monopoly on the silk industry. The Verza, Bovera and Gavazzi families were far ahead of their time in initiating the process of transition from the handicraft to the industrial method of production, a process which was to be completed in the other villages of

³³ The origins of the Verza family business in the field of silk manufacturing date back to 1763, but the first real facts regarding production appear in the 1769 notes of Councillor De La Tour: «Carlo Giuseppe Verza has a spinning factory composed of three shafts with eleven machines for spinning and five for throwing. This mill makes organzine weaves for Messrs. Boara of Malgrate. When operating all the year round, it is able to produce five thousand pounds of silk, but it works for only nine or ten months in the year». From this brief description we can deduce that the Verza business, during the 18th Century, must still have been somewhat modest and that the manufacture of silk was merely one way to utilise the enormous capital from their land and real estate incomes: as the Teresian Land Registers reveal, in fact, the family was one of the richest in Canzo, with vast pieces of land cultivated with mulberry trees and vineyards, land for ploughing and sowing and woodlands, which were concentrated mainly in a large area bordering the territory of Asso and bounded to the West by the river Lambro and to the North by a steep rock face. In this stretch of land, along the provincial road (later named the Valassina road), was situated the 18th Century spinning factory, which was subsequently developed into the vast complex known in the mid-1800s as the «Verza Villa». This first manufacturing unit was passed down by its creator Carlo Verza to his sons Giuseppe, Alessandro, Costantino and Antonio in 1826: under their direction, and especially thanks to Alessandro and the sons of Costantino, the Verza Villa continued to prosper until, as we have mentioned, it became first in the field of silk production in Lombardy. In 1881, however, due to a failure to pay off the heavy debts incurred with the Savings Bank Administration, the property and lands belonging to the Verzas, both in the borough of Canzo and that of Asso, were sold at auction.



the Lecco area only after 1860, and this allowed these three great industrial groups to maintain the control of a large part of the silk production in the area for almost a century.

The Gavazzi-Verza couple had sixteen children. Of these, four died at a young age³⁴ and only one male, Pietro (the famous «Pietro the Great»), continued the Gavazzi line. The other three males, in fact, remained bachelors.

Rachele Gavazzi of Valmadrera recalls that within the family, word was passed down that her ancestor Luigia was particularly ambitious and gave enormous importance (almost to the point of exasperation) to the family's good name. When her son's mother-in-law, Teresa Pascal Tavernier, visited Valmadrera (as a lady-in-waiting, she was accustomed to the luxuries of the Milanese royal court and the stately home of Prince Eugenio Beauharnais in Pusiano), the lady of the house went out of her way to give the visitor a good impression. The household staff, on these occasions, were made to dress in elegant livery.

In 1826 the Verza family amicably divided of all their property among the children and heirs of Carlo and Giovanna Sormani. They also made official with legal documents all the amounts of money that the various members had received in the past without drawing up notary deeds.

This included the dowry of Luigia, which was drawn up by notary Francesco Sormani of Canzo 25 years after the date of the marriage,

Bust of Carlo Verza (1748-1833), father of Luigia Verza Gavazzi (Town Cemetery, Canzo).



Canzo: southern facade of the Verza Villa.

³⁴ In the cemetery of Valmadrera there is a wall plaque dedicated to the memory of the children of Giuseppe Antonio and Luigia Verza who died in early childhood: «In memory of Teresa, Giovanna, Carlo and Carolina, who predeceased at an early age their father Giuseppe Antonio Gavazzi. May they, both those buried in other soils and others in this cemetery, along with Riccardo, grandson of Pietro, rest in peace».

Above right: entrance of the villa (A. Bertarelli Public Prints Collection, Milan).



Abbot Giuseppe Prina, son of Anna Maria Gavazzi and author of poems dedicated «to the venerable Mrs. Luigia Verza, wife of the late Gavazzi».

thus documenting «on paper» what had taken place verbally, with no formalisation, at the time of the marriage³⁵.

Luigia was the patroness of painter Carlo Gerosa³⁶, from Canzo. Perhaps Gerosa's greatest masterpiece, in fact, was the portrait of Luigia herself, painted in 1845, when she was 61 years of age.

Luigia was also photographed in 1862 by Duroni, and in the same year another portrait was made of her.

Among Luigia's other frequent visitors in 1863 were Marellina Lotti, Della Santa, Alessandra Cairati and Léonie Bosquet.

The Abbot Giuseppe Prina, son of Anna Maria Gavazzi (1770-1843) and therefore the nephew of Luigia, was a regular visitor to the Gavazzi homes in Valmadrera and in Milan and had a special admiration for Luigia.

Prina was a fairly accomplished poet and wrote many odes and poems in honour of Luigia and many other family members (Egidio, Antonio, Pietro and Ernestina, Giuseppe and Angela, Carlo and Giulia, etc.).

A nephew of Abbot Prina, Nicola Osio, collected his uncle's works and published them in 1865 in two elegant volumes dedicated to Luigia. The poems, written in dialect and in Italian, are enjoyable and interesting – they reflect life in the Gavazzi home in the period around 1850.

Three recently-found letters, written in 1813, reveal a new fact regarding the biography of Luigia Verza Gavazzi.

In these years, the Pietro Gavazzi Company in Valmadrera produced its own silkworm eggs, which appeared to be of excellent quality, equal to those produced in earlier years by Verza of Canzo. These eggs were then sold on the silk markets of Lombardy. From these three letters, dated March 22nd, 25th and 29th, 1813 and sent from Valmadrera to Milan by Giuseppe Antonio Gavazzi to his brother Carlo, we learn that the person in charge of the production of these precious silkworm eggs, which were then sold at a considerable price, was, in fact, the wife of Giuseppe Antonio, Luigia Verza Gavazzi herself.

A daughter and descendant of renowned silk merchants, Luigia must have learnt from the women of her family the ancient craft of producing high-quality silkworm eggs. It is easy to imagine that the responsibility for the production of such a precious and delicate commodity would be entrusted to the women of the silk mill owners' families, who had the extremely

³⁵ Luigia brought a dowry of 2,797 lire and 35 *centesimi* and received from her father a total sum of 7,148 lire and 65 *centesimi*, and from her brother Cesare 354 lire and 79 *centesimi*.

³⁶ Carlo Gerosa was born in Canzo in 1805 and studied at the Brera Academy under Luigi Sabatelli and privately with Pelagio Pelagi. He associated with Tommaso Grossi, Alessandro Manzoni, Francesco HaYez, Luigi Rossari, Stefano Stampa and many other prominent figures of the cultural world. His customers included some of the leading members of the Lombard aristocracy, such as the Belgiojoso family and the Medici family of Marignano, as well as many of the Gavazzi family. He died in 1878.

The members of the family whose portraits were painted by Gerosa include: Benedetto Gavazzi (1769-1833), Teresa Gavazzi Vegezzi (1797-1858), Emilia Gavazzi Spech (1812-1885), Marco Ponti (1793-1853), husband of Giuseppina Gavazzi, Giuseppina Gavazzi Ponti herself (1811-?), Simone Mazza (1825-1877), husband of Adele Gavazzi (1835-1886) and Luigia Gavazzi Verza (1784-1866).

difficult task of selecting and meticulously controlling these microscopic eggs to ensure the success of the final product. It may well be that many of these women, including Luigia Verza, used 'secret recipes' in carrying out the preparatory operations – recipes that were handed down in the family from generation to generation. Such a task required knowledge, experience, exactness, skill and patience, and it could not be entrusted to the peasant women who worked in the family's mills.

The death of Giuseppe Antonio

In the death registers of the parish archives of Valmadrera, alongside his death certificate (June 30, 1835) is a note which says: «Struck down by apoplexy, he died after eight days without having been able to speak» and goes on to say: «A great loss in Valmadrera, for his exemplary conduct and his Charity and his Authority. He was mourned by all. His funeral ceremony was performed by 39 priests and attended by the School of the Holy Sacrament and the entire village population, as well as a great number of outsiders».

Giuseppe Antonio and Luigia also lived in Milan, at no. 7, Via Palestro in a splendid building that for many years was known (even on the official street map of Milan) as «Palazzo Gavazzi», where Luigia died on 29/3/1866.

The *palazzo* was later sold by the Gavazzi heirs when, after the demise of one of its co-owners, no one was willing to invest so much of their fortune to purchase such an important building.

It is interesting to note that Ernestina Gavazzi Pascal also lived in this building, next to the one in which her presumed father lived!



The house in Via Palestro, Milan, where the Gavazzis lived in the days of Giuseppe Antonio (1768-1835).

MIRA PALEARI GAVAZZI (1766-?)

As we mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the women of this generation also began to appear more in the writings regarding the family.

Carlo and Giuseppe Antonio also had two sisters, Mira and Anna Maria, whose married names were respectively Paleari and Prina.

Beatrice Mira Lodovica, known as Mira or Mirina, was born in Ospedaletto Lodigiano on January 28, 1766.

On February 7, 1780 she married in Valmadrera Giacomo Paleari of Valmadrera, a silk merchant.

On January 4, 1798, with a deed drawn up by notary Stefano Arcellazzi, the dowry was presented. The title of this deed was as follows: «Dowry of 800 lira claimed by Giacomo Paleari, paid to the same by Pietro Antonio, Carlo and Giuseppe Antonio Gavazzi, respectively father and brothers of Mira Gavazzi, his wife». Attached to the document was a very curious list of all the pieces of the bride's trousseau («note concerning the furniture of my daughter Mira, which is given over to her husband Mr. Giacomo Paleari for use of the same»), written in her father's hand.

Members of the Gavazzi family portrayed together with the families of relatives, friends and business associates. These fine period drawings are thought to be the work of Giuseppe Molteni, an artist who had much to do with the Gavazzi family.

With another deed of the same date Giuseppe Antonio gave to his daughter 200 lira more, a sum that was then made over to her husband as an extra dowry.

The couple had two sons; one of these, Giacomo, became a lawyer and renowned jurist, and was one of the supporters and founders of the People's Bank of Lecco. Eliseo, the other son, renewed the old connections with the Gavazzi Spech family by marrying Giovanna Gavazzi, the aunt of Giovanni Gavazzi.

ANNA MARIA PRINA GAVAZZI (1770-1843)

Anna Maria was born in Parè di Valmadrera on June 19, 1770.

She married in Valmadrera on April 15, 1801 Ubaldo Prina, a silk mill owner. He lived in the parish of Santa Maria del Carmine, in Milan.

In the past, the Gavazzi family had already been united in kinship with the Prina family when in 1776 Beatrice Gavazzi, the daughter of Filippo, married Venanzio Prina.

The husband of Anna Maria, as we have said, was a silk mill owner like all the Prinas, with mills in the province of Milan, and had his office in the district of San Protaso al Foro in Milan, as we read in the guide *L'Interprete Milanese per il 1823*.



Carolina Ferrario, Enrichetta Dolzino Gavazzi, Luigia Verza Gavazzi, **Giuseppe Badoni**, Felicetta Dolzino and Maria Badoni Gavazzi.

From left: Carolina Ferrario, Enrichetta Dolzino Gavazzi, Luigia Verza Gavazzi, **Giuseppe Badoni**, Felicetta Dolzino and Maria Badoni Gavazzi.



Egidio Gavazzi, Carlo Prina, **Baron Ciani**, Abbot Giuseppe Prina, Alberto Quinterio and Antonio Gavazzi.

From left: Egidio Gavazzi, Carlo Prina, **Baron Ciani**, Abbot Giuseppe Prina, Alberto Quinterio and Antonio Gavazzi.

Ubaldo was born on February 6, 1771 to Angelo Prina and Maria Caterina Staurengi. His father came from Torricella d'Arcellasco, where the Prina family owned houses, lands and two country residences. One of these became the property of the families of Arauco-Prevosti-Porta, Borri and Stampa, while the other remained property of the family for a while longer and is still today known as the «Prina Villa». It was in this house that Ubaldo and his wife Anna Maria spent their holidays. Ubaldo, therefore, was Milanese, but originally from Torricella d'Arcellasco.

Apart from being silk mill owners, the Prinas also had a great leaning for medical studies, and many of them were doctors (or, as they were commonly known in those days, «physicians»)³⁷.

The Prinas were originally from Castelmarte. In the 1600s, most unusually, all the inhabitants of Castelmarte were named Prina. A branch of the family later moved to Novara, the birthplace of Giuseppe Prina, who was to become the famous Finance Minister of the Italian Republic (1802) and then of the Kingdom of Italy, and who, after the armistice signed by Viceroy Eugene de Beauharnais and the Austrians (April 15, 1814), was seized in his home in Milan by angry crowds and massacred in the street (April 20, 1814). The children of the couple included the Abbot Giuseppe Prina, who was quite a talented poet in dialect, and who wrote several poems dedicated to the Gavazzis.

Anna Maria died in Milan in 1843.

He died in 1864, a few days before his brother Carlo. The Prina couple also had a daughter, who married Nicola Osio, a descendant of Egidio Osio, famous for his relations with the Nun of Monza, alluded to in the book *The Betrothed*.



From left:
Giuseppina Ponti Gavazzi, Giovanni Dolzino,
Giuseppe Dell'Orto, **Giuseppe Antonio Gavazzi**, Giuseppe Paleari, Rosa Dell'Orto Gavazzi and Antonio Simonetta.



From left:
Ernestina Gavazzi Pascal, Bartolomeo Vismara,
Pietro Gavazzi, Marco Ponti, Paolina Vismara Gavazzi and Luigia Simonetta Gavazzi.

³⁷ A brother of Ubaldo, Giuseppe, was a doctor of the Maggiore Hospital in Milan, as their grandfather and their uncle Giovanni before them had also been doctors (it was this latter who sold the Torricella villa to the Arauco-Prevosti-Porta family).

Gavazzi house in
Valmadrera

