

ROSSETTI & HIS BIRCHINGTON CONNECTION - 1882

Dante Gabriel Rossetti, as he preferred to be known in his latter years, was very ill by 1882, suffering from the affects of too much laudanum and alcohol and he had also had a stroke towards the end of 1881. Because of this, his friends thought a stay at the seaside, where there was plenty of good clean air, might help to improve his health a little.

His friend John Seddon offered one of his early bungalows in Birchington and another close friend, Hall Caine, offered to make all the arrangements. He came to Birchington on February 4th 1882 – not exactly the best time to visit a place on the North-facing coast of Kent! In his letters to his friends in his home district of Cheyne Walk in London, he complained about the cold, the wind and the grey skies in wintry Birchington, though admitted that when the sun shone, it was good.

His mother and his sister, Christina, came down to stay with him some of the time. His brother William visited when he could and many of his London friends also made the rail journey to the village during February and March. However, Rossetti's health did not improve, but gradually deteriorated.

The Vicar, the Rev John Price Alcock, came to visit him, but Hall Caine turned him away. By the beginning of April, Dante realised that things were getting serious and he asked to see the Vicar, who came to visit him twice during the week leading up to Good Friday (7th). He died on Easter Sunday, 9th April 1882 and was buried in Birchington churchyard. Christina helped her brother and the Vicar choose the site for his grave – near the South door of the old church. The monument above the grave was the gift of Christina and William and was designed by his old Pre-Raphaelite friend Ford Madox Brown.

The following year his mother's pair of memorial windows was installed overlooking his grave. The pair was designed by another of his Pre-Raphaelite friends, Frederick Shield, and installed the following year. The left hand light was based on one of Rossetti's own paintings.

Since then, many thousands of devotees have made the pilgrimage to Birchington to honour the man who was famous for both his poetry and his paintings, even in his own lifetime. His sister wrote a short poem in his memory and published that year, entitled "In Birchington Churchyard".

In Birchington Churchyard

by Christina Rossetti

A lowly hill which overlooks a flat,
half sea, half country-side;
a flat-shored sea of low-voiced creeping tide
over a chalky, weedy mat.

A hill of hillocks, flowery and kept green,
rounded crosses raised for hope,
with many-tinted sunsets where the slope
faces the lingering western sheen.

A lowly hope, a height that is but low,
while time sets solemnly,
while the tide rises for eternity,
silent and neither swift nor slow.

(In memoriam DGR: published in "Athenaeum", 1882)