

THE BUNGALOWS OF BIRCHINGTON BY WLC  
ART JOURNAL 1886 pp. 233-236

Birchington differs from any other of the many pleasure resorts that stud this breezy coast, in that it is new without being garish.

After a first whiff of the sea at Whitstable, with its numerous oyster dredgers, and passing Herne Bay, the train draws up at an altogether insignificant station; one's bag is quietly shouldered by a porter and a trudge of a quarter of a mile brings us to 'Rossetti', as the last home of the painter-poet is now called. Should one arrive at night, there is but time to notice that this building is a study in brown and red, low pitched and surrounded by a dwarf wall of the familiar Kentish flint, 'ere one is in the centre of a long corridor, lighted ship-fashion by swinging lamps, with doors opening on either side and at each end. Everything is of wood, match-boarded within and clinker-built without, and one's first feeling is of surprise at the absence of snakes! Everything suggests the tropics, from the cool colour of the painted woodwork to the mild suffused light of the hanging lamps.

A wonderful view of the ever-changing sea greets one upon issuing forth in the morning. Immediately in front, at a distance of about a mile, the sun-lit ocean spreads its length and breadth to the horizon, studded with every kind of craft, from the three-masted steamer making for the Nore to the sailing barge hugging the coast and waiting for high water to discharge its cargo. Away to the right the main group of bungalows (see below) nestle close to the edge of the low-lying cliff, and Westgate-on-Sea, the home of Mr. Orchardson RA, lies a little farther on. To the left the 'Birchington Brothers' stand out clear against the morning sky. These, although known to have been many miles inland in Roman times, are now sheer on the seaboard. Midway, and far enough off to be comparatively inoffensive, lies the new 'quarter' of Birchington Bay, built with all the reckless un-picturesqueness of the modern builder. From the other side of the bay, however, 'The Reculvers', with the intervening expanse of sea, varying in its tints of blue from light to dark as the deep water or the sand-bars predominate - quite after the heart of Mr. Brett - forms a capital subject; and behind them the landscape is broken and wooded, with an occasional glimpse of a venerable grey or ivy-mantled church tower. All round Birchington, a few miles inland, the massive Norman churches with their backings of fresh foliage, afford many a paintable subject for the artist, and the churches themselves are full of historical and architectural interest. It is from the end of the bay that our artist has made the sketch which we give on the next page. [view of Reculver towers]

The new 'quarter' of Birchington Bay, with its asphalt 'parade', its tennis ground and its 'desirable villas' may be rendered necessary if the neighbourhood continues to grow as steadily in public estimation in the future as it has done during the past few years, but it cannot claim to deserve any large degree of attention from the visitor allured there either by the fame of the Bungalows or by Rossetti associations. In its want of architectural beauty it contrasts unfavourably with Westgate-on-Sea. Returning therefore towards Margate, and once more passing over the threshold of 'Rossetti', we find ourselves in the drawing room or studio, a large and comfortable room with two bays and an entrance into the conservatory. Taking short walks on the cliff or round the road that winds about the churchyard, and subsequently lying in the 'studio' on one of the curiously contrived couches, in constructing which the architect, Mr. Taylor, expended much ingenuity, Dante Gabriel Rossetti spent most of the last nine weeks of his life, reading, or latterly, being read to by Miss Rossetti, and occasionally, when strong enough, painting.

It was here that, on Easter day, his spirit took its flight. His grave nestles under the south-west porch of the church, which, says Mr. Hall-Caine, in his recollections, "is an ancient and quaint Early Gothic edifice, somewhat rejuvenated, however, but without ivy creeping over its walls. The prospect to the north is of sea only; a broad sweep of landscape so flat and so featureless that the great sea dominates it. As we stood there, with the rumble of the rolling waters borne to us from the shore, we felt that though we had little dreamed that we should lay Rossetti in his last sleep here, no other place could be quite so fit. It as, indeed, the resting place for a poet". A curious runic cross, in an all-too-soft stone, marks the grave, and on it is the following inscription:

HERE SLEEPS  
 GABRIEL CHARLES DANTE ROSSETTI  
 HONoured UNDER THE NAME OF DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI  
 AMONG PAINTERS AS A PAINTER  
 AND AMONG POETS AS A POET  
 BORN IN LONDON  
 OF PARENTAGE MAINLY ITALIAN 12 MAY 1828  
 DIED AT BIRCHINGTON 9 APRIL 1882

In the south-west wall of the old shingle-tower church is the memorial window erected by the painter-poet's mother. The left-hand light is from a design by Mr. Shields, the right hand one was adapted from Rossetti's own picture of the Passover which was given by Mr. Ruskin to Oxford. As a whole it is a notable

piece of stained glass. The old church itself is in itself an important feature in the 'village' standing in what, but for the absence of petty merchants and merchandise, would be the market place. It is but a short walk from the station on the road to Margate, which lies some four miles to the east. It is worth a visit, and contains a well-painted reredos, and an old black-letter Bible. No greater contrast could perhaps possibly be found between this quiet seaside churchyard ... and the desolate and dreary old house in Cheyne Walk, where so much of his life was spent.

Leaving, however, much more concerning the painter of 'Dante's Dream' and 'Beata Beatrice' to the personal investigation of the reader, the more immediate subject of this article demands our attention. The public interest in Birchington certainly had its birth with the bungalow that Mr. Taylor built. From his original plan the others have sprung, and so flourished that there is danger of the original designer being forgotten. This, however, is not our concern. 'Rossetti', which, after the hotel, is the first bungalow come to, is different from the rest in many respects, chiefly because it is entirely of wood on brick foundation; and secondly because the builders of subsequent bungalows have improved on the original plan almost out of recognition. There is little difference between the exteriors of Mrs John Wood's summer residence, or Mr Martin's 'Orion' for example, and 'Rossetti', but the ground plan is very different. Instead of the long corridor in the one with the rooms opening on either side onto the passage, and all on one floor, the rooms of Mrs Wood's bungalow lead from one into the other, and 'Orion' has a charming room on the first floor. Interior decoration, too, contributes much to emphasize the distinction, for whereas 'Rossetti' is wonderful in its simplicity, 'Dilkoosha' or ('Heart's Delight') is decorated and furnished with all the lavish elegancies of a 'high-art' firm, and 'Orion' derives its name from the astronomically correct representation of that constellation in a blue and gold morning room. It would be invidious to express any final opinion respecting the two methods of treatment, but the happy simplicity of 'Rossetti' is perhaps more in character with the spirit of a bungalow.

The other bungalows which lie between Dilkoosha and 'Orion' and are indicated on our picture, differ little from those just described, except in that they are either larger or smaller, and some of them of substantial brick. The coach-houses, too, of those in the centre are decorated with sgraffito work by Mr Frampton, a late Academy student of promise. The method is simple; two layers of different coloured plaster or cement are superimposed and the artist works his design on the second layer until he comes to the first, thus leaving his figures in relief. It is effective on a small scale but easily overdone.

A curious instance of the portability of a small wooden bungalow was afforded by the action of Mr Martin, a Hereford architect, who has become much identified with Birchington bungalows. Having some difficulty with the local authorities respecting a right of way, he took the unusual course of removing his structure one night, by the aid of rollers and two powerful traction engines which were on the estate, and planting it, by the time the surveyor arrived the next day, over the disputed way - a course of action that was as effectual as it was unique.

Outside its bungalows, Birchington has attractions which should not come amiss either to the artist or top the visitor. The village is quaint and the walks abroad full of paintable subjects. Within easy distance, too, is Minster, where the railway to Canterbury is tapped, with a fine Norman church; and nearby in the hamlet of Acol is the disused chalk pit where 'Smuggler Bill' took his famous leap. According to the Rev. Samuel Pegg, the tradition runs that a riding officer from Sandwich, one Anthony Gill, lost his life here in the early part of the last century, while in the pursuit of a smuggler. A fog coming on, both parties went over the precipice. The smuggler's horse only, it is said, was found crushed beneath its rider. The spot has, of course, been haunted ever since. But all this is written in Ingoldsby.

The sea, too, has its attractions for the marine artist, and altogether this new Thanet watering place is by no means devoid of interest. It is rapidly growing in public estimation, and as one of the nearest 'lungs' to London on this part of the coast, it is a welcome addition to that class of summer resorts which commends itself by its surroundings rather than by the quantity of its visitors.