

ARTISTIC THANET
SIX LOCALLY LINKED CHAPTERS IN THE STORY OF ART AND LITERATURE
A local history book by Richard Lewis

CHAPTER ONE

Dante Gabriel Rossetti And His Journey To Birchington

For Dante Gabriel Rossetti, the great Pre-Raphaelite, a journey away from the womb of Chelsea down to the Kent coast was like a journey out into the wilderness.

Force of circumstances led him to Birchington. His health had been wrecked by the endless volumes of whiskey and chloral he had taken over the years to calm his nerves and help him sleep. He was told he needed fresh air. His friend, John Seddon, the architect, had built a large one-storey house called a bungalow (a novel name then) in Birchington and offered it to him. So on 4th February 1882, reluctantly bowing to his fate, he made his way to Victoria Railway Station to journey out to the *Ultima Thule* that was the Isle of Thanet.

Perhaps, as he alighted from the train, he felt the dark wings of death already beating around him, for his first instinct was to return. But his companion, Thomas Hall Caine, the writer, prevailed over his instinct and persuaded him to stay. He would get better. He would get strong again. In Birchington-on-Sea his 54 years would fall away and he would re-find the old vigour and brilliance of before. Unfortunately, in life as in art, such illusions always mask the tragic truth. In that most overwhelming moment of opera, Verdi's dying Violetta believes and makes us believe for an instant that she is coming back to life just before death strikes. Such was the final dream surrounding

1

Rossetti, and all too soon the graveyard at Birchington took into its arms one of the greatest and most revolutionary of all English artists.

The revolution had begun thirty four years earlier in 1848, just as thrones and governments were toppling all over Europe. It was then that Rossetti kicked against the pricks of 300 years of academic tradition and, with Holman Hunt, Millais and a few others, founded the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Together they rejected the idea that Raphael represented absolute unimprovability in art and they rejected the academies which claimed to represent the tradition of Raphael. They abominated Sir Joshua Reynolds and his dull brown colours. They hated the artificiality and triviality of subject-matter that abounded. What Rossetti and his followers wanted was to re-find the sincerity of purpose of the early Italian artists before Raphael, to go to nature and represent it honestly and accurately, to use brilliant, real colours and to look elsewhere than classical antiquity for their themes.