

*A Destiny Defined: Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Elizabeth Siddal in Hastings* by Jenny Ridd. Hastings, East Sussex: Edgerton Publishing Services, 2008. viii, 86 pp. + 56 b/w illus. ISBN: 978-9548390-4-8. £10.00 (paper).

*A Destiny Defined: Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Elizabeth Siddal* is an unusual and energetic examination of Hastings – and, more specifically, 5 High Street – as the site where these two Pre-Raphaelite figures fell in love. Jenny Ridd goes into extensive detail about her journey to explore the historical potential of 5 High Street, her present home, as well as to uncover the “drama” between Rossetti and Siddal in Hastings during their visits to Hastings in 1854 (22 April to 26 June) and again in 1860 (13 April to 7 June). As her introduction makes clear, this slim book is intended as “a lighter read” for those who are interested in both the Pre-Raphaelites and the archival and archaeological history of Hastings.

Ridd provides quite an interesting summary of the history of 5 High Street, home to mayors, town gunners, merchants, smugglers, and, as it turns out, Dante Rossetti and Elizabeth Siddal. Much of this archival information has been gleaned from the Hastings Museum and Art Gallery and the East Sussex Record Office in Lewes, as well as from the full archaeological excavation that Ridd’s husband undertook of the back garden of 5 High Street, which uncovered artefacts from the previous 400 years of occupation. (The Ridds even dated an old Wedgwood toilet-bowl from the original outhouse as being from Rossetti and Siddal’s time.) Committed to historical preservation, Ridd also advocated successfully for the addition of Siddal’s name to the blue plaque commemorating Rossetti’s stay in Hastings, which now graces this curious house.

Elizabeth Siddal – model, muse, and wife of Dante Rossetti – is at the centre of this compelling study. Ridd envisions how the couple would have acted during their stays in Hastings, imagining their relationship in “its first flush” when they were both still “starry-eyed with romance.” For at least seven years now, Jenny Ridd has resided at 5 High Street, effectively “living with them” as she and her husband continue to research the lives of these two figures, not to mention those of other Pre-Raphaelites – William Michael Rossetti, John Everett Millais, and William Holman Hunt – who also holidayed in Hastings. Tracking down any and all references to Siddal’s and Rossetti’s stays with the tenacity of a bloodhound, Ridd identifies scraps of wallpaper, chamber pots, and gravestones as testimonials of their legacy.

To help readers visualize Hastings and its impact on Rossetti and Siddal, this book is full of illustrations and paintings of Hastings as well as illustrations and paintings of and by them; it also includes photographs of 5 High Street and