

Our Lady of Walsingham



The Virgin by the Sea



Our story begins in the year 1061 in a small village in North Norfolk, in England, near the North Sea, in the reign of Edward the Confessor over 900 years ago. During the days immediately preceding the Norman Invasion there lived a devout young widow, Richeldis de Faverches, Lady of the Manor of Walsingham. It was in that year 1061 in Walsingham, that Our Lady appeared to that young widow. It is said, that she appeared three times in a vision and each time showed to Richeldis the house in which the Holy Family had dwelt in Nazareth. Mary requested that Richeldis build a replica of this house in Walsingham. To Richeldis, Our Lady said: "Do all this unto my special praise and honor. And all who are in any way distressed or in need, let them seek me here in that little house you have made at Walsingham. To all that seek me there shall be given succor. And there at Walsingham in this little house shall be held in remembrance the great joy of my salutation when Saint Gabriel told me I should through humility become the Mother of God's Son."

In the Middle Ages, Walsingham became one of the greatest pilgrimage sites in all of Europe. A church was constructed around the house to protect it from the elements. From Britain, Ireland, and the continent of Europe, people came to the shrine, from all walks of life: peasant, king, rich and poor. At the Holy House, all were equal. From the time of Henry III in 1226,

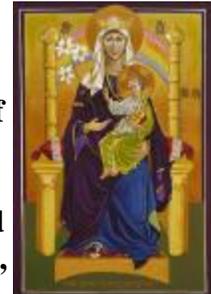


almost every king and queen of England as well as Queen Isabella of France, and King Robert Bruce of Scotland visited the shrine. In the early 1500s, Henry VIII visited the Holy House of Walsingham more than once as a pilgrim. On one such occasion he walked barefoot twice the usual distance traversed by penitents. But Henry's ways changed as the years passed. In his effort to be rid of his wife, Queen Catherine, and marry another, the king broke with the Holy See and had himself declared by his parliament to be the head of the English Church. Then, in 1538, Henry, about to move against all religious orders in his domains, confiscated and burned the Holy House of Our Lady of Walsingham. The magnificent priory church adjacent to it fell into ruin so that only a portion of the massive east wall is visible today. Of the Holy House itself, archeologists have found remnants of its foundation beneath a thin layer of ash on a rectangular knoll near the ruins of the priory church.



But a wealthy Anglican woman, Charlotte Boyd, in the nineteenth century commenced the restoration of the shrine, just as another wealthy woman had initially endowed it in the eleventh century. For pilgrims traveling from London to Walsingham, the last stopping place had been a chapel about a mile away known as the "Slipper Chapel," because they left their shoes there before walking barefoot the last mile to the shrine. The small fourteenth century building was used as a barn to house animals prior to Charlotte Boyd's desire to restore it. Before her plan materialized, she became a Catholic, and in the 1890's bought the chapel and donated it to Downside Abbey. The Guild of Our Lady of Ransom took care of the restorations, and carved the statue of a standing Virgin and Child was given the place of honor. That statue is now in King's Lynn.

A century ago, August 20, 1897, a procession of pilgrims from King's Lynn to the Slipper Chapel marked the renewal of public devotion to Our Lady of Walsingham. But for a generation or more the Catholic Church showed little enthusiasm for the shrine. The reason given was that during the nineteenth century many Catholics in England and Ireland were not pleased with attempts by Cardinal Manning and others to promote public devotions, processions, and rituals. The faithful were accustomed to a more reserved expression of prayer. The recusant families considered such practices as "un-English" imports from abroad. Consequently the restored shrine of Walsingham had little impact initially on English.



It lay dormant for nearly 400 years, just the monastic ruins remaining as a witness to its former life. In 1922, the parish priest at the church of St. Mary the Virgin in Walsingham, Fr. Hope Patten, caused to have made a statue of Our lady of Walsingham. He had discovered in the British Museum a medieval seal of the old monastery, and at its center was an image of our Lady -- presumably a representation of the image that had been destroyed at the Reformation. This statue was placed in the parish church, and at once pilgrims returned once more seeking the blessings of pre-Reformation Walsingham. By 1931 the numbers had become too many for the parish church to cope with and a new shrine church was built, with the Holy House at its center and the image above its altar. So the Shrine of our Lady of Walsingham was reborn, and in our own time it continues to draw thousands each year who, like the medieval predecessors come to discover the reality of "god with us," and the effects of God's loving and healing Grace and Love.



In August 1934 Cardinal Bourne led the Catholic bishops of England and Wales and ten thousand pilgrims to the Slipper Chapel, and from this date it became the official Roman Catholic National Shrine. The four hundredth anniversary of the shrine's destruction was commemorated in 1938 by a Pilgrimage of Catholic Youth, and in 1948 fourteen oak crosses were set up in the garden. There is a tradition for pilgrims to walk the last mile here barefoot.

Many thousands of people have visited the Shrine - some come out of a spiritual need for the atmosphere of peace that seems to emanate from the Chapels, some for aesthetic reasons, whilst others merely stumble across us, nestled away in this secluded Norfolk valley.

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