

The Anglican Shrine at Walsingham, Norfolk, England

The Mystique of Pilgrimage



Probably the most popular pilgrimage sites of the medieval world, other than the Holy Land and Rome, were Santiago (St. James) at Compostela, Spain, the Shrine of St. Thomas Becket at Canterbury, England (destroyed in the Reformation), and the Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham, Norfolk, England.

Compostela still attracts visitors. Today's pilgrimages include the traditionalists who seek favors, health, or forgiveness, as well as those who simply enjoy the comradeship that pilgrimage offers. The most famous fictional pilgrimage was immortalized in

Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, written in 1386.



Little Walsingham and Great Walsingham form the Village of Walsingham in the County of Norfolk. It incorporates the depopulated Medieval village of Egmere, whose remains are among the most extensive in Norfolk. According to the 2011 census, there were 819 people in

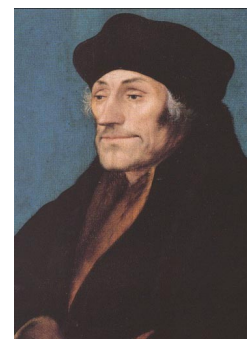
Walsingham.

The Medieval Shrine ("England's Nazareth") ***The Legend of Richeldis***

In 1061, Richeldis de Faverches, the pious widow of the Lord of the Manor of Walsingham Parva, dreamed that the Virgin Mary appeared to her and took her to the house in Nazareth that was the scene of the Annunciation and asked Richeldis to build a duplicate of the house at Walsingham. Later, Geoffrey de Faverches left instructions for the building of a Priory in Walsingham, placed into the care of Augustinian Canons ca. 1146 and 1174. The little wooden house that Richeldis had built as a result of her visions was housed in the priory. Royal patronage and personal visits encouraged interest in the shrine, which soon increased the wealth of the priory. (*Right: Gatehouse of the priory.*)



Erasmus and Walsingham The Renaissance humanist scholar and skeptic Desiderius Erasmus visited Walsingham and wrote about it in a book: *Pilgrimages to Saint Mary of Walsingham and Saint Thomas of Canterbury*. Publication possibly dates from 1524, but Erasmus visited Walsingham as early as 1511. He readily admitted that he was “not one to believe that an ass can fly”, and his skepticism pervades the book that is written in the form of a colloquy. However, it does give a description of what a pilgrim could expect. You can read it in Latin or English on the Internet Archive, translated by John Gough Nichols, FSA, 1849. Erasmus did not join the Reformers officially, but his writings influenced them. (The shrine guardians offered pilgrims for veneration a phial of the Virgin’s milk with which she fed the Christ Child, and presented many other spurious relics that the devout, but gullible pilgrims accepted without question.) Erasmus notes the spring the waters of which were believed to be curative. The translator tells us that there were two springs in his time.



Erasmus (ca. 1466-1536) by Holbein.

The Paston Letters are a collection of the correspondence of a family of Norfolk gentry written between 1422 and 1509. The shrine of Walsingham was a part of their lives, and of that of royalty and the general public and is mentioned several times in the letters. (See last page.)

The pilgrimages to Walsingham commenced in or before the reign of Henry III, who visited there in 1241, and continued for 300 years. The shrine was destroyed in 1538 in accordance with Henry VIII’s Dissolution policies. Henry was a pilgrim to Walsingham as were several of his wives.

Reformation and Restoration Over the years the chapel became a poor house, a forge and a cowshed until rescued by Miss Charlotte Pearson Boyd (1837-1906) a convert to Catholicism from Anglicanism who bought the building, restored it and donated it to Downside Abbey. The Catholic bishop of Northampton celebrated the first public Mass in the Slipper Chapel August 15, 1934. Pope Francis has named the shrine a minor basilica.



The Anglican Shrine Reverend Alfred Hope Patten was appointed Vicar of Walsingham in 1921. A High Church Anglican he was keenly aware of the history of Walsingham. He had a statue made based on the image depicted on the seal of the medieval priory. Anglican pilgrims started coming and accommodations had to be built for them. A new Holy House was built and in 1938 the church was enlarged. HRH Princess Alexandra opened a new refectory in 2001. Work on gardens continued and a new wing was opened in 2008 by HRH Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh.

Right: One of the ancient wells fed by a spring restored.



A Big Day An invitation was issued for “*Opening of New Shrine. The parish priest and pilgrimage committee invite you and your friends to attend the opening of the New Chapel and Holy House (Shrine) on Thursday, October 15, 1931. ~ Pontifical High Mass will be sung in the Parish Church at 11-30. The Translation will be preceded by Benediction at 3 o’clock and concluded with Solemn Vespers at the Shrine.*” A special train ran from Liverpool station, London, leaving at 8:00 a.m. and returning about 9-30 p.m. Breakfast and dinner were available on the train, and lunch and tea were to be had in Walsingham.



The Anchorhold at Walsingham. The Anglican Shrine was unique in possessing a genuine anchoress (see Glossary on this website). Each recluse spent her days in prayer in a small structure with its own garden at the church site. She left only to attend church services. The last known anchoress to be received was Mother Mary Magdalene (Mary Elliot-Weekes) who served from 1972-1995, shown (*Left*) being escorted to her anchorhold by Father Hope Patten.

The Orthodox Presence In 1944 a small Orthodox chapel was built in the Anglican shrine. It was small but had everything necessary for Orthodox worship. A Serbian priest Fr. Nadjanovich was in residence at Walsingham. The Orthodox have a further presence at the former village railway station that has been converted into the church of St. Seraphim (*Right*), a Western Rite Orthodox church.



NOTES:

Princess Marie Louise 1872-1956; granddaughter of Queen Victoria; visited the Anglican shrine as a pilgrim frequently before the War and claimed to be "the first of our family to visit Walsingham since Henry VIII". [From the Shrine’s archives.]

Excerpts from the Paston Letters

Margaret Paston to her husband John: “My mother behested another image of wax the weight of you, to Our Lady of Walsingham.” (A curious custom) Oxnead. 28 of Sept. 1443

To John Paston from James Hawte: “. . . as for the king, as I understand, he departyt to Walsingham upon Friday come sev’night, and the queen also, if God send her hele (health). Windsor, Whitsun Mon., May 22, 1469.

To Margaret Paston from her son John: “And as I was writing this bill, on of the grooms of my lord’s chamber came to me, and told me that my Lady (Elizabeth, Duchess of Norfolk, wife of John Mowbray) will be here in Norwich tomorrow at night towards Walsingham.” London, Nov. 15, 1470

To Margaret Paston: “I heard yesterday that a Worsted man of Norfolk, that sold worsteds at Winchester, said that my Lord of Norfolk and my lady were on Pilgrimage at our lady (Walsingham) on foot.” John Paston, knight, Waltham beside Winchester, the day next Holyrood day, Sept., 1471

To John Paston from John Paston, knight: “Sir, it is so that the Duke of Buckingham (Henry Stafford, beheaded in 1483) shall come on pilgrimage to Walsingham, and so to Bokenham Castle to my lady, his sister.” London, 23rd or 25th of August, 1478.