

Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham

History

Walsingham is a small village in North Norfolk, near the North Sea. In the year 1061 the local Lady of the manor, the Lady Richeldis, received a vision of the Blessed Virgin Mary in which she was asked to build a replica of the holy house in Nazareth where the holy family lived. The holy house was built and a well marked the spot for its location. It quickly became a place of devotion and pilgrimage, and the waters of the well were believed to hold miraculous qualities. Thus from the beginning of the story, the Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham has been a place to experience and celebrate the reality of the Incarnation- the "Word made flesh" -- and a place of healing. Until the martyrdom of St. Thomas a Becket at Canterbury in 1170, Walsingham was England's most celebrated and visited shrine.

King Henry VIII was a pilgrim and benefactor at Walsingham, but, as the Walsingham hymn said, "with greed in his eyes," he had the monastery at Walsingham dissolved in the 16th century and the image of Our Lady which was at the heart of the Holy House, was burned in London. So the shrine met its ignoble end.

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 centre 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 centre 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.

Why Shrines?

Walsingham holds a special place in the affections of Anglicans, being the only English shrine to Our Lady and being very much the focus of Anglican Marian devotion.

Pilgrimage

Pilgrims go to shrines. Shrines attract pilgrims for the reasons above. Pilgrimage has been a part of the Christian experience, for pilgrimage to particular places mirrors the Christian journey itself as we, our souls and bodies, seek to move towards closer to our destiny which is the Glory of God. Pilgrimages can be times of renewal, reflection, new perspectives, spiritual growth and in the company of the wider church, they can be encounters with the Incarnate Word in word, sacrament, fellowship and ministry. Nowhere is this more true, than at Walsingham.

At every Sunday Parish Mass we sing the Angelus, an anthem to Our Lady, at the statue of Our Lady of Walsingham at the back of the church. This statue was placed there in 2001 in memory of a number of parishioners whose names appear on a nearby brass plate. There is a second smaller statue which has been placed, appropriately enough, in the sanctuary of the Lady Chapel. It was brought to the church by young people from our church who visited Walsingham in 1948. One of those who went on that pilgrimage was Gordon Baker. He writes;

“In 1948 a group of us (including myself) from Holy Nativity Youth Association (HNYA) went on a pilgrimage to the Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham. We travelled all the way to Norfolk by train which was quite an adventure for someone as young as myself and I had been entrusted into the safe hands of the Churchwarden of Holy Nativity (Mr. Kenneth Cooke).

Sadly most of those that were on that pilgrimage have now died and the remainder now worship and hold office in other Churches in different parts of the country.

I had the great privilege at the age of 14 to serve at one of the daily Masses in the Holy House. While we were there we purchased a candle (lamp) dedicated to Holy Nativity Knowle Bristol which would be lit daily in the Holy House Chapel.

Every year since this has been lit daily and renewed annually.

Today, Walsingham has significance to the faithful in this country and throughout the world. Many have found great strength from visits to this holy place. The sense of holiness and prayer has inspired churches to set up places of devotion in their local situations. The image of Our Lady of Walsingham can be found in places as varied as the Episcopal Cathedral in Salt Lake City to the Anglican Cathedral at Popondelta, Papua New Guinea, and the Cathedral in Lusaka, Zambia as well as here at Holy Nativity.