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Our Lady of Walsingham



A Saxon House and the Seat of the Queen

... of Heaven

Nearly a thousand years ago – 944 to be exact – two women, a child, and a dream, commingled time and place, bringing Nazareth to a small village in East Anglia, England ... and into the

hearts and lives of men and women ever since. To this day you can stand at the threshold of Heaven and Earth. Every year thousands do, from all over the world. Why do they come? What do they do? And what do they leave with?

Our Lady of Walsingham: a Pilgrimage through Time

In the middle ages medieval man and woman held before them as an ideal, an ambition to make at least once in their life-time a pilgrimage to one of the great shrines of Christendom. The four great shrines of medieval Christendom were Jerusalem with its opportunity to visit the holy places and to walk in the foot- steps of the Master, to walk upon the ground that Jesus Christ himself had hallowed with his presence. Rome, in particular the tombs of the Apostles, St. Peter and St. Paul, the Coliseum and the cemeteries of the early Christian martyrs, the Catacombs ... and to Walsingham in Norfolk, England to visit the Holy House of Nazareth that housed the Statue of Our Lady of Walsingham. It is significant that the English Shrine was the only one dedicated to Mary, the Mother of God.

There were various motivations for the making of medieval pilgrimages, a desire to do penance for sins, ones own or others, a trust to be healed of some disease or suffering by visiting the tomb of a St., for spiritual renewal, guidance, blessing, the seeking of favours, pilgrimage was a highly valued and esteemed Christian practice, and certainly for all those living in England, Walsingham was the most accessible and easiest to arrive at.

A Pilgrimage of its nature always implies effort and perseverance, the willingness to accept deprivation and difficulty, an adjustability to the unexpected, it can be a real experience of dying to oneself and cause us to exercise a very real spiritual poverty. In this lies its potential value of calling us onwards to the goal, forgetful of self for some greater good, for ourselves or others, and an exercise that will certainly and did certainly sharpen the spiritual wits and bring the pilgrim invariably closer to God from the experience.

Many future Saints and martyrs as well as numerous Kings and Queens plus countless numbers of ordinary people sought their guidance from Christ and Mary and the Saints, by means of going on pilgrimage to the places where they were specifically honoured. Indeed Walsingham was so well known that it is said that at some time in his or her life every English man/woman regardless of their station in life, visited Our Lady of Walsingham, according to the English chronicler, Holinshead, the so called Pilgrims Way (the road to Walsingham) was given the first place among all the roads in England. It is interesting to note that Walsingham was a popular place of pilgrimage 800 years before Lourdes.

Where is Little Walsingham?

Little Walsingham is a beautiful English country village hidden away in a Norfolk Dale in the County of East Anglia on the eastern side of England. Walsingham is intersected by the river Stiffkey. It is over 100 miles from London, and 28 miles north-west of Norwich. Its nearest sea port is called Wells, only 5 miles away, but in former times the crowds of pilgrims who came by sea would land at King's Lynn, or Bishop's Lyn, as it was then called.

Walsingham's other means of approach are various winding country lanes and roads, especially the so called Pilgrims Way. Walsingham is a beautiful little village which still retains much of its medieval atmosphere, the close knit houses, many of them in the Jacobean half timbered design, the central market area, called the Friday market, the presence of the ancient ruins of the Franciscan Friary (Grey-Friars) on the south side of the village , the majestic and imposing ruins of the actual great Augustinian Priory in the Abbey grounds , plus the two Holy Wells, and other factors all add to this.

The very names of its streets and lanes are reminiscent of a bygone age, Church Street, Almonry Lane, Thorn Gate, to name a few. Walsingham is extremely picturesque and rural, it takes very little in the way of imagination to feel that one is walking and praying in medieval England. The whole place is steeped in history, the very stones are saturated with prayer, one knows instinctively that this is a place where a great drama has been re-enacted, and that of the entire Pascal mystery.

The Spiritual Inspiration and Founding of the Shrine at Walsingham.

Walsingham has been a place of pilgrimage since 1061. The earliest written account of the founding of the National Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham to survive is in the 'Walsingham Ballard' (c.1465) included in book 1254 in the Pepys library at Magdalen College, Cambridge, England.

In 1061, when St. Edward the Confessor was King of England, five years before the Norman conquest, a lay of the village, a widow, a certain Richeldis de Faverches was captivated by the Holy Spirit, as it were in a new Annunciation from the Lord, she received an inner vision and understanding from the Virgin Mary, Mother of God. The Lady Richeldis was taken up as it were in the Spirit and was shown the very house where Mary herself had been told by the Angel Gabriel that she would be the Mother of God, the Lady Richeldis then understood in this vision by both Mary's words and indications that she was to be instrumental in building another such holy house like this in Walsingham, Our Lady promised the Lady Richeldis ' Whoever seeks my help there will never go away empty handed'.

It was this vision that conceived and gave birth to the whole Walsingham Story, **Walsingham was to become a new Nazareth**. Mary actually appeared three times to the Lady Richeldis, each time in a vision set in the Holy family's home at Nazareth where Jesus lived with Mary and Joseph.

So Mary, the Mother of God, chose Walsingham herself for such a mission, for God's purpose.

The Mother of God indicated the construction of the house, regarding size and indicated the very spot where she desired the house to be. Mary said to the Lady Richeldis, " Do all this unto my special praise and honour. And all who are distressed or in need, let them seek me here in that little house you have made me in Walsingham. To all that seek me there I will give my help. And there at Walsingham in this little house shall be held in remembrance the great joy of my salutation when St Gabriel told me should through humility become the Mother of God's Son".

From this vision of Mary comes the enduring devotion of the English to the Salutation, more commonly referred to as the Annunciation.

As Mary the Mother of God bore the Saviour of the World through offering her simple, *Fiat*, by her gift of obedience to the inspiration and direction of the Holy Spirit, so the life of another lady, the Lady Richeldis bore fruit because of her obedience, her listening and putting into a concrete reality the invitation and desires of Mary, Our Queen and Mother. The lady Richeldis had the house built as she was requested. It was a simple wooden Saxon house and no attempt was made to imitate a Palestinian structure.

After the death of the Lady Richeldis, her son Geoffrey de Faveraches, now Lord of the Marches, and Lord of the manor decided to fulfill his life long ambition to journey to the Holy Land to see the original 'Holy House' in Nazareth. But before leaving he gave directives to his chaplain to institute a religious order to care for the chapel of Our Lady. Eventually the shrine was to be sheltered by the great conventual church that sprang up beside it, a priory of the Austin Canons. So it was that the priory and the shrine stood side by side for centuries.

The actual wooden shrine stood on the north side of the church, and was entered by a door from the church and had its own means of exit for the continuing streams of pilgrims, at some later later the shrine was encased by a stone building, probably for its protection and preservation. So it was that Walsingham became a great centre of pilgrimage, Kings and Queens, monks and religious, minstrels, paupers, peasants, people of every age and state came to pay homage to Mary in this beautiful Nazareth of England, a blessed hallowed spot chosen by the Mother of God herself.

It is still there today. Still the pilgrims come. She came to us. Perhaps one day you will go to her. If you cannot, *you still can* ... for *it* is, *she* is, only a prayer away. She always is.



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