



The History of Walsingham

The Making of a Shrine

FIVE years before the Norman Conquest, and in the days of St. Edward the Confessor, there lived in the little village of Walsingham Parva, a few miles from the sea on the North Norfolk coast, a pious widow lady, Richeldis, or Recholdis, de Faverches (or Faveraches), who had a great devotion to Our Lady and who desired to serve her in every possible manner.

One day, in response to a particularly earnest prayer, the Blessed Virgin took the widow in a vision to Nazareth where she showed her the Holy House of the Annunciation, in which the Archangel Gabriel had delivered the Angelic Salutation, and where the Holy Family lived during the years of Our Lord's upbringing. Three times was this vision repeated, and each time there came the command that the Lady Richeldis should mark well the length and the breadth and the height

of the little house in order that she might set up an exact reproduction of it on her estate at Walsingham, to the praise and honour of Our Lady, and so that all who sought her there might find succour .

Delighted at so wonderful a commission, the Lady Richeldis hastened to carry out her instructions, and called in the aid of skilled craftsmen to construct a house, just such as that which she had seen in the vision. But when it was made, grave doubts arose as to the correct site for the shrine.

The difficulty was partly solved, however, by a strange manifestation, which seemed miraculously to indicate Our Lady's wishes. There was a heavy fall of dew that soaked all the surface of the meadow wherein it had been planned to set the shrine, with the exception of two small rectangles of grass, both of which were left equally dry.

One of these patches lay side by side near two wells already reputed to be holy, and here it was decided to lay the stone foundations on which the wooden house was to rest. But, before the house could be erected, a new difficulty arose. Nothing the workmen could do would make the foundations fit the house, labour how they might. By sunset the task was no nearer completion than in the morning, so that, at last, 'all sorry and sad', they went home to rest.

That night, knowing that the Lady who had first made known her intentions might wish to assist in the matter, the Lady Richeldis spent the entire night in prayer. And in answer, with the aid of Angels' hands, Our Lady caused the whole house to be lifted up and to be set in the other space, 200 feet or more away.

Next morning, when the craftsmen came to complete their unfinished work, they found that the house was already set up, and that with a workmanship far superior to their own.

Thus it was, the outcome of a vision, and the work of Angels' hands, that new Nazareth, England's most celebrated shrine prior to the Reformation, was set up in a remote corner of Norfolk.

England's Nazareth

Later her son Sir Geoffrey de Favarches before leaving for Jerusalem entrusted lands to Edwy his clerk for the support of the chapel and

the foundation of a religious order. According to the opening lines of the Pynson ballad of about 1460, the original chapel was built in 1061

*Of thys Chappel see here the foundation,
Builded the yere of Christ's incarnation,
A thousand complete sixty and one,
The tyme of Saint Edwarde, Kinge of this region.*

Walsingham soon had a great reputation as a holy place where prayers were answered and disease cured. Pilgrims specially came to worship before the ancient wooden statue of the Virgin Mary with the infant Jesus, which stood in the wooden shrine of the Holy House, later enclosed in a stone chapel, and to see other much venerated relics.

By 1281 the Shrine was sufficiently important for King Edward I to come on pilgrimage in thanksgiving for an escape from death which he attributed to a miracle wrought by the favour of Our Blessed Lady of Walsingham and in 1296 at Candlemas-"le jour de la chandeleur"-during the King's second visit the Shrine provided the setting "en la chapelle de notre Dame a Walsingham" for the signing of an instrument of Alliance between him and the Earl of Flanders.

To this shrine there came between 1061 and 1538, hundreds of thousands of pilgrims from all parts of Europe. They included Edwards I, II, III and IV, Henrys III, VI and VIII, Richards I, II, Queens Eleanor of Castille, Isabella of France, Philippa of Hainault, Johanna, widow of Henry IV, Katherine of Aragon, Robert the Bruce smitten with leprosy and then King David Bruce of Scotland both given leave of passage and accompanied by a retinue of knights.

The Black Augustinian Canons who built their Priory alongside had charge of the Shrine which was continually enriched by gifts and grants until it became one of the most famous of Christendom's Shrines of Our Lady.

The road to Walsingham, now become one of England's main highways, was marked by Pilgrim Chapels and Pilgrim Hostels, The Milky Way was renamed the Walsingham Way, pointing across the heavens the route to England's Nazareth in the Holy Land of Walsingham.

The young Henry VIII, it is said, walked the last mile from Barsham Manor House barefooted and presented a jewelled necklace of great value to Our Lady. His first visit as King was made in 1511 and in June of the same year it is recorded that the windows of the outer Chapel, which by this time had been built to afford protection to the Holy House, were being glazed at the King's expense.

In the King's book of payments is recorded a yearly payment of 200s. made for the King's priest singing before Our Lady at Walsingham and for the King's Candle constantly burning there 46s. 8d.

The Destruction of the Shrine

But in September 1538, there is a final entry recording: "For the King's Candle before Our Lady of Walsingham, and to the Prior there for his salary, NIL."

Already on September 18, 1534, the Prior and Canons of Walsingham had signed the Act of the King's Supremacy- the first religious house in England to submit. Norfolk men at Walsingham itself protested with their blood against the fall of religious houses "where God was well served and many good deeds of charity done," but in the June of 1538 Our Lady of Walsingham was dragged away to London to her burning, which it is said took place at Chelsea in September before Cromwell the Lord Privy Seal.

On August 4, 1538, all the Priory property was handed over to the King's Commissioners. The little Holy House was torn down, the Priory Church stripped of its lead and furniture, the Windows, doors, stone called freestone, glass, iron, slates, and tiles were disposed of in lots for a total of £55 15s. 11d.

But even with the physical destruction of the Shrine, there were those who still held the name of Walsingham in honour, and the destroyers found it necessary to send Sir Roger Townshend there to trace the originator of the report that Our Lady still granted favours at her old shrine. In the January of 1539 a poor woman of Wells was committed to the ward of the constables of Walsingham and at Townshend's instructions was on Market Day paraded round the town in a cart with a paper set about her head writ ten with the words " A reporter of false tales," young people and boys casting snowballs at her. This done she was set in the stocks "till the market ended." His report ends

with the following significant remark, "Howbeit I cannot but perceive that the said image is not yet out of some of their heads."

Desolation

For three centuries Walsingham slept. Bereft of its darling, shorn of its glory, the village of Walsingham Parva slipped back through the ages, to the days when the Shrine was not. The Priory tumbled down. Stone by stone, successive generations, who remembered not the First Joy of the Annunciation, which had daily been recited there, carried the great church away, to build it into their houses, when formerly it might have been built into their lives. In a county where quarries are rare and stone is precious, it is not to be wondered at that in an age of unfaith these things should have been so.

Great were the changes. Immediately after the closing of the Shrine the stream of pilgrims dried up, and then, avaricious though the innkeepers may have been in past centuries, the sole means of income of many of the inhabitants ceased. Inns closed and people moved away. The Priory lands fell into the hands of lay-folk, who no longer tilled the soil as a duty to God and their fellow-man, but as a means of profit for themselves. Retainers, almoners, poor, many such found themselves in a sorry plight, for God was now forgotten where He had been well served in former days.

And landowners, not content with their recently acquired properties, began to extend their fences over other lands which were not theirs, the common lands of the people. Murmurings and discontent there were. The stamping out of the Walsingham Conspiracy must have daunted many hearts. But even so strife broke out in other parts of the county, provoked by these very deeds. The notorious Ket Rebellion was in truth nothing but a protest and an attempt to gain fair justice against the rapacity of the land-thieves of the century.

The Return to Walsingham

"When England goes back to Walsingham, Our Lady will come back to England". During the last decade of the 19th century a pious Anglican lady, by name Miss Charlotte Boyd, was driving through the lanes of Norfolk in search of the possible home for some Anglican sisters when she came upon a small 14th century chapel on the outskirts of Walsingham which owed its preservation to the many uses to which it

had been put at one time it served as cottages, another as blacksmith's forge and finally as shelter for the local farmer's turnip cutting. Miss Boyd was much taken with the beauty of the West front which was largely intact, and on making enquiries discovered it was the last of the Chapels on the pilgrim route, traditionally known as "The Slipper Chapel" and dedicated to St. Catherine (for it is her remains that reside on Mount Sinai, the Mountain of the Burning Bush where Moses was commanded to remove his shoes before entering on such holy ground). It is at this chapel that Henry VIII stood barefoot and at which pilgrims were thought to have removed their shoes to walk the last mile barefoot to the Shrine at Walsingham. Miss Boyd was determined to obtain possession and at once entered into negotiation with the owners for its purchase.

And now once more is fulfilled the promise of Our Lady of special grace to all who devoutly visit Her at Walsingham. Before Miss Boyd had completed the purchase of the property she was granted the gift of faith and was received into the Church.

Meanwhile devotion to Our Lady under her Walsingham title was already being revived at the nearest Catholic Church to Walsingham, St. Mary's, King's Lynn, of which parish Walsingham then formed a part and in 1897 the revival was popularly acclaimed. After a service there, some of the congregation, led by Fr. Wrigglesworth, Parish Priest of Lynn and Fr. Philip Fletcher of the Guild of Ransom, were able to travel to Walsingham and walking to the Slipper Chapel were probably the first group of Pilgrims to visit Walsingham since the desecration of the Shrine in the 16th century.

Miss Boyd gave the Chapel to the Downside Benedictines, one of whom had received her into the Church. For many years it was impracticable to make use of the Chapel, there being no resident Catholics in the neighbourhood.

As the revived devotion spread Shrines of Our Lady of Walsingham were erected in other churches. On August 19, 1934 - 400 years after the national apostasy-Cardinal Bourne, Archbishop of Westminster, with Bishop Youens of Northampton and many of the Hierarchy of England and Wales led a great pilgrimage of reparation of over 12,000 pilgrims back to Walsingham to the restored Shrine in the Slipper Chapel.

The Slipper Chapel Shrine, said Mgr. Leo Parker, Bishop of Northampton, speaking at King's Lynn, in 1947, will "also please God be a temporary Shrine until the day shall come when the devotion of our English people, with aid of the Catholics of the world, may make possible a large and worthy fane, to repair the ruin of the old and to eclipse even that raised by the great faith of our ancestors."

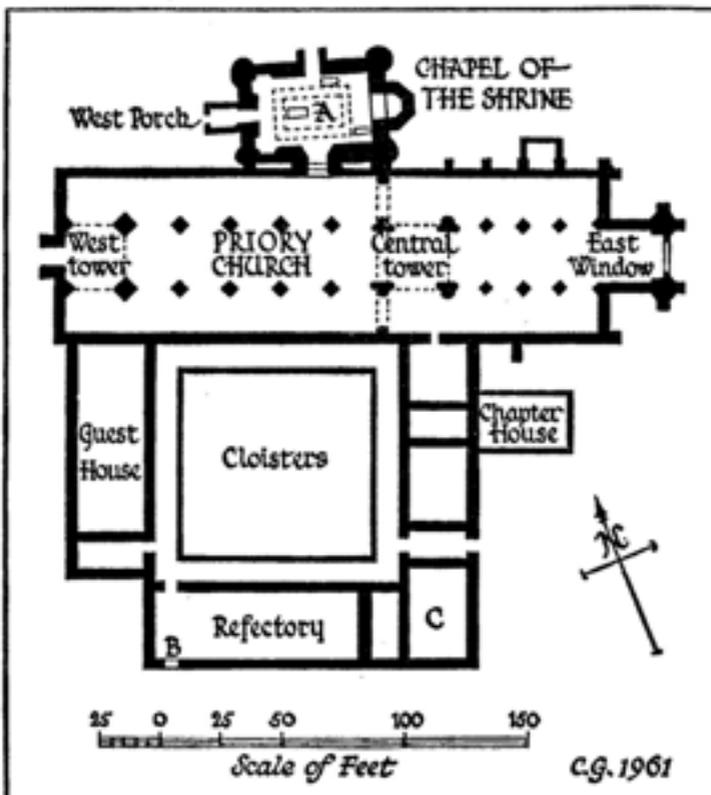
Meanwhile, on July 2, 1950, a temporary Church in honour of the Annunciation was formally opened at Walsingham by the Bishop to serve pilgrims until that day of which his Lordship spoke when the many pilgrimages of reparation shall bear fruit and England makes restitution by rebuilding and restoring to Our Lady her Holy House of the Annunciation

On August 16, 1953, Bishop Parker blessed a new East Window in the Slipper Chapel depicting in glowing colours the Glorious Assumption of Our Lady, in commemoration of the formal definition of the Dogma.

Perhaps the greatest day ever witnessed at Walsingham was the Feast of the Assumption (15th August 1954) when the Apostolic Delegate in the name of the Holy Father (in the words of Bishop Parker) "restored to the brow of our National Madonna the Crown filched from Her by Henry VIII."

This magnificent Marian Year ceremony was acclaimed by more than 15,000 pilgrims standing amidst the ruins of the ancient Priory.

"Nations from afar shall esteem thy land as holy.
And blessed shall they be that shall build thee up."
Tobias Chp. XIII



Walsingham Augustinian Priory. A. The wooden shrine resting on its raised platform. Below and beside it are three stoned lined tombs. B. Buttery-hatch.

OUR LADYE OF WALSINGHAM

by F.C.Devas S.J.

JOY to thee, Queen! within thine ancient dowry:
Joy to thee, Queen! for once again thy fame
Is noised abroad and spoken of in England,
And thy lost children call upon thy name.
Ladye of Walsingham! be as thou hast been
England's protectress - Our Mother and our Queen.

In ages past thy palmer-children sought thee
From near and far, a faith enlightened throng,
Bringing their gems and gold and silver love-gifts
Where tapers gleamed-where all was prayer and song.
Ladye of Walsingham! be as thou hast been
England's protectress - Our Mother and our Queen.

Wonders and signs at Nazareth in England
Told all the world no pilgrim there might plead
For any grace through thy meek intercession
But thou didst grant sweet succour to his need.
Ladye of Walsingham! be as thou hast been
England's protectress - Our Mother and our Queen.

Bitter the day when sacrilegious envy
With impious hands despoiled and wrecked thy shrine
And bore thine image, robbed of gems, to Chelsea
To burn in flames-flames lit by sons of thine!
Ladye of Walsingham! be as thou hast been
England's protectress - Our Mother and our Queen.

Thy Priory that was so great a glory
Lifting its golden towers towards the sky,
Is now a ruin - prayers and praises silenced;
Prone in the dust its ancient beauties lie.
Ladye of Walsingham! be as thou hast been
England's protectress - Our Mother and our Queen.

O Blissful Maid! that sad and bitter passing
Brings to our eyes tears never shed in vain.
Restore, restore dear Walsingham's devotion
And let thy children find thee there again.
Ladye of Walsingham! be as thou hast been
England's protectress - Our Mother and our Queen.

Our martyrs' blood like heavenly seed is scattered;
The harvest now is ripe for us to reap;
The Faith dishonoured now is held in honour.
O help thine own this precious gift to keep.
Ladye of Walsingham! be as thou hast been
England's protectress - Our Mother and our Queen.