

## Walsingham Poems, Songs and Ballads

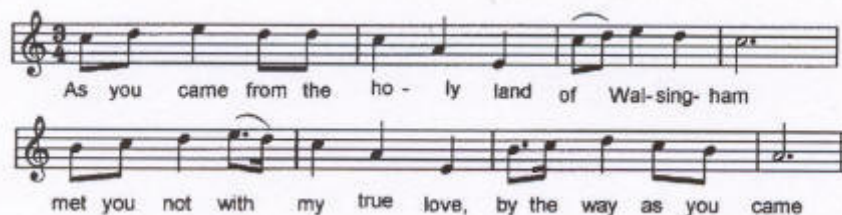
A new musical commission by the Shrine received its first performance at The Walsingham Appeal 2006 concert at St Andrew's Holborn, on Friday, 9th December, 2005.

*A Lover's Complaint* for counter-tenor solo and choir by James Lark (see below) uses words from two so-called "Walsingham Ballads." The following article is a preliminary look at the history of the ballads associated with the Shrine.

**The Walsingham Ballad** - is the name usually given to the earliest written (and subsequently printed) account of the startling events of 1061 - the vision of Our Lady which appeared to the Lady Richeldis. Written in the mid-fifteenth century (c.1460) and printed by Richard Pynson in 1495 it is often referred to as "The Pynson Ballad". However, its author is unknown. The only extant copy was discovered in The Pepys Library at Magdalene College, Cambridge. Was it ever sung (no music has survived) - or simply a narrative poem? Much as it tells us about the origins of Walsingham as a holy shrine, it gives us nothing about the traditions of four centuries of pilgrimage.

However, in the later sixteenth century, the term Walsingham Ballad, meant something quite different. Fifty years after the destruction of the Shrine in 1538 there were still in circulation many "Laments" for Walsingham, two of which have survived, though authorship is unclear. Both may simply be educated re-workings of a folk text. Sir Walter Raleigh is often credited with the (originally untitled) poem which begins "As you came from the holy land/Of Walsinghame. . ." This poem has often been titled by editors - "A Lover's Complaint", "Pilgrim to Pilgrim" and "Walsinghame" are examples. Also current at the time was the poem beginning "In the wreck of Walsingham/Whom should I choose/But the Queen of Walsingham/To be guide to my muse." In 1578 Queen Elizabeth I made a royal progress through Norfolk and romantic speculation assigns this poem to a member of her entourage, Philip Howard, Earl of Arundel. What is interesting is that both poems have more or less the same metre. Did one or the other - or both - of these poems become the Elizabethan "Walsingham Ballad"?

There is further evidence that the Elizabethan "Walsingham Ballad" was well known. We have a simple melody - easily found today in the collection of keyboard pieces known as "The Fitzwilliam Virginal Book" (Vol. I - Fuller Maitland/Barclay Squire edition.) There are two sets of variations on, what was obviously a popular tune, "Walsingham", one by William Byrd and the other by John Bull. The lutenist Francis Cutting, amongst several others, wrote



Walsingham variations. Both the above poems can be sung to the tune "Walsingham".

For us today perhaps the most startling appearance of the Walsingham Ballad is in Shakespeare's

"Hamlet". In Act IV: sc. v, the first of Ophelia's mad songs is a version (earlier than Raleigh?) of the folk ballad. In this version, a woman asks about her pilgrim lover, rather than a man inquiring after his girl. Ophelia does not sing the first stanza, but begins with -

How should I your true love know  
From another one?  
By his cockle hat and staff  
And his sandal shoon.

He is dead and gone lady,  
He is dead and gone;  
At his head a grass-green turf  
At his heels a stone.

This mad-song can be - and was - sung to the tune "Walsingham".

One suspects that the earlier Pynson Ballad was little known (if at all) a hundred years after its publication. No doubt the copies printed by Pynson went into libraries around the country and there lay forgotten. It was not in any way a traditional song sung by pilgrims as they tramped along, but a long poem (21, 7 line verses) telling Richeldis's story. However, verse 21 is a glorious hymn to Our Lady on behalf of pilgrims to Walsingham.

O gracious Lady, glory of Jerusalem,  
Cypresse of Syon and Joye of Israel,  
Rose of Jericho and Star of Bethlehem,  
O glorious Lady, our asking not repel,  
In mercy all wymen ever thou dost excel,  
Therefore, blessed Lady, grant thou thy great grace  
To all that the devoutly visit in this place.

James Lark, in his new piece "A Lover's Complaint", uses the above stanza together with verses from the Raleigh poem.

### **James Lark**

*was born in Kent in 1979. Following school in Cheltenham, he went up to Girton College, Cambridge, as a Music Scholar, where he was a Choral Exhibitioner and held the Senior College Prize. He studied composition with Robin Holloway, and has had works commissioned, performed and recorded by English Voices (Britten Festival), the Choir of Girton College, Cambridge, and Cambridge New Music Society; in 2003, he was commissioned to write a new piece to open the new St Martin Organ by Guy Bovet in Girton Chapel, ; he has written stage scores for numerous productions, including Oedipus (Catmalogian Theatre Company, 2002), With Blacks (a new piece for the Alight Here Festival, London, 2003), A Drink with the Uncertainty Division (Edinburgh, 2004), Lost! (London, 2005) and The Rise and Fall of Deon Vonniget (London, 2005). He has also scored two short films The Ghost of Kirkton Fell (Hired Thugs Productions, 2004) and Summer's End (Hired Thugs Productions, 2005). In 2004 James won a prestigious Jerusalem Award for his work on radio. He currently is Director of Music at St Mark's, Newnham, and teaches composition and 20th Century Music in the Cambridge University Music Faculty.*