

The Walsingham Story

In the year 1061, in the reign of St Edward the Confessor, a widow of the lord of the manor of Walsingham Parva, called Lady Richeldis, had a vision of the Virgin Mary. The Virgin Mary appeared to Richeldis and took her in spirit to Nazareth and showed her the house where the Angel Gabriel had appeared to her. Richeldis was told to take note of the measurements of the Holy House and to build a reproduction of it in Walsingham (hence the name 'England's Nazareth' which was given to Walsingham). Richeldis saw the vision three times.

It proved difficult for workmen to build the wooden house and Richeldis spent all night in prayer. The next morning it was discovered the chapel was completed and it was believed that Our Lady, with the assistance of the holy angels, had removed the House to the spot which she herself had chosen, by which a spring of water was found. This is the Walsingham legend.

Walsingham quickly became a centre of pilgrimage and was the most popular pilgrimage site in Britain. In the 14th century Augustinian Canons built a Priory to look after the pilgrims and they encased the Holy House in a chapel of stone to protect it. Many kings and queens came to pray at the Shrine, the first being Richard Coeur de Lion. Pilgrims often took off their shoes to walk the last mile to the Shrine barefoot as a sign of penitence, or being sorry to God. This place is now the site of the Slipper Chapel (the Roman Catholic National Shrine).

In 1536 King Henry VIII, who had made pilgrimages here, dissolved the monasteries (destroyed them). In 1538 his Commissioners came to Walsingham to break up the holy buildings and seize any valuable goods and the Shrine was destroyed. They burnt the statue of Mary with the infant Jesus on her knee which was above the altar.



In 1921 Father Alfred Hope Patten became the Vicar of St Mary's Church in Walsingham. He wanted to revive pilgrimage to the village so he had a statue carved from wood of Mary with Jesus. It was copied from the original Priory seal now in the British Museum. This statue was put in a side chapel in St Mary's Church.

Father Patten set about raising money to build a new shrine. He purchased some land in the village opposite the Priory and plans were drawn up for a church to be built with a Holy House inside it. The church was designed so that it would resemble the original shrine, although it was made of stone not wood. A well was discovered when building started and is part of the new church.

In 1931 the statue was taken from St Mary's Church and placed above the Altar in the new Holy House. Pilgrims were invited to light candles in it as a sign of their prayers. In 1938 that church was enlarged to form the Anglican Shrine, more or less as we know it today.

