

An overview of the Shrine of Walsingham



In the 11th century, the small village of Walsingham was on the brink of becoming a centre of great religious importance within the county. This was a time of immense interest in the Holy Land, leading many to undertake pilgrimages that were often long and dangerous, with their lives at risk. The period was further complicated by conflicts between Christians and Muslims, making travel even more difficult.

A noblewoman called Richeldis de Faverches devoted her life to prayer and good works for those around her. In 1061, she received a vision from Mary, Mother of God, who showed Richeldis a house in Nazareth where the Archangel Gabriel appeared to deliver the news that Mary would give birth to Jesus. In this vision, Mary requested that an exact copy of the house in Nazareth be built in Walsingham so that it was closer for people to come on pilgrimage. Richeldis received this vision at least three times.

The replica house that was built became the centre point of Christian pilgrimage to Walsingham. It is said that the house was constructed overnight while Richeldis kept a prayer vigil. Due to the house's construction, Walsingham grew spiritually, financially, and in visitor numbers. The site was also supported and visited by successive monarchs from Henry III to Henry VIII, and it spanned over 400 years of continuous support. It was of the same importance as Rome, Jerusalem, and Spain.



However, King Henry VIII would destroy all things Catholic, and the Holy House was demolished in 1538. From then on, Walsingham lost its religious importance, wealth, and prosperity, and where the house was, it became ruins that can be visited today. A small section of wood from the Holy House can be visited in the ruins today.

The Slipper Chapel, built in 1325, was also connected to the Shrine. When pilgrims made their way, they used to stop there, removed their shoes, and continued barefoot to the Holy House. After the destruction of Catholic churches in the 19th century, the Slipper Chapel was used as a cow shed, a poor house, and a barn. However, in 1896, a wealthy lady, Charlotte Boyd, purchased the Slipper Chapel and returned it to the Catholic Church.

It was not until 1934 that the first Catholic Mass occurred in the Slipper Chapel since Henry VIII. On September 8th, the Catholic Bishop of Northampton re-consecrated it for public worship by Catholics. A bigger chapel was constructed to accommodate the increasing number of visitors.

Since 1934, the Slipper Chapel has been known as the National Shrine for England and has continued to develop and draw pilgrims worldwide. In 1982, Pope John Paul II, during his visit to the UK, requested the statue from the Slipper Chapel be taken from Walsingham and placed on the Altar at Wembley Stadium, where he was to celebrate Mass.

In 2015, Pope Francis declared that the Shrine of Walsingham was to become a Minor Basilica. In 2024, the Vatican established an annual national feast day on September 24th to highlight Walsingham's importance to England and Wales.

Pilgrim numbers are increasing yearly, with around 200,000-250,000 visitors. Since 2003, the shrine has been part of the European Marian Network, which connects 20 major Marian Shrines across the continent. In 2009, it hosted the relics of St Therese of Lisieux when they toured every diocese of England and Wales. The Shrine is going from strength to strength and is a place of great welcome, prayer, and spiritual renewal. It is well worth visiting!