



Norfolk Museums Service Information Sheet

The Pilgrimage to Walsingham by David Jones



Reverse of the Great Seal of Walsingham Priory, third quarter of the 13th century. Diameter 45 mm. The inscription reads, 'AVE MARIA GRACIA PLENA DOMINUS TECUM' (Hail Mary full of Grace the Lord be with you).

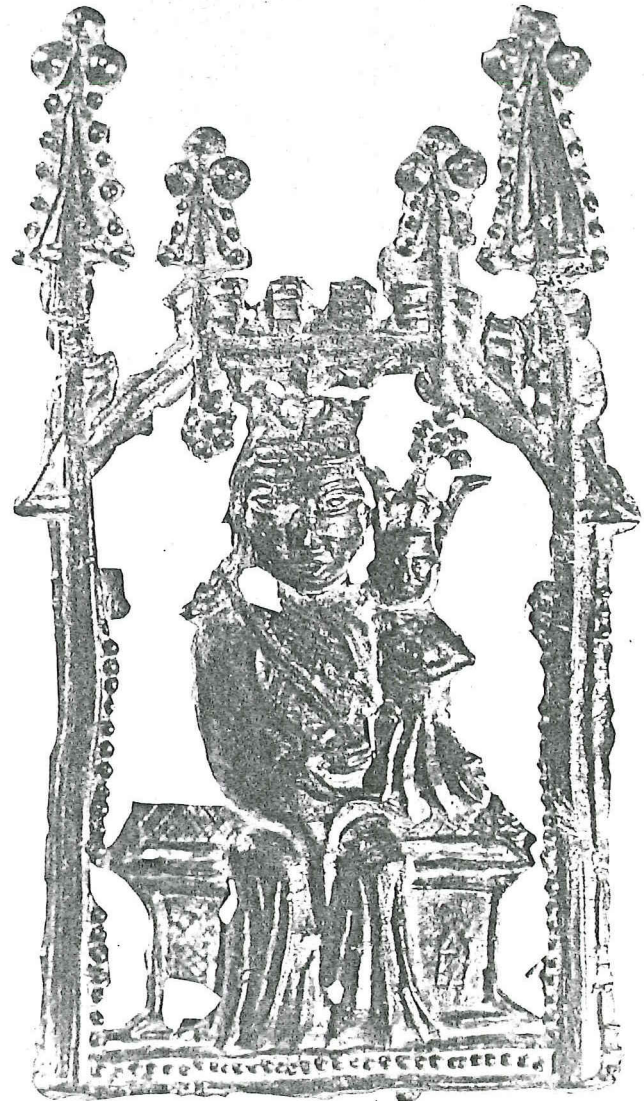
Catalogue of Seals in the British Museum No. 4248.

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Prior to the dissolution of the monasteries in the sixteenth century the Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham had an international reputation and in this country was second in popularity only to the Shrine of St. Thomas a Becket at Canterbury. Indeed Erasmus who visited Walsingham in 1511 described Walsingham as 'a town maintained by scarcely anything else but the number of its visitors'.

Richelde of Fervaques, a widow, had the shrine built in the early part of the 12th century. Richelde had a great devotion to the Virgin Mary and in prayer asked her what she might do to honour her in Walsingham. In a series of dreams Richelde was taken to the Holy Land where the Virgin Mary showed her the Holy House in Nazareth where Mary received the news that she was to give birth to Jesus. Richelde was directed to build a replica of the House in Walsingham. At first attempts were made to build it near two wells but it seems that overnight it was miraculously transported to a spot some two hundred feet away.

Following the building of the Holy House Geoffrey Fervaques, a relative of Richelde, most likely her son, gave lands and tithes to establish a monastery at Walsingham to care for the Shrine. These events are described in a ballad published in 1496 by Richard Pynson. The ballad, written centuries after the event, says that the Holy House was made in 1061, but surviving records of Walsingham Priory now in the British Museum (Cotton MS. Nero E. VII) suggest that the date of the establishment of the Priory was about 1153 and that the Holy House was built after 1100.



A leaden pilgrim badge of about 1400 showing what is probably a representation of the Statue of Our Lady of Walsingham. Made for sale to pilgrims as souvenirs. Height 63 mm.

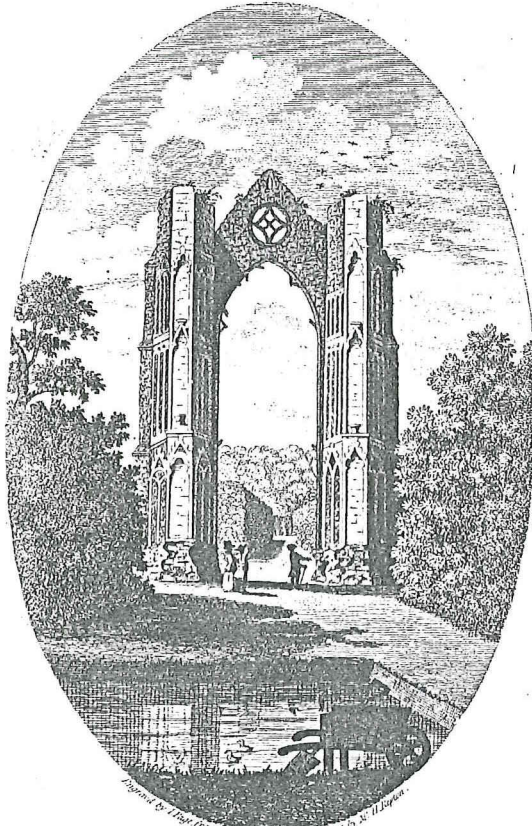
Norfolk Museums Service (King's Lynn Museums).

There are similarities between the story of the building of the Holy House at Walsingham and the later story of the Holy House in Loreto in Italy. The Loreto house was said to have been rescued from the Turks and carried by angels, in three stages, fifteen hundred miles from Nazareth to Loreto near the Adriatic.

The monks who formed the community of the Priory were Augustinian Canons, that is they followed rules for monastic life laid down by St. Augustine. They built a church with a nave of six bays and other monastic buildings which were attached to the

Chapel of the Holy House and must have towered above it. They were helped in this work by gifts of timber from Henry III; forty oaks in 1232 and a further twenty in 1234. He is the first monarch known to have visited the Shrine and was a frequent visitor throughout his reign. His own pilgrimages probably helped the Priory even more than his direct gifts since such Royal patronage helped to spread its fame and encouraged his subjects to follow his example. This first church was completed in about 1280 and it was about this time that the Priory's wealth began to grow beyond that of most of the monastic establishments in Norfolk. Henry III's son Edward I visited Walsingham in 1281 and settled on the Priory ownership of a number of churches in Norfolk. Ten years later a taxation shows the Priory to have had possessions in eighty-six Norfolk parishes.

WALSINGHAM PRIORY.



*In the Garden of
Henry Lee Warner Esq.
To whom this Plate is humbly inscribed.
Published as the Act directs, Nov: 18th 1779, by M. Booth, Norwich.*

Engraving of the East Window of Walsingham Priory, dated November 18th 1779.
Norfolk Museums Service (Castle Museum, Norwich).

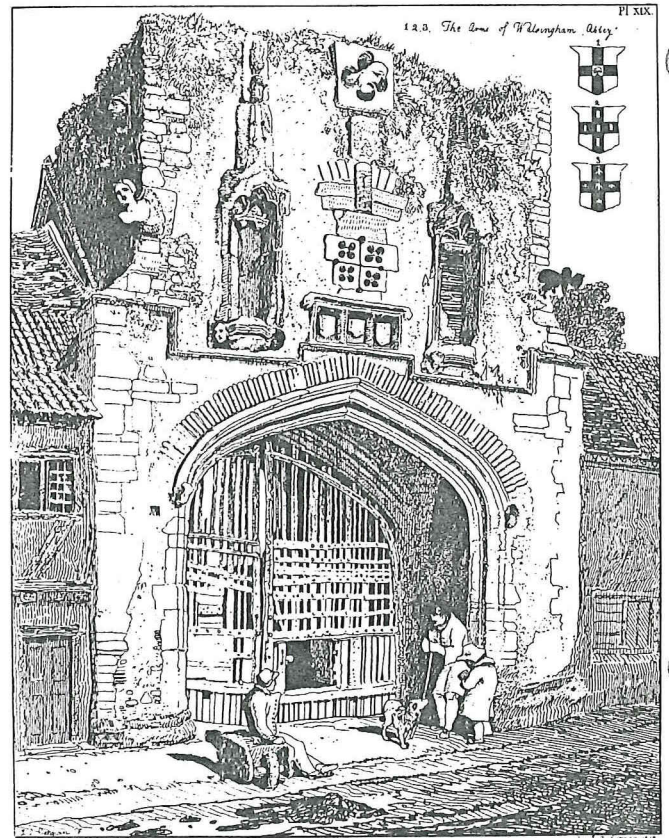
The major part of the fourteenth century was taken up with the building of a new church and monastic buildings. Much of what remains to be seen of the Priory today, including the great East window and the Refectory, are of this period. The one part of the Priory too sacred to be pulled down and rebuilt was the Holy House itself.

In the mid fourteenth century there was concern about the proposed establishment of another religious house nearby. Lady Elizabeth de Burgh, Countess of Clare, was intending to found a house for Franciscan Friars at either Great or Little Walsingham and in 1345 she received a petition from the Prior and Canons of Little Walsingham Priory asking her not to allow the establishment of a rival house. They feared that the presence of the Friary would greatly reduce the Priory's income. Also because of the jewellery and riches in the Shrine the gates of the Priory had to be

locked at night for security. The Canons were concerned that pilgrims coming in the evening and finding the gates shut might go to the Friary and be entertained there and not return next day with offerings to the Shrine. Despite their petition the Friary was established in about 1348. The presence of the Friary, however, did not affect the growth of the Priory to the extent the Canons feared. The ruins of the Friary can be seen on the southern edge of Walsingham on the road to Houghton St. Giles.

During the latter part of the fourteenth century there was a struggle to obtain a greater power and independence for the Priory. In 1384 Prior John Snoryng was removed from office during a dispute in which he was accused of spending a large part of the Priory's revenue in seeking to obtain for it the higher status of an abbey and in consequence for himself the position of abbot. Prior Snoryng was given leave to travel to Rome to plead his cause in the Papal Court but he never achieved his ambition.

Towards the close of the Priory's original period as a place of pilgrimage two visitors described the Holy House in some detail; William of Worcester and Erasmus. William of Worcester visited Walsingham in 1479 and described a new chapel building whose internal dimensions were 48 ft. x 30 ft. (14.63 m. x 9.15 m.) and the Holy House inside it which measured 23 ft. 6 in. x 12 ft. 10 in. (7.16 m. x 3.91 m.). The new building had not been entirely completed when Erasmus, the Renaissance scholar, visited in

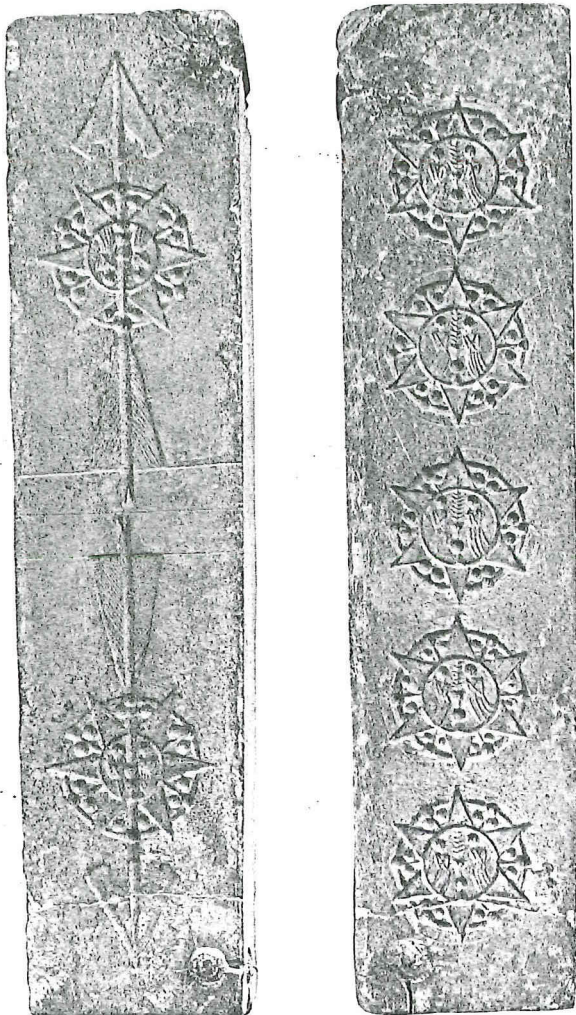


View of the 15th-century West Gate of Walsingham Priory from an etching by J. S. Cotman, published in 1812.
Norfolk Museums Service (Castle Museum, Norwich).

1511. In 1526 he published a collection of essays amongst which was 'Pilgrimages to St. Mary of Walsingham and St. Thomas of Canterbury' where he described the new building as follows:

Within the church which I have called unfinished is a small chapel, made of wainscot and admitting the devotees on each side by a narrow little door. The light is small, indeed scarcely any but from the wax-lights. A most grateful fragrance meets the nostrils.

By the sixteenth century quite naturally the Holy House had suffered much decay and had undergone numerous repairs. Erasmus pointed out the newness of much of its construction.



The two sides of a 15th-century mould for casting pilgrim badges made from lithographic limestone imported from Solnhofen, Bavaria. Found near the Church of St. Mary, Little Walsingham. Height 162 mm.

Norfolk Museums Service (St. Peter Hungate Museum, Norwich).

Walsingham Priory was among the first monasteries to accept that the Pope no longer had jurisdiction over the Church of England. In 1534 they signed a deed stating that from then on they regarded Henry VIII as the Supreme Head of the Church, on earth. A valuation of monastic wealth called the *Valor Ecclesiasticus* was made in 1535. By this time Walsingham was the second richest monastery in Norfolk. Only the Cathedral Priory of Norwich was wealthier. In the following year all the gold, jewels and the major part of the silver was taken from the Priory by agents of the Lord Privy Seal, Thomas Cromwell.

An Act of 1536 enabled the King to suppress some of the smaller monasteries. The feeling grew rapidly amongst the people that the King's destruction of monasteries was unlikely to stop at the smaller establishments. A conspiracy was discovered in Norfolk in 1537. George Gysburghe of Walsingham and Ralph Rogerson met with others several times during the year to plan an uprising. The lighting of beacons was to be the signal for open rebellion and a march on London to protest to the King. Ralph Rogerson was reported to have said:

You see how these abbeys go down and our living goeth away with them; for within a while Bynham shall be put down and also Walsingham and other abbeys in that country.

Nicholas Mileham, the Sub-Prior of Walsingham, also became implicated in the conspiracy. The conspiracy was savagely put down. Eleven men were executed in different towns in the county, presumably to make an example of them to the largest number of people possible. George Gysburghe and Nicholas Mileham, the Sub-Prior, were executed in Walsingham.

Prior Vowell and the canons surrendered Walsingham Priory to

the King on 4th August 1538. The buildings including the Holy House and its chapel were demolished and the lead, stone and wood were sold off as building materials. The Bishop of Worcester, Hugh Latimer, wrote to Thomas Cromwell concerning the statue of Our Lady of Worcester:

She hath been the devil's instrument to bring many, I fear, to eternal fire; now she herself with her old sister of Walsingham, her young sister of Ipswich, with their other two sisters of Dongcaster and Penryesse, would make a jolly muster in Smithfield. They would not be all day in burning.

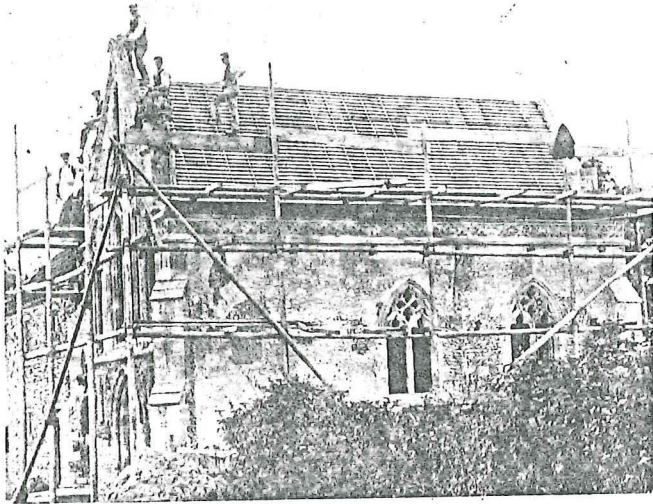
The statue of Our Lady of Walsingham was burnt with other statues probably at Chelsea in 1538. After the dissolution of the Priory the Canons were given pensions and some of them became parish priests. Prior Vowell became Rector of North Creake, a village about six miles west of Little Walsingham. The Priory site was sold in 1539 and Walsingham ceased to be a centre for pilgrimage for more than 350 years.

As in the Middle Ages Walsingham is today visited by many thousands of pilgrims. This revival of an earlier tradition received considerable contributions from two people, Miss Charlotte Boyd (1837/8-1906) and the Rev. Alfred Hope Patten (1885-1958). At the time of her visit to the Slipper Chapel in Houghton St. Giles Charlotte Boyd was an Anglican and it seems intended to buy it in order to establish a house for Anglican nuns. Whilst negotiations were taking place she was received into the Roman Catholic Church in Bruges in 1894. The purchase was finally settled in 1896 and restoration of the Chapel began. The Slipper Chapel was built between 1325 and 1350. There is a tradition that pilgrims took off their shoes there before walking the final one-and-one-third miles to Walsingham Priory, although the name Slipper Chapel has only been applied to it in recent times. From the early sixteenth century it had been used at different times as a workhouse, blacksmith's forge and a pair of cottages. Its restoration was completed in about 1897. The Chapel was given into the care of the Benedictine Monks at Downside, near Bath. Miss Boyd died in 1906, some years before the Chapel came to be used regularly and before a statue of Our Lady of Walsingham had been installed there.

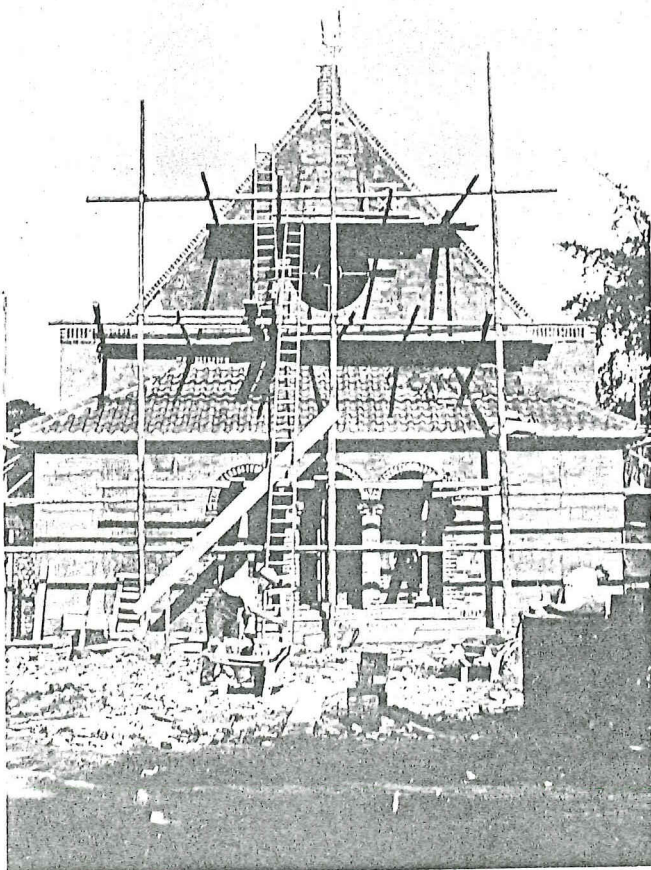
The restoration of the ancient sanctuary of Our Lady of Walsingham was granted by Pope Leo XIII on February 6th 1897 when he personally blessed a statue to be placed in the Shrine at King's Lynn. The Guild of Our Lady of Ransom (founded in 1887) together with the parish priest Father George Wrigglesworth installed this statue in the Holy House which is part of the Annunciation Church at King's Lynn on 19th August 1897. The following day, the pilgrims took the train to Walsingham to visit the Slipper Chapel which had been restored for Catholic use. The Annual Pilgrimage took place every year from 1897, and although there were plans to develop the Catholic presence at Walsingham itself (which formed part of the parish of King's Lynn) this was not actually realised until 1934.

Alfred Hope Patten was born in Sidmouth in Devon in 1885 and was ordained in 1914. After work in parishes in London (St. Pancras), Teddington, Buxted and Carshalton he became Vicar of the Anglican Parish of Walsingham in 1921. He began immediately to organise pilgrimages to Walsingham. For the following ten years pilgrimages were centred on the Parish Church of St. Mary and All Saints. On October 15th 1931 the first stage of the Anglican Shrine on its present site opposite the 'Knight's Gate' in Walsingham was opened. The land on which the Shrine was built was given by Sir William Milner who was a partner in the firm of Milner and Craze, Architects, who designed the Shrine. After services in the Parish Church a procession led by a large number of priests made its way to the newly built shrine. It was extended in 1937 and the number of chapels within the building greatly increased. The Rev. Hope Patten was the Administrator of the Shrine and Master of the College of Guardians which governs it in addition to his being Parish Priest until his death in 1958. His vision of the Anglican Shrine reached beyond the Shrine itself. For a number of years there was a children's home connected with it and there was a continuous effort to establish a College of Canons reflecting that of the original priory. During the Second World War a community of nuns came to help with the work of the Shrine. Today nuns of the Anglican Order of St. Margaret continue this work but the College of Canons has ceased to exist.

There had been negotiations to purchase the original site of the Priory in Walsingham. After these failed, Bishop Youens of Northampton enlisted support from the Catholic bishops to centre devotions on the Slipper Chapel. On 19th August 1934, Cardinal Bourne and many of the bishops led 10,000 pilgrims to the Slipper Chapel, now proclaimed the National Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham. The large pilgrimages began from this date. During the war years, Walsingham was a restricted zone, but in 1948, following the international cross-carrying pilgrimage to Vézelay, the



Restoration of the Slipper Chapel at Houghton St Giles, probably in 1896/7. This building is now the Roman Catholic Shrine. Norfolk Museums Service (Shirehall Museum, Walsingham).



Building the Anglican Shrine, Little Walsingham, 1931. Norfolk Museums Service (Shirehall Museum, Walsingham).

great wooden crosses now positioned around the Shrine were brought from fourteen places in England. In 1968 the Marist Fathers were asked to undertake the direction of the National Shrine. To accommodate the growing numbers of pilgrims a very large building, the Chapel of Reconciliation, was erected. It was blessed by Cardinal Hume on 6th September 1981, and consecrated on 22 May 1982 by Bishop Alan Clark of East Anglia.

The railway which brought so many pilgrims to Walsingham in the past was closed down in 1964. The remaining station buildings now form one of Walsingham's religious establishments. In 1967 the buildings were converted and extended, including the addition of an 'onion' dome, to become a chapel of St. Seraphim of Sarov, a chapel of the Russian Orthodox Church in Exile.

Cardinal Basil Hume, Archbishop of Westminster, is a frequent visitor to the Slipper Chapel and in May 1980 the Most Rev. Robert Runcie led a pilgrimage to the Anglican Shrine and later made an informal visit to the Slipper Chapel, becoming the first Archbishop of Canterbury to visit Walsingham since the Reformation. The pilgrims were also joined by the Duchess of Kent, the first member of the Royal Family to have visited Walsingham on pilgrimage since Henry VIII.

In 1982 Pope John Paul II made a pastoral visit to Britain. The directors of both the Catholic and Anglican shrines were present when the Statue of Our Lady of Walsingham was taken to the celebrations at Wembley on May 29th.

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