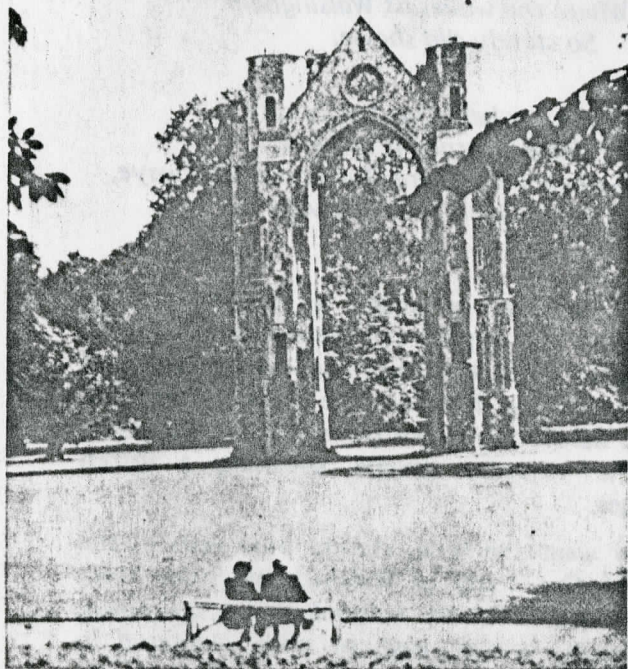


ENGLAND'S NAZARETH

Edmund R. Yarham



The exchange rate will never be more favorable than now for you to make your Pilgrim Way to Walsingham, North Norfolk, England. Thousands of American pilgrims visit it every year to pay homage to Mary at the Shrine of Our Lady.

In the Middle Ages, devotion to Mary in England was so widespread that the country became known as Mary's England, later corrupted to Merrie England. Walsingham has been famed in story and ballad for over 900 years. The great Dutch scholar and philosopher, Erasmus (1466-1536), spoke of the Holy House as "the most celebrated place throughout all England."

A verse relative to the shrine he described runs:

*Of this Chappelle see here ye foundation
Builted the yeare of Christ's Incarnatyon
A thousand complete, sixty-and-one,
The Tyme of Saint Edward, King of this
Regione.*

Mary's Shrine at Walsingham. Top to bottom: the Common Place with pump house, or conduit, crowned by fire beacon; the ruined east end of the Priory Church; the Slipper Chapel, where pilgrims remove their shoes before walking the last mile barefoot.

This fifteenth-century ballad describes the foundation of the shrine by "a noble wydowe, sometime lady of this towne, called Rychold." The ballad goes on to tell how she was led in spirit by the Virgin to Nazareth and there shown the house in which Gabriel announced that Mary was to bear the Christ. Rychold was then bidden to build a replica of this house at Walsingham, which she did.

*Gentle herdsman tell me,
Of courtesy I pray,
Unto the Town of Walsingham
Which is the right and ready way?*

These lines of a medieval rhymester are just one piece of evidence that as a place of pilgrimage Walsingham became one of the most famed centers of Christendom, rivaling St. James of Compostela in Northwest Spain. For over 900 years Walsingham has been famed in ballad and story. In old chronicles the Milky Way was spoken of as "Walsingham Way," because by the light of its myriad stars the pilgrims found their way to journey's end.

The town was created by and owed its existence to these pilgrims, and in large part it was a jumble of inns and hostelries for their accommodation. The priory became exceedingly rich; the Plantagenet monarchs were great benefactors. From the time of Edward the Confessor onward, kings, queens, priests, penitents, scholars, merchants, and peasants made their pilgrimage to the shrine.

To this remote spot came Henry III, Edward I, Edward II, and innumerable others. Among them were Edward III and his Queen, Edward IV, Henry VII, Henry VIII, Katherine of Aragon, Cardinal Wolsey, the Dukes of Brittany and Anjou, and the Duke of Norfolk and his Duchess. All came with their hopes and prayers, some in pomp, others in charity, and all with gifts.

It was a tragedy that Walsingham's end came at the hands of the last monarch to make his barefoot pilgrimage there. Henry VIII placed a valuable necklace on the statue of our Lady and paid twice a year for a candle to be kept burning before the shrine. He also contributed to the support of a priest to offer Mass.

But following the Feast of St. Michael and All Angels, 1538, came the ominous entry in the records: "For the King's candle before Our Lady of Walsingham and to pay the Prior for his salary—nil." The holy image was, by order of Henry's minister Thomas Cromwell, torn from the shrine and taken to London, where it was

publicly burnt in his garden at Chelsea. It had been in the Holy House for almost five centuries.

The Priory was left to decay, and its stones went to build houses. The Slipper Chapel, the last of the wayside oratories which lined the roads to Walsingham and where the pilgrims put off their shoes to walk the last mile barefoot, became derelict. So it remained for nearly 400 years, until it was restored and reopened for worship early this century, one of the first signs of Walsingham again becoming a place of national pilgrimage. Once again the penitents go unshod.

An Elizabethan ballad speaks in woeful terms of the desecration wrought by Henry VIII:

*Bitter, bitter, oh to beholde
The grasse to growe
Where the walles of Walsingham
So stately did shewe.*

*Sinne is where Our Ladye sate,
Heaven turned is to helle;
Sathan sitte where Our Lorde did swaye,
Walsingham, oh, farewell!*

Now, happily, on many a summer day at Walsingham the pilgrim can see medieval England living again with its strong and simple faith and all its pageantry. Here are the great processions, here the barefoot pilgrims from dukes to dustmen, here the reverent people speaking a dozen languages.

Many wear the long, cloudy blue veils of the Guild of Our Lady of Walsingham. Some from overseas are in lovely colored cloaks, primrose, blue, green, scarlet, rust, or pink, clustered in groups like flowers in a garden. There is a great blaze of brilliance as the splendid silk banners go by, with bishops in cope and miter, silver censers swinging, monks in brown or white habits, and nuns in black.

Walsingham lives again!

Edmund Robert Yarham is a schoolmaster in Norfolk, England. A professional educator, he has studied school systems in various countries, including the United States. He is a Fellow of the British Royal Geographical Society. Over the years, he has contributed to various Catholic publications in several countries.