

Readings: *Isaiah 7: 10 – 14 OR Acts 1: 12 – 14; Canticle Magnificat; Luke 1: 26 – 38.*

Today the Church in England celebrates the Blessed Virgin Mary under the title she has borne since her appearance in the Norfolk village of Walsingham. It was in 1061 that Richeldis, the lady of the manor, had a vision of Our Lady who asked her to build a shrine in honour of the Annunciation. Mary showed her the pattern for the shrine, which was to represent the house in Nazareth where Mary accepted the invitation to be the mother of the Son of God. Richeldis did as she was asked and built the shrine. Later the shrine with its image of Our Lady came under the care of Augustinian canons, who established a priory in the village.

In July 1538, the priory was surrendered to the commissioners of King Henry VIII. The image was taken to London and burnt, the shrine was destroyed, and the priory buildings and lands sold.

An anonymous ballad – probably written during the reign of Elizabeth I – reveals the grief felt by some at the loss of the shrine and the dishonour done to Our Lady:

*Weep, weep, O Walsingham, whose days are nights,
Blessings turned to blasphemies, holy deeds to despites.
Sin is where Our Lady sat, heaven is turned to hell,
Satan sits where Our Lord did sway -- Walsingham, O farewell!*

But the 16th century dissolution was not to be the end of Walsingham's shrine.

At the end of the 19th century the Slipper Chapel (the last of many marking the way to Walsingham), which had survived as a barn, came into Roman Catholic hands, and in 1934 the Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster declared it to be the National Shrine of our Lady.

Meanwhile a new Vicar had come to Walsingham – Fr Alfred Hope Patten, who had served a curacy at S Mary's Buxted, where a chapel had been built to the measurements of the medieval Holy House. On 6th July 1922 Fr Patten had an image of Our Lady and her Divine Son, based on the ancient seal of the priory, erected in the parish church. From that time the Rosary has been prayed every day (never interrupted, either by World War II or by the present pandemic) in front of that image, which now stands in a rebuilt Holy House.

At present pilgrimages to both the Catholic and the Anglican shrines are restricted, but prayers continue to be offered for all manner of needs, communal and individual – among them prayers for the conversion of England and the unity of all Christians in one Church.