

Feast of the Annunciation - Mary across the ages



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Celebrations begin to mark the 950th anniversary of the founding of one of England's greatest shrines devoted to the Blessed Virgin, which despite destruction during the Reformation has today re-emerged as one of the nation's primary sites of pilgrimage.

The Annunciation by Zanobi Strozzi (1412-68). © National Gallery, London

Well over 100,000 people a year go on pilgrimage to the Marian shrine of Walsingham, in Norfolk, where 950 years ago a devout Saxon noblewoman, Richeldis de Faverches, had a vision in which she was commanded by Our Lady to build a replica of the house in Nazareth where the Annunciation took place.

During medieval times, it became one of the greatest pilgrimage centres of England before being destroyed during the English Reformation instituted by Henry VIII, himself one of its former pilgrims. After a hiatus of nearly 400 years, a Catholic Marian shrine was re-established at the end of the nineteenth century, followed by an Anglican shrine in the 1920s, culminating in a new Holy House being constructed in 1931.

Today, Walsingham is a runaway success, often characterised by the ecumenical nature of the pilgrimages undertaken by those thousands making the journey to the shrines. Last week, ahead of the opening celebrations to mark the 950th anniversary of Richeldis' vision, historians met in Walsingham to set the scene for this remarkable story.

By 1153: In a book published in 1956, J.C. Dickinson argued that the origins of the Holy House built by Richeldis belonged to the first half of the twelfth century. The basis for his theory was a cartulary in the British Museum, which gives 1153 as the date when Richeldis' son, Geoffrey, founded Walsingham

Priory.

In 1538 Henry VIII had the greatest Marian shrine in England destroyed. Material fabric can be smashed and monks removed but old Catholic practice lives on in the language, in the literature.

By 1896: The revival of pilgrimage to Walsingham is one of the most remarkable in the religious history of this country. It had its roots in Anglo-Catholicism and in the figures of Charlotte Pearson Boyd and Fr Alfred Hope

Patten.

In 1906: it became the Roman Catholic National Shrine.

What of Walsingham today? The village was shaken last year by the departure of three Anglican nuns from the Society of St Margaret to join the ordinariate. Meanwhile, pilgrim numbers are holding up – an estimate for 2010 of 100,000 to the Catholic shrine, and, excluding day visitors, 13,000 resident pilgrims at its Anglican counterpart.

In the final talk of the conference, Bishop Lindsay Urwin, administrator of the Anglican shrine, talked of the incompleteness of Roman Catholic pilgrimage without the Holy House and the sense of diminishment that resulted from its denominational nature. Speaking in a personal capacity, he predicted no significant growth in pilgrimage to Walsingham without a breakthrough – and that, he suggested, might be the rebuilding of the Holy House as an ecumenical endeavour.

The conference was organised by Tim McDonald, the Catholic shrine manager and coordinator of the 950th anniversary celebrations. These begin on Thursday with First Evening Prayer for the Annunciation in the Anglican shrine church and end in September with the Sixteen singing works by the sixteenth-century Spanish composer Victoria in the Roman Catholic Chapel of Reconciliation.

On 27 March, in the presence of Our Lady's statue from the Slipper Chapel, Archbishop Vincent Nichols will celebrate a Solemn Pontifical Mass in Westminster Cathedral. And in September, Walsingham will host the annual meeting of the European Marian Network, whose sanctuaries stretch from Ukraine to Portugal, Lithuania to Gibraltar.

?Simon Scott Plummer is a journalist.

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