

## Ipswich, Willesden and Walsingham, Three Marian Shrines in Sixteenth Century England

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Everyone likes a mystery. The story I am going to tell has elements of a good detective story: statues revered for centuries, royal agents bent on destruction of images, traditionalists trying to preserve sacred objects for future generations and persistent pious legends of true images which one day might be revealed and a devotion revived in the land of 'Our Lady's Dowry.' And of course, like any good detective story, heroes and villains. You can make up your mind which are which from the likes of Thomas More and Thomas Cromwell. At the Reformation in England in the 1530s there was an orgy of destruction of images of saints, holy objects, crucifixes and crosses. Reformist bishops such as Latimer and Ridley lead the way. Thomas Cromwell, chief minister to Henry VIII ordered the plundering of shrines and monastic institutions. Pilgrimages, hitherto, a way of life for ordinary Christians, were banned and the holy places despoiled. But what happened to the relics, statues and images from these shrines and churches? What if some had survived, hidden away or sent abroad for safe keeping?

At the start of the sixteenth century, pilgrimages were part of the traditional faith of England and central to everyone's lives. This was an experience which was extremely common in the medieval period right up to the reign of Henry VIII after which it was strongly discouraged by acts of parliament and the new regulations brought about by the religious reformers who had the king's ear at that time. A pilgrimage is a devotional practice consisting of a prolonged journey, often undertaken on foot or on horseback, toward a specific destination of significance. It is a short-term experience, removing the participant from his or her home environment and identity. The means or motivations in undertaking a pilgrimage might vary, but the act, however performed, blends the physical and the spiritual into a unified experience.

During the middle ages, people made pilgrimages for a variety of reasons. Many holy sites were believed to have a healing powers, such as Walsingham, in Norfolk. Pilgrims who had a sick loved one could seek divine help at a place like this, along with people who were ill themselves, and people who had recovered from illnesses could also come to give their thanks to God. Penitents would also undertake pilgrimages in order to gain forgiveness for their sins, or to shorten time in purgatory for themselves or for others. Basically, as a pilgrimage was a journey of faith, anything a person felt they needed God's help for could be motivation for the journey. Walsingham in Norfolk was the most popular destination for a medieval or early Tudor pilgrim.

For most Catholics at that time, Mary was of huge importance in their religious life. Mary, the Mother of God was revered and honoured almost universally in England at this time. More churches were dedicated to St Mary or other variations of her titles than any other saint. This practise was particularly strong in East Anglia and surrounding areas. Many cathedrals and larger churches had Lady Chapels and there were so many places of pilgrimage associated with Our Lady which were visited by rich and poor alike. A central part of the medieval Christian faith was the Marian cult. The English towns and villages most noted for medieval devotion to Mary in Britain were: Walsingham in Norfolk, the primary British shrine of Mary and known across Europe; Coventry; Doncaster; Ely; Evesham; Glastonbury; Ipswich; Lincoln; Pontefract; Willesden and Worcester. Many abbeys and priories were dedicated to Mary, especially the Cistercian and Carmelite ones. Yet, actually, very many more places could be

added to the list as devotion to Mary was common; most people could not travel far and needed a local place to visit on pilgrimage.

On Lady Lane in Ipswich once stood a chapel dedicated to Our Lady of Ipswich. The earliest reference to it is in the thirteenth century and, like other Marian shrines, it was suppressed in the 1530s. The Ipswich shrine to Our Lady was positioned in its own chapel instead of being placed in the local parish church. This sometimes happened if the dedication of the local church was not to Our Lady. At its height, it was a very popular pilgrimage site. Even today in Ipswich there are several churches with medieval origins with similar dedications: St Mary at the Elms, St Mary Le Tower, St Mary at the Quay and St Mary at Stoke. Notable visitors and events at the shrine of Our Lady of Ipswich included the wedding of Princess Elizabeth, daughter of King Edward I, to the Count of Holland in 1297. In the fourteenth Century both King Henry VIII and his wife Catherine of Aragon both visited the shrine separately, staying with Lord Curzon on Silent Street in Ipswich. Other famous visitors included Anne Boleyn, Cardinal Thomas Wolsey and Sir Thomas More. More is said to have witnessed and recorded a miracle of 'Our Lady of Grace' involving the healing of twelve-year-old Anne Wentworth. In his book 'The Supplication of Souls' he describes how Anne, daughter of Sir Roger Wentworth, suffered from seizures in which she would spasm, blaspheme and speak of prophesy. After Anne had a vision of 'Our Lady of Grace' she was taken to the shrine and laid before the image of the Blessed Lady. Thomas described Anne Wentworth as... 'grevously tourmented and in face, eyen, loke and countenance so gryselly chaunged...that it was a terrible syght to beholde'.

However, in front of the audience she recovered 'perfytely and sodeynly' as More recounted. It is believed that Anne, in recognition of this miracle later took her vows and became a nun.

The fate of the statue of Our Lady of Grace, as the statue was known, is unclear. It was reported to have been transported to London in a cart and delivered to the house of Thomas Cromwell in order to be burnt along with the statue of Our Lady of Walsingham and other images. There is evidence that this was indeed the fate of some holy objects. Cromwell's steward is reported to have remarked of the statue from Ipswich that it had 'nothing about her but two half shoes of silver'.

What happened after that is a matter of conjecture. There is a gap which is unaccounted for between 1538 and 1550 when it is believed the statue was smuggled away by sailors who set sail for Italy. It was a dangerous time to have such a statue in one's possession at that time. We know the ship set sail and that the Italian sailors took refuge from a ferocious storm during the voyage. In return for their safe passage, the story goes, the sailors offered the statue to the people of the town of Nettuno in the south of Italy. And there the statue stayed. It was and still is, treated with huge respect and given pride of place in the local church. (*Figure 1*)

In 1938 a historian of thirteenth century iconography, Martin Gillett examined the statue which the locals like to call 'The English Lady'. Gillett described it as being in the English style and noted that it was wearing two half shoes made of English silver just like the ones mentioned by Cromwell's steward. Although the statue had been somewhat altered, various clues such as the folds in her clothes and the child's position on the right knee instead of the left all seem offer clues about its English origin. In 1959, whilst the statue was undergoing restoration, an inscription was discovered under the right foot of the Lady. It reads 'Thou art gracious' in Latin. It is well known that Ipswich was the only shrine in England dedicated to 'Our Lady of Grace'. So, as we have seen, one statue at least does appear to have survived the iconoclasm of the reformers of the sixteenth century. Today, you will find a replica of the statue from Nettuno carved from English oak in the church of St Mary at the Elms in Ipswich.

Another very famous shrine of the Virgin Mary was at Willesden, Middlesex, then just outside London. Little is known about how the tradition of pilgrimage to the shrine of Our Lady of Willesden began. A Visitation report of 1249 mentions the presence of two statues of Our Lady in the local church, one of which may have been the so called 'Black Madonna'.

By the end of the middle ages the shrine at Willesden had become famous and pilgrims travelled many miles to visit it. By the early sixteenth century the shrine had become so famous that it was visited by royalty such as Queen Elizabeth of York. In 1517 William Litchfield, Vicar of Willesden and Chancellor of St Paul's Cathedral died and was buried in the chancel of Willesden church before the image of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Litchfield also gave to the church a gilt chalice, 'the same to remain to the use of the said Church and the honour of the Blessed Virgin for ever.' This chalice is still in regular use in the church today.

Sir Thomas More, Henry VIII's Chancellor is said to have petitioned the Blessed Virgin under her title of 'Our Lady of Willesden'. More's biographer Thomas Stapleton (1535-98) says that More regularly made pilgrimages on foot to shrines up to seven miles from London, including Willesden. More visited during the first week of April 1534 and stayed nearby.

However, some writers and clergymen in the sixteenth century spoke out against pilgrimages, shrines and statues of the Virgin Mary. William Tyndale (c.1494-1536) complained of those who continuously repeat: '*Our lady of Walsingham pray for me; Our Lady of Ipswich, pray for me; Our Lady of Wilsdon, pray for me.*' He clearly thought that this invocation had little or no power or indeed merit. In 1527 the reformist priest Thomas Bilney (c.1495-1531) was arrested for preaching against pilgrimages, even doing so in Willesden church itself in Whitsun week that year.

*'You do not well to goo on pilgremage to our Lady of Walsinghan, Ipswicke, or Wyllesdon, or to any other place and there to offer for they be nothing but stocke and stones, therefore it were better to tary at home and pray to God there.'*

These people may be seen as the forerunners of the changes in the faith of the nation during the 1530s and beyond. Willesden, like all the other shrines, was subject to the new laws and regulations. The statue, made of dark, ebony-like wood, was removed and disappeared. This fits the description of one made of dark wood which was reportedly burnt in 1538 by order of Henry VIII's chief minister, Thomas Cromwell. It was said to be covered with gold, silver and precious jewels, gifts from grateful supplicants and pilgrims. An eyewitness described the shrine as standing beneath a canopy of silk between the altar and the nave and was protected by an iron grille. Richard Mores, Cromwell's agent described it like this:

*'They have there an image of Our Lady in robes of sarcenet with stones; with a veil withal of lace embroidered with pearls and other precious jewels, and gold and silver... We did strip the image which we found to be of wood, in colour like ebony, of ancient workmanship, only save the upper parts thoroughly plated in silver.'*

He added that the church was crowded with pilgrims. '*Even at our coming there were five folk praying before it, two old men and a woman and a child, and one that had brought an offering of flowers.*' Even after the shrine's destruction, as late as 1563, in the *Second Book of Homilies*, a newly reformed Church of England was still inclined to warn against idolatrous invocations to: '*Our Lady of Walsingham, Our Lady of Ipswich, Our Lady of Wilsdon and such other.*'

Clearly, the ordinary faithful of the realm had not entirely given up their Catholic faith and practises. It probably took a long time to stamp out the traditional faith of ordinary Christians. For the crime of being an 'idolatrous parish' the state imposed an annual fine of £13 on the incumbent of the parish and the vicar was also fined a further 26/- for having housed an 'idolatrous image'.

By far the most famous medieval shrine of Our Lady was Walsingham in Norfolk. Erasmus, the Dutch scholar, visited Walsingham in 1513 and was impressed by the splendor of the Shrine. He wrote: '*There is a small chapel, which admits by a small narrow little door, on either side, those who come to salute our Layde ; the light is feeble, in fact scarcely any, excepting from wax candles. A most delightful fragrance gladdens one's nose.*' Of the statue in the chapel he said: '*When you look in you would say it is the abode of saints, so brilliantly does it shine with gems, gold and silver ... Our Lady stands in the dark at the right side of the altar ... a little image, remarkable neither for its size, material or workmanship.*'

This all came to an abrupt end. Henry VIII, annoyed by the church's refusal to grant him the divorce he wanted and short of money to fight foreign wars, ordered the dissolution of the monasteries and in 1538 the Priory of Walsingham was closed, the 'Holy House' which was made of wood and dating from the founding of the shrine, burned to the ground. The statue of Our Lady taken to London to be destroyed, or so the story went. However, recently, the Catholic Herald published an article casting new light on the matter of the supposed destruction of the holy image from Walsingham. Two English art historians, Michael Rear and Francis Young, proposed just such a scenario in their article on 26<sup>th</sup> July 2019. Their theory is that a statue known as the Langham Madonna, a battered thirteenth century English statue to be found in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, could actually be the original statue of Our Lady of Walsingham, the most famous image of medieval England and the very one which was at the heart of the shrine there. But equally well, it could be, they suggested, a very near copy of medieval origin.

The official story was that the simple wood statue of the Madonna and Child that stood beside the shrine's main altar was hauled away and destroyed in 1539, when the Priory Church at Walsingham was torn down and its religious community dispersed by order of King Henry VIII after they had hanged the sub-prior but pensioned off the Prior of Walsingham. Contemporary accounts of the statue's fate, though, are notably vague. So, what really did happen? Records list two different locations for the statue's burning, one at the 'heretics' pyre' at Smithfield and the second location in the court of Thomas Cromwell's house at Chelsea. There appear to be no eyewitness accounts of the event. Rear and Young proposed instead that a substitution was made and that the genuine statue, was hidden by local recusant Catholics. Similar defiant acts have been described by Professor Duffy in his book *The Stripping of the Altars*. Rear and Young suggested that Sir John Grigby, the vicar of Langham, Norfolk, a small village six miles from Walsingham could be the instigator of this plot to hide the holy statue of Walsingham. Grigby had been arrested in 1537 as part of the 'Walsingham Conspiracy,' a brave but futile, armed plot to defend the shrine's looming destruction. This had been hatched among the peasants of the surrounding villages by Ralph Rogerson, a yeoman farmer who was also a lay chorister in the priory church. Unlike the principal conspirators, who were hanged, drawn, and quartered, Grigby was somehow allowed to return to his parish to continue his ministry.

Grigby's most notable parishioners at Langham were the Calthorpes of Langham Hall, who resisted pressure to accept the new Anglican faith, remaining recusants, that is, those who

would not attend the Anglican services. Another recusant family, the Rookwoods of Euston in Suffolk, inherited Langham Hall a few years later, in 1555. The family was believed to have attempted to hide at least one other image of Our Lady in the decades after the English Reformation. In 1578, whilst hosting a visit by Queen Elizabeth, Edward Rookwood was arrested when an image of Our Lady of Euston was found in his possession, hidden on their farm. The statue was destroyed, and Rookwood was imprisoned for this offence. But could the authorities have failed to notice an even more famous image also hidden at Langham Hall? Until then the idea that the Langham Madonna could be the actual medieval shrine statue had not seriously been considered.

The statue was eventually passed to a saleroom in London before being bought by the Victoria and Albert Museum. Rear and Young suggested that there was an error in records passed on to the museum when the statue was bought in 1925 and that these records were later lost. There are, in fact, three villages in the east of England called Langham, namely in Norfolk, Essex, and Rutland. The London saleroom had claimed that the Madonna had come from Langham Hall, Essex, near Colchester, but this place lacked any association with recusant Catholics of any sort whilst Langham in Norfolk certainly did have documented connections with Catholicism. Six years after the Museum acquired the statue, Henry Joy Fynes-Clinton, one of the founding guardians of the Anglican Shrine at Walsingham, wrote in the journal the *Tablet* of the discovery of an ancient carved wooden figure in an old house near Walsingham. He suggested that it could be a copy of the Walsingham image, or even the original, 'saved perhaps as other relics and holy things, by means of substitution being made for the purposes of satisfying the desecrators'. Rear and Young thought that the Langham Madonna might possibly be a later copy of the Walsingham statue as devotional copies were common just as they are now. The Langham Madonna's presumed thirteenth century origin could be confirmed through carbon dating.

Circumstantial evidence was needed in order to prove the provenance of this statue. The Langham statue is remarkably similar to the image on the seal of the Priory of Walsingham now held by King's College, Cambridge. If the statue was indeed the Walsingham image, would it not have some markings to indicate what it was and where it was from? There is evidence that the Langham Madonna has a notch at its base that consistent with possible removal of a so-called, 'toadstone' which was mentioned in the account by Erasmus during his 1512 visit to the Shrine. A toadstone, also known as bufonite, is a gem or fossil tooth formally supposed to have been formed in the head of a toad and credited with therapeutic or protective properties and possibly an antidote to poison. It is an idea preserved in folk-memory that it represented Our Lady's victory over evil and sin in the same way that later statues sometimes depict her with her foot on the head of a snake, representing the serpent in the Genesis story. We know from contemporary accounts that the statue wore a crown. A band around the statue's head could possibly have been designed to secure the large crown known to have been donated by King Henry III in 1246. We also know that the Virgin sat on a throne from the evidence on the seal from the priory. (*Figure 3*). A series of dowel holes on the back of the image could have been used to secure it to the throne shown on medieval priory seal. Much of this is supposition. More research is needed as it is as yet unproved that this is a medieval East Anglian statue or even the very image of the Virgin Mary which was so revered by so many for so long in the village of Little Walsingham.

(Figure 2)

Pilgrims still visit the Slipper Chapel, the priory ruins and the Anglican and Catholic shrines. The popularity of Our Lady of Walsingham has not waned since the shrines were re-

founded in modern times. In 2020 the Bishops of England and Wales rededicated England to Our Lady as her dowry. The many shrines of Our Lady, whether ancient foundations or more recent ones, continue to attract pilgrims, penitents and tourists.

*Figure 1*

Our Lady Of Netunno, Italy



Photo by Liz Harsant

*Figure 2*  
The Langham Madonna in  
the Victoria and Albert Museum



© The Victoria and Albert Museum, London

*Figure 3*  
Drawing based on the seal of Walsingham Priory



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