

## WALSINGHAM...UNIQUE

Walsingham is unique. It's history shows that it was not even a village first, which then became taken over by the Pilgrim movement. Walsingham was planned and built to cater principally for pilgrims. In 1061, Richeldis de Faverches, the lady of the manor, had a vision of the house in Nazareth where the annunciation took place. She obeyed the Virgin Mary's command and built a replica of the Holy house in Walsingham. Around 1153, the Augustinian Canons established a priory adjacent to the Holy House, and in 1347, a Franciscan Friary was built at the south end of the village. Thus Walsingham became the principle shrine to the Virgin Mary in England. It is regarded by many today as "England's Nazareth".

We might say too, that Walsingham Methodist Church is unique, not just because it is the oldest Methodist Church building still in use in East Anglia, but because it came to be built, 200 years ago, almost certainly within the sight of, and probably on the foundations of, the 14th century Franciscan Friary. The present ruins of the Friary cover two and half acres, but originally their property covered thirteen acres; which means that for 200 years Methodist worship has been taking place on a site which first witnessed Christian worship over 600 years ago. The Franciscans preached here in English up to their dissolution in 1538, the Methodists continued the preaching tradition 200 years later, and seem all set to maintain the tradition into the 21st century!

John Wesley's only visit to Walsingham was on Tuesday 30th October, 1781. It is probable that he preached from the old Market Cross in the Friday Market, and we are told that remains of the brick foundation of the Cross are preserved in St. Mary's church, Walsingham. Twelve years after Wesley's visit, and just two years after his death in 1791, the building of the present church was begun.

Although minute books for the society at Little Walsingham seemed to have been lost, the account books of the trustees are available from 1793. One of the earliest entries states, 'the building of Walsingham Chapel was begun on June 10th 1793' when a stone laying ceremony was performed. Today, it has proved impossible to find any inscribed foundation stones. But the account

books tell us that 'after singing and prayer, upon the ground the foundation was laid. The first stone was laid at the South West corner by Mr. Weldnill, officer of excise, the second was laid by Lewis Minns, Miller, at the North West corner, the third was laid at the South East corner, by Martha Lambert, shopkeeper, the fourth was laid at the North West corner by Mr. Denton, then assistant preacher in the circuit'.

The chapel was opened for public worship on Sunday June 8th 1794, by Reverend Charles Boon, then Minister at Great Yarmouth and chairman of the district. The ministers in the Walsingham circuit in 1793, were William Denton and Isaac Lily, and in 1794 William Heath and Francis West. The membership at the time was two hundred.

During the period 1901 to 1913 records of the offertories show an average collection of between 8 and 9 shillings a week. Seat rents brought in about £10 per annum in 1888, but only £2:2 shillings in 1921, the last year they were recorded.

Throughout the 19th century Walsingham was at the head of a Wesleyan circuit stretching at different times from Heacham and Hunstanton in the west, to Tittleshall in the south, and Bodham in the east. The exact composition of the circuit varying as circuit boundaries were redrawn. In 1798, the circuit comprised 12 places with Walsingham, Bunnham Thorpe, Well and Briston being the largest and the rest making up a total membership of 157. In 1847, the circuit had expanded to 33 places the total quatenage paid was £66:18s 6d; indicating that the strongest places now were Wells, Walsingham, Fakenham and Docking. A return of April 1881, lists 16 places in the circuit.

Today hardly a week goes by when there are no visitors in the village, either by the official coach load or the unofficial car load. We are pleased and proud that the Methodist church is mentioned in the village guide given to the pilgrims, and they are made welcome to services on Sundays and Wednesday afternoons.

Although the Methodist is in the minority in this unique place it has a very close relationship with all the other churches.

It celebrated its bicentenary in 1994.