



Thin Places, Sacred Spaces, Historical Traces

St Helen's Tour of Mystic Britain A Visitors' Guide

Chapter 7 – Norfolk and East; August 2023

This time we do head a little further, down the coast to the easternmost part of England, Norfolk. Lynn Glenn has memories of Walsingham that you'll want to read, and Heather McIntyre is going to relate the interesting story of Julian of Norwich. St Cedd is enough to contemplate that three contributors will talk about him and the effects he's had: Val's study gives the historical perspective, while Helen and Henry Giroux will relate their personal impressions from visiting St Cedd's crypt. Look for the references to pilgrimage as we walk; more on that later ...

The small northern Norfolk village of Little Walsingham is the site of two shrines, one Anglican, the other Roman Catholic, dedicated to Our Lady of Walsingham. In the 11th century, a local noblewoman had a vision from Mary to build a replica of her small home in Nazareth; it was quickly constructed and soon became a shrine and a focus for pilgrimage. A priory built around the Holy House remained until the Dissolution of the Monasteries (remember that from chapter 6?) when the site was destroyed, but the memory remained and two towns later recreated aspects of the original.

In the early 20th century, the pilgrimage to Walsingham was reinitiated and a small pilgrim church containing a Holy House was built with a new statue of Our Lady based on an image preserved from the 12th century. Pilgrimages, processions and education continue with hospitality (accommodation and food) provided in the village.

My personal connection with the Shrine begins with my paternal grandmother. Her two daughters-in-law were due within days of each other with her first and second grandchildren, so she took a bus trip to Walsingham to light a candle for her first. I turned out to be that first grandchild, arriving 6 days before my cousin. Much later, I determined to go to there to light a candle for *my* first grandchild, so when we



Walsingham, Norfolk



A window at Our Lady of Walsingham, Photo:
http://grahamhoward.jalbum.net/Photo_Gallery/

heard the news from our son and daughter-in-law, we put together a weeklong trip to England shortly before the due date. On arrival, I entered the building and, with echoes of my own grandmother in my head, went in and lit a candle. Stepping back, I said to myself, "Alright little one, anytime now". Later we found that our daughter-in-law went into labour about 2-3 hours after the candle was lit. So the granddaughter waited for grandma to achieve her link with her past.

Next, our journey brings us to a small church near the town of Norwich. It is well-known because a holy woman lived here: St Julian of Norwich, the earliest

recorded female author in the English language.

Not much is known about Julian herself; even her original name is unknown since she acquired the name because she lived within the church of St Julian. Her books suggest that she lived from 1342-1416. As an anchoress, she was walled up within a small room or “anchorage” attached to the side of a church and had contact with the outside world only through a small window through which letters or food were passed. Funeral rites were often conducted when someone entered an anchorage, as it was seen as dying to live a new life in Christ, concentrating solely on God and not worldly or physical concerns. The church we're visiting is the same building in which Julian spent her entire adult life. Her cell is visible on the right side of the building.



Julian's cell, exterior (on the right). Photo:
<http://www.britainexpress.com/counties/norfolk/norwich/st-julian.htm>

Julian is revered for her 16 visions of Christ, recorded in a book she called “Revelation of Divine Love”, later expanded with theological analysis of the visions. Her work is remarkable for its antiquity and is still valued by Anglicans, Catholics and Lutherans because of how clearly and beautifully it evokes God’s love for mankind. To Julian, God had no wrath in his nature: “all that is contrary to peace and love is in us and not in God.” In her first vision, when she thought she was dying from an unknown illness, Christ appeared to her, granting her an understanding of His suffering and His love for humanity. Her work is direct and emotional; even separation by time and culture does not dull her powerful portrayal of God as “mothering” creation and suffering along with it as it deals with great evils. The lifestyle of anchorites and anchoresses, as well as the evocative description of God’s suffering in Julian’s work, are important reminders of the value of selflessness and the closeness of God to mankind.

Sources: Catholic Encyclopedia, Magill, Kevin. Julian of Norwich: Mystic or Visionary? London: Routledge, 2005, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/08557a.htm>

St Cedd was a disciple of St. Aidan of Lindisfarne (which we read about in Chapter 5). Cedd and his brothers, learned to read and write Latin at Aidan’s monastery on Lindisfarne. All four brothers were ordained as priests, Cedd in 653. King Paeda of Mercia, wanting his people to become Christians, asked Aidan for help. He immediately sent Cedd, who sailed down the east coast of England from Lindisfarne and landed at Bradwell. Here he found the ruins of a deserted Roman fort where he built his first church out of wood, before realizing that stone from the old fort would provide a much more permanent building, hence the source of the name ‘St. Peter-on-the-Wall’. This simple monastery would, like those at Iona and Lindisfarne, have been at the same time a church, a mixed community of men and women, a hospital, a library, a school, an arts centre, a farm, a guest house, and a mission base.

Cedd was so successful here that when King Sigbert of the East Saxons (Essex) asked for a similar mission, Cedd was the obvious candidate. He repeated his success and was then recalled to Lindisfarne where he was made Bishop of the East Saxons. Cedd often visited his northern childhood home and in 659 was introduced to King Ethelwald who asked him to establish a monastery in Northumbria. Cedd chose a site at Lastingham, as it was wild and seemed fit only for wild beast, robbers and demons (he liked a challenge). Cedd also established Christian centres at Mersea, Tilbury, Prittlewell, and Upminster, modeling them on the style of churches in Egypt and Syria.

In 664, Cedd was an interpreter at the Synod of Whitby of which we heard much in the last chapter. Convoled in September/October, 663/64, it settled the dispute that had divided the Christians of Northern England (whom the Celts had evangelized), from the Christians of Southern England (whom the Romans had evangelized). The issue became especially important to King Oswiu of Northumbria, who followed the Celtic way, while his wife, Queen Eanfleda, followed the Roman.

St. Colman and St. Cedd presented the case for the Celtic practice, citing the authority of St. John the Evangelist. St. Wilfrid and St. Agilbert presented the case for the Roman usage, citing the authority of St. Peter and of the Council of Nicea. When Colman assented to the truth of Wilfrid's statements about Peter, Oswiu decided to follow St. Peter, the keeper of the keys. Although some Christians kept Celtic customs after this, Roman practice soon dominated the English church.

That same year (664), while at his monastery in Lastingham, Cedd caught the plague. As he lay dying, 30 of his monks from Bradwell came to pray for him. They too caught the plague and only one young boy survived to return to Bradwell. On the first Saturday of every July, about 2000 pilgrims process to the windswept Norfolk coast to picnic and worship in this place of history and extraordinary aura.

Henry & Helen visited the crypt in Lastingham, built soon after St. Cedd and his monks died. It is reached through the parish church, unremarkable in itself, but descending the staircase at the back of the nave, the atmosphere changes from one of Victorian pews and old hymn books, to a sense of serenity and prayerfulness. The air was somehow softer with a gentleness that is hard to describe. It felt safe, a little like being "hugged" by the Holy Spirit. This was a place where Christians have worshipped for more than 1300 years; standing where St. Cedd was likely to have preached all those centuries ago, we felt a strong connection with the myriad of souls that have been there over the centuries. It left us filled with awe; it was hard to leave this amazing place. At the time we had never heard of St. Cedd and his brothers, but what remarkable men they must have been to leave behind two 'thin places'.



St Mary's Crypt, Lastingham (photo: www.redbubble.com)

Pilgrimage is a recurring theme in our visits this week. Why pilgrimage? What does it do for those who undertake it? Its call seems to transcend cultures, religions and eras, having been practiced since recorded history in disparate places by diverse religions. Wikipedia calls it "a journey or search of moral or spiritual significance", and <http://www.pilgrimswaycanterbury.org> calls it a "meaningful journey to a sacred place". Its physical destination is often a shrine, a place where someone before us, usually long ago and therefore mysticized by time, manifested God's spirit, but its real destination is a place inside ourselves. When we go, we expect to experience communion with the saints who have been here before us as well as those with whom we share the pilgrimage, and through them all, our God. We go to what we believe is a "thin place" in order that our journey may itself become for us a "thin place". It is a deep part of our spiritual heritage, not to be lightly dismissed.

Your Mystic Britain travel guides

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