

Norwich Cathedrals

The Catholic Cathedral of St John the Baptist in Norwich

The Catholic Cathedral of St John the Baptist in Norwich is one of the finest examples of Victorian Gothic Revival architecture in England. Unlike Norwich Cathedral, the medieval Church of England cathedral, St John's is a relatively modern building. Construction began in 1882 and was completed in 1910. It was originally built as a parish church for Norwich's growing Roman Catholic community and was largely funded by Henry Fitzalan-Howard, the fifteenth Duke of Norfolk. The church was designed first by George Gilbert Scott Junior and, after his death, completed by his brother John Oldrid Scott. In 1976, it became the cathedral of the newly established Roman Catholic Diocese of East Anglia.



The cathedral's origins are particularly interesting because they are connected with pilgrimage. The Duke of Norfolk's decision to fund the church was associated with a vow made during a pilgrimage, and the building was intended partly as an expression of thanksgiving. Its Gothic design also deliberately recalled England's medieval Catholic past, linking the nineteenth-century revival of Catholicism with the religious heritage that had existed before the Reformation.

This provides an important connection with Walsingham, one of England's greatest medieval pilgrimage centres. According to tradition, the shrine at Walsingham was founded in 1061 after Richeldis de Faverches experienced visions of the Virgin Mary and was instructed to build a replica of the Holy House at Nazareth. By the later Middle Ages, Walsingham had become a major European pilgrimage destination, attracting ordinary people as well as English monarchs. Pilgrims travelled to Walsingham along several routes, including one from Norwich.

The Reformation brought this tradition to an abrupt end. In 1538, Henry VIII ordered the destruction of the Walsingham shrine and the famous image of Our Lady was removed and destroyed. Catholic pilgrimage to Walsingham consequently disappeared for centuries. However, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries witnessed its revival. The Slipper Chapel at Houghton St Giles was restored by Charlotte Pearson Boyd in the 1890s, and a Roman Catholic pilgrimage took place there in 1897. Walsingham subsequently became the centre of the revived Catholic pilgrimage tradition in England.

St John's Cathedral is therefore closely connected to Walsingham not because it was itself a medieval shrine, but because both represent the revival of Catholic pilgrimage and identity in Norfolk. Today, the relationship is especially visible through the Walsingham Way, a 37-mile pilgrimage route linking Norwich with Walsingham. The route can begin at either the Anglican Norwich Cathedral or the Roman Catholic Cathedral of St John the Baptist and follows the historic tradition of pilgrims travelling across Norfolk towards Walsingham.

The cathedral thus acts as both a destination in its own right and a modern starting point for pilgrimage. Its nineteenth-century Gothic architecture recalls England's Catholic medieval past, while its continuing connection with Walsingham demonstrates how that past has been recovered and given new life in the modern Catholic Church.

The Anglican Cathedral Church of the Holy and Undivided Trinity in Norwich

Norwich Cathedral, officially the Cathedral Church of the Holy and Undivided Trinity, is one of England's most remarkable medieval buildings. Standing at the heart of Norwich, it has been a place of Christian worship for more than 900 years. Its history began in 1096, when Herbert de Losinga, the first Bishop of Norwich, founded a Benedictine monastery and began constructing the cathedral.



The decision to establish the cathedral at Norwich followed the transfer of the bishop's seat from Thetford. Herbert de Losinga chose a site within the city and created not only a cathedral but also a large Benedictine monastic community. Much of the original Norman building was completed during his lifetime, before his death in 1119. The cathedral was built largely in the Romanesque style, using stone brought from areas including Caen in Normandy. Its massive nave, rounded Norman arches and decorative arcading still give the building much of its distinctive character.

Over the following centuries, the cathedral was repeatedly enlarged and altered. One of its most important additions was the Angel Choir, constructed between 1256 and 1280. The great cloisters were also developed from the late thirteenth century onwards and were eventually completed in the fifteenth century. Their intricate stonework and hundreds of medieval roof bosses are among the cathedral's greatest artistic treasures.

The cathedral's famous spire has also had a turbulent history. The first recorded spire was completed in 1297 but was blown down during storms in 1361–62. A second spire was destroyed by lightning and fire in 1463. The present spire was probably completed around 1485 and rises approximately 315 feet (96 metres), making it the second-tallest cathedral spire in England after Salisbury.

A major turning point came during the Reformation. The Benedictine priory was dissolved in the sixteenth century, ending centuries of monastic life. The cathedral church, however, survived and became an Anglican cathedral. Historic England records that the priory was dissolved in 1539 and that the church continued as a cathedral under a dean and chapter.

Later centuries brought further restoration and change. Parts of the building were repaired or remodelled, particularly during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, while twentieth-century work sought to preserve its medieval fabric. Today, Norwich Cathedral remains the mother church of the Diocese of Norwich.

It continues its traditional pattern of daily worship while also welcoming visitors interested in its architecture, history, art and music.

Norwich Cathedral therefore represents more than nine centuries of English religious and architectural history. From its Norman foundation and Benedictine origins through the Reformation and into modern Anglican life, successive generations have left their mark on the building. Its soaring spire, vast nave, medieval cloisters and extraordinary roof bosses make it both a living place of worship and an important monument to England's past.