

# A Short Guide to St Mary's Church Felmersham, Bedfordshire



**The West Front**

## Introduction

Felmersham Church stands on a small bluff across the valley of the River Great Ouse, and it was here in 1220 that the priors of Lenton in Nottinghamshire decided to build an outpost of their Cluniac order.

Pevsner<sup>1</sup> poses the following question: *“What can the reason have been for Felmersham receiving the noblest parish church in the county during the noblest age of medieval churches, and moreover a church in spiritual scale, even if not in size, vying with any abbey or priory church? “*

## Early History

During the reign of Henry II (1154-1189) Robert, son of William de Meppershall, granted Felmersham church to the monks of Lenton Priory. An entry in the Lenton cartulary (a monastery register-book) gives *Confirmation by King John (1199-1216) to Lenton of the Churches of Meppershall and Felmersham...* In view of Saxon burials discovered to the east of the church it is likely that it was built in the same area as the present church between 1220 and 1240.

Just why the monks decided to build such a large church for a small community is open to debate. Medieval churches were built to the glory of God and this was achieved by spending all available money, with no regard to the local population, and indeed the Priory was exceptionally wealthy. It could be possible that the monks intended to build a satellite monastery, but never completed the project; by 1283 they had relinquished the advowson to the Crown. The fact that the church was built with a central tower lends added credence to this suggestion. Relatively few medieval churches have a central tower and, those that do, were not primarily built for parish use.

Whatever the explanation the Lenton monks built what is today regarded as one of **the finest Early English Gothic buildings in the region**. The plan of the church, being cruciform, is as laid out in 1220, with nave and chancel of equal splendour. The tower was extended in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, together with the clerestory and battlements.

## Exterior of the Church

The **west front** of the church is regarded as one of its most noteworthy features. Simon Jenkins<sup>2</sup> remarks that *“The west front is Felmersham’s*

*pride, ornate for collegiate architecture that tended to concentrate on the chancel”.*

The doorway to the nave is flanked by slim shafts and filleted mouldings, with a blank arch to the left and right. Above are seven arches with dog-tooth and other intricate patterns, crowned by ring-shafted windows with richly moulded pointed arches to the left and right. In the centre is a 15<sup>th</sup> century window where perhaps there were three lancets.

The **tower** stands centrally over the area between the nave and the chancel and it was in the 15<sup>th</sup> century that it was raised, adding an extra large stage and battlemented top and a small turret. Prior to this the tower was probably surmounted by a broach spire.

From a position near the **lych-gate**, added in 1917, it is possible to see evidence on the tower of the steep pitch of the original nave roof. This was flattened when the clerestory was added, improving the lighting in the nave.



## Interior of the Church

Entering the church via the **porch**, the floor and side benches are formed by 18<sup>th</sup> century gravestones moved from the graveyard when the path to the church was widened.



A rare survival from medieval days is the **sanctuary ring** (1) on the Early English, nail studded door to the church. Above this door is a statuette of the Virgin Mary (2) with arms outstretched, likely to be Victorian.

The centre of the nave (3) is a good place to obtain a general view of **the impressive interior of St Mary's**. For some reason the pillars in the nave are alternately round and octagonal. Looking up, at the base of each truss of the Victorian wooden roof structure, are twelve **angels** all with wings outspread and holding shields.

Below these are **medieval corbels** supporting the wall posts of the roof. In the four corners are the four evangelists – Matthew represented by an angel (4), Mark by a lion (5), Luke by an ox (6) and John by an eagle (7). They are similar to the creatures described in the Book of Revelation as surrounding the Throne of God and became known as the “apocalyptic beasts”. Each figure holds a scroll which may have carried the name of the saint. Many other corbels are carved 13<sup>th</sup> century heads, probably of local people and benefactors. Almost above the porch door (8) is an upside-down male figure with his head between his legs, and poking his tongue out to ward off evil spirits.

Moving forward towards the chancel is the Victorian stone **pulpit** and a modern **lectern**; note the tongue-protruding medieval face above the Rector’s chair on the left. Standing under the bell tower is the climax of the church; this crossing between the transepts is judged by Pevsner to be of “*cathedral seriousness*”.



The **organ** (9) was built and installed by W Nicholson of Worcester and was opened for Divine Service on 17 April 1873.





The inscription on the 15<sup>th</sup> century **rood screen** (10) translates as *“Pray for the souls of Richard Kynge and his wife Annette builders of this work”*. With rich tracery and coving on both sides, the small angels add an exquisite touch. The loft was removed in 1853 and the painted decoration was restored in the Victorian era.

Moving into the chancel there is the original **priest’s door** on the right (11) and a **double piscina** a little further on (12) with its twin stone basins, used at one time for rinsing the chalice.

The **east window** in the chancel (13) was commissioned in 1951 by Sir Richard and Lady Wells in memory of their three sons who gave their lives in the Second World War, and to their nurse. Francis Spear’s design consists of a central figure of the risen Christ; to His right stand St Mary and St Christopher and to His left St Thomas and St James. These are shown as patron and name saints of the three sons and their nurse.

Moving back into the transept, the present day interior is filled with natural light with the windows being re-glazed in 1951 with antique glass.

In the south transept (14) is the **Memorial Chapel**. A **modern window** was installed to celebrate the millennium. John Lawson, who designed the window, was one of the leading stained-glass artists of his generation. He designed glorious windows not only in Westminster Abbey and many other British cathedrals and churches, but also in mosques, palaces and hotels as far afield as Dubai, Oman and Brunei. For the last three decades of the 20th century he was chief artist for the internationally renowned Goddard & Gibbs Studios.

The central theme of the design is the Transfiguration which is symbolised as a central burst of light with rays, in the form of a cross, extending across the whole of the window. The topmost area represents the universe; leaf and field shapes in shades of green indicate the local rural landscape. At the bottom, conflict and war are symbolised by using strong rust and crimson colours, and spiky thorn shapes. An appropriate reminder as the chapel is used as a memorial to the fallen in the two world wars.



Just before the porch door is a board that **lists the rectors and vicars** (15) from 1235 onwards, on the basis of transcripts held by Trinity College, Cambridge. Below the board is a recess said to have been used in pre-Reformation days for containing holy water.

The **font** (16) is Early English with an 18<sup>th</sup> century domed cover.

Postscript: Sadly the celebrations commemorating the 800 years of St Mary's in 2020 had to be cancelled due to the coronavirus pandemic.

## Other places of interest nearby

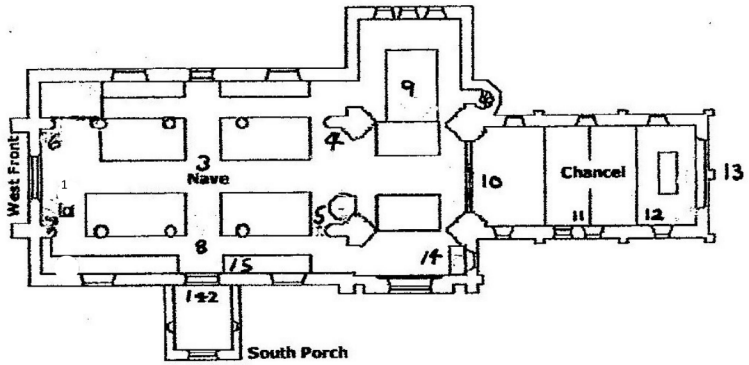
To the right of the lych-gate is a **stretch of pathway** constructed by driving stones edge-on into the ground. Further down, the change in style of the wall marks the addition to the churchyard in about 1915.

Immediately south of the church is the **Tithe Barn**, originally part of College Farm; it is eight bays long with buttresses and tie beams, and more closely set collar-beams. It was built in 1428 and at that time King's Hall, Cambridge, held the rectorial rights of St Mary's Church. This entitled them to claim one tenth of the crops grown within the parish and the barn was built to store such tithes. It was converted into dwellings in the early eighties.

**Felmersham Bridge** was completed in November 1818 using material quarried from within the parish. Soon after, flood damage caused major repairs to be carried out. The bridge was finally reopened in July 1820. Before the bridge was built, the main route north out of the village was via a crossing at the Pinch Mill Islands, along the Old Road to the east.

In June 2018 celebrations were held to mark the 200th anniversary of the opening of the bridge and the day began with many villagers gathering to witness the then Rector, Fr Reuben Preston, blessing the bridge.





Plan of St Mary's Church  
 The numbers correspond to the reference numbers in the text



Ken Shrimpton 2005, revised Jane Carwithen 2023

With further information from:

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|---------------------|---|
| Ken Shrimpton       | Felmersham, The History of a Riverside Parish 2003  |
| 1 Pevsner & O'Brien | The Buildings of England Series: Bedfordshire, Huntingdonshire and Peterborough 2nd Ed 2014 |
| 2 Simon Jenkins     | England's Thousand Best Churches 1999   |
| W E Draycott        | Grain and Chaff 1985  |