A Short Guide to

St Mary's Church

Felmersham, Bedfordshire



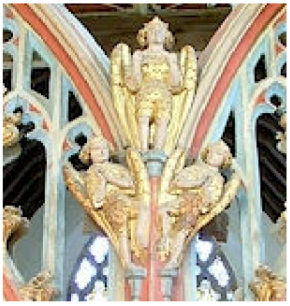
St Mary's viewed from the South



Sanctuary Handle



Double Piscina



Angels on the medieval screen

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, a Cluniac house founded in Nottinghamshire. 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....* What this early church looked like or where it was built, we do not know. However, in view of the Saxon burials recently discovered to the east of the church it is likely that it was built in the same area as the present church.

The present-day church was built by the monks of Lenton Priory between 1220 and 1240, but just why they 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 size of the local population. This then could be the explanation, although it is possible that the monks intended to build a satellite monastery but never completed the project. 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. The scale of the internal arches at the central crossing and the fine external stonework at the west end, also suggest that the church was destined for a greater purpose.

In 1204 Pavenham and Radwell were attached to Felmersham and the monks may have felt that a larger church was needed in order to meet the needs of an enlarged community. Whatever the explanation, the Lenton monks built what is today regarded as one of the finest Early English Gothic buildings in the region.

Except for the porch, which was rebuilt and enlarged in 1828, the plan of the church is as laid out in 1220. This is relatively unusual because most churches have been added to over the centuries. However, whilst much of the stonework above ground level is Early English, the building has seen many changes.

Early English (EE) Features
Outside the church, the magnificent West Front (at the west end of the church) is considered to be a fine example of EE architecture. The finely moulded and shafted door and the arcade of seven arches with detached shafts above, are classic EE features although the three windows above the arcading are of a later date. They replaced the original windows when the roof was raised and flattened a century or so later. The tower is EE with a Perpendicular top stage. On the tower west face are the witness marks of the earlier ridge roof.
On entering the church the first impression is of space and light, however this was not the case when the church was first built. With no upper clerestory

windows and only small lancet windows in the aisles, the building would have been poorly lit. However, it would still have been an impressive sight, with the nave lined with pillars and arches and the central tower supported on four, finely moulded, cathedral-like columns.
There are traces of paint on the south east nave pillar (1) and also the remains of wall paintings in the ringing chamber which in former times would have formed part of the picture of doom above the chancel arch.
The chancel still retains the original priest's door (2) and a double piscina (3) but earlier windows were replaced in 1853-4 in order to reconstruct the Victorian notion of the original chancel.

Stained Glass
A striking feature of the present-day interior is the amount of natural light in the building. This is because the windows were entirely re-glazed in 1951 with antique glass in very light tints, the only exception being the east window (4). This window 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 stands St Mary and St Christopher and to the left St Thomas and St James. These are shown as the patron and name saints of the three sons and their nurse.
To celebrate the millennium a modern window (5) was installed in the Memorial Chapel. The central theme of the design is the Incarnation 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 that the chapel is used as a memorial to the fallen in the two world wars.

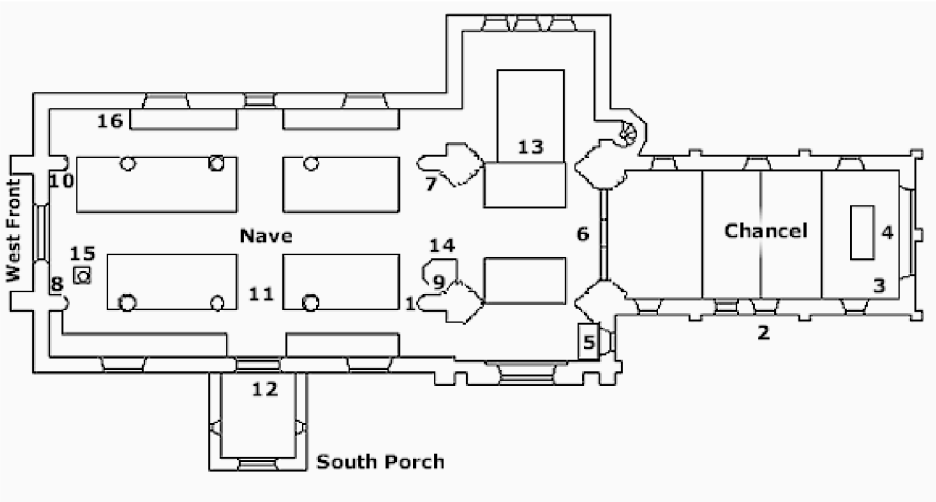
Medieval Rood Screen
The inscription on the rood screen (6) translates as "Pray for the souls of Richard Kynge and his wife Annette builders of this work". Unfortunately it is undated but the architectural style (perpendicular gothic) and documentary evidence suggests an early 15th century date. We are fortunate still to have this fine example of a medieval oak screen since relatively few survived 17th century Puritan zeal.

Other points of interest
When the nave roof was raised and flattened, the twelve carved stone corbels (stone brackets) supporting the original roof were left intact. The early Christian church represented the four evangelists as winged creatures and these can be seen in the four corners - Matthew represented by an angel (7), Mark by

a lion (8), Luke by an ox (9) and John by an eagle (10). They are similar to the creatures described in the Book of Revelations 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 of the other corbels are carved 13th century heads, probably of local people and benefactors, and interestingly they illustrate the headwear fashion of the time. The corbel nearest the south door is an upside-down male figure (11) with his head between his legs, poking out his tongue to ward off evil spirits.

Confusingly, the south door has two handles, the larger handle is known as a sanctuary ring (12). Fugitives could claim sanctuary by holding this ring; they then had the protection of the church for 40 days during which time they could choose to be either punished or banished from the realm.

The organ (13) was built and installed by W Nicholson of Worcester in 1873 and the rather incongruous pulpit (14) was installed in 1895. Also in 1895 the top of the font (15) was raised with a course of stone and the side panels were carved. This alteration makes the font difficult to date but it is likely to be the same date as the church. In the rear corner of the church (16) is a wooden-framed, flail-locking turret clock (early to mid 17th century), a medieval scratch or mass dial and the parish bier (1893).



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