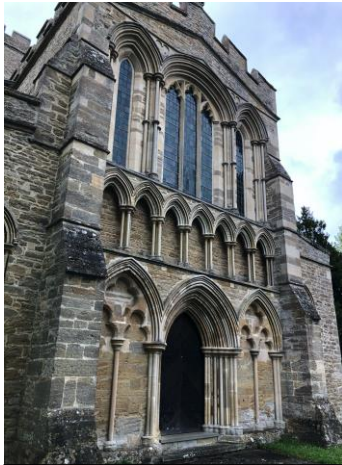


## Small Pilgrim Places Journal 36: St Mary's Felmersham

About 7 miles to the north-west of Bedford the small village of Felmersham lies next to the Great Ouse, a river of over 140 miles which runs on through the fens and flood plains around Ely to finally drain into the sea at Kings Lynn by The Wash.

The village has a population of less than a thousand, no shop or post office and just one pub, so the church of St Mary, with its imposing central tower and west front rising up majestically from a small bluff, comes as a bit of a surprise. It was originally built by the priors of Lenton, Nottinghamshire in the thirteenth century as an outpost of the Cluniac Order, founded about a hundred years earlier.



The West front

The west front is a striking feature of what has been described as one of the finest English Gothic buildings in this area. The west door is set under seven delicate Gothic arches, above which is a large 15<sup>th</sup> century window. Rather strangely, within a few feet of the west front are steep steps leading straight down to the road, making it rather difficult to get a view of the whole facade. But hospittaller Sue Whitehouse, who popped over from her nearby home to meet me as I arrived, said that wedding couples are allowed to go through the door and pose for photographs.

Inside the church, what first caught my eye was the 15<sup>th</sup> century rood screen dividing nave and chancel. Its loft was removed in Victorian times, when its paint was restored: the rich blue, red and gold decoration of its tracery, on which sit a number of small carved angels, still glows beautifully. Beyond it the chancel is lit by a 20<sup>th</sup> century east window depicting the risen Christ and Mary. The high altar under the window, Sue said, was still used for high days and holidays, whereas a small nave altar serves on most occasions.



The rood screen



The memorial chapel

In the chapel in the south transept, kept as a memorial to the fallen of two world wars, is a window designed for the millennium by the renowned John Lawson, whose designs also grace Westminster Abbey and several cathedrals.

Above the nave the wall posts of the roof are supported by medieval corbels depicting the four evangelists among other figures. One, near the south porch, is upside down with head between legs – perhaps warding off evil spirits that might rush in through the north door opposite. Another above the rector's stall is cheekily sticking out his tongue – whether at the rector I couldn't say.

The whole interior of St Mary's gave the impression of a well-cared for and loved church. Indeed, as I walked in a parishioner was busy polishing and tidying in readiness for an "in person" service the following day, their first since the pandemic lockdowns.



The view across the river to St Mary's

Parts of the churchyard are managed as conservation areas, and there were plenty of spring flowers flourishing, including drifts of primroses by the south porch. Just near the church a bridge crosses the Ouse, and after a picnic lunch on the bank a footpath afforded a ramble along the riverside. It is a popular spot for water-loving birds: I spotted herons, Canada geese and Egret among the tall reeds and grasses, and half-a-dozen Greylag geese in a watermeadow feasting on dandelion clocks.

Ali Green