

Small Pilgrim Places Journal 38: All Saints Waterden, Norfolk

Having travelled northwards from the flat Broads and Fens of Norfolk, the fields and woods of the farmland around Fakenham appeared to me to form an almost rolling rural landscape, dotted with a few small settlements and lone houses not far from the north Norfolk coast. A thousand or so years ago a village listed in the Domesday Book as Waterden (meaning "watery valley") stood just to the east of an old Roman road running arrow-straight north-north-east to the coastal marshes and, beyond, the North Sea.



*The approach to the church
from the car park*

The village died out in the 16th century, and nothing of it now remains except for the Church of All Saints, which may date from Anglo-Saxon times and whose eclectic architectural features show evidence of a millennium of use, neglect and restoration, including some extensive works carried out very recently.

A Grade II* Chapel of Ease in the Creakes Benefice, not far from Walsingham, All Saints is now hidden amongst tall trees along a grassy path off a narrow lane. Metal gates next to an informative interpretation board open onto a grassy track leading to the churchyard, which when I visited was heavy with the scent of shoulder-high Queen Anne's Lace. A couple of the mature trees held bird and bat boxes. Leading from the far corner of the churchyard is a narrow footpath sloping down over a stream to a field; this may have been the route villagers took when coming to worship.

Standing on the track, still a public

footpath today, I imagined the village folk of medieval times making their way along the same route, over the stream and up to the little flint-and-chalk church. They wouldn't have seen the dainty timber bellcote that is now perched on the west end of the rood and holds a single bell, but to my eye it's an attractive addition that adds to the impression of the entire building rising organically from its lush green surroundings. I noticed that on the west end of the church is a ruinous wall, possibly the result of a collapse of part of the nave. A bench has been installed here under a curiously square, domestic-looking window, to mark the restoration works carried out by the Friends of Waterden Church in 2019 and partly funded by the National Heritage Lottery Fund. Walking round to the south side I noted three gothic arches along the outside wall, where a side aisle



All Saints viewed from the field-side track



The interior looking east, showing the font and box pews

Leaving the church behind I headed off between intensively farmed agricultural land, and was delighted to be surprised by a pair of marsh harriers flying low over a young green cereal crop. Once threatened with extinction, these handsome raptors have made a comeback in recent decades and their population is now more secure than it has been for a century or so, but they are still highly protected. As I was writing this journal entry, I glanced out from my lodgings – a circular room in a converted old windmill – and in front of my window a lone marsh harrier was quartering the surrounding fenland under massing evening clouds – a great treat to end the day.

The floor plans and details of the latest restoration are helpfully on display inside the church. The interior is very simple, uncluttered and attractive. It is lit only by candles, there being no electricity (and no water supply either). The heavy timber doors, nave and chancel arch date from the 12th century. An unadorned 14th century octagonal font stands by the north door. The rest of the nave is furnished with plain box pews, installed in the 19th century. At the east end, above the altar, is a four-light window, and to the south is a small piscina, possibly of 13th century origin.



The view through the north porch window to the fields beyond

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