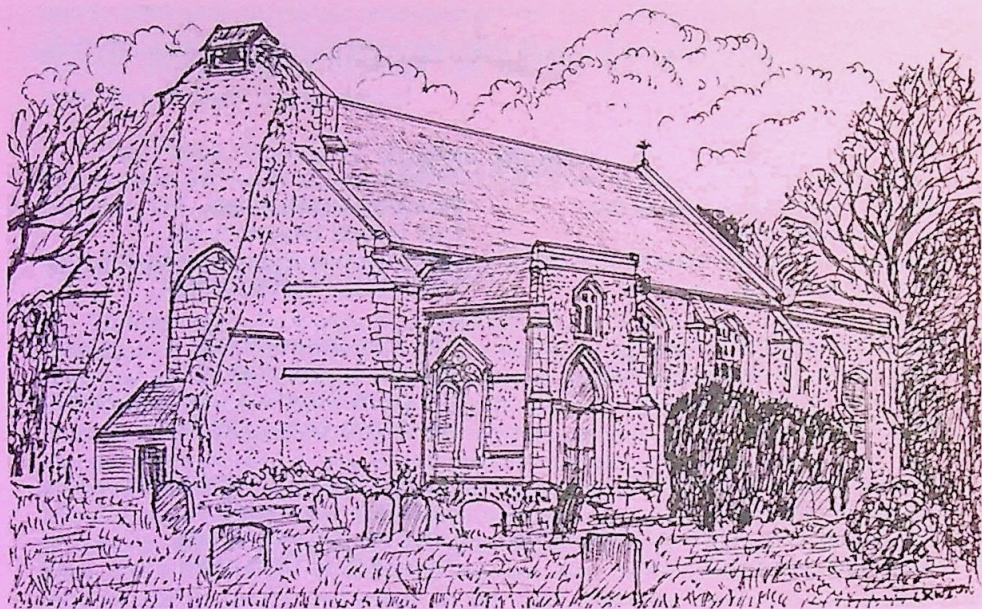


**A Brief Guide
to
The Church
of**



**St Mary the Virgin
MELLIS
Suffolk**

Welcome to

St. Mary the Virgin, Mellis.

This historic and beautiful building is still in regular use for Christian worship – the purpose for which it was built. Recent restoration work has shown that there was an earlier church on the same site before this late 13th century building, confirming at least a thousand years of Christianity in this village. “Little Domesday” records a church in Mellis that was probably on the same site. The building and its restorations over the years show the economic changes that the village has experienced over this period but its inhabitants found ways of showing that Christian worship matters. This continues to the present day. We hope that you will enjoy the beauty, peace and interest here and we hope above all that you will feel at home here in Gods house.

The following verses were written in spring 2000 and give the visitor a flavour of what they will find.

Mellis Church

Mellis Church she smiled at me,
As I was walking by,
I paused and felt the warmth that came
From more than sun and sky.

Was it the peace that flowed,
From those old stones so worn,
The brick and flint a history,
Before my life was born?

Was it the flowers and trees,
Around me as I passed,
That brought my childhood back to me,
And simple pleasures lost?

Was it the bird song clear,
That made my senses glow,
With music never ending, till
The evening shadows flow?

Was it the old lime tree,
That insects brought to life,
Vibrating, humming, seeking out,
Their nectar, without strife?

Was it the presence felt,
Of lives remembered here,
The grave flowers placed at festivals,
Now faded, brown and sear?

And as I paused, I understood,
That life is full of warmth,
If only we can stop to see,
The beauty of Gods earth.

Yes,
Mellis church she smiled at me,
That day in early May,
I think it was the living faith,
Of souls who'd passed that way.

Please spare a moment to pray for the priests and people whose spiritual home this is and help to keep this ancient church intact and worthy of its purpose for future generations to enjoy.

May God bless and keep you.

Saint Mary's Church, Mellis.

Mellis is one of several very distinctive and picturesque villages in North Suffolk, which is well away from the tourist routes, but is well worth a visit. Travellers in the old days will remember it as a station on the L.N.E.R Ipswich to Norwich line. Mellis station (long since closed) was in fact the junction for the branch line to Eye. The outstanding feature of Mellis is its large open grazing common, which covers a large proportion of the parish and stretches for a length of nearly two miles. Part of the north end is "an area of special landscape value". It has been described by Norman Scarfe as one of the finest commons in East Anglia. In April 1664, this "green" was used for an enormous muster, ordered by Parliament to train men in archery and battle skills for the Civil War. They clearly needed training as five men were accidentally shot during the proceedings! The gory details were recorded thus, "Edward Gibes of Thrandeston was slain at a muster, being shot through the bowells, and another of Wortham was shot into the thighe and three others were shot through theyre clothes".

The Parish Church of St. Mary the Virgin occupies a peaceful and picturesque setting in its tree shaded churchyard, a short distance across the common from the road to Gislingham.

What To See Outside The Church

Unfortunately St. Mary's no longer has its tower and is shrouded by trees. Therefore it does not stand out from a distance, but the intrepid pilgrim who ventures along the drive to the churchyard gates (erected in memory of a Churchwarden who served the church faithfully for many years) will be rewarded by seeing a building of fine proportions and dignity. Its fabric shows the economic history of the village with the mixture of mellow colours of the different building materials used in its repairs and restorations, all blending into the green of the trees and varied herbage. Its plan is simple, comprising of a nave, with a south porch and chancel and a vestry added to the North East corner. Most of the building that we see today dates from the 15th century, but a recent restoration of the pew platforms disclosed the broad base of the wall of an earlier church. This bridges the gap in time between the Saxon Church, which is recorded in the "Doomsday" Norman records and the beginning of the existing building in the 13th century. The oldest parts that can still be seen are associated with the chancel and porch. The windows are nearly all in the perpendicular style of architecture.

The square western TOWER collapsed in 1730. When Tom Martin visited the church five years before, he described the tower as being cracked and records of materials that were used at that time seem to indicate that attempts were made to lighten the structure e.g. by the use of thatch.

A considerable amount of the ruins remained in the early 1800's, when Isaac Johnson made a sketch of the church. It is said that stone from the fallen tower was used to make the raised path across the common known locally as "The Carnser". Decorated and carved stone was also part of a building near the existing railway crossing. It "disappeared" in the early 1990's when the property changed hands. There is however a photographic record of the material. Money from the sale of some of the tower material, with £170 raised by subscription, was not used until 1784. £80 was spent on a tenement, with an acre of land and a common right for the use of paupers, who were the responsibility of the parish at that time. This cottage continued in use until 1830 when it was sold to the Great Eastern Railway to make way for the new line to Norwich. The remainder of the money was used to repair the church roof. Fragments of the north and south walls of the tower still remain and have been used to act as buttresses to support the west end of the nave. A small portion of the east wall of the tower remains and rises a short distance above the nave roof and contains a brick bellcote which now houses the BELL. This has a diameter of 30 inches and was cast in 1626 by Miles Graye of Colchester. It was brought to Mellis from Thwaite church in 1859. There were four bells in 1553 and five in 1725; perhaps this was why the tower collapsed! Probably they were damaged or sold when the tower collapsed. The bell was repaired in 1999 after the clapper had dropped off. A new bell stock was also fitted, after it was found that much of the ironwork was corroded. This enabled the bell to be rung to celebrate the new millennium.

The lofty NAVE has great dignity and displays fine 15th century craftsmanship. It's sturdy stone-faced buttresses not only support the walls but also enhance the proportions of the building. The north and south walls have tall and matching three-light Perpendicular windows, with beautiful tracery, punctuated by stepped horizontal transoms. Stone string courses run beneath them and form hood-moulds above them. Around the nave and porch is a base-course with a chequer pattern in flush-work, using stone and knapped (or split) flints. Especially to be noted in the walls are some of the square "put-lock" holes, which were used for scaffolding when the structure was built. The north doorway has a large and continuously moulded arch. In the east wall of the nave on the north side is the turret containing the rood-loft staircase. In the south wall of the nave at the western end is part of the staircase that led to the parvise, now removed.

The CHANCEL is shorter and less magnificent than the nave, but its windows, which are also smaller and have simpler tracery, are also 15th century Perpendicular.

Of the two southern windows, the eastern one has been blocked with 18th century brick and its western counterpart has renewed corbel heads supporting its hood-mould. The small priest's doorway has a pretty moulded arch. The roof is almost flat. It was reroofed in 1988 after the gales of October 1997 had stripped the covering. The level of an earlier roof-ridge can be seen on the east wall of the nave.

The chancel appears to have suffered during the 17th and 18th centuries and its east wall has been considerably patched up with brick. The four-light east window was entirely renewed in the mid 19th century. At the generous gift of a parishioner, a new stained glass east window was installed in 1996. It depicts in a symbolic way the church dedication to St. Mary the Virgin using the natural flora found around Mellis common. A careful look will identify, buttercups, sloes, dog daisies, wild roses, blackberries and oak leaves, all symbolising the stars of the nativity, the gold of royalty, the thorns of the passion and the traditional blue and shape of her gown.

If one can find time to look, there is the evidence of worship during the 1939-1945 war by a blackout blind-roller remaining above the south window, a necessity in an area full of airfields.

It is worth remembering that until comparatively recently, the rector of the parish was responsible for the upkeep of the chancel, whilst the parishioners looked after the rest of the fabric. This explains the different styles of building here in the nave and chancel and also why the chancel appears a little worse for wear.

What does appear to be original, however, is the unusually tall frieze of flushwork panelling extending along the base of the east wall and the wall of the adjoining vestry, which is also 15th century and is lit by plain rectangular windows. The flushwork is riddled with early 19th century graffiti, certainly due to the close proximity at that time, of the village school next to the main gate. It is easy to imagine the children when having their lunchtime sandwiches in the churchyard, rising to the challenge.

In the churchyard to the east of the chancel, there are some 18th century headstones, which are carved with skulls, etc.

The south PORCH was originally two-storeyed, with a parvise (or priest's chamber) above. The roof was lowered considerably and the dividing floor removed in 1858. Before that the porch had a vaulted stone ceiling. The windows are of the Decorated period and are the oldest windows in the church. Large weathered gargoyles peer out from the southern corners and the lofty entrance arch has large capitals and bases.

WHAT TO SEE INSIDE THE CHURCH

The south door admits us to a bright and cared-for interior. The wide nave is lofty and spacious; the chancel beyond it is smaller and lower. We see here work from several periods, as people over the centuries have altered and beautified it. Some craftsmanship remains from mediaeval times, when the windows were filled and glowed with coloured glass, the walls were painted with murals and a wealth of teaching and symbolism was displayed in carving in stone and wood, explaining to the uneducated the mysteries of the Christian religion.

After the Reformation, much of the colour and carving disappeared and the decor of the interior was altered to meet the new liturgical requirements. The churchwarden's accounts reveal certain additions to the furnishings in the 17th century. A new pulpit and reading desks were set up in 1615; a sounding board above the pulpit was brought from Eye. An hourglass was purchased for the pulpit in 1629. The Royal Arms were first set up in 1617, also framed tables with the Lord's Prayer and Commandments. In 1637, in obedience to Bishop Wren's instructions, the rails were made to enclose the Communion table. Most of these original rails still exist, in the front of the choir stalls. In 1641 a new lock and key were made for the parish chest. 1643-5 was a difficult time for the church with the Puritan destruction of "superstitious images" in churches, by the Earl of Manchester. Bills are recorded paying for the reglazing of the windows (after the removal of the stained glass), the taking down of some crosses and the dismantling of the organ. During the recent, year 2000, renewal of the pew platforms, this destruction of the glass was verified by finding slivers of the mediaeval glass near the south windows.

By the early 19th century, the chancel was in a poor condition. A local newspaper reported in 1823, that, "One Sunday the Parish Clerk was standing by the altar rail when a vault under the floor suddenly gave way, through which he sank to his neck, to his great terror and astonishment." The report added, "the communicants had not long quitted the scene."

When David Elisha Davy visited the church in June 1844, the communion table was raised on a wooden floor approached by two small steps; the east window was then constructed of brick and may have been a different shape to the present one. The nave had a plaster ceiling which hid the roof and at its east end were a few box pews, although open benches provided most of the seating. The octagonal pulpit of 1615 remained. The mediaeval painted rood screen was at that time placed at the West End of the nave. Davy commented that the "church had a very dreary and miserable appearance."

In 1858-9 a major restoration of the porch and nave took place. The restoration was instigated by the Revd. Henry Creed, who arrived with his family to live in the village in 1836. He was probably the first Rector to live in the parish since the Commonwealth. The architect was J. Johnston of Bury St. Edmunds. The porch was altered, its roof lowered and its upper floor removed. The plaster ceiling in the nave was removed and the nave roof restored. New south doors were made and nave benches were renewed. A planned rebuilding of the church tower did not take place. Sometime before 1863, the rector had a new east window inserted, but it was not until 1897-8 that a thorough restoration of the chancel took place. This was re-opened in February 1898 by the Bishop of Norwich. The floors of both nave and chancel were paved with Minton tiles, the choir stalls renovated, a new altar cloth and Axminster carpet for the choir stalls provided, and new altar rails made in memory of the Revd Henry Creed, rector for 24 years. It may have been during one of these restorations that the present pulpit was added. In the early 1990's the internal walls were repaired, cleaned and lime-washed.

In 1996 a new stained glass window was designed, made and installed by the Mellis workshop of Surinder and Roland Warboys. A plaque to the south of the base of the window records the event. This was followed in 1999-2000 by a restoration which included the renewal of the pew platforms in the nave and chancel, the repair and re-hanging of the bell with repair of the bellcote and the installation of an under-pew electric heating system. The front pew on the south side of the nave was removed to improve accessibility. During the period 1992-2000 a working party also produced a unique set of kneelers, all individually designed and depicting items from the church, the village, the common and special interests of the members.

OTHER ITEMS OF NOTE

At the west end of the nave is the blocked TOWER ARCH, which contains an interesting ancient Saxon style door with remains of an iron wedge closure, within a round arch. The door is older than the filling of the tower arch but its origin is unknown. Above hang the framed and painted ROYAL ARMS of Charles I dated 1653, one of only five sets of his arms in the county. To the west of the south doorway are the remains of the STAIRCASE, which formerly led to the parvise above the porch.

The fine 15th century octagonal FONT is of the typical East Anglian pattern and its base step is embellished with stone quatrefoils. Around the stem are four lions, above which is a band of flowers and angels with outstretched wings supporting the bowl. The bowl panels contain the emblems of the Four Evangelists, alternating with Tudor roses. Traces of its original colouring survive in the base panels. The Font has been repaired at some time and this has resulted in abnormal positioning of the segments.

The NAVE WINDOWS have engaged shafts and internal hood-moulds, which rest upon fascinating grotesque corbel heads. Much mediaeval craftsmanship remains in the rafters of the broad open-timbered NAVE ROOF, which is supported on the walls by stone angel corbels, bearing shields, musical instruments, etc.

The BENCHES were greatly restored and renewed in 1858, but some of the mediaeval woodwork has been re-used, including some of the poppyhead ends. In the backs of the western benches on the south side is panelling from the old box pews the last of which were removed in the 1898 restoration.

The southeast window of the nave contains what is left of the 15th century GLASS, which once filled these windows. In the tops of the three lights are jumbled fragments, but in the tracery are several figures, some of which are complete. Amongst these we can identify St. Jude with his boat and St. James the less with his fullers club.

Beside the east wall nearby is an altar TOMB, topped by a stone slab containing the indents for former brasses of a male and female. Its front has lozenges containing shields (more can be seen beneath the southeast window), but has no inscription. This is the 16th century tomb of a member of the YAXLEY family, who owned the Manor of Heigham Hall in this parish. Davey records that in 1844 there were painted wooden memorials to Anthony Yaxley (1559) and Richard Yaxley (1569) in the church, so this may be the tomb of John Yaxley, Sergeant at Law and father of Anthony, who died in 1505.

Beneath the narrow, but elegant CHANCEL ARCH (supported by Responds with concave sides) stands the 15th century ROOD SCREEN. This has been carefully restored, but is mostly original woodwork. The colour was restored about 1900 by one of the Revd Henry Creed's daughters who faithfully reproduced the original colours. The base has single panels, with cinquefoil tracery; note in the spandrels (in the top corners), the tiny carvings of foliage, dragons and little faces with protruding tongues, now recorded on one of the recently made kneelers. The openwork section above has exquisitely carved tracery, opening out into what must have been a beautiful canopy. Above this was the rood loft, along which it was possible to walk. Early postcards of the church show a large crucifix above the screen, but this was not the original Rood. The STAIRCASE to this remains, with its lower entrance behind the organ (now blocked up) but its upper entrance can be seen on the north side. Above the loft stood the great ROOD (Our Lord, crucified, flanked by his Mother and St. John). This existed as late as the nineteen twenties, but has since disappeared.

The ORGAN was built by Bedwell in 1898. It has two manuals, pedals and nine speaking stops.

Careful observation reveals that THE CHANCEL "WEEPS" (or deflects) very slightly to the north. This is not uncommon and is more likely to be the result of building convenience rather than any symbolic reason. The CHANCEL ROOF is a fine arch-braced cambered tiebeam example of the 15th century. It was recovered in lead in 1989. During the recent renewal of the wooden choir stall floor, the remains of the bases of 14th century stone seating were disclosed, with evidence of the original floor, mediaeval tiling and floor level.

The STALLS also incorporate ancient woodwork. Money was left by widow Elizabeth Grene in 1527 for the "desks of the chancel" to be "new made", and the poppyhead ends were part of this work. The COMMUNION RAILS, purchased in 1637, now support the book rests of the choir stalls, having been redeployed in 1898 when the existing altar rails were inserted. The altar is the 17th century COMMUNION TABLE installed after stone altars had to be destroyed.

In the south wall of the sanctuary is a PISCINA beneath a plain restored arch. Into its sexfoil drain was poured the water from the washing of the priest's hands at Mass.

The north wall contains a larger recess, beautifully carved and decorated, its arch having flowers and foliage in the spandrels and tiny flowers in the borders. Beneath it are five niches, which retain their tiny vaulted canopies, and above was a carved stone canopy, now gone. The niches symbolise the Five Wounds of Christ, clearly indicating that this was an EASTER SEPULCHRE, where the Blessed Sacrament was placed from Good Friday to Easter to symbolise Our Lord's burial in the tomb. There is a fine 17th century CHAIR, with a fascinating carving of Abraham about to sacrifice Isaac, with the ram shown caught in a thicket. Two more chairs incorporate old wood work in their backs, one with 17 century Jacobean panelling and another with linenfold panelling.

A 15th century arch, flanked by corbels of a king and a bishop, contain the sturdy 15th century VESTRY DOOR, with its original closing ring, boss and lock. In the vestry is a CUPBOARD incorporating 17th century woodwork, with characteristic blank arches, also a significantly repaired solid mediaeval PARISH CHEST where church and parish valuables would have been stored.

Amongst the church PLATE is a chalice presented in 1746 but made in 1682. Also an alms dish of 1776 and an 18th century paten. A modern silver plate Chalice was donated as a memorial by a Canadian friend in 1980.

The nave contains MEMORIALS to those men from the village who served and gave their lives in the two great wars of the 20th century. There is also a plaque to a Rector's daughter who died in World War I. In the chancel floor there is an 18th century ledger slab to members of the Clark family, with a crypt below it.

During 1997-9 the Diss Decorative and Fine Arts Society under the guidance of NADFAS recorded the interior of the church. In January 2001 a book containing the results of their work was presented to the church with additional copies to the diocese and the Victoria and Albert Museum. There was a Rector of Mellis – Hubert de Malling – in 1240. The parish has undergone a series of pastoral reorganisations and it is currently part of an extended benefice of nine parishes, including Wetheringsett, Gislingham, Thornham Magna, Thornham Parva, Thorndon, Stoke Ash, Yaxley and Thwaite. The magnitude of this task for the clergy, resulted in the following verses written in millennium year.

The New Benefice

Brought into being by pastoral measure,
Signed by the Queen by consent of advisors,
So England's tapestry changes its pattern.
Is it Gods will or just human pressure?

Weatheringset, Gislingham, Yaxley and Mellis,
Thwaite and Stoke Ash, Thornhams Magna and Parva,
Thorndon together, historical churches,
Pray for the priest who guides such a benefice.

In the past, parishes came into being,
To give all that dwell in the land Christian care,
A priest for believers and those with no faith,
Offering Christian guidance and spiritual meaning.

Births, deaths, marriages and care for those in need
Give clergy ways of showing the Christian truth,
To lives young and old, in this short earthly span
Offering life to all those who Christ's words take heed.

How should priests cope with this problem we weave?
What methods are there to help deal with the task?
By praying with love and faith in the spirit
And not by themselves, but with all whom believe.

So "gird up your loins", as the prophets would say,
Go spread the "Good News" to those that will listen,
And all in these parishes rise to the challenge,
It's never too late - till we reach Judgement Day!

This Brief Guide was written by Roy Tricker, a lover of Suffolk Churches, it was updated in the Millennium Year 2000 by the Churchwarden Alan Spence.

