

1. Entering by the Decorated (14<sup>th</sup> century) South Porch, note the Font, symbol of entry into the Church by baptism. Octagonal, in Perpendicular style (15<sup>th</sup> century), its simple panels betray a more exotic past in scraps of colour still adhering to the stone despite determined efforts of reformers to scrape away every vestige of decoration.

2. From here can be seen above the door the Royal Arms of William of Orange (William III) dated 1698, with the names of Churchwardens William Jay and John Fisher. Churchwardens have played an essential part in Fleet history, saving the church from the more extreme vagaries of official bureaucracy and maintaining services in bleak periods of sequestration.

3. Behind the font the great 5-light west window, also Perpendicular, its delicate tints a tribute to Rector's wife Annie James in whose memory parishioners and friends restored the nave in 1898, recorded on a brass plaque.

Beneath the window a rough-hewn stone altar table, unfinished. Beside it an 18<sup>th</sup> century armorial headstone from the churchyard recording in verse Surgeon Johnson of the Bull. Nearby is the "defaced miniature effigy of a 14<sup>th</sup> century Civilian" (Pevsner).

4. Look up and admire the resilience of the brass chandelier. Said to be of Flemish design, inscribed "The Revd James Ashley, Rector, Geo. Savage and Jno Ashfield, churchwardens 1796", thrown out in 1863 and left in pieces on a rubbish heap, it was found and re-hung in the chancel in 1874. When electricity came in 1945 it was removed as obsolete, only to be adapted and re-hung yet again in 1964.

From this point note the drunken angles of the 13<sup>th</sup> century nave piers due to marshy soil and earth tremors. Note also the large mortar gaps on the lower part of the piers compared with the finer spaces near the capitals at the top. This shows the inexpertise of Early English masons learning new skills before 14<sup>th</sup> century craftsmen of the Decorated era raised the piers for processions with banners and other ceremonial paraphernalia much loved by the Cluniacs. Scraps of pigment remain despite the almost total defacement of dressed surfaces. Doorways were altered and enlarged on south and north walls.

5. The unusual musical figures among the eight corbels supporting the hammerbeam roof, described by Pevsner as "exceedingly fine busts of great variety", reflect the dedication of the "choir monks" of Cluny who perfected the Gregorian chant. *All Souls Day* was also their legacy to the future, as was the victorious First Crusade, preached by a Cluniac Pope in 1095.

Discoloured patches underfoot may be all that remain of Cluniac ornament and statuary burnt in a frenzy of destruction inside the building. Once "the conscience of Christendom", the Cluniacs became despised for their riches and aloofness, answering only to the Pope.

6. On the north wall a list of Fleet incumbents begins with William Winchecumbe, undated. The priest was among the possessions gifted to Castle Acre when Joscelin of Fleet confirmed his father's gift of the church to the priory in the early 12<sup>th</sup> century. Note the rough texture of the wall of the north aisle and hints of herringbone above faint outlines of earlier arches.

7. Note the corner left of the east window of the north aisle; a redundant double corbel indicates the sturdy structure of the former north side chapel. In the window are the 14<sup>th</sup> century arms of Henry of Bolingbroke, Earl of Lancaster, son of John of Gaunt (b1366), used until 1399 when he became the first Lancastrian King of England as Henry IV and a subject for Shakespeare. Grooves and ridges show the position of a former rood loft approached by circular stairs near the organ.

8. The organ replaced a barrel organ of about 1795 by Edw and Jno Pistor, now in the Royal Pump Room museum at Harrogate. Formerly the organ was at the west end. The 1881 inventory stated: "one small organ with pedals to pull down the last octave of the great organ". Built by Bryceson & Morten of London, possibly to a design of Dr S.S. Wesley for use at a

Gloucester festival, the organ was installed in 1875, worked by bellows until electrification. Mrs Daisy Twell has been organist since 1959.

9. Approaching the chancel, more signs of alteration appear. Pevsner described the responds of the chancel arch as Early English, heightened like the nave piers to suit Decorated requirements. Roughly patched holes indicate former fittings and furnishings.

10. The walls of the chancel were brought in with the removal of the side chapels. Pevsner wrote: *The North chancel windows, if representing those of the North chapel are interesting. Two have mullions up into the arch, but above the pointed-trefoiled lights, round trefoils. Bond describes them as having dropped tracery and Tudor arches. A radiator hides the remains of a slender pier respond.*

11. Between two windows on the north wall is the Fleet Imp, far more impious than his cousin in Lincoln.

12. Beneath the carpet is a black slab incised with the image of a priest and a small dog at his feet. Lead-filled dovetail holes show where brass originally covered it.

13. The beautifully carved oak choir stalls were the gift of Canon James who restored much of the chancel. An inscription on the altar rail reads: "In Memory of Canon James Rector 1874-1910 These Rails and the Clock were Given by Parishioners 1912". The raised wooden floor and pine pews in the nave do not appear in 19<sup>th</sup> century inventories. The endurance of worshippers who knelt on stone flags is to be wondered at.

14. North wall memorials include one to the wife of Rev Dods who died in her 21<sup>st</sup> year and Lt John Hutchinson, Rector's son killed on active service in Libya in 1942, "the saddest news... ever received", his memorial designed by Sir Charles Nicholson ARIBA in 1943.

15. The altar is raised on stone flagging three steps above the chancel floor. Above it, the Victorian east window contains 20<sup>th</sup> century stained glass celebrating the coronation of King George VI in 1937. The Madonna and Child

occupy one panel, Christ in Majesty the other, above smaller panels depicting the appearance of the risen Christ to Mary Magdalene on the first Easter Day.

16. On the south wall are three Decorated sedilia (seating for priests) and a piscina (basin), with steep trefoiled ogee arches and heavily crocketed gables (Pevsner). These resemble the empty niche outside on the south-eastern buttress of the building. Buttresses strengthened walls when windows were enlarged for better light.

17. A wifely memorial mourns William Jay; the family tree of the Jays and Parkes is on the window sill. Hidden by the choir stalls is a black floor slab recording family members.

18. A 'wineglass' pulpit with sounding board.

19. The south aisle has a Lady Chapel altar dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary with memorials to Fleet villagers who served and died in two World Wars, with the banner of the Royal British Legion. On the wall is an aumbry holding the sacraments blessed and ready for use.

20. The incomplete black basalt slab by the door was moved from the north side of the church. Its Norman French inscription translates: *Richard Attegrene and his wife Agnes Pray for their souls 80 days.....* The brass was removed from this also.

21. Outside, a few yards from the porch is the separate tower with belfry and spire, total height 112', all Decorated. Corbel tables adorned with paired figures top the tower, reached by a spiral staircase inside. The stone above the ground floor is softer than that below, suggesting a rebuilding at some time.

Originally there were six bells. Wear and tear, not to mention the depredations of pigeons, forced replacement and repair. The bells were removed in 1999 for refurbishment and a new bell cast, *Big Tom*, in memory of churchwarden Thomas Twell. The bells were rehung in 2000 and are used regularly.

Masons' marks may be seen near the door at the top of the tower. This opens onto a parapetted path round the base of the spire which has small inset quatrefoil lights, popular in the mid-14<sup>th</sup> century. The steeple was repaired in recent years after becoming dangerous.

There is a view of the Victorian rectory considered 'forbidding' by Pevsner. Designed by Ferrey in 1864, the brick and slate fully celled building has over 20 rooms and replaced thatched and timbered buildings recorded from 1606. A new rectory was built in the Seventies next to Monks Green field, probably a reference to the Cluniacs.

22. Paths to the church are seen to avoid the doors. In early times it was thought the devil travelled only in straight lines; thus, he would be unable to enter the church. Ugly beasts on corbels reminded people of the horrors of Hell.

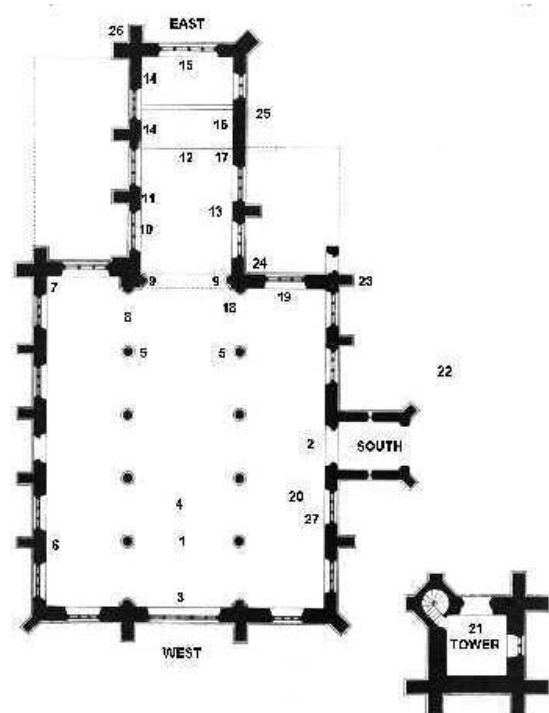
23. The exterior walls of the church reveal as much alteration as the interior; on the south wall a blocked doorway in a buttress was once a priestly entrance to the side chapel.

24. An abrupt break in the dripstone/hoodmould over the window signals rebuilding.

25. High on the south chancel wall a corroded ornamental frieze recalls the icing-cake art of the Decorated period, in keeping with the piscina, sedilia, and corner niche in the buttress, long emptied of its saintly figure.

26. On the north east chancel corner a broken string course shows rebuilding of this end of the church.

27. Further details and books will be found inside. Do sign the visitors' book. Donations are received with grateful thanks for the continued preservation of this Listed Grade 1 building. We hope you have enjoyed your visit.



*St Mary Magdalene Church  
Fleet Lincolnshire*