



Down the centuries at St Edmund's

AD 856

Edmund, a devout Christian, became King of East Anglia at the age of 15. He fought the Danes but was defeated and shot through with arrows before being beheaded. The Abbey of Bury St Edmunds housed his shrine.

1202

Bishop of Norwich John de Grey decreed Southwold should have a 'chapel of ease', under the patronage of St Edmund, King and Martyr, to make it 'easier' to take the sacrament without travelling to St Margaret's at Reydon.

1430

After the chapel burned down, bequests poured in from townsfolk to help fund the magnificent church you see today. It took 60 years to complete and featured many colourful and visual aids that helped a largely illiterate population better understand Christianity.

1534

The Protestant Reformation in England, following Henry VIII's break with Rome, called for churches to be 'purified' of traditional catholic elements. The rood loft, with its depiction of Christ crucified, was hauled down with shrines and statues smashed and brasses plundered.

1643

Suffolk-born William Dowsing, appointed by puritan Oliver Cromwell as 'Commissioner for the destruction of monuments of idolatry and superstition', took down angels and cherubim as well as destroying the font cover and over 100 'superstitious' images.

1799

With the restoration of the monarchy, things went back to how they were before the Civil War. But the 'preaching box' interior with a wooden gallery masking the tower arch and windows half bricked up to conserve heat, made St Edmund's a gloomy place to step into.

1849

Major repairs and restorations began, including removal of 17th century box pews and galleries. Roof angels were re-embodied, stained glass installed, the sanctuary steps raised and candles placed on the new altar.

1929

Architect F.E. Howard designed a new font cover, lectern and altar reredos and re-painted the pre-Reformation pulpit. Sadly he died before it was all completed.

1943

A WW2 bomb blew out the stained glass, including the east window, later replaced by Sir Ninian Comper in a stunning design depicting the story of St Edmund. Light had taken over from darkness.

2015

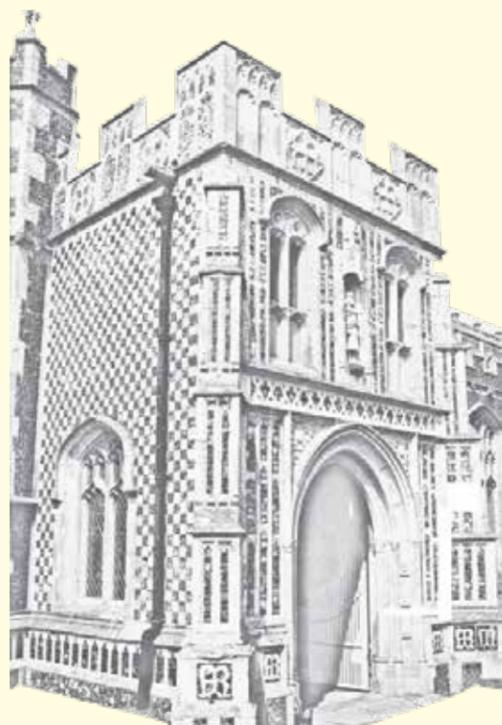
A new lead roof and a major re-ordering has created a truly splendid space for worship and community use.

More to discover



Thank you for making time to visit St Edmund, King & Martyr.

Do spend a few minutes walking round the outside of the church to fully appreciate what a truly magnificent building it is.



St Edmund's is built in the soaring perpendicular style of the 15th century with its emphasis on vertical lines. It is 144 feet long and 56 feet wide with a majestic tower of 100 feet.

Leaving the main entrance, turn to admire the two-storey porch with its 20th century statue of St Edmund in the niche above the door. It may once have contained an effigy of Our Lady, reflecting the monogram MR at the base of the porch. Note how each letter of MARIA is superimposed one on another.



Turn right to appreciate the full glory of the west face of the church as shown on the cover of this guide. Pause to admire the outstanding workmanship. The shiny flint dominated church building in East Anglia in the 15th century since no other stone was readily available in the quantity required. Note the inscription over the vast west window which, translated, means 'Saint Edmund pray for us'.

The tower houses a ring of eight bells, the oldest two dating back to the early 16th century. One is inscribed: 'In wealth and in woe praise God'. More land was added to the churchyard in 1458, given by the Prior of Thetford in return for annual rent of a single rose placed on the altar each year on St John the Baptist's day, 24th June.

The high life



As you walk round the building, look up to see angels interspersed with roses and grotesque faces just below the parapet. The mouths of gargoyles act as spouts for protecting the building from rain and the faces often reflect the humour of the 15th century stone masons. They may have been based on friends, relatives or even a demanding foreman!

Church of St Edmund, King & Martyr Southwold



1 Font

The baptismal font marks the start of the journey of faith. The seven sacraments, that included baptism and matrimony, were hacked off by Tudor reformers and the medieval cover was destroyed in 1643 by puritan soldier William Dowsing. It was replaced by F.E. Howard in 1935 and is one of the tallest in the country.



2 Southwold Jack

This 15th century figure depicts a soldier of the House of York and dates from the Wars of the Roses - the period in which the church was built. He was designed to strike a bell at hours and quarters and today he rings the bell at the start of services.



4 Funerary hatchment

Hatchment means heraldic achievement and this one was used at the funeral of James Robinson in 1836. Hatchments were carried in the funeral procession and hung on the dead person's house before being transferred to the church. 'Resurgam' means 'I shall rise again.'



5 Masons' marks

Over 70 masons' marks appear throughout the church. The two Rs, appearing separately on the north pillar of the tower arch, are thought to be initials of master mason of Dunwich Richard Russell, also responsible for St Edmund's.



6 Royal arms

Royal arms were a symbol of a monarch's authority and began to appear in churches after Henry VIII became supreme head of the Church of England. They often replaced the rood (3). This recently-restored example is a 1783 coat of arms of George III.



11 Rood screen

The rood screen is the glory of the church and one of the most highly regarded of its kind. Dating back to 1480, it stretches across the width of the building. Angels feature to the north, apostles in the centre, and prophets to the south, each section by different artists, probably Flemish. The woodwork tracery and gesso work is largely untouched but the faces were scratched out by Dowsing with some retouched in 1874 and cleaned in 1930. The screen no longer supports the rood and loft, destroyed by the Tudor reformers, which would have been accessed by the narrow stairway in the Trinity Chapel.



12 Choir stalls and chancel benches

Late 15th century carvings on the choir stalls are some of the richest in Suffolk. Note the profiles of kneeling donors on the bench ends, the misericord seats and, most of all, the curious carved figures on the arm rests. Graffiti on the 16th century bench fronts to the east of the stalls, suggest the work of parish school pupils.



7 Walnut chest

A knight hunting a wild boar is featured on this handsome walnut chest which is at least 50 years older than the church!



8 Pulpit

The richly decorated pulpit, with its trumpet stem, is rare in dating from before the Reformation. The bright colouring was the work of architect F.E. Howard, pupil of Sir Ninian Comper, in 1930.



9 Lectern

F.E. Howard wanted the lectern to harmonise with the medieval pulpit he had freshly gilded. It features figures of the evangelists.



10 Organ

A modern organ console of 1966 can be seen behind the pulpit. The organ itself was built by Walkers in 1887 and the fine Gothic-style organ loft featuring angels, can be seen above the chancel benches (12).



13 East window

The east window displays St Edmund's trial, his martyrdom and his rising in glory, all in dazzling colour. It was the last work of Sir Ninian Comper and replaced the glass that was blown out by a bomb in 1943.



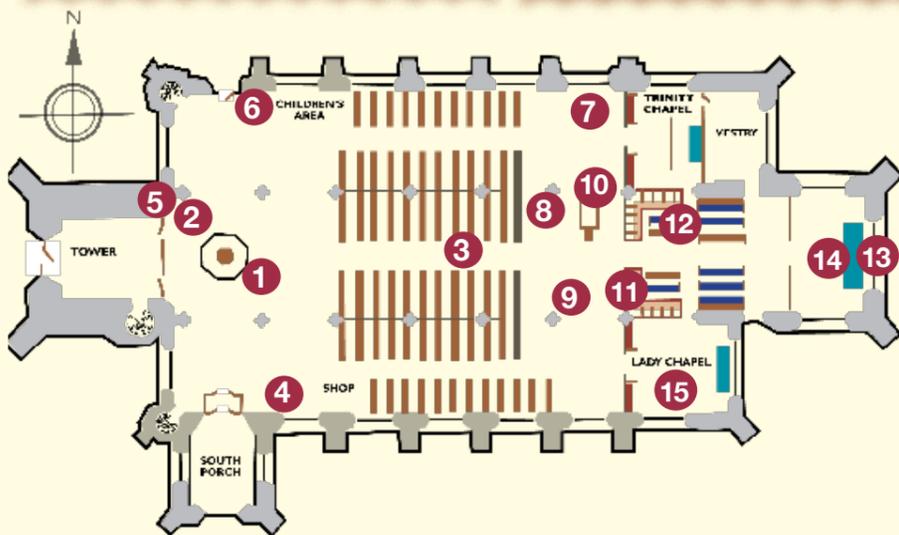
14 High altar and reredos

The high altar is lit by the great side windows and, in 1873, was raised to the height intended by the original medieval builders. The reredos is another design of F.E. Howard and portrays Christ's ministry of blessing, healing, teaching, pardoning and serving.



15 Lady Chapel

The quiet space of the Lady Chapel enables you to enjoy the daylight that pours in through the clear window, write a prayer, light a candle or simply sit for a while to reflect on your visit to this beautiful church.



3 Roof

Look up to see how the wooden nave roof with its angels on the hammerbeams, transforms to a richly decorated mid section before the pattern changes again on the painted chancel ceiling. The mid section is known as the canopy of honour which would have shielded the rood - a huge wooden cross featuring Christ crucified. It has since been destroyed by 16th century reformers although the screen remains (11). The roof itself is an exquisite example of the work of medieval craftsmen at a time when churches were ablaze with colour. It was accurately restored in 1867.



This is a brief outline of what you can discover in St Edmund's. If you would like to find out more, you can purchase a guide from the shop at the west end of the church.