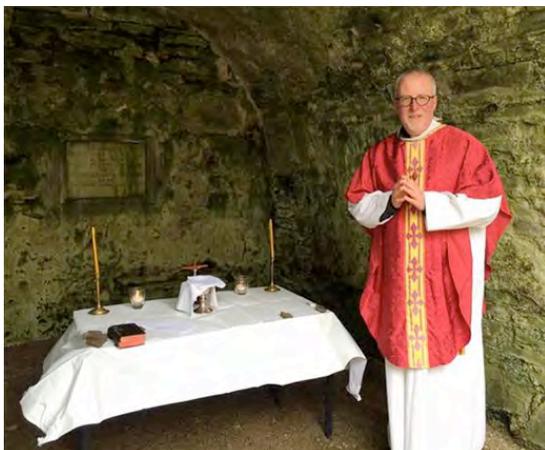


## Our Church

The church is dedicated to St Magnus the Martyr, earl of Orkney, who died on 16 April 1117. He was executed on the island of Egilsay having been captured during a power struggle with his cousin, a political rival. Magnus had a reputation for piety and gentleness and was canonised in 1135.

The identity of the St Magnus referred to in the church's dedication was only confirmed by the Bishop of London in 1926. Following this decision a patronal festival service was held on 16 April 1926. In the 13th century the patronage was attributed to one of the several saints by the name of Magnus who share a feast day on 19 August, probably St Magnus of Anagni (bishop and martyr, who was slain in the persecution of the Emperor Decius in the middle of the 3rd century). However, by the early 18th century it was suggested that the church was either "dedicated to the memory of St Magnus or Magnes, who suffer'd under the Emperor Aurelian in 276 [see St Mammes of Caesarea, feast day 17 August], or else to a person of that name, who was the famous Apostle or Bishop of the Orcades." For the next century historians followed the suggestion that the church was dedicated to the Roman saint of Cæsarea. The famous Danish archaeologist Professor Jens Jacob Asmussen Worsaae (1821–85) promoted the attribution to St Magnus of Orkney during his visit to the British Isles in 1846-7, when he was formulating the concept of the 'Viking Age', and a history of London written in 1901 concluded that "the Danes, on their second invasion ... added at least two churches with Danish names, Olaf and Magnus". A guide to the City Churches published in 1917 reverted to the view that St Magnus was dedicated to a martyr of the third century, but the discovery of St Magnus of Orkney's relics in 1919 renewed interest in a Scandinavian patron and this connection was encouraged by the Rector who arrived in 1921.

Next year will be 900 years after the martyrdom of St Magnus and already a group from London have visited the ancient sites in the Orkneys. Father Philip Warner writes *"One reason why we chose 2016 for our own 900<sup>th</sup> celebrations is that next year, his feast day, April 16<sup>th</sup>, is trumped by Easter Day, and therefore we won't be able to celebrate it. Liturgically, that's correct; but in another, is not Easter Day the feast par excellence of All Saints? All sanctity, all transformation of life which comes through responding to God's grace in the striving for sanctity comes only through the triumph over death of Our Lord in his glorious Resurrection, into which we enter through the waters of Baptism. On Easter day next year, as in every mass, we will to continue to claim our share in the prayers of St Magnus our Patron."*



The Church in Egilsay

## St Magnus

Magnus reigned in Orkney alongside his cousin Hakon in the early 12th Century. After a relatively peaceful period, relationships between the two men and their followers fell apart and brought both parties to the brink of battle. That was eventually averted, and both Magnus and Hakon were encouraged to meet to bring peace to Orkney. Egilsay was the chosen location for the meeting, and both Earls were instructed to bring only two ships and an agreed number of men. But Hakon arrived with eight vessels, and it was clear he had more than peace talks in mind. Magnus was eventually executed after Hakon instructed his cook to deliver a fatal axe blow to his cousin's head.

Shortly afterwards, the miracles began.

The Orkneyinga Saga recounts that the site of Magnus' murder was originally rocky and overgrown, but after his death "God showed that he had suffered for righteousness' sake" and the area was miraculously transformed into a green field.

Magnus' mother, Thora, pled with Hakon to allow her son a Christian burial. Hakon relented and allowed Magnus' corpse to be retrieved. It was transferred to Birsay, where it was interred at Christchurch, the church Magnus' grandfather, Thorfinn Sigurdsson, had built. The exact location of this church remains uncertain today. Although it is generally thought to have either been on Brough o' Birsay or the site of the current St Magnus Kirk on Mainland Birsay. Recent investigations seem to favour the latter. Wherever he was laid to rest, from the day of his burial a bright, heavenly light was said to have been seen above Magnus' grave. This holy light was accompanied by a "heavenly fragrance".

Before long, as the cult of Magnus grew, other stories began to spread, each detailing the miraculous happenings around about the Earl's gravesite. The Orkneyinga Saga recounts in great detail the numerous miraculous healings that resulted from visits to the Magnus' resting place.



Initially, the Bishop of Orkney, William the Old, tried to suppress the growing cult of Magnus, dismissing the alleged miracles and warning that it was "heresy to go about with such tales". But then, in an episode described in the Orkneyinga Saga, Bishop William was suddenly convinced of Magnus' holiness after being struck blind in his Birsay cathedral. Falling upon Magnus' grave, and praying, the bishop's sight was miraculously restored. Intriguingly the bishop's change of heart seems to have coincided with a visit to Norway. Although the saga makes no mention of the purpose of this journey, the historian William Thomson suggests that, in Norway, the bishop had met with the future Earl Rognvald, the man who would later found St Magnus Cathedral after the Orkney earldom. If this were so, Bishop William's sudden promotion of the cult of Magnus could have had political reasons - Rognvald's plans to acquire the earldom centred on the popularity of the Magnus cult.



Whatever the reason, 21 years after their burial, Bishop William had Magnus' remains exhumed, washed and tested in consecrated fire. Their holiness confirmed, Magnus was proclaimed a saint and his remains enshrined above the Birsay kirk's altar.

The relics stayed in Birsay "for a long time" until Magnus supposedly appeared to a Westray man, Gunni, in a dream. Magnus told Gunni that Bishop William should be told that Magnus wished to leave Birsay and move east to the

growing town, Kirkjuvagr – the Kirkwall we know today.