

# Birsay



The Orkneyinga saga tells us that in his later years Earl Thorfinn the Mighty lived usually in Birsay. This is where he had Christ Church built and where he was buried. The residence of an earl implies a centre of power and activity, and the archaeology in and around the modern village of Birsay certainly supports the idea that Birsay was an important place in medieval Orkney.

The remains of several churches, long halls and ornate architectural fragments hint at high status occupation along the bay and on the Brough of Birsay. Birsay is where the earl, his family and his bodyguard resided, and it was the centre of the Church in the earldom until the mid-12th century.

The moving of Magnus's shrine from Birsay to Kirkwall, sometime around 1130, brought considerable change to Birsay's position in the earldom. The centre of power moved with Magnus to Kirkwall, where soon there would be a new Cathedral complex, forming the centre of the bishopric and probably a new Earl's Palace too.

Birsay became less central, though continued to be a rich estate. The Brough of Birsay was home to a monastic order, the rich farmland around the bay formed one of the principal estates in the islands gifted by the earls to the Church in the later Middle Ages.



Birsay would see a revival of power and influence in the late 16th century under the rulership of the Stewart earls, as evidenced today in the ruinous, yet still imposingly grand Earl's Palace.

We should imagine Birsay at the time of Magnus as a busy and prosperous place, the centre of an earldom that held political sway across the north of modern Scotland and down the western seaboard to the Hebrides and Ireland. This was a key settlement situated on rich farmland and on the main sea route between Norway and the continent. Its prosperity grew under the Norse earls, who made this place their home.