

St Magnus Cathedral



St Magnus cathedral was founded in 1137 by Earl Rognvald who, in order to gain support for his political ambition to become earl of Orkney, made a vow to build a church of stone in Kirkwall more magnificent than any other in the land and to dedicate it to St Magnus, his uncle.

At the time of foundation, Kirkwall was already an established settlement but the shift of the central seats of ecclesiastical and secular power along with the cult of saints ensured that Kirkwall developed into Orkney's principal urban centre.

Built of local red and yellow flagstone the cathedral has been assigned to masons of the Durham school. It is likely that enough of the building was complete to allow the transfer of Magnus's remains there by the 1150s, although the building was not finished until three hundred years later.

The cathedral was built to house Magnus's remains, serve as a dynastic mausoleum for the Earls of Orkney and to be the new episcopal seat of the Earldom. Now standing in relative isolation, it once formed the central part of the cathedral precinct of which the nearby Bishop's Palace was also part, and as such was a dominant feature in the growing town of Kirkwall.

Knowledge of medieval Kirkwall is limited by the extent of later developments, in particular the redesign of the town by the Stewart Earls in the Renaissance period. The Cathedral would have originally stood on the edge of the shore of the Peedie Sea, which is now a small boating pond, but once extended much further into the town, thus affording a grand and defensible approach.

In 1192 Earl Rognvald, founder of the Cathedral, was canonised, and subsequently the cathedral's east end was altered perhaps to accommodate the remains of the two Earldom saints. We should not underestimate the impact of the Cult of St Magnus (and to a lesser extent Rognvald) on the development and prosperity of the town and the bishopric. As Goodfellow writes, 'even Kirkwall

had little or no room for those holy pilgrims seeking after the healing virtue which was supposed to come from the body or bones of dead Magnus'.

Today, St Magnus cathedral dominates the skyline as a fine example of Romanesque architecture. It is owned by the burgh of Kirkwall and serves as a parish church for the Church of Scotland. During renovations in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, two sets of human remains were discovered hidden away. These were identified as St Magnus and St Rognvald and are now entombed within two of the Cathedral pillars.