

The bones of St Magnus



You stand now at the end of the St Magnus Way - the culmination of the official pilgrimage. Nearly 900 years ago, the remains of St Magnus were brought here, to St Magnus Cathedral. This magnificent structure was started in 1137 by Magnus's nephew Rognvald, a Norwegian who came to Orkney to claim his uncle's Earldom. In order to gain support for his claim on the islands, Rognvald promised the people of Orkney that he would raise a fine stone minster; he was as good as his word. In around 1150 the relics of the new saint were brought here and entombed in a magnificent shrine which would have stood on this very spot.

We don't know for certain what sort of shrine Magnus would have had, but it would probably have been richly decorated with precious metals, gems, and beautiful craftsmanship, as befitting the tomb of a noble and a saint.

The cathedral was built as a site of pilgrimage, and proved to be very popular. In about 1230 the building was extended eastwards, and the shrine of Magnus was relocated to the far east end of the church.

In 1560, Scotland became a Protestant country, and the shrine of Magnus was dismantled. The bones of the saint disappeared, presumed destroyed.

During restoration works in 1919, workmen discovered a wooden box hidden in this pillar - it contained a man's bones, including a skull bearing a deep wound. The bones are believed to be those of Magnus, hidden during the Reformation to prevent their destruction. The bones were placed back in the pillar in 1925 - the stone is above you, marked by a simple cross. That is where they remain to this day, protected by the oldest and most holy part of the cathedral that bears his name.