

## Foreword

My earliest memory of Orkney is standing outside the house where I was born. I was four years old. My back was to the Harry Loch, and I was looking up at white clouds scudding across a sky of the brightest blue. I turned towards the house – Merkister – and, as the clouds flew high over the roof, the house suddenly looked as if it was falling forwards on top of me. In terror I turned and ran straight into the stone wall behind me. The scar on my forehead is with me still.

So too is the lure of Orkney, whose hallmark is wide open sky. Each time we come back, it casts the same spell – that of homecoming. Clouded sky above, green fields beneath, and the horizon stretching as far as you can see. For anyone following the St Magnus Way, that will be an abiding image. Because the land is rolling – not exactly flat, but never mountainous – you are always aware of the sky's dome above you. That, and the sea of course.

Most of those who arrive in Orkney to make the St Magnus pilgrimage will come by boat, arriving in Stromness, which my father described as a town that tumbles into the sea. It is the place where the great poet George Mackay Brown lived, and from which he took his inspiration. He wrote of the sea when it is storm-driven as something 'treacherous, which ... took more than ever it gave'. But he also loved it at peace, stretching calm beyond the green fields: 'blue hand and green hand together, like praying, in the summer dawn'.

Orkney is a rich land that has drawn settlers over many thousands of years. Their legacy is everywhere – in standing stones, tombs, and dwellings. The martyrdom of St Magnus on Egilsay is one of its darker episodes. However, it led to the glory of St Magnus Cathedral, built in homage to the martyred saint. In his *Songs for St Magnus Day*, Mackay Brown wrote: 'Saint Magnus, keep for us a jar of light, beyond sun and star'. He has left more than a jar – he leaves the Orkney sky, which, for all those who travel it, will light the St Magnus Way.

*Magnus Linklater CBE*



# 1 Planning to walk the Way

The St Magnus Way is a challenging and rewarding 60-mile (96-km) walk through the beautiful landscape of Orkney. It was created in 2017 to commemorate the 900th anniversary of the death of St Magnus of Orkney and to encourage exploration of the physical and spiritual heritage of Orkney. It follows a well waymarked route around Orkney Mainland in five sections. These are preceded by an excursion by ferry to the small island of Egilsay to visit the site of St Magnus' martyrdom. For the creation of the route, see page 70.

On Mainland, the route follows the traditional journey of Magnus' body from the coast of Evie to Christ's Kirk in Birsay where he was originally buried. The route continues south from Birsay to the shores of Scapa Flow. It culminates at the impressive St Magnus Cathedral, Kirkwall, founded in 1137 to house his remains. For more on the development of the route see page 70.

## Themes of the St Magnus Way

St Magnus Way incorporates pilgrimage sites and routes to encourage walkers to consider themselves as pilgrims. A different theme is associated with each part of the route. The island of Egilsay marks the place where Magnus was martyred. The theme of Peace encourages thinking about the sacrifice that he made there for the sake of peace in Orkney, and our continuing need for peace in the midst of conflict.

As the journey continues, the five Mainland sections focus on themes of Loss, Growth, Change, Forgiveness and Hospitality. These themes and their associated questions can stimulate reflection as part of the process of walking through the glorious Orkney landscape. These texts are available online and are reproduced on the prayer paddles available in St Magnus Cathedral.

*St Magnus Church, Egilsay*



## Destination Orkney

Orkney is an archipelago of 70 islands of which 20 are inhabited. At its closest point, it lies only 6 miles off the north-east coast of Scotland (Duncansby Head), but the island group measures over 50 miles across. Its population is about 22,000 people, of whom nearly half live in its two largest settlements, the capital Kirkwall (8500) and the town of Stromness (2200). It has been voted 'Scotland's best place to live' for eight years in succession, according to a Bank of Scotland survey. And as a place where you are never more than a few miles from the sea, its maritime tradition, astonishing coastline and natural harbour of Scapa Flow are huge influences on life in Orkney.



For up to 9000 years, Orkney's fertile terrain and easy access by sea has made it attractive to settlers. It boasts some of the most important Neolithic sites in western Europe, dating from about 3000 BC. These include the settlement of Skara Brae, the great chambered tomb of Maeshowe and two impressive stone circles with henges – the Stones of Stenness and Ring of Brodgar. Together these four comprise UNESCO's Heart of Neolithic Orkney World Heritage Site (inscribed in 1999): see page 16.



Skipping forward to the late 8th century, Orkney was settled by people from what is now Norway and ruled by earls under Norwegian sovereignty until 1472. Magnus, later Saint Magnus, at first shared the earldom of Orkney with his cousin Håkon. The story of their deadly power struggle and Magnus' martyrdom in about 1116 is told in part 2-1.

Orkney has been part of Scotland only since February 1472 when, like Shetland, it formed part of the dowry of Margaret of Denmark, daughter of Christian I of Norway. In 1469, at the age of 13, she married King James III of Scotland. Later, the union of the Scottish and English crowns (1603) and Parliaments (1707) made Orkney part of what became the United Kingdom.

Any visit to Orkney offers an experience of a unique culture, with distinctive history and Norse heritage evident in its placenames and everyday language. From the 8th and 9th centuries AD, Norwegian settlers named the places in Orkney, drawing from their language Norn (derived from Old Norse). Norn was spoken until the early 15th century when its gradual replacement by the English language accelerated. The last speaker of Norn died as recently as 1850.

Although many Norse names have become anglicised, often that affects their spelling more than their pronunciation. Placenames ending in -say are pronounced more like -sea or -see e.g. Egilsay sounds more like Egilsea.

Since many Orkney words are new to visitors from mainland Britain, let alone from further afield, we have listed some useful ones including prefixes and suffixes. For convenience, the table shows only the most common examples, and includes a few that are not of Norn origin.

In summary, Orkney has a wide range of attractions as a destination: in addition to its world-class prehistory and distinctive heritage, it has extraordinary wildlife, especially seabirds: see pages 25 to 29. At a practical level, walkers will relish its delicious dairy products, meat and seafood; and they may enjoy tasting products from its breweries and whisky and gin distilleries. Above all, Orcadians offer a special brand of welcoming hospitality. So we recommend anyone who intends to walk the Way to plan some extra days, not only to explore other sites on Orkney Mainland, but also to visit some of its islands.

<i>word or part of word</i>	<i>meaning</i>
<b>-bigging</b>	building
<b>-bister, -buster</b>	farm, dwelling
<b>breck</b>	slope
<b>broch</b>	Iron Age round stone tower
<b>bu, by</b>	farm
<b>-dale, -dall</b>	valley
<b>firth, -ford</b>	fjord, bay
<b>geo</b>	ravine
<b>holm</b>	small island
<b>howe</b>	mound
<b>kir-, kirk-</b>	church (also corn)
<b>knowe</b>	knoll, mound
<b>ling</b>	heather
<b>-ness</b>	point, headland
<b>noust</b>	place to haul out a boat
<b>peerie, peddie</b>	small
<b>-quoy</b>	cattle pen
<b>sten-, -stain</b>	stone
<b>strom</b>	tide, stream
<b>ting</b>	assembly
<b>-ton, -town</b>	enclosure
<b>voe, -wall, wick</b>	bay

## Best time of year and weather

Most people will opt to walk St Magnus Way in late spring, summer or early autumn. Wildflowers are at their best in late spring and summer, and birds are more active and visible during early spring and autumn. Accommodation will also be more limited out of season, so the best months overall are from April to October.

In theory, the Way could be walked at any time of year. It never involves high altitude and the major constraints on winter walking are short days, greater chance of wet, windy weather and sodden ground in the offroad sections. Unless you live at high latitude (about 59° N) you may not realise how much the hours of daylight vary – from over 18 hours in late June to barely six hours in late December.

Whatever the season in Orkney, it is rare to have a week of uninterrupted wind and rain, but it is also unusual for settled weather to last more than a few days. It's usually likely to be windy, and in summer this makes sun protection extra important: it's easy to forget how strongly the sun burns. Any hat needs a strap or lanyard or it may blow away.

Finally, be aware that Orkney is prone to sea fog (aka *haar*), especially in summer months. It forms when warm moist air is chilled by the sea, causing condensation. Unless the land is warm and the sunshine strong, the fog may take a long time to burn off, especially if a sea breeze keeps sweeping more fog inland. It is not only damp and cooling, but also reduces visibility drastically; this can make navigation challenging.

## How long will it take?

Your ideal itinerary depends on your preferred pace and fitness, and, perhaps crucially, on the availability of accommodation in key places. The route is intended as a long and enjoyable walk, not as a test of endurance or speed. For many walkers means that you need six days.

This book presents the walk in six sections, and we hope you will be inspired to complete the whole itinerary. However, we recognise that some readers will have limited time in Orkney, that some may have to compromise with non-walking friends and family and that readers' priorities and preferences vary. We therefore suggest some possible variations.

If you have only five days to spare, the most obvious way to save a day is to omit Egilsay, which simplifies the public transport (buses and ferries). This comes at a price: you would miss the whole island experience – not only the site of Magnus' martyrdom, but also the golden sandy beaches of the east coast and the RSPB Onziebust nature reserve. For the fit and ambitious walker, another five-day option is to retain Egilsay but combine sections 3-3

**Table 1 Distances and stages**

	miles	km	pages
Gurness			
3-2	13.4	21.6	33-40
Birsay			
3-3	10.4	16.7	41-45
Dounby			
3-4	10.3	16.6	46-51
Finstown			
3-5	9.6	15.4	52-57
Orphir			
3-6	12.8	20.6	58-65
Kirkwall			
Total (Mainland)	56.5	90.9	
Total (inc Eglisay)	59.9	96.4	

and 3·4 so as to walk from Birsay direct to Finstown. This makes a very long day, but the terrain is not challenging and you save a mile by bypassing Dounby. If you are not fazed by the idea of a 19·7-mile day then the long hours of summer daylight certainly make it possible.

Another option for saving a day may appeal to those who dislike road walking. From Dounby to Finstown the Way runs 75% on tarmac, and you could skip this section making use of the Stagecoach bus service.

If you are new to long-distance walking, St Magnus Way is a good choice provided you take heed of weather and tide warnings. You are advised to obtain our *Notes for novices*: see page 71.

## Walk, cycle or both?

A more radical choice is whether to walk or cycle, or even perhaps to mix the two. The 67-mile St Magnus Cycleway connects the same places as the walkers' mainland route, but it follows tarmac roads almost throughout: see pages 68-9 for a map and more information. The mileages shown there are measured from Kirkwall, following the direction indicated on the website. However you could reverse the direction if you prefer.

It can be completed in a single day by the experienced, fit cyclist or enjoyed in a more leisurely way as either or both of two circuits: a 27-mile southern loop from Kirkwall and/or a 40-mile northern circuit from Finstown. And if you can sort out the logistics, you could even cycle part of the route and walk the rest, bearing in mind that as of 2022 the only bike shop in Orkney is in Kirkwall: visit [www.cycleorkney.com](http://www.cycleorkney.com).

## Accommodation and refreshments

There is a range of hotels, bed and breakfasts, self-catering cottages and campsites in Orkney although it can be hard to find accommodation for a single night: some B&Bs and nearly all self-catering require minimum stays from two nights and upward. Popular locations can become fully booked months in advance, often by people who return to Orkney every year.

One option is to stay in the same accommodation for several nights or even for the whole week and arrange with the owner, or with a taxi company, dropoffs and pickups at beginning and end of each section of the Way. The taxi option is more affordable if you have a group of at least four walkers.

With advance planning and a flexible attitude and budget, you may be able to book accommodation at the end of each section. The official website suggests

Table 2 Accommodation and refreshments

	B&B/ hotel*	hostel/ bunkhouse	pub/ café*	shop	campsite	public toilet
Evie (1·6 miles offroute)				✓		✓
Birsay	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Dounby	✓		✓	✓		✓
Finstown	✓		✓	✓		✓
Orphir	✓					✓
Kirkwall	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

\* not necessarily serving food in the evening



accommodation options on that basis: see [bit.ly/SMW-accomm](http://bit.ly/SMW-accomm). Currently you cannot overnight on Egilsay unless you wild camp. This is camping by small numbers for up to 2-3 nights and it is legal in Scotland provided that it is done responsibly: see the panel about SOAC on page 14. Avoid camping in enclosed fields of crops or among livestock, and if you want to camp near a building, seek permission from the owner. There are spaces suitable for wild camping at the end of every section of the Way, although privacy may be limited by the open nature of the landscape.

There are limited local bus services connecting with the beginning and end of each section. Before relying on them, check timetables carefully: see page 71.

The locations of shops selling food are marked on the maps and listed in the facilities table. Be prepared to plan in advance what food supplies to carry: only Birsay, Dounby and Finstown have conveniently located shops. As of 2022, at section-ends, only Dounby and Kirkwall have pubs or restaurants that offer evening meals. However, some B&B hosts may be able to help if you shop for supplies. Always carry plenty of drinking water for the day's walk, unless you rely on purifying tablets or filters.

*Wild camping on the beach near Gurness*