



WALKING ST MAGNUS WAY

ORKNEY PILGRIMAGE 2021



Day 9: Friday 21 May *Finstown to Ophir*

Oh my it was cold Friday morning! The wind was so cold we gathered in the shelter of the public toilets at Finstown to say our prayers. This was an experience very far from that of other days, when the sun warmed us, and we could pray open-eyed to drink in the beauty of our surroundings. The theme today was 'Forgiveness': we concentrated on our own need to both receive and extend forgiveness.

We began by driving to Naversdale, to the home of the St Magnus Way archivist, Sarah Jane Gibbon. Sarah Jane is a researcher and lecturer at the University of the Highlands and Islands. Today she told us the story of the Naversdale Rune Stone, found by her father on their farm land. Here it is, pictured below.



The runes on the stone say: 'in heaven, hallowed be'

Sarah Jane spoke of how her father had left the stone on her doorstep. She had translated the runes, but could not make out what language was being written. With help from experts in runes elsewhere, the inscription turned out to be written in phonetic Latin, 'in heaven, hallowed be', so a section of the first line of the Lord's Prayer (Pater Noster). It was carved by someone on Orkney who had often heard the prayer and was very literate in runes, but not in Latin. Sarah Jane's story was another reminder of

the long history of Christianity in these islands, generations of faithful saying the same prayer we say each day.

At this point we divided – some of us to walk on directly to Ophir from where we were, others to return to Finstown to walk the whole stage. I was in a group of four that set out for Ophir. The wind was biting cold, but thankfully blowing us along ('May the wind be always at your back'). We walked quietly and sometimes alone, reflecting on the theme of the day. The path wound up the side of a hill, until suddenly we turned a corner and we could see into the far distance – Scapa Flow in one direction, Ophir and its bay in another.



Our personal thoughts were our own, the business done with 'Our Father in heaven, whose name is hallowed', strictly private. However, as we tipped over the hill the wind was less aggressive, and the land became more green, and there was – for me at least – a sense of grace and mercy all around.



Ophir Kirk

The four of us had our lunch in the yard of the church in Ophir, seated around a picnic table. We were three people with many years of ordained ministry and one GP. Over lunch we spoke together about those whose lives had been ravaged by the sins done to them. What kind of forgiveness and new life is possible following abuse, we wondered? And yet, each of us knew of those who through encountering the kindness and mercy expressed by Christian friends or priests, had recovered from dreadful experiences, and gone on to form new relationships which were, as far as we could see, not only fresh starts, but ones in which that which had been done to them was not repeated.

After our lunch we rose to walk the final shortish distance down towards the beach, to the Round Church in Ophir. Between the centre of the village and the sea the land softens and changes. The sun came out, and the wind dropped a little more. There was an immense sense of peace, which we all noted and commented on. Sheep and their lambs grazed safely in the fields around us, the sea sparkled away to the horizon. We walked quietly to a burial ground, in the centre of which was all that remains of an ancient circular church.



This church is mentioned in the *Orkneyinga Saga*. Nearby are the ruins of a 'drinking hall' of the Earls.

'There was a great drinking hall at Ophir, with a door in the south wall near the eastern gable, And in front of the hall, a few paces down from it, stood a fine church. On the left as you came into the hall was a large stone slab, with a lot of big ale vats behind it, and opposite the door was the living room.'

David McNeish, writing the introduction to this stage of the Way, says

'The stage from Finstown to Orphir, shifts attention to Hakon, Magnus's cousin who ordered his death and ruled the united Earldoms afterwards. He himself made pilgrimage to Jerusalem and it was likely this journey, visiting the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, that inspired the construction of the Round Kirk in Orphir. Our theme for this stage is Forgiveness – reflecting on whether Hakon was sorry for the murder of Magnus, and our own need to both receive and extend forgiveness. By all accounts Hakon ruled well, and those who like to cleave sacred and secular argue about whether his penitential pilgrimage was less about faith and more about the political calculations of being seen to be sorry. Motives can be mixed and still lead to an encounter with the transcendent.'

We ended our day in this peaceful place, certain that it was indeed the encounter with the transcendent that mattered.

So wherever you are as you read this: The deep peace of Christ to you.