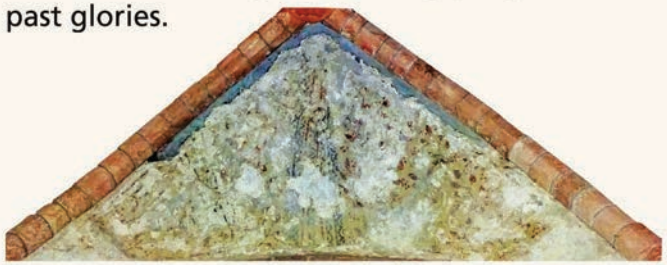
The cathedral through the ages

St Magnus Cathedral was built when Orkney was an earldom within Norway and it is the only completely medieval cathedral surviving in Scotland. Made from striking red and yellow sandstone it is considered one of the finest examples of Romanesque architecture in Britain.

Construction started in 1137 and continued in stages until it was completed several centuries later. Over nearly 900 years its appearance has changed many times. Built as a site of pilgrimage, the cathedral was once richly decorated, plastered and painted. A small fragment of painting survives in the north nave aisle, offering a tantalising glimpse of past glories.



In 1560, the Scottish Reformation transformed the cathedral from a Catholic to a Protestant church. Wall decoration and colour were painted or plastered over, giving a much plainer appearance.

Restoration in 1913-30 saw plaster and paint removed from the walls, leaving the rough stone surface we see today.

Graffiti surveys at other medieval cathedrals and churches have revealed a wealth of drawings and inscriptions. It is likely that the walls and pillars here would have been similarly marked, but the long history of different stone treatments means that few of these now survive.

The St Magnus Cathedral Graffiti Project

Work on the St Magnus Cathedral Graffiti Project started in 2019. It was commissioned by Orkney Archaeology Society (OAS), and funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) and OAS. Recording was undertaken by volunteers trained and assisted by archaeologists from the Orkney Research Centre for Archaeology (ORCA), part of the Archaeology Institute of the University of the Highlands and Islands.

The project has recorded over 600 individual marks on the ground floor alone, ranging in type and date from 12th-century masons' marks to 20th-century pencil graffiti, and mysterious marks that may have had a ritual purpose.

ORKNEY ARCHAEOLOGY SOCIETY
Volunteers supporting Archaeology in Orkney

ORKNEY ISLANDS COUNCIL

Made possible with Heritage Fund

University of the Highlands and Islands
Oilthigh na Gàidhealtachd agus nan Eilean

Images and text: Antonia Thomas, Orkney Archaeology Society, Orkney Library and Archive, Fran Hollinrake.

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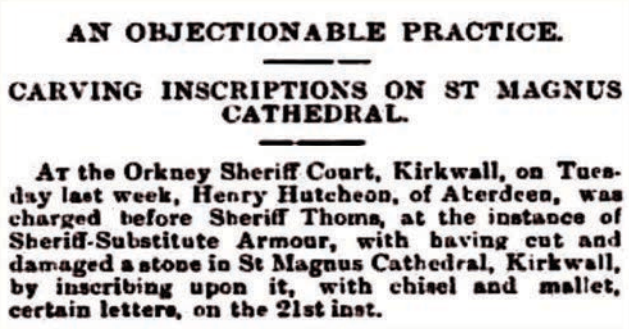
Graffiti, carvings and inscriptions in St Magnus Cathedral

St Magnus Graffiti Project

A self-guided tour

Graffiti: vandalism or heritage?

In medieval times, mark-making and graffiti were seen differently to the way they are today. It was common for pilgrims and visitors to carve their names, or leave devotional marks such as crosses. These marks are an important part of the cathedral's heritage but it is no longer acceptable to carve one's name on a historic building.



AN OBJECTIONABLE PRACTICE.

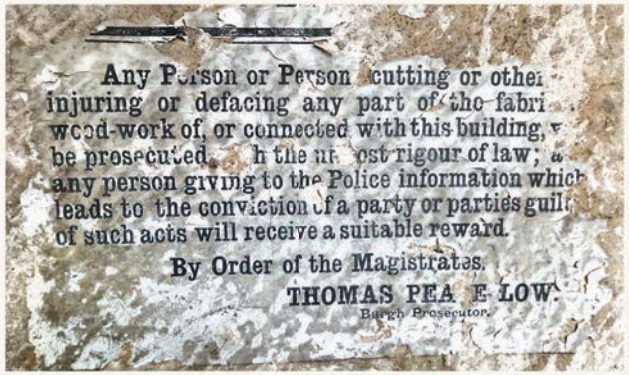
CARVING INSCRIPTIONS ON ST MAGNUS CATHEDRAL.

At the Orkney Sheriff Court, Kirkwall, on Tuesday last week, Henry Hutcheon, of Aterdeen, was charged before Sheriff Thoms, at the instance of Sheriff-Substitute Armour, with having cut and damaged a stone in St Magnus Cathedral, Kirkwall, by inscribing upon it, with chisel and mallet, certain letters, on the 21st inst.

On 29 July 1891 The Orkney Herald reported a case brought before the Sheriff Court in Kirkwall of Henry Hutcheon from Aberdeen, charged with *'carving letters into the north side of the tower parapet. The accused readily admitted the offence, stating that "I admit that I was cutting out my name on a stone… I saw a great many names, so that I did not think there could be any harm done if I put mine there too."'*

Unfortunately for the St Magnus Graffiti Project, the upper part of the tower was rebuilt in the early 20th century, although photographs survive from before that time, like this self-portrait of photographer David Horne.

Sheriff Thoms described the graffiti as 'an act of vandalism which the people of Orkney were growing more ashamed of daily'. This incident led to the Magistrates' Order forbidding graffiti in the cathedral, some posters of which survive in the upper levels. Following the court case, the cathedral employed its first custodian, Peter Wick, who is buried in the graveyard **(A)**. He was employed specifically to prevent people from carving their names on the walls.



Any Person or Person cutting or other injuring or defacing any part of the fabri wood-work of, or connected with this building, be prosecuted with the utmost rigour of law; a any person giving to the Police information which leads to the conviction of a party or parties guilt of such acts will receive a suitable reward.

By Order of the Magistrates.

THOMAS PEA E LOW.
Burgh Prosecutor.

This is the gravestone of William Bisset **(B)**, who was in charge of the restoration that was carried out in the cathedral in the 1840s. He died in 1848 and the stonemasons of the day carved their unique marks on this stone. They are very worn now but still visible.

This carving can be found on the left hand side of the bishop's door **(C)**. Could it show a mitre, the head-dress worn by bishops? This is a special ceremonial door, and the eroded coat of arms above it contains the shape of a mitre.

St Magnus Cathedral, including boundary walls, railings, graveyard and war memorial are category A-listed by Historic Environment Scotland. A parish church for the Church of Scotland, the cathedral is unique in being held in trust by Orkney Islands Council for the people of Orkney.

Graffiti highlights

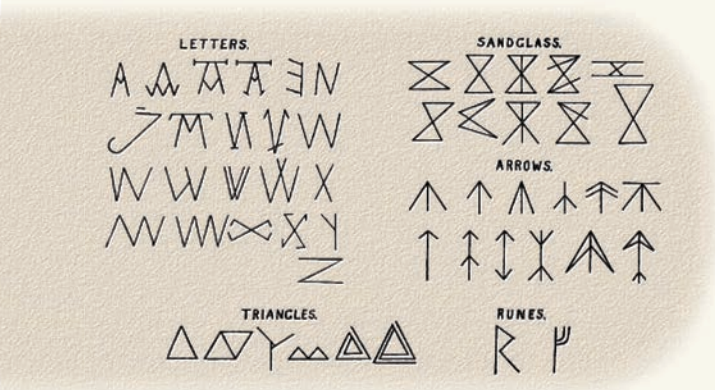
Many different types of marks and carvings have been made around the cathedral since it was first built. This is a guide to some of the best examples, which are in easily-reached areas of the ground floor. Some are easy to spot but a torch might be needed for others.

Names and dates

Initials, names and dates can be found in several parts of the cathedral, often in small groups. Many of them date to the 1800s, but other carvings may be even older, such as the initials 'RA' on a memorial in the north aisle of the nave **(1)**.

Masons' marks

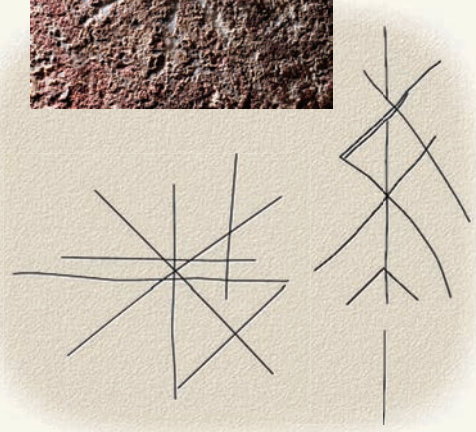
Each stonemason who worked on the cathedral through the ages had their own special mark, which was carved onto all the pieces of stone they worked with. Some of these marks look like letters, or runes, whilst others resemble arrows or triangles. Some of the earliest examples look like hourglasses – these can be seen on the 12th-century stonework **(2)**.



Many of the marks were recorded by a former cathedral custodian, Albert Thomson. He made a comprehensive survey of the masons' marks, which was published in the Orkney Miscellany in 1954.

Mystery marks

In the choir area there are two carvings on one of the pillars which resemble stars or asterisks **(4)**, and a different geometric carving on one of the crossing pillars **(3)**. These may be the worn remnants of ritual protection marks made by medieval worshippers.

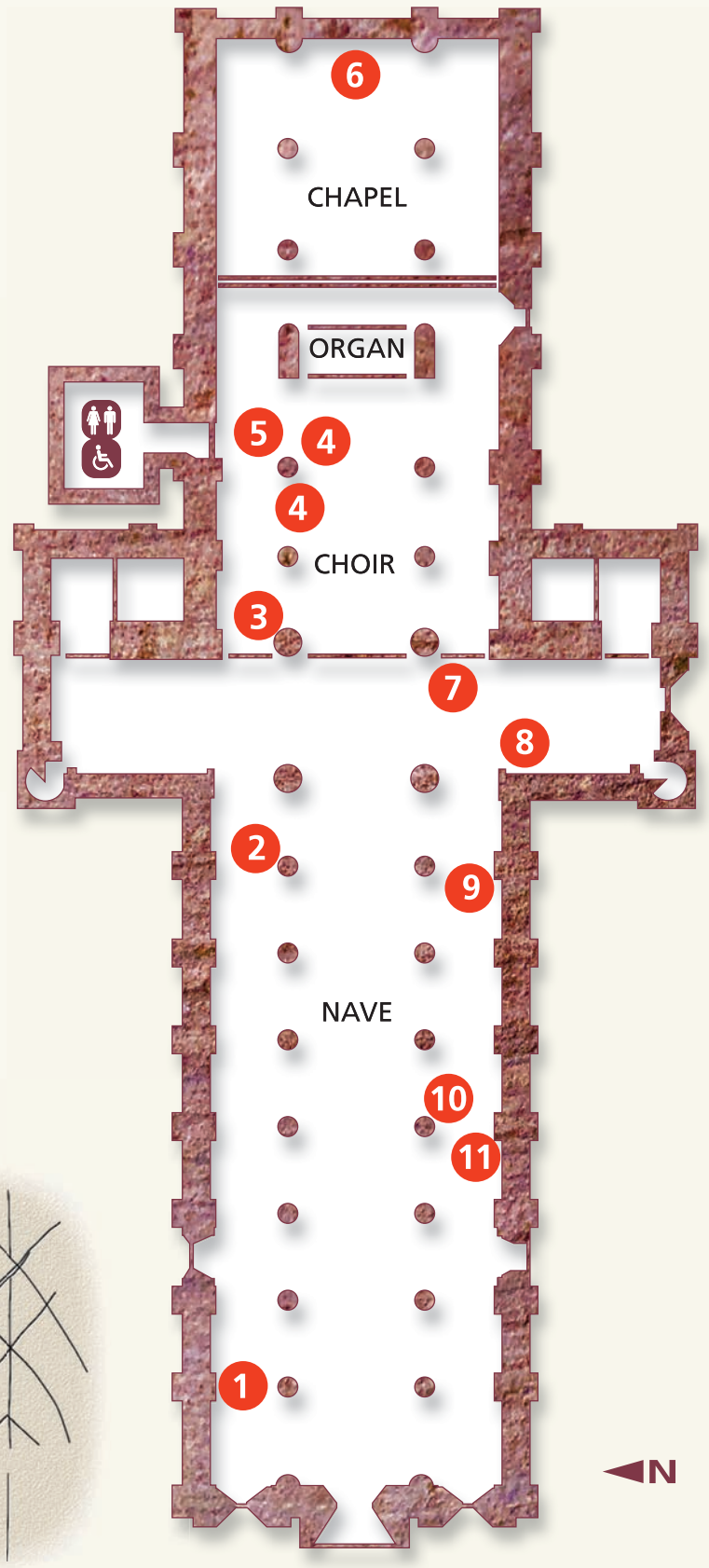


Scars from grinding and scraping

On some of the pillars **(5)** there are deeply scratched grooves. It is possible that these were where pilgrims and worshippers ground and scraped away the stone to get the 'holy dust' which could then be eaten or mixed with water and drunk as a sort of cure for all ills. There is evidence of this practice in other places in medieval Europe.

Consecration crosses

When a church was made holy, the bishop or archbishop would consecrate it by walking around blessing the building and sprinkling drops of holy water. It was traditional to carve a cross wherever the drops fell. There would usually be twelve such crosses, and they were sometimes painted or elaborately carved. These two examples **(6)** were moved here from elsewhere in the cathedral.



Pecked marks

On the south-facing side of one of the pillars in the crossing **(7)** there is a clustered group of small pecked marks. These may have been made by pilgrims to mark their visit, something that is recorded at medieval pilgrimage sites elsewhere.

There are also several faint incised lines next to the pecked marks, but it is not clear what these were – perhaps the worn remains of a drawing?

Incised Maltese or Greek-style cross

This is the deepest carved cross in the cathedral. This wall **(8)** was once plastered, so the carving must date to before that time, making it a very early example. It is in a prominent position, and would have taken a long time to carve out. It may have originally been a consecration cross, or a symbol of devotion.

Hexafoil carving

This hexafoil (meaning 'six-petalled flower') or daisywheel is scratched into the string course above and to the left of the Paplay tomb **(9)**. These compass-drawn designs are found in many religious and non-religious buildings of all ages. They may have been simply decoration, but inside a church it is thought they could be apotropaic – marks of protection against evil.

Marian marks

Many churches contain examples of these marks, which look like two V-shapes overlapping, or an inverted M-shape **(10)**. One interpretation is that the two V-shapes could mean ' Virgo Virginum', Latin for 'Virgin of Virgins', and the 'M' would be for Mary. During the Middle Ages Mary was an extremely popular saint.

Pencil inscription

There is a small and faint inscription written in pencil, on the top of one of the red sandstone columns in the wall arches **(11)**. It reads 'H.D. 1940 Wilts'. Was the writer one of the many army personnel stationed here during WWII?