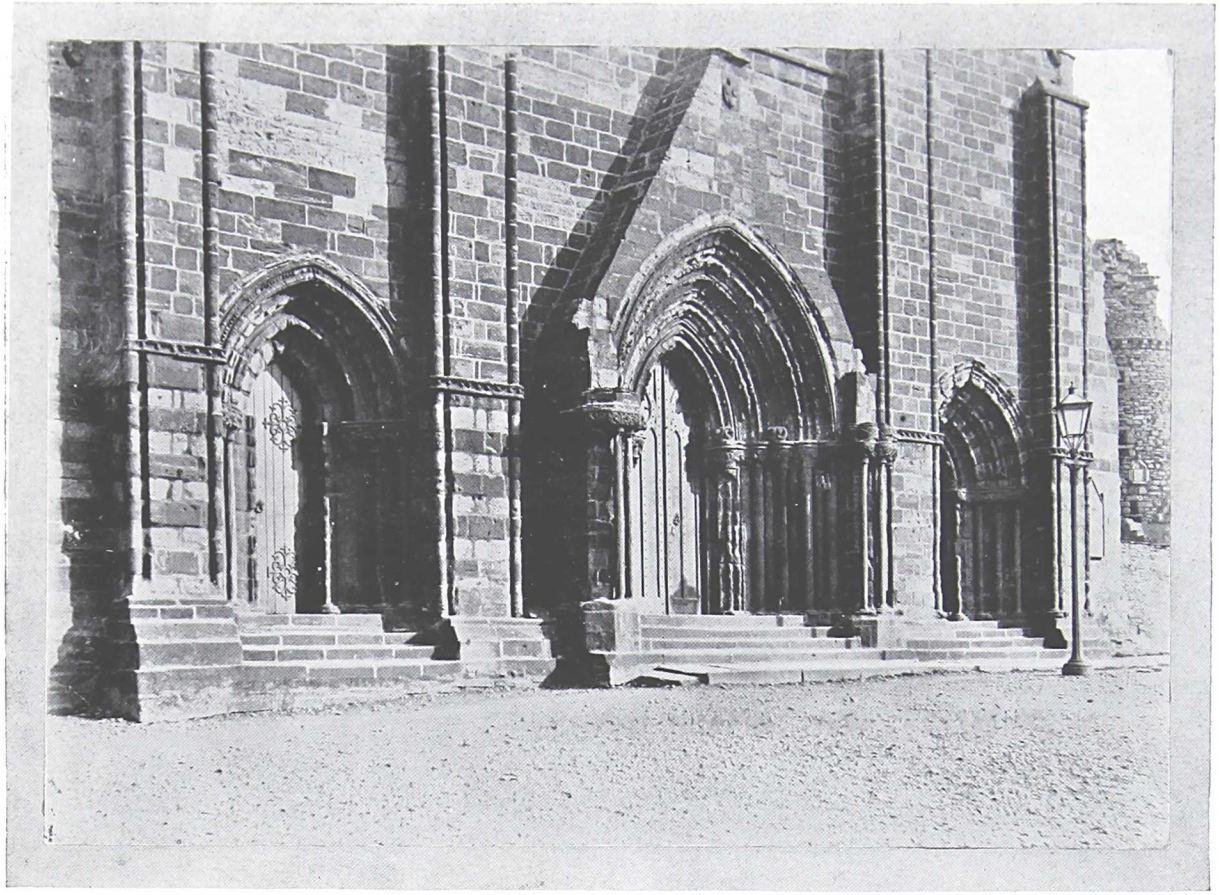


ST MAGNUS CATHEDRAL—THE TRIPLE PORTAL.

St Magnus Cathedral, Kirkwall.[1]

THOSE who have visited the Isles of the Orkney Group are not surprised to meet the unexpected. These islands are in general low in elevation, although one or two—especially Hoy—have hills of the respectable height of 1000 to 1500 feet. Yet for all this lack of geological prominence, there are some of the highest sea cliffs in Scotland, one fully 1000 feet rising from the sea; and the coast line is in places worn out by the waves in voes or geos, caves and gloups, in the most extraordinary manner.

Again, notwithstanding the northerly latitude, the soil is deep and fertile in most places. Beneath this farm land excavations have revealed several dwellings of men in prehistoric ages, such as at Skarrabrae and Aikerness—houses of the greatest interest to archaelogists. Besides these, there stand above the land 'standing stones' of great antiquity, and burial mounds which attest ancient religions and civilizations of early residents. Most notable are the Standing Stones of Stennes, the great Ring of Brodgar, and Maeshowe, all within a short distance of each other.

Of the early religions of man in Orkney we know little, but we have most interesting survivals of small but goodly churches in many of the islands built after Christianity was embraced in the 10th century by the Norsemen. The actual dates of these churches are not easily determined, but they stand, mostly ruined fanes, to tell of the faith and skill of their builders. The circular church at Orphir, and those at Enhallow, Westray, and others are examples. In a class of its own is a wonderful church on Egilsay, a gem of great value and beauty. It is of two chambers; attached to the west wall is the surprise of a circular tower, the chancel is covered with a circular barrel vault, and above that is a priest's chamber. The whole design makes a delightful picture; almost perfect in its stonework, but disgracefully deprived of its roof, and thus exposed to the violent gales that abound in winter.

[1] The 800th anniversary of the founding of this Cathedral takes place this year.—ED.

Above all other Ecclesiastical buildings in these far-flung islands the Cathedral at Kirkwall stands supreme in the interest of its history, in its noble plan, and in the artistry of its design.

Usually the churches of Scotland stand on ground dedicated from earliest days for religious purposes. Some of our churches are on early Celtic foundations, but at Kirkwall this great church is not so honoured. It was the first church to be built upon its site.

The original church of Kirkwall was that dedicated to Saint Olaf. Its site is known to have been some little distance north on the flat land near the harbour ; it was an ancient foundation, but only a fragment of the 16th century is left, a doorway circleheaded with rosette ornaments on the jambs and round the arch, built into a tenement in Bridge Street. This church of St Olaf gave its name to the Parish in which Kirkwall stands—the Parish of St Ola.

The Cathedral church is strongly associated with the church on the island of Egilsay, because the latter was the site of the treacherous murder of Earl Magnus, and it was to the memory of this sainted relative that Earl Rognvald erected the great church at Kirkwall.

A very noble conception this church is, and carried out in a noble manner. It stands in a spacious churchyard, so that it can be studied from many points. From the main street a splendid north-western view is obtained, from which the general character of the building can be discerned. Almost the whole church is in the late Norman style, but the eastern bays of the choir were erected in the 13th century ; the transept shows a gable with the usual storeyed design of round-headed windows ; the nave has bold aisle windows, and diminutive clearstory ; the lofty west gable rises grandly from the ground, and exhibits some later work in a glorious Triple Portal of thirteenth century date, and overhead a later traceried window above which the gable is reared skyward.

The whole effect of the exterior is of grave simplicity and dignity. One of the doors of the Triple Portal is open ; let us enter. Within the central aisle we are arrested, amazed at the apparent size of the church. It is massive, spacious, almost overpowering, and yet we recall that it is not really large for a cathedral church. We pass along one of the aisles, and look across under the tower towards the transept, and again the grandeur of the place amazes us ; it seems to call to remembrance such great interiors as that

of St Albans, although when we refer to figures and feet and inches St Albans is double the breadth of St Magnus, and generally on a much larger scale. This is a marvellous thing; what elusive quality inhabits this fane?

Some persons have suggested that this extraordinary effect is the result of some subtle proportion; but it seems to be more than that. If we take the length and breadth of various Churches we can compare them with Kirkwall :—

Kirkwall—	220 feet long	and	17 feet 6 inches	clear span	$=\frac{1}{13}$
Jedburgh—	219	,,	22	,,	$=\frac{1}{10}$
Glasgow—	251	,,	26	,,	$=\frac{1}{9}$
Dunblane—	212	,,	20	,,	$=\frac{1}{8}$

The effect of this measurement is not easily grasped, and therefore is not of very great importance. It is of greater interest to compare some English examples, where we note that some of the largest Churches—Lincoln, Ely, and Westminster—show a proportion of $\frac{1}{13}$th, and Durham of $\frac{1}{14}$th, so that there is nothing exceptional in this at Kirkwall.

Much more readily grasped is the proportion of breadth and height :—

Kirkwall—	17 feet 6 inches	clear span,	height	51 feet	$=2\frac{3}{4}$
Glasgow—	25	,,	,,	75 ,,	$=3$
Holyrood—	24	,,	,,	61 ,,	$=2\frac{1}{2}$
Dunfermline—	22 (flat ceiling)	,,	,,	?	=2 fully
Linlithgow—	23	,,	,,	?	=2

From these figures it will be seen that there is no unusual subtlety in the proportions of St Magnus, and we must look elsewhere, in part at least, for the appearance of vastness which pervades this building.

Probably the chief feature responsible for this effect is the extreme narrowness of the central aisle, with its clear span of only 17 feet 6 inches from pier to pier. This width is more like the usual breadth of small country churches. We have to go to Rosslyn Chapel to see anything analogous. Here, in a 15th century church, we have :—

Rosslyn—	Width of aisle	15 feet	height	42 feet	$=2\frac{3}{4}$
Kirkwall—	,,	17 feet 6 inches	,,	51 ,,	$=2\frac{3}{4}$

But Rosslyn leaves no impression of vastness, perhaps, partly, because only the choir is intact.

Another, and perhaps the chief asset at Kirkwall, is that the piers of the nave arcade are very massive—fully 4 feet 6 inches in breadth, and, besides, that the clear span from pier to pier along the arcade is just double that size—9 feet. That is a proportion of 2 to 1. In Rosslyn the piers are about 3 feet wide and the span 7 feet 6 inches $=2\frac{1}{2}$ to 1.

Then we have Dunfermline with the span equal to three diameters. In St Albans there is no help, as the piers are 10 feet and the clear span about 12 feet.

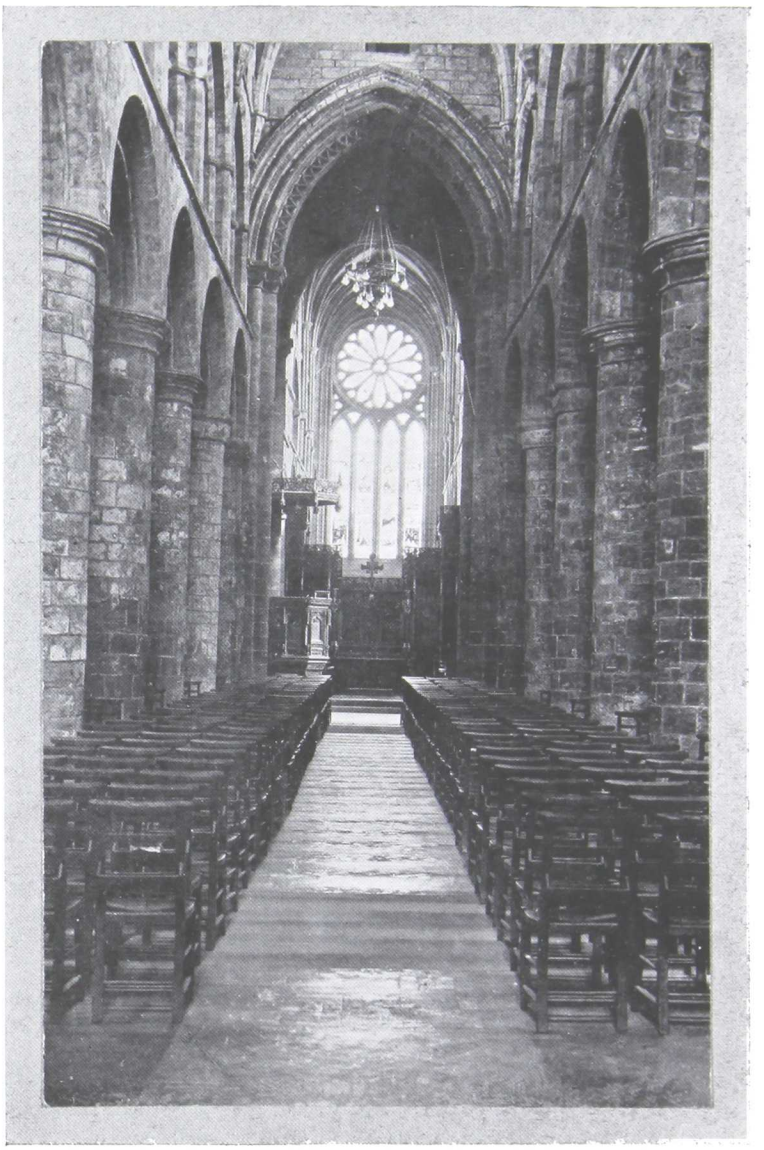
We have, then, at Kirkwall these massive piers and this close span, which in perspective gives an almost continuous wall of piers, preventing the eye from wandering into the side aisles. Thus the tendency is to lift our gaze with the vertical lines of the piers, to a further contributory feature—the boldly designed triforium, so close to as to be almost united to the arcade, which carries the view still upward above the clearstory to the lofty vault, where we are drawn along the great vista till the dimensions of the fabric are rather assumed than comprehended, with the result of an impression of vastness. Such seems to be the secret of this marvellous effect, so conspicuously present to most discerning eyes.

This effect does not occur only in the older parts of the building; for in the three later choir bays the same proportion is held and the same effect is obtained. Great churches with central spans of 30 feet or more, and with height to correspond, may well look imposing, but here a like impression is obtained in a church of much less scale.

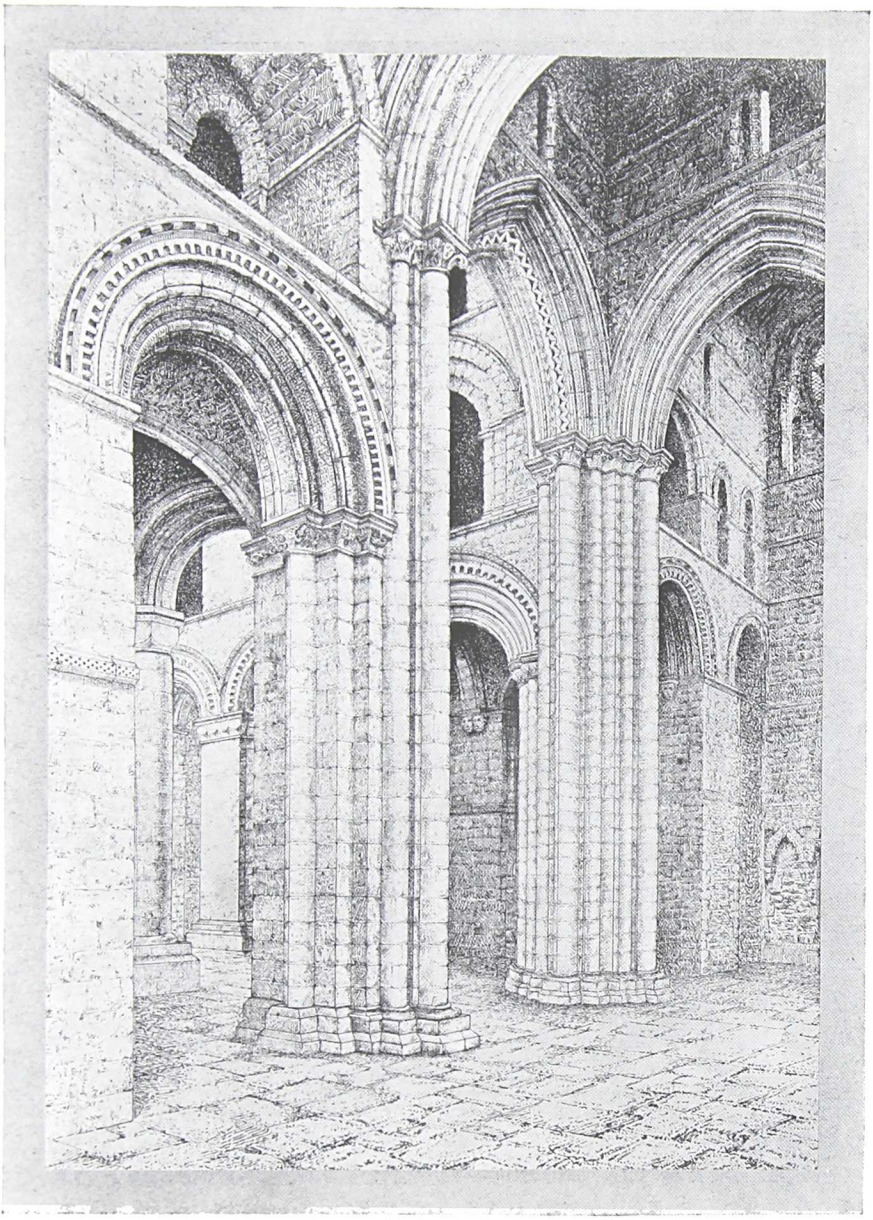
So much for the interior, but in some parts a similar effect is obtained as regards the exterior. If we look at the Triple Portal at the west end, a full century later than the Norman work inside, the same elusive proportion affects us. These doorways seem great. Their ingoes are deep, with shafts on the receding jambs. In the case of the central doorway its width is 5 feet 2 inches, and each jamb is fully two-thirds of that width, a proportion which always produces a goodly result. In the side doorways the jambs are greatly enlarged to the full width of the doorways, which gives a wonderful appearance of dignity to doorways only 2 feet 7 inches wide. There is indeed something on which to ponder.

Two buildings have been considered as the prototypes of Kirkwall—Durham and Dunfermline. If we compare these we find that the proportions of nave, arcade, and triforium in Durham and Kirkwall coincide; whereas in Dunfermline the triforium is less in height and lacks massiveness.

It may seem strange that a large Church, and one so marvellous, should be found in the far off isles of Orkney; but we must remember that when this Cathedral was begun these islands were not an outlying part of Scotland, but



ST MAGNUS CATHEDRAL—THE NAVE.



ST MAGNUS CATHEDRAL—THE CROSSING.

an important appendage of the Kingdom of Norway, and that the Earls of Orkney were almost independent sovereigns, with powerful influence at the Norwegian court. Earl Rognvald, who built the Church, was the son of Kol the husband of Magnus' sister. Kol was a man of great ability, and many think he was the ruling spirit in the designing of the building. Certainly he took an immense interest in it, and having command of the best architectural skill he lavished it upon the Church. Within and without we discover here and there slight evidence of its Viking origin, but it is most indebted to work seen in England and Scotland, and naturally so, as Earl Rognvald and his Bishop, William the Old, were very friendly with many distinguished men in these kingdoms, and were doubtless more or less familiar with church building at home and abroad. The tale of its erection and its sequence of styles is of almost thrilling interest. When it was commenced, in 1137, the Norman work at Durham, say from 1093-1120, would be completed ; the work at Dunfermline, which was started after 1124, would be well advanced ; then Kelso, founded in 1128, would probably have its nave—the only part now visible—in progress. And it is interesting to observe that in that Abbey we have, both in the triforium and clearstory, delicate and original arcading in the Transitional style which succeeded the Norman. After this comes Kirkwall (1137), by which time the new fashion of design was being exploited in Scotland. Therefore we may fitly expect that Earl Rognvald, before he was well on with his choir, was overtaken by the advent of the Transitional style. Then came a pause ; during the two years that he was crusading in Palestine the work would be mainly or entirely suspended, but when he returned, in 1155, the Transition was in force in Scotland.

Probably before Rognvald left for Palestine the work on the choir had reached the transepts, and the abutments in transepts, nave, and choir would be ready for the building of the central tower. Now, be it noted, the piers of the tower and their caps have a strong flavour of Transitional character. This, indeed, has caused some perturbation in some quarters, as to how it is that Transitional work on the tower appears among the (late) Norman work on arcades of naves, transepts, and choir. Three views have been advanced in explanation. One suggestion is that the Norman piers of the tower were re-chiselled in the Transitional style, but there does not seem to be any evidence

pointing to that. Another suggestion is that the old piers were encased with Transitional mouldings; but as the piers as they stand with their presumed outer casing are of moderate dimensions—under 5 feet across—it is scarcely to be expected that the rubble inner piers could have supported the weight of a great central tower. A final suggestion is that the original Norman piers were removed and new piers erected in the Transitional style upon the old foundations. Otherwise, they say, How account for the Norman work in the arches forming abutments for the tower arches? But the removal and re-building of such a heavy mass of masonry as the central tower would tax the skill of the masons of that time, and unless the tower had fallen (which it did not) it seems unlikely that anyone would dream of taking it down. Then there would be a great expense in so doing, and we know that all sources of monetary supply had been exhausted, so that there would be no funds for such a purpose.

But besides all that, why need such suggestions be put forward to account for the Transitional work of the tower piers, when it seems quite natural that in the sequence of architectural design the Transitional style had come into vogue at that date? We have the late Norman work from 1137 to 1153, then the Transitional work on the tower piers from 1155. At this date we have the fully fledged Transitional work at Dundrennan, in 1142, with keel shafts and bell caps more than ten years before the tower at Kirkwall was built.

A beautiful feature of St Magnus Cathedral is the use of colour decoration in the stonework of the exterior. This is best seen in the doorways of the south and west fronts, where we have clever grouping of red and grey stone alternately, sometimes in alternate rings of arches, sometimes otherwise arranged, but always with a beautiful decorative effect. Work of this order is rare in Scotland, and in Kirkwall we have the most successful treatment in our country.

There is one feature of the interior which must be referred to—the fine design of the three bays of the thirteenth century Choir. We may regret the disappearance of the three apses of the Norman east end, but these three bays erected in continuation of the choir are of rare beauty. It is good to note that although, at that date, pointed arches were usual, at Kirkwall these three bays have round-headed arches in sympathy with the older Norman ones. The

beautifully sculptured capitals are delightful, and the fine vaulting is a fitting crown for the whole.

As a result of the Reformation, and of sundry alterations and "improvements," there have been swept away much interior woodwork which adorned the Church. We observe that Billings in his sketches shows an elaborate erection like a Bishop's throne, and farther east a loft richly panelled. These represent some of the excellent interior fitments now gone for ever. All that is left can be seen in a small collection of scraps of carving and fragments of panelling in the triforium over the south aisle of the nave.

Truly the material things of this world pass away.

HENRY F. KERR.