

HISTORICAL TOUR OF THE CHURCH OF ST MAGNUS THE MARTYR

Welcome to the Church of St Magnus the Martyr by London Bridge and to the three united parishes of St Magnus the Martyr, St Margaret New Fish Street and St Michael Crooked Lane.

1. When was the church built and who was St Magnus? These are questions to which there are no definite answers. Let me give you two possible accounts.

Account number 1 - the traditional account: A 12th-century charter re-confirming a grant of land near London Bridge in 1067 by William the Conqueror to Westminster Abbey refers to St Magnus as a stone church at that date. That would suggest a pre-Conquest foundation. Most authorities until the mid-19th century, including John Stow, believed St Magnus to be the Bishop of Caesarea of that name who was martyred in AD 258. In the Middle Ages, St Magnus claimed (along with St Peter's Cornhill and St Nicholas Cole Abbey) to be the oldest church in the City.

Account number 2 - a Victorian revision: The Westminster Charter with its reference to the church in 1067 is a 12th-century forgery. Most people now accept that. The site on which we are now standing was part of the foreshore of the River Thames in Roman times and for some centuries afterwards. The Roman river wall ran roughly along the line of what is now the north wall of the church. Some wood from the Roman quayside is preserved outside by the tower. In 1846 a Danish Professor came to England and suggested that the church was actually dedicated to the Norwegian St Magnus of Orkney. Two churches were dedicated to St Olave, King of Norway (St Olave Hart Street in the City and St Olave Southwark, now commemorated in the street name Tooley Street). Olaf is remembered for assisting Ethelred the Unready against the Danish invaders by using his ships to pull down London Bridge in 1014, thus preventing the Danes from crossing the river and giving rise to the nursery rhyme 'London Bridge is falling down'. St Magnus of Orkney was martyred around 1116 and canonised in 1135. St Magnus's church is therefore a 12th-century foundation.

The truth probably lies somewhere in between these two accounts. The archaeological evidence suggests that Thames Street appeared in the late 11th century, running immediately behind (north of) the old Roman riverside wall and crossing the existing north-south streets. Churches such as St Magnus came into being south of the new thoroughfare of Thames Street on reclaimed land to meet the needs of the growing population along the waterfront. It is therefore likely that St Magnus was founded by around 1100, i.e. before the martyrdom of St Magnus of Orkney.

However, in the absence of definitive historical evidence the Bishop of London decided in 1926 that the dedication should be to St Magnus of Orkney, so that is who we, along with Kirkwall Cathedral on the Orkneys, celebrate on 16th April each year as our patron saint.

So who was Magnus of Orkney and why did he become a saint? His story is told in the 'Orkneyinga Saga', also called the History of the Earls of Orkney. The saga is an Icelandic narrative, written around 1200, of the history of the Orkney Islands from their capture by the Norwegian king in the 9th century until about 1200.

At the end of the 11th century the Orkney Islands were jointly ruled over by three cousins – Hakon, Paulson Erling and Magnus Erlingsson. On his way to raid Ireland, the Isle of Man and Wales, King Magnus the Barefoot of Norway collected the three young men to assist him in his battles. During the Battle of the Menai Strait, Erling was killed leaving Hakon and (our) Magnus to rule jointly over Orkney. Magnus, a peace-loving man, refused to lift a sword, preferring to stand to one side and to chant psalms from the Old Testament. Such action did not endear him to the Viking king. As a result he hurriedly left the battle and sought sanctuary in Scotland.

When King Magnus died Hakon was proclaimed Earl of Orkney and Magnus left Scotland and returned to Orkney. For the next few years Hakon and Magnus ruled together uneasily. Magnus decided to pay a visit to Henry I in England. On his return he was confronted with Hakon's determination that their joint rule must end with himself as the sole ruler of the island. A conference was arranged to discuss their problems and to sort out solutions. It was accepted that each man would attend the meeting on the Island of Egilsay with only two ships and their crews. Magnus arrived at the rendezvous with the correct number of ships and men, but Hakon had other ideas. Leaving nothing to chance he arrived the next day, bringing with him eight ships fully manned.

Magnus realised that he was in mortal danger and retired to the little church on the island to pray and to seek sanctuary – the Saga reads “not for fear's sake, but to commit to God his case”. Hakon's men stormed the church, but took a while to find where he was hiding. After much discussion between the two cousins, Hakon's followers demanded Magnus's death. Hakon's cook, Lifolf, was called to behead him. The Saga reads “he signed himself with the cross and bowed himself for the stroke and his spirit passed into heaven”.

Miracles were soon being claimed at Magnus's tomb. He was canonised in 1135 and the Cathedral of St Magnus in Kirkwall, begun in 1137, was consecrated in 1151. In 1937 the Rector of this church attended the 800th anniversary celebrations of the Cathedral in Kirkwall. During his stay he visited Egilsay Island, attended a service held in the roofless church of St Magnus on Egilsay Island and suggested that the congregations of Kirkwall and London should unite to erect a permanent stone memorial on the site where St Magnus was murdered. A cairn of local stone was constructed and dedicated the following year.

2. History of the church up to the Great Fire

Between the late Saxon period and 1209 there was a series of wooden bridges across the Thames, but in that year Peter de Colechurch's stone bridge was completed. Until 1831 the bridge was aligned with Fish Street Hill, so the main entrance into the City from the south passed the West door of St Magnus.

The bridge included a chapel dedicated to St Thomas a Becket for the use of pilgrims journeying to Canterbury Cathedral to visit his tomb. The chapel was in the parish of St Magnus and after some years of rivalry a dispute arose between the church and the chapel over the offerings given to the chapel by the pilgrims. The matter was resolved by the brethren of the chapel making an annual contribution to St Magnus.

The church grew in importance. It was extended in 1234. In the 14th century the Pope was the Patron of the Living and appointed five rectors to the benefice. An important religious guild, the Confraternity de Salve Regina, was founded. Henry Yevele, the King's Mason and architect of Westminster Hall, was a parishioner and rebuilt the chapel on the bridge between 1384 and 1397. He was buried at St Magnus on his death in 1400. St Magnus Corner at the north end of London Bridge was an important meeting place in mediaeval London, where notices were exhibited, proclamations read out and wrongdoers punished.

Let's now have a look at the wonderful model of old London Bridge made in the 1980s by David Aggett, a Liveryman of the Plumbers' Company. The model shows how the bridge would have appeared around 1400. There are over 900 people on the bridge, but one is in 20th century dress. Can you find him?

Things did not always run smoothly at St Magnus. A 15th century visitation by the Ordinary records that the churchyard was untidy, books and vestments were in a poor state and the church wardens were not keeping proper accounts. Worse still, during the time of divine service, the priest and clerks were more often than not to found drinking in alehouses, fishing or partaking in other trifles.

We then come to the Reformation. The fraternity of Salve Regina was dissolved and the chapel on the bridge turned into a house and later a warehouse. The churchwardens were ordered to break up the altar stones. However, in the 1560s the church had its most famous Rector, Miles Coverdale, translator of the Scriptures into English. It is perhaps worth pausing to consider Coverdale's achievement in that regard.

Working alone in exile in Antwerp, he was the first to translate and print the entire Bible in English. The printing of Coverdale's Bible was finished on 4 October 1535 and soon reprinted in England by James Nicolson in Southwark. Of course Coverdale was building on the work of William Tyndale, who was under arrest by October 1535, and he was not translating himself from the Hebrew, as he made clear on his title-page. But he gave the people of England the whole Bible printed in their own language as well as many unforgettable phrases: 'Seek ye the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is nigh' (Isaiah 55:6); 'By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept when we remembered Sion' (Psalm 137:1); 'enter thou into the joy of thy lord' (Matthew 25:21).

Coverdale was Bishop of Exeter in Edward VI's reign, fled abroad once again during Queen Mary's reign and returned to London in 1559. In January 1564 he accepted from Edmund Grindal, bishop of London, the living of St Magnus. He was too poor to pay the first fruits, and they were forgiven him by Queen Elizabeth. He resigned from St Magnus in the summer of 1566, after two and a half years. It is possible that he left the living on puritan grounds, as in March of that year Archbishop Parker had caused great consternation among many clergy by his edicts prescribing what was to be worn, and by his summoning the London clergy to Lambeth to require their compliance. Coverdale excused himself from attending. He could not travel, he said, and there were other reasons.

As long as his strength permitted (he was now nearly eighty) Coverdale preached in London, with a keen following in godly circles, though since he was apparently becoming fearful for his safety they could not always discover where he would preach next. In January 1569 he gave his last sermon, at a regular service he was attending at St Magnus the Martyr, when it was found that there was no preacher. John Hooker describes what happened.

“Certain men of the parish came unto him, and earnestly entreated that considering the multitude was great, and that it was pity they should be disappointed of their expectation, that it would please him to take the place for that time. But he excused his age and the infirmities thereof, and that his memory failed him, his voice scarce to be heard, and he not able to do it, that they would hold him excused. Nevertheless such were their importunate requests that he did yield unto their requests: and between two men he was carried up into the pulpit, where God did with his spirit so strengthen him, that he made his last and the best and the most godly sermon that ever he did in all his life. And very shortly after he died, being very honourably buried with the presence of the duchess of Suffolk, the earl of Bedford, and many others, honourable and worshipful personages.”

Coverdale died on 20 January 1569, and two days later was buried in the chancel of St Bartholomew by the Exchange, under the communion table. The marble stone and brass inscription were destroyed in the great fire of 1666. St Bartholomew's Church was pulled down in 1840 to make room for the Royal Exchange. Coverdale's remains were removed to St Magnus, where they now lie, with a tablet on the east wall, close to the altar.

Moving on to the 1590s, we find an entry in the registers recording the marriage of Benjamin Johnson to Anne Lewis in 1594. It is thought that this is the great Elizabethan dramatist Ben Jonson and one can imagine the marriage in what John Stow in his famous Survey of 1598 describes as the “fair parish church of St Magnus”. Extensive repairs were carried out to the fabric in the 1620s.

In 1632 and again in 1640 there were massive fires on London Bridge and one of the Tables of Benefactions at the West end, dating from the 1670s, records the close escape that the church had in the latter year during the “late terrible Fire on London Bridge”. The Table also records the provision by Mrs Susanna Chambers for a sermon to be preached on every twelfth day of February to commemorate its preservation. The custom of the annual ‘Fire Sermon’ has been revived in recent years. The next sermon will be on 19th February 2009.

An impression of what the church looked like at this time can be seen in panoramas such as Wenceslaus Hollar’s famous ‘View of London from Bankside’ of 1647.

3. After the Great Fire

Of course, the mediaeval church was swept away in the Great Fire of London of 1666. The fire started close by in Pudding Lane and St Magnus was the second church to perish, the first being St Margaret New Fish Street, which was on the site now occupied by the Monument. St Margaret’s was not rebuilt and that parish united with St Magnus in 1670.

Parish life resumed very quickly, probably in a temporary structure, and there were burials in the ruined church, including in December 1670 of Thomas Farriner, in whose bakehouse the Great Fire started. The rebuilding and fitting out of the church was to take the next fifty years.

1668: The parish started work on rebuilding with George Dowdeswell as the mason.

1671: Christopher Wren was appointed to complete the work.

1671-84: Rebuilding of the near-rectangular, aisled church with Portland stone walls at a cost of £9,580. The south aisle tapers to the East. Slender Ionic columns with cabled fluting rising from octagonal pedestals, which inspired the famous passage in TS Eliot's poem 'The Wasteland':

*'This music crept by me upon the waters'
And along the Strand, up Queen Victoria Street
O City city, I can sometime hear
Beside a public bar in Lower Thames Street,
The pleasant whining of a mandoline
And a clatter and a chatter from within
Where fishmen lounge at noon: where the walls
Of Magnus Martyr hold
Inexplicable splendour of Ionian white and gold.*

Originally there was a double bay in line with the blocked north door, which implies an internal transept. An extra pair of columns was inserted later.

Corinthian screen and doorcase, set against the West lobby wall, of 1677. On either side of the doorway there are shelves for the loaves of bread that were distributed to the poor after Sunday morning service.

Holy Table, now the altar in the chapel of Christ the King.

Font - octagonal gadrooned bowl given in 1683 on a later stem of Greek-cross plan with ogee-shaped cover.

Communion rails made from Sussex wrought iron.

Towering two-storey reredos with carved pelican, paintings of Moses and Aaron and a painted Glory of 1708, including work by Grinling Gibbons (whose trade mark, the 'pea-pod' is to be found behind the crucifix on the altar). The Baroque carved angels had been added by 1810 and the upper stage was reassembled in the 1890s and then again in the 1920s.

Sword-rest of 1708, wrought-iron

Very fine Wren-period pulpit and tester by William Grey

Churchwardens' box pews.

1703-06: Square tower surmounted by a large, octagonal stone lantern with a lead-covered dome, on which stands a small lantern and concave obelisk spire, the whole 185 feet high. The design was influenced by St Charles Borromeo, Antwerp.

1709: Projecting clock on tower by Langley Bradley, the gift of Sir Charles Duncombe. Ornamental statuary replaced in 1807. Last re-gilded in 2007. When Sir Charles was a young apprentice he never knew as he crossed London Bridge whether or not he was late for work. The clock was therefore intended to help other apprentices from being thrashed for arriving late.

1712: West gallery, reached by double staircases with twisted balusters, and organ by Abraham Jordan (Senior and Junior). This was the first swell organ. On the parapet, note the iron columns with Queen Anne's monograph.

1714: Bells were installed in 1714 and these were rung regularly from that time until the Second World War. The bells were removed from the tower in 1940 for safety, but while in the ground they suffered damage and were eventually scrapped. A new ring of 12 bells have been cast at the Whitechapel Bell Foundry and are being installed in 2009.

4. Later Eighteenth Century to 1921

The next big upheaval came in the 1760s. A dreadful fire broke out on 18th April 1760 in an oil shop at the SE corner of the church, which consumed most of the church roof and did considerable damage to the fabric. There was a major restoration, but no sooner had that been completed than the Corporation decided to widen London Bridge.

The end of the church building was on the edge of the roadway at the north end of the bridge. Now a new footpath for pedestrians crossing the bridge was to be created through the tower of the church. As a consequence it was necessary between 1762 and 1768 to remove the vestry rooms at the West end of the church and open up the side arches of the tower so that people could pass underneath the tower. The tower's lower storey thus became an external porch. Internally a lobby was created at the West end under the organ gallery and a screen with fine octagonal glazing inserted.

By 1782 the noise level from the activities of Billingsgate Fish Market had become unbearable and the large windows on the north side of the church were blocked up leaving only circular windows high up in the wall. At some point between the 1760s and 1814, nobody is quite sure when, the present clerestory was constructed with its oval windows and fluted and coffered plasterwork.

History repeated itself in the early nineteenth century. There was another serious fire in 1827 when a warehouse built up against the south wall of the church caught fire. In 1831 Rennie's new London Bridge was opened further upstream and the old bridge demolished. Peter de Colechurch's bones in the crypt of the chapel on the bridge were unceremoniously dumped in the Thames. St Magnus ceased to be the gateway to London as it had been for over 600 years. The building of Adelaide House in 1924 further mutilated the original setting.

Another consequence of the new bridge was the construction of King William Street, the demolition in 1831 of the church of St Michael Crooked Lane and the union of that parish with that of St Magnus and St Margaret. A number of monuments were transferred from the church of St Michael Crooked Lane including a memorial to Robert Preston of the Boar's Head in Great Eastcheap.

*Here lieth the Body of Robert Preston
Later Drawer at the Boar's head Tavern in Great Eastcheap;
Who departed this life March the 16 Anno Dom. 1730
Aged 27 Years*

*Bacchus to give the Topping World Surprize
Produc'd one Sober Son, and here he lies.
Tho' nurs'd among full Hogsheads he defy'd
The charms of Wine and ev'ry vice beside
O Reader, if to Justice thou'rt inclin'd
Keep honest PRESTON daily in thy mind.
He drew good Wine, took care to fill his Pots
Had many virtues that outweigh'd his faults
You that on Bacchus have the like dependance
Pray copy Bob in Measure and Attendance.*

A new Vestry House of brick and stone with tripartite windows was built to the South of the church in the 1830s. This was perhaps by Robert Smirke, who built the former rectory on King William Street in 1833-35. The ground floor of the Vestry House provides offices for the priest and verger. The basement and first floor flat are rented out to tenants, including the Friends of the City Churches.

During the second half of the C19th there were only two Rectors, Alexander McCaul father and son. The Revd Alexander McCaul Senior was a Christian missionary to the Polish Jews, who became professor of Hebrew and rabbinical literature at King's College, London in 1841. His daughter, Elizabeth Finn, a noted linguist, founded the Distressed Gentlefolk Aid Association (now known as Elizabeth Finn Care). The McCauls lived in the Rectory in King William Street, which was sold by the Diocese in 1921.

5. 1921 to date

However, the Rector who changed the face of St Magnus was the Revd Henry Joy Fynes-Clinton, Rector from 1921 to 1959. He was effectively the leader of the Anglican Papalist movement within the Church of England. He changed the liturgy in the face of vigorous opposition from some quarters, restored the mediaeval fraternity of Salve Regina and commissioned Martin Travers, the distinguished High Anglican designer, to refashion St Magnus in the mid 1920s. Many of the fittings we see today are Travers's work, including the statues of St Magnus and of Our Lady of Walsingham, the rood, the crucifix on the altar, the cross in the pulpit and the Bavarian Rococo-style benches. He also installed the reredoses in the two side chapels, the one in the Christ the King chapel being the old porch form the north door of the church.

The alterations were not to everyone's liking. Besant in his *City Churches and their Memories*, published shortly after the changes, was severely critical. "The three-decker pulpit and high pews are gone by the board. In the place of one simple altar there are now three, with candles to burn and a heavy smell of incense, all in the Roman manner – hopelessly and absolutely out of keeping. That is how it strikes me."

After the Second World War new stained glass was commissioned. The glass in the south aisle is by Lawrence Lee and dates from 1949 to 1955. The four windows depict St Magnus of Orkney with the ruins of Kirkwall Cathedral, St Margaret of Antioch showing the Monument, St Thomas of Canterbury with the chapel on London Bridge and St Michael with the church in Crooked Lane. With the exception of one old piece of glass from the former Plumbers' Hall, the glass on the north side is by Alfred Wilkinson and dates from 1953 to 1960. This shows the arms of the Plumbers', Fishmongers' and Coopers' Companies together with those of William Wand when Bishop of London and Geoffrey Fisher when Archbishop of Canterbury, together with the insignia of the Fraternity of the Salve Regina.

The modern stations of the cross are the work of two young carvers, Robert Randall and Ashley Sands, who have carved the 14 stations from honey-coloured Japanese oak. The carving is broad and unfussy, with very expressive use of drapery; the only painted detail being the simple gilding of the haloes. The stations are linked together in the way the landscape is conveyed – the rocky foreground with the occasional stunted tree, the low clouds and the small buildings (including representations of the Church) bring continuity and coherence to the sequence of images. The golden oak from which the stations are carved stands out against the dark oak panelling; although the stations are only 2ft by 1ft they have a monumental quality that is associated with much larger works.

Other notable works of art in the church include the:-

icon of Our Lady of Perpetual Succour painted in 1908 in Moscow

copy of Van Dyke's *Madonna and Child* above the Lady Chapel altar

Holy Countenance of St Veronica's Veil on the east wall of the Lady Chapel

copy of Rubens' *Descent from the Cross* in the south aisle

Alfred Stevens' copy of Murillo's *St John the Baptist* near the font

modern icon of St George, painted in the Ethiopian Orthodox tradition.

The crypt has been fitted with a kitchen and is the nearest the church has to a parish hall. The bones of those buried in the crypt were removed to Brookwood Cemetery in 1893.

Michael V. Cooper
Churchwarden and Parish Clerk