

KIRKWALL

Mention the Orkney Islands to most people in mainland Scotland, and images of wild seas, winter storms and bleak, treeless landscapes are likely to come to mind. We do have all those things, but in Kirkwall we also have one of the most bustling and beautiful high streets in the country.

Kirkwall owes its status as Orkney's capital to its position between the great natural harbour of Scapa Flow to the west, and the North Sea to the east. Rich rolling farmland lies to the north and south. Produce from the island's farms, and seafood from its fishing fleet, flow through Kirkwall on their way to customers across the UK and beyond. Kirkwall is a busy market town and port, and its shops and other businesses need to provide everything the hard-working population could possibly require – after all, it's not easy to nip to the nearest city when that is Inverness, separated by 15 miles of the Pentland Firth and 100 miles of the A9!

Kirkwall's businesses have worked hard – both individually and jointly through Kirkwall BID – to maintain and improve their town centre. The high street now has, at the time of writing, a full complement of commercial premises, with no vacant shopfronts. This is not down to good luck, but rather to the loyalty that local consumers feel for their high street, and the attentiveness and creativity of business owners in meeting their needs. The Orkney public's love for Kirkwall's high street is not surprising, as at its centre lies St Magnus Cathedral, the heart of the Orkney Islands since its establishment in 1137.

Stretching out to the north and south of the cathedral lie the two halves of our high street, in winter months illuminated by tree and canopy lights recently installed by our BID. In summer the surprisingly numerous trees are complemented by hanging baskets all along the street, provided by the Community Council. In recent years the Townscape Heritage Initiative has helped fund renovation of several iconic buildings that had fallen into disrepair: some of these are now thriving new businesses, and all contribute to the preservation of the town's heritage. THI also introduced street-layout improvements, following full public consultation, to make the high street more pedestrian friendly, and installed (in partnership with BID) new benches, planters and information boards. Cycle racks and water stations are next on the agenda.

Most importantly, perhaps, local consumers support the (mainly independent) shops that line the high street. They also flock to the frequent events the town hosts, including live music, pipe band parades, shopping days, our unique Ba games on Christmas Day and New Year's Day, Easter Egg hunts and Neepie Lantern trails. Visitors are frequently highly complimentary about the town, and we get a lot of visitors: Kirkwall is currently the UK's most popular cruise liner destination, with nearly 150 liners being welcomed in 2019.

All in all, our high street is a mix of farming, fishing, shopping, history, locals, tourists, business, sport and culture – in other words, a vibrant community. And that is what really makes Kirkwall beautiful.

