

Malmesbury enters Friendship Agreement to honour royal connection with Norwegian town

Malmesbury and the municipality of Fitjar in Norway have created a Friendship Agreement to cement their shared royal history, which dates back to Saxon and Viking times.

Mayor of Malmesbury Cllr Stephen James and his counterpart in Fitjar, Wenche Tislevoll, met online for the signing ceremony, which aims to build closer links between the two towns.

Malmesbury and Fitjar (pronounced Fityar) have shared royal connections. The first King of England, Athelstan, was a patron of Malmesbury and is buried in the town. Athelstan was the foster father of Viking King Hakon who – because of his English upbringing and education – went on to become the first Christian king of Norway.

In 2024, Malmesbury celebrated 1,100 years since Athelstan became king, and last year, a pilgrimage walk was organised to Kingston-upon-Thames – his place of coronation – which was also attended by delegates from Fitjar.

Indeed, for the people of Fitjar, King Athelstan is one of the best-known English monarchs, up there with King Henry VIII, and Queen Victoria, and Fitjar's municipal councillors unanimously supported the Friendship Agreement.

Cllr James said: "We are delighted to have signed this Friendship Agreement with the municipality of Fitjar, which recognises the historical link between King Athelstan and King Hakon, and hence the two towns. It should provide much greater understanding of this part of our history, and I hope it encourages residents and visitors to explore the story for themselves. It seems that every Norwegian child learns about Athelstan, but I suspect very few in Malmesbury knew about Hakon before this."

The municipality of Fitjar is a community in the west of Norway. The population is around 3,200, and it has approximately 400 islands, mostly uninhabited. Malmesbury, by contrast, is rather bigger; the hilltop Wiltshire market town has a population of around 6,000.