

ART. VI.—*The pre-reformation church bells of West Cumberland.* By MARY C. FAIR.

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WEST CUMBERLAND is rich in pre-reformation bells, for no less than thirteen still survive there, at Beckermest (2), Distington (2), Egremont, Ennerdale, Eskdale, Loweswater (now in Crosthwaite church, Keswick, on a window sill), Muncaster, Waberthwaite (2) and Whicham (2); all but the Egremont and Loweswater bells are still in use. Some of the bells are hung in inaccessible bell-cotes, so that full details of them could not be recovered; meanwhile these notes will serve to record their presence and their five hundred years of service.

(i) BECKERMET, St. Bridget's.¹ (Inventory of 1552; entry lost. Tradition says that the bells came from Calder Abbey, to which St. Bridget's belonged, and this is quite possible).

1. *South bell (treble)*: diam. at mouth 14½", height 12"; founder's mark an inverted Lombardic T on the sound-bow. Inscribed around shoulder in widely spaced Lombardic letters IHES (Jesus); the space on the inscription band is filled with a geometric pattern and three illegible letters. Headstock and 6 canons remaining.

2. *North bell (tenor)*: diam. at mouth 17", height 15"; founder's mark as on no. 1. Inscribed around shoulder in widely spaced Lombardic letters MARIA (Mary); space on inscription band filled as on no. 1. Headstock and canons all missing.

¹ Cf. Canon Loftie's records in Parker, *The Gosforth District*, 2nd ed., p. 120.

The two bells are clearly by the same founder, whose name has not been identified; the character of the lettering suggests a mid-fifteenth century date.

(ii) DISTINGTON.² (Inventory of 1552: 2 *Prche Bells*).

3. *Treble*: diam. 16", height not given; a plain Greek cross is used as initial, followed by the inscription in small Lombardic lettering similar to that on no. 8 below. SANCTE CUDBERTE ORA PRO NOBIS, with interval stops (a) three roundlets vertical between two perpendicular lines and (b) (between *pro* and *nobis*) four perpendicular lines enclosing three lozenges with a horizontal line laterally bisecting them; (b) is repeated six times above the inscription. Below the inscription, in rather large letters, UC: this may stand, not for the bell-founder, but for *William Curwen*, owner of a third moiety of the manor of Distington, who died of the plague in 1403 and was perhaps the donor of the bell. The letter U is identical with the very curious and unusual one on the Erasmus at Greystoke.³ The ancient dedication of Distington church was probably to St. Cuthbert, the modern one being to the Holy Spirit.

4. *Tenor*: diam. 19", height not given; a plain Greek cross is used as initial and repeated as interval and end stops. Inscribed, in larger Lombardic lettering of rather different character, SANCTE CHRISTOFORE. No further details of this interesting bell are available; but as the above William Curwen had a son Christopher, it may be that the latter was the donor of it, dedicating it to the saint whose name he bore: dedications to St. Christopher are very rare in the north-west of England.

(iii) EGREMONT. (Fig. 1. This bell has not been

² Cf. CWI xiv, p. 323.

³ Cf. CWI xi, p. 134; its date has not been ascertained: it is a most difficult and highly unusual inscription, without good precedent; the lettering is composite, Black Letter and Lombardic, perhaps late 15th or early 16th century.

recorded in our *Transactions* previously; it now hangs in a frame in front of the organ, in the south aisle of the church).

5. *Tenor*: diam. at mouth 24", height 20"; initial cross (for both lines) a cross florée. Inscribed STEPHANUS IHONSON ET IHOHNES PRESTE | ET ALII PEROCHIANI ME FIERI FECERUNT⁴—"Stephan Johnson and John (? the) Priest and other parishioners caused me to be made." The interval stops between the words are two lozenges with a small roundel on the centre of each, set vertically; above, below and between the inscription bands is a treble rolled moulding. The bell has lost its clapper but retains its 6 canons. The inscription, placed high up on the shoulder, has some very distinctive letters (notably the A and H) which are exactly like those of the Edenhall bell, and the cross florée has a similar marked resemblance to that at Edenhall.⁵ The technique of the lettering and casting is so exceptionally good that a local foundry seems out of the question, and the bell may well have come from York, that great centre of the industry in the North, which provided the fine pre-reformation bells at Dacre, Threlkeld, Cumrew and Renwick in Cumberland. Stephan son of John witnesses a deed of c. 1390 concerning land in Egremont (*Register of St. Bees*, p. 331); Mr. Whitehead dated the Edenhall bell 1380-1420 (CW1 xi, p. 150), so the Egremont bell may confidently be assigned to the same period. No reference has been discovered to John Preste or John the Priest; could he have been a chantry priest of the chapel of St. Michael within the church of Egremont?

(iv) ENNERDALE. (Inventory of 1552: entry missing. The bell is unfortunately inaccessible now).

4. This reading has been recorded correctly, for the first time, by the present rector, the Rev. W. J. Bucks.

⁵ Cf. CW1 xi, p. 150 (by the Rev. H. Whitehead).

6. *Tenor* (?): dimensions unobtainable; no initial cross or interval stops recorded. Inscribed STA BEGA ORA PRO NOBIS—"St. Bega, pray for us." The date of the bell cannot be ascertained; it may either belong to the time of William Thornton, last abbot of St. Mary's, York (1530-9), under whom Ennerdale chapelry obtained parochial rights (*Register of St. Bees*, p. 369), or have come from St. Bees itself at the Dissolution. It may be noted that the first recorded bell to St. Bega was the second of the 10th century ring at Croyland abbey (recorded by Ingulphus in his *Life* of St. Guthlac, the founder of that abbey); I know of no other Cumberland bell bearing this dedication.

(v) ESKDALE. (Inventory of 1552: entry missing. This bell, too, is inaccessible, but the inscription is shown in a print by Mr J. Melville from a negative by Mr S. B. Gaythorpe of a plaster cast by Mr Harper Gaythorpe).

7. *Treble*: dimensions unobtainable; no initial cross or interval stops recorded. Inscribed SCV CVTRI BA. This is the work of an unskilled founder: the As are all inverted, as is the S, and the spacing is irregular; it is probable that the last two letters are part of the preceding word, with a B inserted for an N: this would give the reading SANCTA CATHARINA. Some of the paterae of the letters are scattered over the bell, and are mostly illegible; the bell has had very rough treatment. Eskdale was granted parochial status in 1445, the provision of bells being specially mentioned (*Register of St. Bees*, p. 369), so it is probable that this bell is of that date.

(vi) LOWESWATER.⁶ (Inventory of 1552: *ij Prche Belles, iiii littell Belles*).

8. *Treble* (?): diam. at mouth 16", height 14"; no initial cross or interval stops. Inscribed SANCTA MARIA ORA PRO NOBIS—"St. Mary, pray for us."

⁶ The description of this bell was kindly provided by the Rev. G. K. Carpenter, vicar of Crosthwaite church, where it is now preserved.

The ratio of height to diameter suggests an early date, possible fourteenth century. The dedication of Loweswater is unknown.

(vii) MUNCASTER. (Inventory of 1552: entry missing. The bell itself is inaccessible; the inscription is copied from a cast at Muncaster Castle, shown to me by Lady Ramsden).

9. Measurements not known; no initial cross or interval stops. Inscribed SANCTA MARIA ORA PRO NOBIS. The character of the lettering indicates a fifteenth-century date; there is no clue to founder or donor. It may be noted that the church is dedicated to St. Michael.

(viii) WABERTHWAITE. (Inventory of 1552: *I Littell belle* -, the rest of the entry missing. The bells are now inaccessible, but were described by Parker in CW2 ii, p. 105).

10. *Tenor* (?): dimensions unknown; no initial cross or interval stops; end stop a lozenge. Inscribed STS JACOB' DNS TOS UALKER—"St. James, Sir Thomas Walker." The founder has used the medieval N inverted for the U of *Walker*. Central loop and 6 canons remaining. St. James was the original patron saint of Waberthwaite church; Thomas Walker was inducted rector in 1429, and was still there in 1473.

11. *Treble*: dimensions unknown; no initial cross, interval stop a diamond, end stop a lozenge. Inscribed HENRICUS SEXTUS REX—"King Henry the Sixth." The founder has used inverted N's in place of U's. Central loop and 6 canons remaining. The king visited Muncaster in 1461 and died in 1464, so that the bell may be closely dated.

(ix) WHICHAM. (Inventory of 1552: — *Belles*, the number missing. The bells are now inaccessible, but photographs of them, taken by Mr Sydney Gaythorpe of Barrow nearly fifty years ago, and printed for me by Mr

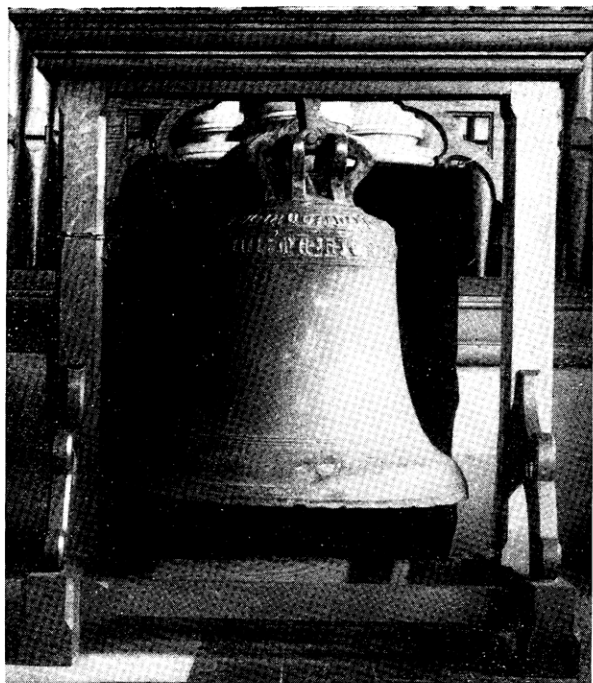


FIG. 1.—Pre-reformation bell, Egremont Church, Cumberland.



FIG. 2.—Whicham, No. 12.

From negatives by Mr S. B. Gaythorpe nearly 50 years ago.



FIG. 3.—Whicham, No. 13.

To face p. 113.

J. Melville, and casts of their inscriptions are available for study).

12. (Fig. 2). Measurements not known; no initial cross, but a fragment of geometric ornament as at Beckermet. Inscribed SANTA MARIA ORA PRO NOBIS. The paterae are widely placed on the double-roll inscription bands. The headstock survives, but the canons are broken. The style of the lettering suggests a fifteenth-century date.

13. (Fig. 3). Measurements not known; no initial cross, but ornament as on no. 12. Inscribed SANCTE MICHAEL ORA PRO NOBIS. The ancient canons remain, but the original headstock is replaced by an iron crook.

The two Whicham bells are clearly a pair, and probably belong to the fifteenth century; nothing is known of their history.⁷

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Thanks are due to the incumbents of the various churches for their great help, and also to Mr Sydney Gaythorpe and Mr J. Melville for photographs of the Eskdale and Whicham bells, Lady Ramsden, Mr T. Gray, F.L.A., Mr F. Barnes, F.L.A., the Rev. W. S. Sykes, Miss Agnes Sim and the Rev. J. C. Dickinson, F.S.A.

⁷ It should be noted that the S is reversed in the inscriptions on nos. 1, 7, 8 (initial only) and 9-13, but, for technical reasons, it has not proved practicable to print it so in the foregoing notes.