

ART. X.—*The West Cumberland group of pre-Norman crosses.* By MARY C. FAIR.

Read at Carlisle, March 25th, 1950.

THE sequence and siting of the Anglian and Norse crosses of West Cumberland do not appear to have been considered specifically hitherto. The purpose of the present paper is to put forward a provisional classification of the main features of the group, to pay particular attention to the specialised series in white freestone, and to invite further attention to the problem.

The West Cumberland crosses and cross-fragments form a localised group, commencing at Waberthwaite, continuing round the district to Bromfield and Aspatria and there abruptly ceasing. One thing the crosses and surviving fragments seem to have in common: they have been erected on the line of very ancient highways, many of them at road-intersections, on or near ancient fords, or near other features, so as to suggest that these monuments were erected to mark points of importance on the routes. The monuments themselves vary considerably in character, indicating the work of different schools of carvers at different dates; one series in particular, examples of which commence at Beckermeth and continue to Aspatria, has been carved in a whitish freestone and not in the familiar red freestone almost invariably used by other carvers. The work executed on these white freestone monuments is vigorous but crude, conspicuously lacking in the refinement and artistic skill of the other craftsmen; does this, as W. G. Collingwood suggested fifty years ago, indicate a school of native carvers located in the district, taking inspiration from the work of more highly trained sculptors, but doing their work according to their own ideas and interpretation?

Among outstanding examples, two crosses which survive complete stand conspicuously supreme, namely Irton (early 9th century, Hiberno-Celtic) and Gosforth (c. A.D. 1000, Anglo-Norse); both have retained their heads and both stand in their original sockets. Outside the limited area of West Cumberland, the crosses of Lancaster, Heysham and Kendal are Anglian and considerably earlier than the West Cumberland group; but at Urswick in Furness a fragment of a late Anglian cross, noted by W. G. Collingwood, seems to have an affinity with the late Anglian crosses at Waberthwaite and Irton.¹ From the same site comes a small fragment of a cross of Gaelic-Norse type, to be dated to the latter part of the tenth century; it is of red freestone, and W. G. Collingwood thought that it had affinity with the West Cumberland series, especially with the crosses at St. John's Beckermes.² No remains of crosses are recorded between Urswick and Waberthwaite, so that there is still a considerable gap to be bridged.

At Rockcliffe, considerably north of our West Cumberland area, there is a wheel-head cross, having around the shaft two horizontal bands, of the same unusual type as a shaft of red freestone at Bromfield; this cross is datable to the late tenth or the eleventh century.³

I. *Waberthwaite*. Here there are two crosses, one Anglian probably of early tenth-century date, the other Anglo-Danish but retaining considerable Anglian tradition, of the mid-tenth century.⁴ The former shows certain affinity with the Irton cross. The siting of these crosses is notable; in antiquity the Norman church and the two crosses stood alone, beside the ancient ford of the river Esk and on the line of the Roman road coming up from the south, pointing to another ford, further north, across the river Mite. The hamlets of Waberthwaite and

¹ CW2 xi 462-468.

² CW2 x 307-311.

³ CW1 xii 174-175; CW2 xxvi 378.

⁴ CW2 xxv 81-85.

Newbiggin are both a full mile distant from ford and church, and we have here the sequence Anglian cross, Anglo-Norse cross and Norman church, set up in isolation remote from dwellings, beside the great ford of the river Esk, which is tidal here; shallow-draught vessels can reach the site at high tide from the harbour of Ravensglass, lower down the river.

2. *Muncaster*. An ancient road led from Waberthwaite ford and church to the site of crosses and church at Muncaster which in antiquity, before the Penningtons came to settle nearby (in the time of Henry II), must have stood alone, a mile from the village and harbour of Ravensglass. Just north of the church were four road-ends, the meeting-point of roads from Ravensglass eastwards up Eskdale, from Waberthwaite to the north, and to Irton over the fell end and fording the river Mite, to cross a desolate moor to Irton church. Muncaster church still has traces of early Norman masonry; the existing cross-remains there suggest that there were two or possibly three monuments:—

(a) The socket of a cross, character unknown.

(b) The shaft of a Gaelic-Norse cross of *c.* A.D. 1000.

(c) The head of a cross of the same type as (b), which may or may not belong to it; it was found by the late Lord Muncaster at Eelbeck Ground, two miles away in the valley of the river Mite, on the route of the ancient trackway to Irton.⁵

3. *Irton*. The site of church and cross is even today remote from habitation, at the intersection of ancient trackways on a desolate plateau, overlooking the crossing of the river Irt and the Wasdale valley and mountains. The cross is Hiberno-Celtic, of the early 9th century, and still retains its head.⁶

4. *Gosforth*. The site of the church and the group

⁵ Calverley, *Crosses*, p. 238.

⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 206.

of crosses is at the intersection of several ancient highways, upon which a village must early have grown up. In antiquity it stood upon the fringe of a great morass in the valley of the river Bleng, a tributary of the Irt. Gosforth had at least three pre-Norman wheel-headed crosses:—

(a) The splendid example still surviving complete, an outlier of the Anglo-Norse group centred in Cheshire and Derbyshire.

(b) A companion cross to (a), standing near by, destroyed in 1787; its head has been built into the east wall of the north aisle, within the church, in order to preserve it.

(c) The Fishing Cross, of which a portion of the shaft is built into the wall of the church, above the recess where two hog-back tombstones are preserved: these and the crosses are dated *c.* A.D. 1000, while the church still retains traces of early Norman masonry.⁷

5. *Beckermest St. Bridget's.* The site in antiquity must have been remote from the village; it stands upon the line of an ancient trackway leading down to a ford across the river Ehen. The name is significant: it means Hermit's Beck, occurring as Bekhermett in the Lay Subsidy Roll of 1333. The church has been much rebuilt; there are traces of thirteenth-century structures, with later alterations. In the churchyard are the battered remains of two crosses:—

(a) The red freestone stump of a debased example of the Anglo-Norse type, upon which was an inscription in Gaelic-Norse minuscules; its socket has five incised cup-marks on the upper surface. Date: *c.* A.D. 1000.

(b) The headless shaft of a white freestone cross with "spiral" carving, of the late tenth century. The socket in which it leans does not belong to it, and may possibly represent a third cross.⁸

⁷ *Op. cit.*, pp. 168-176.

⁸ CW₂ xv 145.

6. *Beckermet St. John's*. The church, which is Early English but much restored, stands in the village of Beckermet, at the intersection of ancient roads. There are remains of cross-fragments of different types, but all late, representing five or six crosses. White freestone crosses of the "spiral" carving type are well represented: one retains a portion of its head, which is free-armed, strongly resembling fragments preserved at Distington, Workington and Aspatria. Other remains are of red freestone. W. G. Collingwood suggested⁹ that the white stone cross-heads at Beckermet St. John's, Bridekirk, Bromfield, Cross Canonby and Dearham, and also at Kirkby Stephen in Westmorland, outside our district, are rustic imitations of the fine Anglian work of an early cross at Carlisle, of which a fragment was found about 1888, while alterations were being made at a house in the Abbey. The crosses at Beckermet St. John's are assigned to the tenth and eleventh centuries.¹⁰

7. *Hale*. The church is situated by itself, on an ancient highway, in a hollow away from the village; it has indications of twelfth-century masonry, but has been much restored. Several cross-fragments are preserved at the church, one a much worn fragment of a shaft which resembles that at Muncaster; a late tenth or early eleventh-century date is suggested.¹¹

8. *St. Bees*. The church of the Benedictine priory was founded in 1125, perhaps upon an older foundation. It is at the intersection of ancient roads, and the coast is near by for access by sea. Cross-fragments are preserved here, some in the white freestone resembling those at Beckermet St. John's; others are in red freestone.¹²

9. *Distington*. The church is ancient; its original dedication is unknown, but one of the ancient bells is

⁹ CW2 i 292.

¹⁰ CW1 iv 144; Calverley, *Crosses*, p. 34.

¹¹ Calverley, *Crosses*, p. 180.

¹² *Op. cit.*, p. 260.

dedicated to St. Cuthbert and it is possible that that was the dedication of the church itself. It is situated, in antiquity rather apart from the village, near the Roman road from Moresby to Papcastle; access from the sea would also be easy. There are remains of one or two of the white freestone crosses preserved in the church, of the same type as the others in the series. Date: tenth century.¹³

10. *Harrington*. The church is of ancient foundation, but rebuilt. At the cross-roads, up the hill from the church, during widening of the road at a point called Ellerbank, a fragment of a cross-head was found. It is of white freestone, and strongly resembles the examples at Distington.¹⁴

11. *Clifton*. The church is of the twelfth century, rebuilt, and stands on the line of an ancient road, near a river crossing. There is the shaft of a cross of the tenth century, in red freestone.¹⁵

12. *Workington*. The church of St. Michael is an ancient foundation, rebuilt, standing near the harbour of "Derwent Moue" and on the line of ancient highways. Fragments of tenth and eleventh-century crosses were found during the restoration of the church, most of them being of the distinctive white freestone. One of these fragments is especially to be noted, as it has the uncommon key pattern, only two other examples of which are known in Cumberland: one is at St. Bees, the other at Glassonby.¹⁶ W. G. Collingwood suggested that this unusual pattern was brought from Ireland, by settlers who came to Cumberland during the tenth and eleventh centuries, and that the crosses bearing it are the work of Irish Vikings.¹⁷

¹³ *Op. cit.*, p. 133.

¹⁴ Cf. H. Valentine in CW2 xxv 369-371.

¹⁵ CW2 ii 108.

¹⁶ CW2 i 289.

¹⁷ Calverley, *Crosses*, p. 277.

13. *Brigham*. The eleventh-century church stands on the line of the Roman road leading to Papcastle, and near a ford of the river Derwent; in antiquity it must have stood alone. Six cross-fragments are preserved in the church and a cross-head at the vicarage, all of tenth or eleventh-century date.¹⁸

14. *Bridekirk*. The original church was built in the twelfth century, on the line of the Roman road from Maryport to Papcastle. There is here a tenth-century cross-head of the type noted previously, in white freestone.¹⁹

15. *Cross Canonby*. This is an early twelfth-century church, which in antiquity stood alone, at the intersection of the Roman roads leading north from the great fort at Maryport and on the branch-route to the fort at Old Carlisle. There is here a fragment of the cross-head of a tenth-century cross in white freestone, as well as a red freestone cross-shaft and a hog-back tombstone, also of late tenth-century date.²⁰

16. *Dearham*. The twelfth-century church in antiquity stood alone, on the line of an ancient road. A late tenth-century Gaelic-Norse cross, resembling that at Muncaster, has been removed into the church, where a cross-head of the distinctive white freestone series is also preserved.²¹

17. *Plumbland*. The church is a twelfth-century foundation, rebuilt during the thirteenth century. A fragment of a white freestone cross, of the usual type, is preserved, as also a portion of a tenth-century hog-back tombstone. The church stands near an ancient highway.²²

18. *Isel*. This is a twelfth-century church, near an

¹⁸ *Op. cit.*, p. 72.

¹⁹ *Op. cit.*, p. 60.

²⁰ *Op. cit.*, p. 103.

²¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 124.

²² *Op. cit.*, p. 253.

ancient road; fragments of tenth-century crosses in white freestone, typical of the series, are preserved.²³

19. *Gilcruix*. The church is an ancient one, rebuilt, standing on the line of an ancient highway; there is a cross-head in red freestone, of c. A.D. 1000, which resembles those at Muncaster and Dearham.²⁴

20. *Bromfield*. The church is an ancient foundation, dedicated to St. Kentigern, and stands on the line of an ancient highway. Here there are fragments of a cross-head of white freestone, much destroyed, and a hog-back tombstone.²⁵ There is also the shaft of a red freestone cross of the unusual "banded" type, of the late tenth or early eleventh century, of which another example, retaining its wheel cross-head, is recorded at Rockcliff.²⁶

21. *Aspatria*. The twelfth-century church stands near an ancient highway from Maryport to Wigton. A late tenth-century cross is in the churchyard, and preserved within the church are two cross-shafts of the white freestone series; there is also a late tenth-century hog-back tombstone.²⁷

At Aspatria the regular sequence of the West Cumberland crosses ends abruptly. When we note how numerous they are, how closely together they are sited, and how they all stand on or very near to ancient highways, it seems possible that they may attest and define the limits of a period of missionary activity, perhaps when Christian Norsemen arrived to make good the dislocation which had been caused by heathen ravages.

²³ *Op. cit.*, p. 211.

²⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 136.

²⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 80.

²⁶ CW2 xxvi 378.

²⁷ Calverley, *Crosses*, p. 11.