

ART. XI.—*The church bells of Isel.* By B. L. THOMPSON, M.A.

*Read at Carlisle, July 17th, 1958.*

TO commemorate the coronation of Her Majesty the Queen in 1953 the parishioners of Isel decided to repair their two church bells which were hanging idle in the small bell-cote at the west end of the church. Messrs. John Taylor & Co. of Loughborough were consulted, and they reported that it might be possible to repair the smaller bell (the treble, or no. 1) but it would not be possible to repair the larger bell (the tenor, or no. 2) which had lost its canons and was badly broken. No. 1 was therefore taken away to Loughborough with a view to its being repaired, but in the end even this could not be done and no. 1 came back to rejoin no. 2, as it was felt that both bells were of such historic interest they should be preserved inside the church in honoured retirement. The parishioners, with commendable zeal, thereupon raised the money necessary to buy two new bells to take the place of the two old ones.

The story outlined above is interesting from the antiquarian point of view because it is now possible to add two more medieval bells to the already impressive list of medieval bells in this part of Cumberland.<sup>1</sup> The Isel bells are not recorded in Mr W. G. Collingwood's *Inventory of Ancient Monuments*,<sup>2</sup> and although the late Miss Mary C. Fair was suspicious that they might be early, and looked at them hopefully from the ground, it was only possible to be sure of this when Messrs. Taylor & Co. made their examination and had the bells brought down from the bell-cote. They then formed the opinion that both bells were "early 14th century, or even earlier." Miss Fair made an independent inspection of the bells

<sup>1</sup> Miss M. C. Fair, "Bells of West Cumberland", CW2 xlviij 108 ff.

<sup>2</sup> Mr W. G. Collingwood, "An Inventory of the Ancient Monuments of Cumberland", CW2 xxiii 247.



No. 1. The treble bell, with canons, *circa* 1375.



No. 2. The damaged tenor bell, perhaps 14th century.

as soon as they could be seen at close quarters (21 November 1953) and wrote as follows:

“The bells are down. I think *no. 1* late 14th or early 15th century? *No. 2. The Casualty*. Looks to me earlier than *no. 1*, about mid 14th century? It looked rather slimmer in the waist than *no. 1*. The crown is so shattered, its shape was no help in judging . . . The injury to the bell is tragic.”

The writer took photographs of the bells in the hope that Miss Fair would prepare an article about them for *Transactions*, but owing to her death in February 1955 this was never done and the present note is a second-best attempt to fulfil her intention. *Bell no. 1* — the treble — is  $17\frac{3}{4}$  in. in diameter; height, lip to shoulder  $14\frac{1}{2}$  in., lip to crown  $15\frac{1}{2}$  in., lip to top of canons 20 in., and to top of argent  $21\frac{1}{2}$  in.; the thickness at the sound bow is  $1\frac{1}{8}$  in. No inscription or marks of any kind. *Bell no. 2* — the tenor — is 19 in. in diameter; height, lip to shoulder 15 in., lip to crown  $16\frac{1}{2}$  in., the canons and argent are absent, having been broken off; the thickness at the sound bow is  $1\frac{3}{8}$  in. No inscription or marks of any kind.

Mr Frederick Sharpe of Bicester, who is one of the leading authorities on church bells, has seen photographs of the Isel bells and writes:

“The bell without canons (*no. 2*) is of the normal South of England shape for a mid 14-century bell. Bell shapes developed later in the North and so I should date this one *circa* 1375. The bell with canons (*no. 1*) is puzzling. It looks primitive except for the angular shoulder and peculiar shaped crown. So far as I am able to judge from your photograph, a later method of joining the cap and cope moulds appears to have been used. I suspect it may be a recast by some itinerant man . . .”

The two ancient bells are now safely housed inside the church. The two new bells were hung in 1955 and are respectively 18 in. and  $21\frac{1}{2}$  in. in diameter, and each carries the inscription EX DON. ISEL. ANN. CORON. ELIZ II 1953.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Information kindly supplied by Mr Paul Taylor. Miss Fair (to use her own phrase) “hatched out an inscription or two” for the then Vicar, Mr Gregory, so she was partly responsible for the wording.