

ART. XIV.--*Keswick Town Clock Bell.* By the REV. H. WHITEHEAD.

Communicated at Ambleside, September 4th, 1889.

THIS bell, owing to its alleged antiquity, has become famous. The earliest mention of it that has come under my notice is in W. Scott's "Beauties of the Border", published in 1821. Mr. Scott, who evidently never saw it, or he would not have called it the "church bell", says, (p. 103):—

The church bell at Keswick is of great antiquity bearing date AD 1001.

Whellan, in his History of Cumberland, published in 1860, speaking of Keswick Town Hall, which was erected in 1813 on the site of the Old Court House, says (p. 345):—

The clock bell, which was taken from a building that formerly stood on Lord's Island in Derwent Lake, said to have been the manor house of the Earls of Derwentwater, has the letters and figures H D R O 1001 upon it; a decisive proof of its high antiquity.

The Old Court House or former Town Hall of Keswick is thus mentioned in Mr. Fisher Crosthwaite's pamphlet on "The Last of the Derwentwaters" (p. 15):—

I found a memorandum among the papers of the late Jonathan Ottley, in which he made out that the former Town Hall of Keswick was built in 1695, and some of the materials were brought from the mansion on Lord's Island, and the ancient bell was then removed which is still in use.

In this connection it may be as well to notice that Hutchinson (II, 198), speaking of St. John's-in-the-Vale, says:—

In the chapel is an old seat, with the date 1001 on the back of it. Tradition assigns that it was formerly in St. Herbert's chapel on the island in the lake.

This

This old seat, which is no longer extant, if brought from an island on the lake, more probably came from Lord's Island than from St. Herbert's; there having been for centuries no chapel on St. Herbert's Island. The mansion on Lord's Island is thus described by Mr. Crosthwaite:—

The large and convenient house with gardens, orchards, and other conveniences, spoken of by the Rev. T. Robinson, was built by Sir Thomas Radcliffe sometime about 1450. The former residence was at Castlerigg. . . . Tradition says that the stones were taken away to build the Mansion on Lord's Island. . . . For many generations the Radcliffe family resided on the island. So late as 1623 Sir Edward Radcliffe is mentioned as having his Mansion on Lord's Island. . . . It is very probable that the house was dismantled during the civil war about the year 1651.

The town clock bell, then, if of date 1001, would have been originally at Castlerigg on the main land.

Dated ancient bells are rare in this country. The late Mr. T. North, F.S.A., in his "Church Bells of Bedfordshire" (p. 6) says:—

A few early dated English bells have been found: one at S. Chad's, Cloughton, Lancashire, is dated 1296; another at Cold Ashby, Northamptonshire, is dated 1317; two at South Somercotes, Lincolnshire, bear the date 1423; and two others at Sowerby in the same county tell us they were cast in the year 1431.

To these may be added the tenor at Thirsk, Yorkshire, on which is inscribed ANNO MILLENO QVATER CENTO QVOQVE DEN EST HÆC CAMPANA IESVS, and the treble at Holme Cultram, dated MILL.CCCC.LXV. From which it appears that the Keswick town clock bell, if the figures 1001 really stood for a date, would be by nearly three centuries the oldest known dated bell in England.

Its claim to be regarded as of such high antiquity is encountered by two objections.

I. The letters of its inscription are Roman capitals, and its figures Arabic, arranged in this way:—

H D IOOI R O

But

But were Arabic numerals used in this country at so early a date as the very beginning of the eleventh century? Mr. T. Wright, F.S.A., says:—

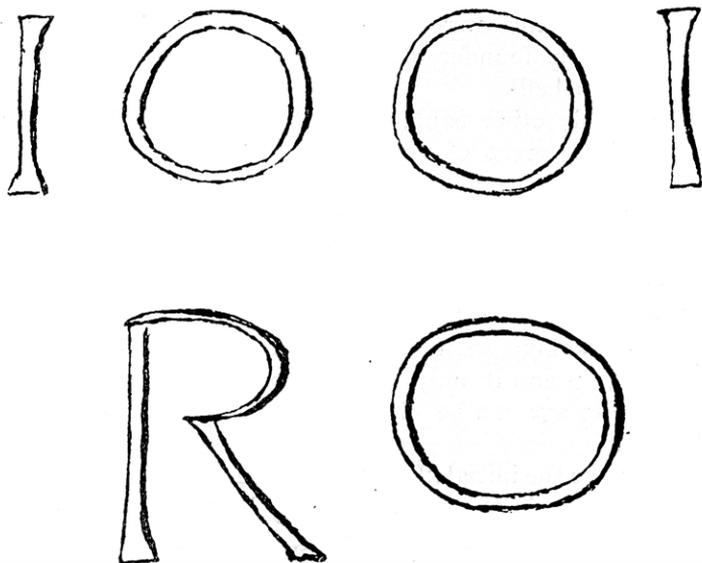
It was only in the 14th century that these algorismic numerals became generally used in books, and it is not probable that they would be used in inscriptions on buildings till long afterwards. . . . Rare examples of inscriptions in these figures may occur in the 15th century; but even in the 16th, as is well known, the prejudice was strongly in favour of Roman capitals. (*British Archaeological Journal*, vol. II, p. 72).

And if improbable in inscriptions on buildings until long after the fourteenth century, it is simply impossible in bell inscriptions of the very beginning of the eleventh century.

II. The shape of the bell is comparatively modern. Mr. Stahlschmidt, speaking of a bell at Chaldon, Surrey, which he describes as “very like a common flower pot”, says he thinks “it may be certainly reckoned as not later in date than 1250, and from its archaic shape may well be much older” (*Surrey Church Bells*, p. 77). But there is nothing at all archaic about the shape of the Keswick bell. It is not even “long-waisted”.

What explanation, then, can be given of the figures 1001, if they may not be regarded as indicative of a date? Some persons have suggested that the second figure was originally 6, and that some mischievous wag by means of a file has converted it into O. “The top of the 6 in 1601”, writes one to me, “has been filed off, as I saw with my own eyes; and the resulting O is somewhat shorter than the genuine zero which follows”. The accompanying illustration (full size) may seem to favour this opinion. But an engineer, with whom I examined the bell, for the express purpose of deciding this point, very confidently stated that the top of a 6 had not been filed off, and that the figure has always been O; which opinion, by the way, seems to be corroborated

roborated by the occurrence of the same figures on the old seat formerly in the chapel of St. John's-in-the-Vale.



Another explanation of these figures has been propounded, viz: that they indicate the 1001st bell cast by the founder. On which point it may be worth while to quote the following letter, signed Thomas Radcliffe, which appears in *Notes & Queries* of September 24, 1887:—

I bought the other day an old case clock of oak, which has an ornamented brass face. On a round sunk shield in the usual place is engraved roughly W BARNARD NEWARK 1061. The clock may be two hundred years old. I wish to know when W Barnard began business in Newark as a clockmaker, and when he finished. Also the number of clocks he made. Surely not 1061! That would be a work which in those days of hand labour would not be done in the lifetime of one business man. It seems to me probable that the number is intended for 161, or else the maker numbered the first clock he made 1001 (as some makers of articles do even now), in which case the clock in question would be the sixty first.

It

It would be almost as curious a coincidence if the Keswick bell and the St. John's old seat were each the first as it would be if each were the thousand and first specimen of the work of its maker. But indeed I doubt whether any founder ever adopted such a plan of numbering his bells.

The only other explanation, as far as I know, which anyone has given of the figures on the bell, is that the founder by some accidental mistake substituted O for 6 as the second figure. But here also, as with the other hypothesis, the matter is complicated by the old oak seat.

Now, whatever may be thought of these explanations, to none of which do I commit myself, I am decidedly of opinion, looking to its shape, that the bell is of no great antiquity; and it only remains to ascertain whether any clue to its age can be obtained from the initials which it bears.

I believe the initials R O to be those of the founder whose name occurs in the following entry in the churchwardens accounts of Haughton-le-Spring, Durham:—

1615, May 14 To Mr Robt Oldefeild bell-founder for casting of the litle bell xiiij^{li}.

This bell is no longer in existence. But the entry shews that Robert Oldfeild was casting bells for the north in the early years of the 17th century. He was probably connected with the Oldfeilds of York, one of whom, William, cast the Daçre treble in 1606 (*ante*, IX, 490); the initials W O and R O occur together on a shield on the 3rd bell at Broughton, Yorkshire, dated 1615 (Whitaker's *Craven*, Morant's edition, p. 114); and on the Castle Sowerby treble, dated 1586 (*ante*, IX, 486), are found the initials R O, somewhat larger than those at Keswick, which however they resemble in character, especially in the relative dimensions of the two letters. Mr. Stahlschmidt, in a letter to me, said:—

The

The Oldfields are a mysterious family. I have them at Canterbury, York, Nottingham, Hertford, and London; and there were besides three or four peripatetic ones with no apparent abodes at all.

My theory of Robert Oldfeild is that he was a member of the York firm, travelling at intervals during the period 1586-1615 as a peripatetic founder; and that in one of his peregrinations he cast what is now the Keswick town clock bell.

The initials H D are less easy to identify. It has by some been taken for granted that D must needs stand for Derwentwater. But during the period in which the bell was probably cast there was no such person as a Derwentwater. The initials, then, may be those of some steward or agent who gave the order for the bell to be cast; and his name might possibly be discovered in the archives of Greenwich Hospital.

