



SILVER RING FOUND AT URSWICK.

TO FACE P. 93.

ART. VIII.—*A Silver Seal Ring.* By H. S. COWPER.

Read at Alston, July 11th, 1929.

IN September, 1889, I exhibited a silver ring of considerable interest, and described it in a report to the Society of Antiquaries, printed in their *Proceedings*, vol. xiii, p. 26. It was said to have been found several years earlier in a private garden in Great Urswick, inside an urn, which sounds a little improbable, and I have no corroboration of this. Beyond these facts, I know nothing further of its find-history, nor do I know its present whereabouts.

It is very massive and fairly fits my forefinger, which is of about normal gauge. It is of 15th century date, but of an unusual type. The bezel is circular and engraved for sealing, and each shoulder has a compartment over three-quarters of an inch long, each engraved with a design in relief.

Now the sealing device is a pointed shield on which is apparently a letter W, over which, or "in chief," are four dots or roundels placed lozenge wise. I say "apparently" because there is just another possibility which I must mention later. On one shoulder is depicted, beneath a tree of many branches and three flowers, a unicorn which, with head turned away, fawns upon a female figure, half nude and seated. The unicorn is about the size of a spaniel, and the horn, which grows out of the back of his head, is held by the woman's right hand while she grasps its hoof with her left.

You will probably guess what this compartment shews. The old fable was that the unicorn was the cruellest of all wild beasts, only to be tamed or killed when in the presence of a chaste maiden. Accordingly, on the other compart-

ment we see the hunter himself taking advantage of the opportunity, advancing, and I think, drawing his bow, and not yet aiming, as his right hand has not been raised to his ear. He wears a short hunter's coat girded at the waist, but apparently no head gear.*

There is a difference in the characters of the work on the shoulders and bezel of the ring. The fable subjects are broadly and freely treated, and they fill up their compartments giving a bold and satisfying design. No doubt, through wear, they have lost a good deal of detail. The engraving on the bezel, the shield surrounded by a cable border, is cut in a somewhat crude and amateur manner, which is, I think, not in accordance with the work on the shoulders, and I do not think the bezel was engraved by the same hand which designed and made the ring and the fable subjects.

This crudeness of the work on the bezel indicates, I think, that the shield was put on by order of a purchaser, and engraved by a less trained hand. This is important in considering a theory which has suggested itself to me.

A friend to whom I shewed the impression of the shield, some time ago, said, "Is that a letter W? Is it not a badly cut heraldic fret?" Now the Curwens owned lands at Allithwaite in Cartmel from the 13th century onwards, and in the 16th and 17th centuries there were Curwens at Cartmel, Urswick and Aldingham.† Their well-known coat was a fret and a chief. Further the Curwens of Workington used supporters from about 1500, perhaps earlier, and these supporters were the unicorn and maiden. Is it possible that a Curwen

* In the *Journal, British Archaeological Assoc.*, v, 274-5 ("On an ivory Casket of the fourteenth century") the same subject is shown but the hunter is armed with a spear and the maiden draped. The subject also is found on the carved stalls of the church of Stratford-on-Avon and Chester Cathedral. Again on the capital of a column at St. Pierre, Caen, where the design and treatment much resemble those on the ring, the hunter is an archer: the maiden draped; and there are two trees of different species.

† See J. F. Curwen, *History of the Ancient House of Curwen*, 1928, p. 289.

bought a unicorn and maiden ring, but handed it to a provincial engraver to do his shield on it, but the engraver (no herald) botched it so that it looks like a W?

An attractive idea, but will it bear examination? I doubt it. I have strained my eyes at the Victoria and Albert and British Museums, looking at rings; but I have seen no examples of frets looking like W's, and much as I should have liked such an identification, I do not think any man who could afford a ring like this, would have it engraved by a man who did not understand heraldry.