

ART. XI.—*Ambleside old church.* By B. L. THOMPSON,
M.A.

Read at Penrith, July 3rd, 1956.

IT is fifty years since Miss M. L. Armitt, with access to the Rydal Hall MSS., wrote her paper "Ambleside Town and Chapel"¹ which is still the only authoritative history of Ambleside. Miss Armitt showed that "already in 1597 a chapel existed in Ambleside, though when it was built, or how the cost of it was supported by the few townsmen, is not known."² From old plans, made later than 1620, Miss Armitt was able to say the structure was "24 yds. long and 7 yds. wide, having two entrances on the south side, and fifty-one benches and four pews disposed on either side the aisle."³ The communion-table was flanked by seats, the pulpit was almost half-way down the chapel, and the reading-desk was somewhere in between the two. "The only irregularity of outline was at the NE. corner where an enlargement extended the pews of Ambleside Hall."⁴ The old chapel, "decayed and damp and almost past using" was rebuilt by subscription in 1812 and usually called St. Anne's though (Miss Armitt says) "it is doubtful whether it was ever formally consecrated." The present parish church of Ambleside, St. Mary's, was consecrated in 1854. It now seems desirable to add a postscript to Miss Armitt's paper by reporting several small discoveries and developments in recent years.

The 16th-century church. It used to be said there was no picture in existence of the church that was pulled down

¹ CWAS. 2. vi. 1-101

² *Ibid.*, 37.

³ According to his MS notes Machell, in 1692, made the measurements 26 yards by 8 yards, perhaps external instead of internal.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 39-40.



PLATE I, FIG. 1—Ambleside Church, by Sir George Beaumont, 1806.



PLATE I, FIG. 2—"Church near Ambleside", an old engraving, printed in reverse for comparison with fig. 1.

in 1812. Happily this proves to be incorrect. There is a tiny sketch by Machell in the margin of his notebook,⁵ done in 1692, showing western bell-turret, west window, and five small windows and two doors in the south wall. Secondly, there is a small wash-drawing by Sir George Beaumont, done in 1806, showing the east windows and the western bell-turret (here reproduced). Thirdly, there is an engraving entitled CHURCH NEAR AMBLESIDE by an unknown artist, and undated.⁶ When compared with the Beaumont drawing, this is quite clearly a view of the same building from the same angle, but reversed in the process of engraving, which makes identification more difficult. These last two pictures are in the Armit Library at Ambleside.⁷ We now know how picturesque the old chapel must have been, with its distinctive crow-stepped bell-turret at the west end and its irregular arrangement of windows at the east end.

By the beginning of the 19th century the chapel was in a bad way and was considered to be beyond repair; in any case it was no longer worthy to be the parish church of the growing, modern Ambleside. It was small, "very mean", and whitewashed externally.⁸ Internally it was unceiled and had texts painted on the walls.⁹ The roof leaked and it is said that people went to church armed with umbrellas for protection during divine service. Until 1812 the building may still have had some of its original furnishings and perhaps a little piece of old glass in one of the windows, for Machell sketched a coat of arms—apparently the Braithwaites'—in a small window next to the east window. He also copied an inscription, then to be seen, on the "Chappel Bell". This has defied all attempts at interpretation. Our President kindly

⁵ II, 151.

⁶ reproduced in "Together Met", Noel Harden, 52.

⁷ where, also, is a pen and ink sketch of "Ambleside Chapel" by A.D., undated, but as it bears no resemblance to the others, nor does it represent the 1812 church, it seems to deserve no further consideration. It was formerly in the possession of the Greens of Pavement End, Grasmere, and later of Mr S. Garside.

⁸ Dorothy Wordsworth's *Grasmere Journal*, 16 April 1802.

⁹ "Description of Westmorland" by Rev. Mr Hodgson, 218.

wrote about it to the Victoria and Albert Museum, South Kensington, and Mr C. C. Oman, Keeper of the Department of Metal-work, could only say that part of the second line "might imply that the bell had been cast at Winterthur" and suggested that the drawing should be submitted to the Schweizerisches Landesmuseum, Zurich. This was done, and Mr F. Gysin replied "I think . . . that we can exclude the Winterthur hypothesis. First we are quite unable to make out anything like Winterthur in the inscription and on the other hand we know positively nothing about bell-founders in Winterthur . . . This seems to be one of the cases where the founder hopelessly mixed up his letters because he could not read." A similar conclusion—that the inscription is unintelligible—was also reached by Mr Kenneth Smith, of Tullie House, and by Mr Cecil G. Bulman, who was so good as to check the copy of the inscription with the original manuscript note. Thus the conundrum is likely to remain forever unsolved because the bell itself has vanished, though its clapper may be one of the two now preserved at St. Mary's. It is known to have been cracked in 1798, when it was rung more rapidly than usual to announce the news of Nelson's victory at the battle of the Nile. Perhaps it was subsequently re-cast, because until recently there was in the tower a bell inscribed "Preston & Ross, Liverpool, 1846" which has been given recently (1956) to the new church at Mirehouse, Whitehaven.

The 19th-century church. In 1812 the chapel was rebuilt on the old site. It has been generally supposed that the old building was entirely demolished, but Miss Noel Clay and Mr W. Vity of Ambleside are both of the opinion that the west wall was left standing and was incorporated in the west wall of the new church. The north, east and south walls were all new, making the building larger than its predecessor. The tower projected outwards from the west wall, the "porches" in the

angles being added later: they are not shown in drawings by William Green dated 1821.¹⁰

St. Anne's, the 1812 church, became "the old church" when St. Mary's, the 1854 church, was built in a different part of Ambleside. Many elderly people remember its being used for Sunday afternoon services down to fairly recent times, but gradually it fell out of favour and finally in 1940 leave was given for it to be converted into a church hall. After the war, in 1945, alterations were made, and most of the fittings were removed. The parish chest, the font, and several mural monuments were taken to St. Mary's.¹¹ Only the Royal Arms of George III still remain above the gallery of the old church. The churchyard is now, alas, uncared for, but in it may be found memorials which deserve more respectful attention than they receive at present, especially the one marking the grave of John Kelsick, the young founder and principal benefactor of Ambleside Free Grammar School, who died in 1723, and whose tombstone, with its Latin inscription, was erected by Roland Simpson, a scholar of the school, as an act of gratitude, in 1814.

¹⁰ *"Thirty-Six Etchings from Nature"*

¹¹ *"Together Met"*, 80.