

ART. VIII.—*Notes on the church bells of Cumberland.*

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Read at Kendal, April 27th, 1974.

THE Rev. Henry Whitehead, successively Vicar of Brampton, Newlands, Newton Reigny and Lanercost, who died in 1896, described in our *Transactions* more than half the church bells then existing in Cumberland. He wrote no less than eleven papers, of which two were printed posthumously, covering 85 churches and 173 bells in north, east and mid Cumberland.¹ In 1902 Dr C. A. Parker contributed an article on the bells of Gosforth, Irton and Waberthwaite.² In 1948 Miss M. C. Fair compiled a summary of "The Pre-Reformation Church Bells of West Cumberland" and in 1950 added a note on the medieval bell at Lamplugh.³ In 1957 and 1958 two brief articles reported happenings to the bells at Eskdale and Isel,⁴ but there has been no study of the bells of the whole county.

Recently an attempt has been made to investigate the bells not previously recorded in *Transactions*, and although research of this kind can never be complete, it is now possible to say (perhaps for the first time) more or less precisely how many there are. In 1973 the number of consecrated churches in Cumberland, including Alston, Garrigill and Nenthead which are not in the Diocese of Carlisle but the Diocese of Newcastle upon Tyne was 197. These churches had a total of nearly 450 bells, gongs⁵ and tubes⁶; some of

¹ CW1 vi 221; vii 417; viii 135 and 505; ix 240 and 475; xi 129; xiii 194 and 310; xiv 259 and 275.

² CW2 ii 99.

³ CW2 xlvi 108 and l 209.

⁴ CW2 lvii 97 and lviii 118.

⁵ Bassenthwaite, St John, 5; Watermillock, 1.

⁶ Maryport, 10.

them, of course, are modern and cannot yet claim to be of antiquarian interest.

The *medieval bells* are the most important and the most worthy of preservation. They are as follows: Two at Aikton; a pair at "Old St Bridget's", Beckermeth; one (of 3) at Brigham; two at Burgh-by-Sands; one (of 8) at Carlisle Cathedral; the tenor bell at Castle Sowerby; the treble at Cumrew; two (of 3) at Dacre. The ancient church at Over Denton has a very small medieval bell, minus its clapper, preserved on a window sill. Distington has two, in a Victorian church; Edenhall, two (of 3); Egremont, one in retirement; Ennerdale, one still in use; Eskdale, one in retirement.

Greystoke, remarkably, possesses four bells which are all pre-Reformation, but only three of them are rung. Holme Cultram has the distinction of a bell actually dated 1465 (as well as an eighteenth-century one). Isel's two medieval bells have been replaced by two bells of 1953. At Kirkbride the single bell (diameter 16½ in.) was thought by Whitehead to be blank; however, with the aid of field-glasses this appeared to the writer not to be so, and in April 1973 Mr G. Nelson took a plaster cast and established that the short inscription is SCA BRI DE. This suggests that it may have been cast specifically for Kirkbride church and seems to disprove a tradition that it was once at Melrose Abbey.⁷

There is a fine medieval bell (the tenor) at Lamplugh; two, less distinguished, at Langwathby; and one at Loweswater. This last has had a varied career, it was discarded in 1884, rescued by Canon H. D. Rawnsley, preserved at Crosthwaite for eighty years, and finally returned to Loweswater. In 1963 our member Mr C. B. Martindale, F.R.I.B.A., when making an official inspection at Moresby unexpectedly found two medieval bells in the tower of the 1822

⁷ CWI xv 150.

church. The treble (15½ in.) has an inscription of 25 letters apparently commemorating that it was given by John Pennington; the tenor (17 in.) has a corrupt inscription of 10 letters which has so far defied interpretation. These bells (which are not a pair) were unknown to Miss Fair and have not been recorded previously. Muncaster has a medieval bell, one of two, and so has Newton Reigny. Renwick's treble is still in use; the old tenor, which is an alphabet bell, has been replaced by a bell of 1893. There are two ancient bells at Scaleby, and two at Threlkeld. Waberthwaite and Whicham, which have pairs of medieval bells, are both churches that have open bell-cotes. This makes a total of 46 pre-Reformation bells, quite a high proportion, because only 122 of the 197 churches are of pre-Reformation origin. Nearly all of them are inscribed bells: in most cases there is merely the usual invocation to a saint, but longer inscriptions may be seen at Egremont, Greystoke, Holme Cultram and Lamplugh. The treble bell at Waberthwaite is remarkable for having HENRICUS SEXTUS REX. The most ancient of the bells are almost certainly fourteenth century, and Whitehead's comment is still true: "perhaps we shall not be far wrong in assuming these bells (the two at Burgh) and the Aikton treble to be the oldest inscribed bells in the county."⁸

Other bells have been considered as "possibly medieval" but rejected for the time being because of unconvincing evidence. The single bell at Bolton is said to be a sanctus bell, but looks rather large; the treble at Kirkland is an ancient shape but was thought by Whitehead not to be early; the little bell at St John's-in-the-Vale is inaccessible but might be co-eval with the original chapel which stood on the site; Uldale is a church likely to have old bells but their appearance is more suggestive of the eighteenth century; and

⁸ CWI viii 519.

finally, the tenor at Whitbeck is the long, narrow-waisted type that usually indicates considerable age.

Turning to *the period 1550-1700* there is only one dated bell of the late sixteenth century, the treble at Hutton-in-the-Forest, 1588, surprisingly by Thomas Draper, a bell-founder of Thetford, Norfolk. The known seventeenth-century bells add up to about twenty. Ainstable has a pair dated 1688 but they are not inscribed. Allhallows old church used to have a pair; one of them survives at Bolton Low Houses and is dated 1687, the other was sold to an antique dealer at Leeds. Although Bowness-on-Solway now has two Taylor bells of 1905 their predecessors recline in the church porch and have a romantic history, having been stolen from across the Solway: the smaller is dated 1616 and came from Dornock near Annan, and the larger (probably the older) from Middlebie near Ecclefechan. Amongst the eight bells at Carlisle Cathedral are two by J. & W. Langshaw who were local founders — they are the present number 3 (1659) and the tenor (1657) — whilst number 5 (1608) is by George Lees and Edmund Wright, also believed to be local men. Corney's treble has the date 1621 and the tenor has 1614 and the initials R O which may stand for Robert Oldfield. At Culgaith is a single bell of 1670; at Dacre the treble is by W. Oldfield, 1606; and at Edenhall number 2 is by W. Seller, 1665, and seems to have been originally at the hall before being given to the church.

Little is known concerning the bell at Harrington but Harper Gaythorpe recorded a tradition in the Curwen family that it came from Furness Abbey;⁹ this would be more interesting if it were still the same bell, but as it is dated 1674 it has obviously been re-cast. The tenor at Hutton-in-the-Forest is dated 1653 and may be the work of Thomas Stafford of

⁹ Furness Lore, 1900, p. 77.

Penrith. He is better known for casting very large bells (for example, at Cartmel, Kendal and Kirkby Stephen) which had a tendency to "burst", so we are glad to find a small bell of his still existing. In the parish of Ivegill the derelict chapel at High Head is about to be declared redundant: lying on the floor is a badly broken bell of 1635. Last of the seventeenth-century bells we come to number 2 at Kirkoswald, 1619, by W. Land a bell founder whose work is mostly found in London and the eastern counties. Mention should also be made of an unrecorded bell at Watermillock, no longer used, which may be of this period; and the bell at St Nicholas's church, Whitehaven, whose tower alone escaped destruction by fire in 1971: it is inscribed WE GLORIFY THEE and although it is not dated the history of the church indicates it may well be the original bell of the new building on the site in 1693. The churchwardens' accounts for that year refer to a bell and a clock.¹⁰

There are almost fifty *eighteenth century* bells but the founders of 13 of them are unknown. Addingham has a bell (1787) by I. Robinson of Penrith who probably also cast the Garrigill bell (1764) which was "brought from Penrith". Bootle's treble (1729) is by W. Packer. At Brigham both number 1 and number 3 have the initials of Abraham Rudhall of Gloucester whose firm re-cast them in 1711 at Kendal. Caldbeck has an interesting trio, the treble (1726) being by Luke Ashton of Wigan and the other two (1724) probably by A. Peever. He appears to have been another Penrith bell-founder who was also responsible for a bell (1729) in the detached bell-tower at Kirkoswald (no longer hung). A specimen of his handiwork used to be at Addingham but is now reduced to two small pieces only. The tenor at Dalston (1704) is by Ralph Ashton of Wigan, as are the treble at Skelton (1711), a disused

¹⁰ W. Jackson, *Cumberland and Westmorland Papers and Pedigrees*, 1892, vol. ii, 117.

bell at Thwaites (also dated 1711), and a pair at Melmerby (1715). There is a big bell at Irton Hall — it was at Irton church until 1887 — with a remarkable inscription commemorating the defeat of the Pretender: IMPOSTOR FUGATUS ANO GEORGII REGIS SECO ANNO DOM 1715. Maryport boasts a bell (1761) by W. Evans of Chepstow, Monmouthshire; this doubtless reached Cumberland by sea. Lastly, we must mention two bells by T. Mears, one at Westward (about 1785) and the other at Wigton (1789). The Wigton churchwardens specially ordered a bell “of a sufficiency and weight that its sound be heard in the whole parish”.¹¹

The name Mears introduces us to a firm which (as T. Mears, C. & G. Mears, Mears & Co. or Mears & Stainbank) produced some notable bells for Cumberland in the *nineteenth century*: 1846, Thursby (6 bells); 1856, Cockermouth (8); 1857, St Bees (8); 1864, St Stephen's, Carlisle (8) — these bells were saved when St Stephen's church was demolished and were hung at the new St Elisabeth's church when it was built at Harraby in 1967; 1896, Aspatria (8). At St Aidan's, Carlisle, is a large Mears & Stainbank bell, hanging from a bracket outside the north-east corner, undated but known to have come originally from a private house, Highmoor at Wigton.¹² In 1899 it was given to Christ Church, Carlisle, and from there was transferred to St Aidan's after the two parishes were united. Warners of London supplied a ring of eight for Irton in 1887, and ten years later they added five bells to the one at Irthington to create a ring of six. Taylors of Loughborough cast 6 for Bridekirk in 1869 and 8 for Christ Church, Silloth, in 1883. Silloth's tenor weighs 23-2-6 and is the heaviest bell in the county. There are many other nineteenth-century bells,

¹¹ T. W. Carrick, *History of Wigton*, 1949, p. 41.

¹² T. W. Carrick, *History of Wigton*, 1949, pp. 190 and 199.

indeed some 220 altogether, but the figure is hardly surprising in such a church-building and church-restoring era.

Little need be said here about the *twentieth century* bells. Taylors, who are still active, have provided the majority of the eighty bells: 1902, Egremont (8); 1903, Arlecdon (8); 1910, Cleator Moor (8); 1914, Hensingham (8); 1959, St Michael's, Workington (8 re-cast); and various other bells besides. In 1921 Warners, now unfortunately defunct, added 5 bells to the previous singleton at St George's, Millom; and in 1949-1950 Gillett & Johnston of Croydon were responsible for Alston's ten bells, the only ring of ten in Cumberland.

I wish to acknowledge the kind assistance of the clergy, churchwardens and other friends who co-operated in the research for this paper.