

Mother Shipton investigated/Chapter 1

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MOTHER SHIPTON AND CARDINAL WOLSEY.



MOTHER SHIPTON INVESTIGATED.

Chapter first.

THE ALLEGED PROPHECIES OF MOTHER SHIPTON AND OTHERS, ABOUT THE END OF THE WORLD—
THE MOTHER SHIPTON OF POPULAR BELIEF—HER PROPHECY IN RELATION TO CARDINAL WOLSEY—
HER TRADITIONARY BIRTH, MARRIAGE, LIFE AND DEATH.

This critical investigation of the Mother Shipton literature is published early in 1881, the year in which, according to that celebrated Yorkshire prophetess, the world is to come to an end. The best known of the prophecies attributed to her, is the following;

"The world to an end shall come,
In eighteen hundred and eighty one."

This, and other prophecies, said to have been copied from records of unimpeachable antiquity in the British Museum Library, which prophecies in some cases have been reproduced in alleged *fac-simile*, have raised curiosity even in the scientific and sceptical mind, and fanned the flame of imagination in the mind idealistic, as to what amount of truth, or error, or deception, may be at the root of the matter. These questions it is my object to attempt to solve by reference to papers of true antiquity in the national possession.

Prophecies about the end of the world have always had more or less influence. Whiston predicted that the world would be destroyed on the 13th October, 1736, and crowds of people left London, to see, from neighbouring fields, the destruction of the city, which was to be "the beginning of the end."

Numbers of fanatics in Europe, predicted the end of the world in 999. "The scene of the last judgment was expected to be at Jerusalem. In the year 999, the number of pilgrims proceeding eastward, to await the coming of the Lord in that city, was so great that they were compared to a desolating army. Most of them sold their goods and possessions before they quitted Europe, and lived upon the proceeds in the Holy Land. Buildings of every sort were suffered to fall into ruins. It was thought useless to repair

them when the end of the world was so near. Many noble edifices were deliberately pulled down. Even churches, usually so well maintained, shared the general neglect. Knights, citizens, and serfs, travelled eastwards in company, taking with them their wives and children, singing psalms as they went, and looking with fearful eyes upon the sky, which they expected each minute to open, and to let the Son of God descend in glory."^[1]

A panic occurred in Leeds in 1806, during which many in their fear "got religion" for a time, and indulged in a temporary repentance. A Yorkshire hen had been laying eggs in a village close by, inscribed, "Christ is coming." Eventually the writing was discovered to be in corrosive ink, and the trick by which observers were made to believe that the hen laid them in that condition, was found out.

The *Pall Mall Gazette* of April 14th, 1879, says that the Mid-Somerset people believed Mother Shipton to have prophesied that on Good Friday, 1879, Ham Hill, near Yeovil, would be swallowed up at 12 o'clock by an earthquake, and Yeovil itself visited by a tremendous flood. Some people actually left the locality with their families to avoid the calamity; others made various preparations for it. On the Good Friday large numbers of people flocked to the vicinity of Ham Hill, to see it swallowed up, but were disappointed.

The following is the most largely circulated form of one of other Shipton's reputed prophecies, which of late years has been exercising the public mind. I quote it from p. 450 of *Notes and Queries*, December 7th, 1872, but since, as well as before then, its circulation has been extensive.

ANCIENT PREDICTION,

"(Entitled by Popular tradition 'Mother Shipton's Prophecy,')

"Published in 1448, republished in 1641.

"Carriages without horses shall go,
And accidents fill the world with woe.
Around the world thoughts shall fly
In the twinkling of an eye.
The world upside down shall be
And gold be found at the root of a tree.
Through hills man shall ride,
And no horse be at his side.
Under water men shall walk,
Shall ride, shall sleep, shall talk.
In the air men shall be seen,
In white, in black, in green;
Iron in the water shall float,
As easily as a wooden boat.
Gold shall be found and shown
In a land that's now not known.
Fire and water shall wonders do,
England shall at last admit a foe.
The world to an end shall come,
In eighteen hundred and eighty one."

The present popular ideas about Mother Shipton herself are twofold, as set forth in cheap publications, mostly almanacs with her name on the cover. Some of these profess to give her authentic history with the marvellous elements sifted out; others include the miraculous incidents.

The following account of her life, as adapted to the more sober-minded readers of the present century, is summarised by me from a book entitled *Mother Shipton and Nixon's Prophecies*, compiled from original and scarce editions by S. Baker, published in 1797, by Denley, Gate Street, Lincoln's Inn Fields, London. The pamphlet gives information about the life of Nixon, a Cheshire prophet, also about Ursula Shipton, for Ursula is the real name of our heroine. She is stated by Baker to have been born in July 1488, in the reign of Henry VII, near Knaresborough, Yorkshire. She was baptised by the Abbot of Beverley, by the name of Ursula Sonthiel. "Her stature," adds her biographer, "was larger than common, her body crooked, her face frightful; but her understanding extraordinary."

Baker states that she was a pious person, who at the age of twenty-four was courted by one Toby Shipton, a builder, of Skipton, a village four miles north of York; soon afterwards they were married. She became known as Mother Shipton, and acquired fame by means of her extraordinary predictions.

When Cardinal Wolsey intended to remove his residence to York, she announced that he would never reach that city. The Cardinal sent three lords of his retinue in disguise, to inquire whether she had made such a prediction, and to threaten her if she persisted in it. She was then living in a village called Dring Houses, a mile to the west of the city. The retainers, led by a guide named Beasley, knocked at the door.

"Come in, Mr. Beasley, and three noble lords with you," said Mother Shipton.

She then treated them civilly, by setting out cakes and ale before them.

"You gave out," said they, "the Cardinal should never see York."

"No," she replied, "I said he might see it, but never come to it."

They responded, "When he does come, he'll surely burn thee."

"If this burn," said the Reverend Mother, "so shall I."

She then cast her linen handkerchief into the fire, allowed it to remain in the flames a quarter of an hour, and took it out unsinged.

One of her awe-stricken visitors then asked what she thought of him.

She answered "The time will come, my lord, when you shall be as low as I am, and that is low indeed."

This was judged to be verified when Thomas Lord Cromwell was beheaded.

Cardinal Wolsey, on his arrival at Cawood, ascended the Castle Tower, and while viewing York, eight miles off, vowed he would burn the witch when he reached there. But ere he descended the stairs, a message from the King demanded his presence forthwith, and while on his journey to London, he was taken ill and died at Leicester.

She accurately foretold the destruction by tempest of the Ouse Bridge and Trinity Church, York, in the following mystical language: "Before Ouse Bridge and Trinity Church meet, what is built in the day shall fall in the night, till the highest stone of the church be the lowest stone of the bridge."

Baker's booklet passed through two editions in 1797. He alleges that some of her prophecies therein were copied from an "original scroll delivered by her to the Abbot of Beverley; privately preserved in a noble family for many years, and lately discovered among other curious and valuable manuscripts." He states that she foretold the time of her death, and that after taking solemn leave of her friends she departed, with much serenity, A.D. 1651, when upwards of seventy years of age. A stone

monument was erected to her memory on the high North Road, between the villages of Clifton and Skipton, about a mile from York. The monument represents a woman upon her knees, with her hands closed before her, in a praying posture, and "stands to be seen there to this day," (1797). The following is said to have been her epitaph:—

**Here lye's she who never ly'd
Whose skill often has been try'd
Her Prophecies shall still survive,
And she keep her name alive.**



1. Mackay's *Popular Delusions*. London: 1869. Vol. i, p. 222.

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