

1485



The Cheshire Plowboy Prophet

by Herb Kugel

He was the village idiot, yet his predictions can astound us six centuries after they were made. His name was Robert Nixon. He was born in 1467, in Cheshire, England, on a small, impoverished tenant farm owned by the Abbey of Vale Royal, which was located in the center of the shire or county itself. Although he became famous as the Cheshire Ploughboy Prophet, he was first known only for his stupidity—so much so, that his almost destitute father experienced great difficulty in simply teaching him how to take care of cattle or drive a pair of oxen.

An only son, Robert's head was unusually large and his protuberant eyes made him an object of ridicule, yet even with the constant insults, he usually remained a mild and inoffensive person, a boy who rarely said anything more than yes or no. He was not physically attractive and, in fact, he was described as "...a mere ideot [idiot]—a short, squab [squat] fellow, with a great head and goggle eyes; used to drivell [slob-

ber] as he spoke, which was in a hoarse voice, and very rarely; had a particular spite against children, and would frequently run after them to beat them."

The "Ideot's" Predictions

One day, the "ideot" surprised everyone by suddenly predicting that an ox belonging to a neighboring farmer would die. Not long after this, Robert and a group of villagers watched as an apparently healthy ox collapsed. When the animal was examined minutes later, no cause could be found for its sudden death. Lord Cholmondeley, the county squire, heard about this amazing prediction and sent for young Nixon. He wanted to teach the boy to read and write, but Robert sullenly resisted every effort at education and was soon returned to his father's plow. A few days after leaving Lord Cholmondeley, Nixon was busy plowing when he abruptly halted in his tracks, and, open mouthed, looked up at the clear blue sky. The farm overseer ordered him to get on with his work, but the

boy didn't or couldn't move. The overseer struck him with a strap and demanded he stop dreaming, but Nixon remained rigid. Over an hour went by. The overseer stood watching with a mixture of curiosity, awe, and growing fear, not knowing what to do or what to expect. Finally, the trance—if that's what it was—abruptly ended as quickly as it began; Nixon began plowing again as if nothing unusual had happened. The overseer asked him what he had seen. Nixon's reply was enigmatic. "I have seen things that I cannot tell you, and which man has never saw [sic] before." The overseer became even more disturbed. Nixon's voice was suddenly clear and without accent, unlike his usual faltering, hoarse speech.

This was only the beginning. Nixon, again speaking in mysterious, unaccented tones, spoke for two hours to a group of amazed and frightened patrons in a local tavern. He spoke the "history of the future." He told of Oliver Cromwell—who would be born in 1599, 132 years after Nixon, and the subsequent Civil War and beheading of Charles I, the king's execution taking place in 1649, 182 years after Nixon's birth. Nixon also told of the Restoration of the monarchy and of William of Orange, who was born in 1650 and who would rule England as William III. He then told of a French Revolution (1789) and, finally, he foretold an event that would take place in



Henry Tudor defeats Richard III at Bosworth—as foretold by Robert Nixon

1688, 221 years after his birth: the deposition of King James II.

“When a raven shall build its nest in a stone lion’s mouth on top of a church in Cheshire, a king shall be driven out of his kingdom to return nevermore. As token of the truth of this, a wall of Mr. [Lord] Cholmondeley’s shall fall.”

Word of this prediction quickly reached Lord Cholmondeley, who laughed at it. He immediately had all his walls carefully examined, and they were found secure. He told his bailiff that young Nixon was certainly wrong on this occasion, but the next day a structurally sound wall abruptly crumbled to the ground without any apparent reason. The remainder of this prediction also came true when a raven built its nest in the mouth of a stone gargoyle atop a Cheshire church. The nest was built just a day before King James II was deposed in 1688. Not only had Nixon seen the king’s abdication, he had also foreseen an event that had taken place the day before. True to Nixon’s prediction, James II never returned to England but died in exile in France.

One of Nixon’s most famous and darkly accurate predictions concerned the

fate of the Abbey of Vale Royal itself. King Edward I founded the abbey in 1277, and in its heyday it was the largest Cistercian abbey in England. Nixon warned one its abbots who was annoying him:

“When you the harrow come on high, soon a raven’s nest will be.”

Harrow’s Martyrdom

This prophecy came grimly true during the Reformation when the last abbot, whose name was Harrow, was called before Knight Marshal Sir Thomas Holcroft and sentenced to death for refusing to accept King Henry VIII as supreme head of the Church. Henry had sold the monastery and part of its estates to Holcroft for about £915. Holcroft’s crest was a raven. Nixon also prophesied that a small twig would make the abbey door. This prediction was laughed at and thought ridiculous, but when the abbey’s great doors were removed so that a new front entrance could be installed, an old thorn plant was cut down and put in the doorway to keep animals from straying into the building. Nixon also predicted that stones from Norton Priory at nearby Runcorn and stones from the Abbey of Vale Royal itself would meet in

the middle of the nearby River Weaver. Everyone also laughed at this, but they stopped laughing when stones from both Vale Royal and the Norton priory were used to build the “old” Acton Bridge across the river.

War of the Roses

Nixon could not only see into the future; he could “far see” into his present as well. Cheshire, Nixon’s home, is located in the west of England, near Liverpool and the Irish Sea, while the town of Market Bosworth is located in central England, in Leicestershire, near Birmingham, some 88 miles from Cheshire. On August 22, 1485, English history was changed by a battle at a field near the town. Robert Nixon, the Cheshire Prophet as he was now called, “saw” the battle. On that date, Nixon was plowing a field when he abruptly halted in his tracks. He suddenly raised the whip that he used to prod the oxen pulling his plow, brandishing it over his head as if it were a sword. He began to shout, again in a voice that was not his own, “There, Richard! There! Now! Up, Henry! Up with all arms! Over the ditch, Henry! Over the ditch and the battle is won!”