



The only English Pope

A Tribute to Nicholas Breakspear, Pope Adrian IV

by Rosemary Traynor

As we rapidly approach the great Millennium many plans are underway worldwide to celebrate the event; and rightly so.

Here in Hertfordshire we have cause to mark a double celebration which, unhappily, seems to be in danger of slipping by without acknowledgement or honour. This event is the birth at Bedmond, in the year 1100, of Nicholas Breakspear, more widely known as the only English Pope.

There appears to be few commemoratives of Nicholas, even in Hertfordshire. One marks the site of Nicholas's birthplace at Bedmond where, by the remarkable foresight and pride of the Parish Council, a small plaque, surrounded by bedding plants, is set into the kerbside.

In 1924, Hertfordshire Historical Association placed a memorial in the Abbots Langley Church of St. Lawrence and also in the same village, displayed in the vestibule of the Catholic Church of St. Saviour, there is a fine marble bust of Adrian IV. Again, his effigy appears resplendent on the High Altar screen of St. Alban's Cathedral.

But it is not easy to locate any of these commemoratives of the man whose untimely death 'stirred our England which gave him birth with grief... and is a cause of sorrow to all good men'. (John of Salisbury 1159).

What exactly is known of Nicholas Breakspear? In fact, quite a lot. He was born at Bedmond in the parish of Abbots Langley within the domain of the Benedictine Abbey erected on the execution site of Alban, England's Protomartyr. His father, Robert, had removed from the paternal manor of 'Breakspears' in Harefield to take tenure of land owned by the affluent Abbey. Robert married and had two sons. Why he left his family at a later date is not known, but his acceptance by the Benedictines at the Abbey is documented and, indeed, his remains are buried there.

Nicholas became a pupil at the Abbey School, where as a boy from a poor background, he received a privileged education.

As he advanced in years and knowledge, Nicholas was attracted to the disciplined life of the Abbey, but upon his request to join the Order, the Abbot urged patience and more study. Undoubtedly, this did not appeal to the disgruntled adolescent. Did he, one wonders, try other religious orders such as the Augustinian Priory at Royston or the Benedictine establishments at Peterborough and Ely? In the event, Nicholas departed the leafy tracks of Hertfordshire for wider scholarship beyond the English Channel.

Europe in the 12th century would not have been an inhibiting option even for a part-educated, ambitious young man. Nicholas would have been fluent in Latin and have had a knowledge of French. The Church, under a unifying temporary and spiritual Pontiff, exercised a cohesive influence. It was the heyday of Christendom with theologians and philosophers, architects and builders of great Cathedrals; the emergence of artists, poets and writers all contributing to an age of promise. It would have captivated and lured the acquisitive mind of young Nicholas.

And so the future Pope crossed the Channel and England's loss was to prove the Vatican's gain. He proceeded to Paris, briefly continuing his education at St.



Part of the medallion frieze of Popes in the Nave of St. Paul's Outside the Wall, Rome



Bedmond High Street and the stone which marks the birthplace of Nicholas Breakspear

Denys. There followed a nomadic period when Nicholas pursued an academic life in various monasteries in Provence, finally being accepted as a monk in the Augustinian Abbey of St. Rufus, set outside the walled city of Avignon. It was here, in 1137, that he was finally ordained a priest.

For seven years Nicholas Breakspeare led the austere life of an Augustinian Canon Regular, impressing the community as 'elegant in person, pleasant in countenance, prudent in speech and of regular obedience - a most exact observer of regular discipline'. (Boso, contemporary biographer). So impressive were his virtues that in 1137, on the death of Abbot William II, he was elected unanimously to be his successor.

But his time at Avignon was not to be without tribulation. Many monastic orders were imposing a stricter regime to counteract moral laxity and Nicholas tightened control in his own abbey. His monks dissatisfied with the Englishman's firm stance, twice petitioned Pope Eugenius III for the Englishman's removal, to which he eventually acceded. The Pope recognised the diplomatic potential of Abbot Nicholas and was not long in appointing him to the hierarchy as Cardinal Bishop of Albano. He was consecrated in 1150.

Eugenius, convinced by the Englishman's political and negotiating skills, was soon to put him to the test in the maelstrom of Scandinavian church politics. He dispatched his newly-created Cardinal as Legate to resolve religious unrest in Scandinavia and to effect changes in Church structure, particularly in Norway.

The English Legate completed his mission over the course of four years, achieving 'peace for the Kingdoms, law for Barbarians, quiet for the monasteries, order for churches, discipline for the clergy and a people acceptable to God, doers of good works'. (Boso). The Cardinal Bishop of Albano returned to his diocese with an enhanced reputation.

It was a fact of the times that the encum-

bants of the Papacy had brief reigns, and with the death of Anastasius IV after only one year in office, the hierarchy were again called upon to appoint a successor. Nicholas was a strong contender. His successes in Scandinavia, along with his renown for learning, communicative skills, virtue and energy had made him an obvious candidate; it was, however, with humility and prayer that he accepted his unanimous election to the Chair of Peter. He was consecrated on Sunday, 5th December 1154 taking the name of Hadrian (to the Latins) or Adrian IV.

The English Pope was by now an integrated European, 'mild and patient of manner, fluent and polished in his speech and a distinguished preacher' and, as Boso surprisingly observed, 'an excellent singer'.

With a firm hand Adrian negotiated the pitfalls of his new position, but living in uneasy and turbulent times, was soon to cross swords, literally, with the war lord, Frederick Barbarossa as well as infamously embroiled with Henry II, the newly-crowned sovereign of England.

Henry sent a deputation to Rome in 1155 to convey 'important concerns of the King'; his Envoy was the Abbot of St. Albans, Robert de Gorham. Henry paid homage and fealty to the Vicar of Christ and gifts were bestowed and accepted.

Without rancour, Adrian received the Abbot's deputation kindly and graciously accepted the gifts, which included a fine pair of embroidered slippers made by the hermit, Christina of Markyate.

Undoubtedly, Frederick II, the Roman Emperor, Barbarossa, intent on domination of all Europe, and with no respect for established rights of either Church or States, presented Adrian with insurmountable problems. Adrian dealt with these fearlessly, but his guile and diplomacy, and eventual warring, were to no avail against Frederick's savagery.

Of Pope Adrian's many Papal Bulls or letters, 'Laudabiliter' was the most controversial and damaging. In this the Pope acceded



The remains of St. Rufus Abbey, Avignon, where Nicholas Breakspeare was Abbot from 1130-37

to Henry's request to occupy Ireland, cursed by a barbaric Barony and primitive people. Although the British Monarch's occupation of Ireland did not take place until after Adrian's death, the English Pope has been held culpable. These and other momentous disputes occupied Adrian IV during his four-year term of office. He was to die suddenly of the quinsy on 1st September 1159.

His tomb is an imposing sarcophagus in the crypt of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome where he is particularly venerated by Norwegians who revere him as the 'Apostle of the North'.

Pope Innocent III, one of Adrian's noblest successors, said that the Englishman had 'used to great advantage the talent that had been entrusted to him, and that, like a faithful and prudent servant, he did much for the glory of God's name, and for the credit of his own ministry'. (13.2.1205).

With such praise, and as we approach the 900th anniversary of his birth in Hertfordshire, surely we can honour in a tangible way, this remarkable man, Nicholas Breakspeare - Adrian IV, the only English Pope.

Breakspeare Farm House - In 1941 the farm was offered to the National Trust by the then owner, Mrs Amy Gertrude Hogan, as a place of national significance. When considered by the Executive Committee in 1951 the offer was turned down.

