

Nicholas Breakspear, Englishman and Pope

Leaflet prepared by Alan Johnson
for Nicholas Breakspear Week in Abbots Langley
Sunday 24th September to 1st October 2000

Nicholas Breakspear,
Englishman
and Pope

The story of his life and times in eight short instalments
written for daily use during

**Nicholas Breakspear Week
in Abbots Langley,**

held from Sunday 24th September to Sunday 1st October 2000
as a commemoration of the ninth centenary of his birth
at Breakspear Farm in Bedmond
in the year 1100



ADRIAN IV.

CONTENTS

Foreword

Part 1 His birth and early life

Part 2 Nicholas determines to be a monk

Part 3 Abbot Nicholas

Part 4 Cardinal Breakspear travels north

Part 5 Nicholas is made Pope

Part 6 King Henry asks for Ireland

Part 7 Pope Adrian defies his enemies

Part 8 Trouble to the end

Foreword

This short life of Nicholas Breakspear in eight parts was conceived as one of the activities for "Nicholas Breakspear Week" in Abbots Langley. This was a week in which the people of Abbots Langley could celebrate the birth of Nicholas Breakspear, born in Bedmond, Abbots Langley, 900 years ago and destined to be the only Englishman to become Pope.

It was decided to run the week from Sunday September 24th to Sunday October 1st, and in St Saviour's Church it was thought appropriate to recall Nicholas Breakspear's life in eight instalments, one instalment to be read in public each day at the main Mass.

The story as summarised in these eight parts is drawn mainly from *Nicholas Breakspear, Englishman and Pope* by Alfred H. Tarleton (1896). I am most grateful for being given access to this rare book from the Salvatorian archives. I have also referred to *The English Pope (Adrian IV)* by Edith M. Almedingen (1925), *Lives of the Popes* by Richard P. McBrien (1997), and *Saints and Sinners: a history of the Popes* by Eamonn Duffy (1997).

Many details of Nicholas Breakspear's life are not clear from contemporary accounts, but I have adopted the most likely turn of events and told the story free of historical conjecture. The story itself falls easily into eight parts, each with its own narrative unity but leading, rather like a soap opera to the next instalment.

To my knowledge there has been nothing on radio or TV this year about Nicholas Breakspear, and this is a pity. His is a tale worth telling to the widest possible audience.

Alan Johnson
24th August 2000

Nicholas Breakspear, Englishman and Pope.

1 - His birth and early life

Our story begins 34 years after the Norman Conquest, and concerns Nicholas Breakspear, the son of a tenant farmer, who was born in the village of Abbots Langley and who alone of all Englishmen lived to be elected Pope. By the year 1100 the Saxons of England under King Henry I were beginning to live at peace with their Norman conquerors, but life was still very hard for the peasants who tilled the soil under their land-owning masters. In the valley of the River Colne, some 20 miles north-west of London, lived Robert, a tenant farmer who took his surname from Breakspears, the little hamlet near Harefield where he helped to work the family plot of land. To this day, a large Victorian dwelling called Breakspear House stands near this spot which was for centuries associated with the Breakspears.

Robert Breakspear was a younger son and therefore had no expectation of inheriting what little property his parents possessed. Not wishing to be dependent on the charity of others, he moved a few miles north to a tract of open farming land rising above the River Gade and not long cleared of its prehistoric forests. There he found a settlement with a church and a priest, and there he and his wife began again the life of relentless toil which was the lot of tenant farmers.

Perhaps Robert Breakspear had another reason for moving to this part of Hertfordshire. This particular piece of open farmland or "long lea" as it was called, had been given some years earlier to the great Benedictine abbey of St Albans, and Robert may have felt that an abbot would be a better overlord than a Norman baron. So it was that, about the year 1100, Robert Breakspear came to the "Abbot's Long Lea", known today as Abbots Langley, where a simple Saxon church stood on the site of the present church of St Lawrence the Martyr. Here, on a poor farm in Bedmond, about half a mile north of the church, was born to him and his wife the son whose memory we are honouring this week.

Soon after his birth the baby boy was brought to the church for baptism. When the priest took the child in his arms and baptised him Nicholas, who among those gathered round the font could have imagined what life held in store for him? But we, 900 years later, know well what became of him, and can take pride in the events of his life as, day by day this week, we tell his story, the story of Nicholas Breakspear, Adrian IV, Englishman and Pope.

Nicholas Breakspear, Englishman and Pope

2 - Nicholas determines to be a Monk

Nicholas Breakspear, born and baptised in 1100, was brought up on the farm in Bedmond, Abbots Langley, where his father Robert toiled for his family's subsistence. Some years later we learn that Robert has become a monk in St Albans Abbey. How and why he left his wife and children to become a monk is uncertain. It is convenient to assume that his wife had died, but contemporary accounts of Nicholas's life shed no clear light on this mystery. We know, however that Nicholas himself, aged about 18 or 19 years, having had some schooling at the Abbey, also applied to take the monk's hood there.

Surprisingly, given his later ecclesiastical eminence, Nicholas's application to enter St Albans Abbey was rejected. There are hints that his father thought him lazy, and that the Abbot found him lacking in education, and urged him to undertake further studies to make himself better fitted for admission. Whatever the reason for this rejection, Nicholas was not abashed; on the contrary, he was fired with a burning resolve to pursue elsewhere his chosen way of life. Since there were no universities in England at the time, his thoughts turned naturally to the opportunities for study to be found overseas. Poor as he was, he worked his way to Dover, took ship for France and made his way to Paris.

In Paris Nicholas went to the abbey of St Denys. We hear no more of any idleness, for at St Denys Nicholas became a most painstaking scholar. He stayed there for about six years. It was about the year 1125 when he felt that it was time to move on again, and he then worked and begged his way southwards. After a short while attending various schools in Arles, his desire for the monastic life reasserted itself. There were numerous religious houses in nearby Avignon, and so it was to this city that Nicholas now made his way. He came at last to the gates of the abbey of St Rufus, a monastery of Canons Regular living under the Augustinian rule. Here he was readily granted admission.

Apparently Nicholas was very popular among his brethren at St Rufus. His personality and demeanour pleased everyone in the community, and after a few years of probation he was admitted fully into the order. At last Nicholas was able to take the monk's hood and to vow his life to the service of Christ. What form would that service take? Where would it lead him? As this week goes on, we shall find out.

Nicholas Breakspear, Englishman and Pope

3 - Abbot Nicholas

Nicholas, now in his late twenties, settled happily into the routine of the Augustinian Abbey of St Rufus. The Augustinian rule, not directly formulated by St Augustine but derived from his epistles and sermons, called for living and eating in common, regular worship at the fixed monastic hours and a commitment to running schools for the instruction of the young. The background to this activity was the performance under supervision of all the usual monastic tasks in scriptorium, kitchen, refectory and dormitory plus the work of sacristans and cantors in maintaining the worship of the chapel. There was also the distribution of alms to the poor and the care of the sick. An exact account was kept of every man's daily tasks and this was laid monthly before the abbot. Such was the discipline which Nicholas now espoused.

While Nicholas himself carefully obeyed the rules of the order, others were growing lax. Yet Nicholas, firmly wedded to the strict discipline, remained popular with all his brethren whatever their degree of commitment to the rule. So esteemed was he by the community that when the abbot died in 1137 the monks unanimously chose him as their new head. With great solemnity Nicholas was duly installed as Abbot of St Rufus.

Perhaps the monks who elected him thought that this modest and obliging Englishman was going to rule them with a gentle hand and tolerate their slackness. If so they were wrong. Nicholas soon put a stop to the easy ways into which the monks had gradually drifted and firmly enforced the strict rules of St Augustine. There were, needless to say, murmurs of discontent, murmurings which rumbled on for many years. Eventually a rebellious group of monks sent to the Pope in Rome a list of grievances against their abbot. Nicholas went personally to Rome to defend himself before the Pope.

The Pope was Eugenius III, a reforming pope and a man of similar background and outlook to Nicholas. He was unlikely to side with the dissident monks. Having listened to their complaints and noted the bearing of Nicholas in his own defence, Eugenius counselled reconciliation and mutual forbearance. Nicholas and his brothers heeded the Pope's advice and returned to Avignon. For a while there was peace at the abbey. But not for long. The rebellion broke out again, stronger than ever. The ringleaders, determined to get Nicholas deposed, appealed again to the Pope. Again, monks and abbot set out for Rome. Again they appeared before the same calm and venerable pontiff. But this time the outcome was different.



Nicholas Breakspear, Englishman and Pope

4 - Cardinal Breakspear travels north



Again Pope Eugenius listened to the malcontent monks. This time he dismissed them. "Depart," he said, "and choose for yourselves a superior with whom you can live in peace. This one shall be no longer a burden to you." But he did not depose Nicholas. He created him Cardinal and Bishop of Albano (much was made of the irony that he who failed in St Albans succeeded in Albano) and selected him for an important mission to Scandinavia. For many years the churches of Norway and Sweden had resented their subordination to the Danish Archbishop of Lund. They wanted their own archbishops. Both countries sent emissaries to the Pope to plead their cause and Eugenius promised to send a Papal Legate to reorganise their churches, settle disputes and found the desired archbishoprics.. Who better to send than Cardinal Breakspear, a native of that sturdy island race which knew the Scandinavians so well? Nicholas set off. He travelled through England on his way (what reunions with family and friends that must have entailed!) and embarked from the Norfolk coast, most probably from Lynn, then Lynn Episcopi, now King's Lynn. He landed in Norway in June 1152.

After sorting out a serious feud between three ruling princelings, Nicholas chose Trondheim to be the archbishopric of Norway. At a glittering ceremony attended by the three princes, he invested one of the Norwegian bishops with the pallium and installed him as Norway's first Archbishop. He went on to reform the church. He swept it of abuses and stopped the heathen practices which had crept into the ritual. He also enjoined the payment of Peter's Pence. Nicholas left Norway for Sweden, full of honours and revered as a saint.

The clergy of Sweden, a country split by a fierce north-south rivalry, met Nicholas at a synod in Tinköping. Predictably, they could not agree a location for the promised new archbishopric. In the north they wanted Uppsala while the Gothlanders in the south were equally determined to have Skara. Nicholas went ahead with other reforms but decided that the time was not ripe for the creation of a Swedish archbishopric. He left for Denmark. The Danes already had at Lund their archiepiscopal see, but Nicholas found that his friend Archbishop Eskill of Lund was vexed at the loss of Trondheim from his jurisdiction. Eskill was somewhat mollified, however, when Nicholas gave him the pallium originally intended for the new archbishop of Sweden and allowed him to continue to style himself "Archbishop of All Sweden".

After nearly two and a half years in Scandinavia it was time for Nicholas to return to Rome. And there a surprise awaited him.

Nicholas Breakspear, Englishman and Pope

5 - Nicholas is made Pope

In 1154 Nicholas came back to Rome, eager to report back to Pope Eugenius. but this was not to be, for Eugenius had died. His successor was the aged Anastasius III, who nevertheless welcomed Nicholas back and confirmed his actions in Norway and Sweden. Anastasius, however, was 90 years old, and very soon after Nicholas's return he too died.

When the cardinals met to elect a new pope they knew that they were electing not only the chief bishop of the church but also the temporal ruler of the papal states. This had been the case for centuries. It was the pope who ruled Rome, together with the surrounding city-states and much of Italy besides. And with political rule came power struggles.

The cardinals at that conclave in 1154 were ruefully aware of the political unrest in and around the city of Rome. In 1143 the citizens of Rome had rebelled against the pope, formed a commune and elected their own senate. They were joined and then led by a notorious revolutionary named Arnold of Brescia who detested ecclesiastical wealth and denounced the pope as the head of a corrupt system. Under Arnold of Brescia the commune declared papal rule to be at an end and proclaimed the restoration of the old Roman republic. There was more. Just before the conclave opened news had come that Frederic Barbarossa, the Holy Roman Emperor, had led a large and imposing army from Germany across the Alps. Barbarossa was determined to subjugate the cities and petty republics of Northern Italy and to curb the ambitions of Arnold of Brescia and the Roman commune. What would Barbarossa do when he reached Rome? After the papacy of quiet and peace-loving Anastasius, the cardinals needed to elect someone strong and resolute to take his place. Sitting among them, fresh from his strenuous but acclaimed mission to Scandinavia, was Cardinal Nicholas Breakspear, reforming abbot and zealous Apostle of the North. All eyes turned to him. With one voice they elected him to the papal throne. According to custom he took a new name on his election, calling himself "Adrian", the fourth pope to do so.

Thus, on 4th December 1154, did Nicholas Breakspear, born in a lowly farmhouse in Abbots Langley, become Pope Adrian IV. One of the first people to congratulate him was King Henry II of England. It was early in 1155 that Nicholas (or rather Adrian, as we must now call him) received King Henry's message of congratulation, but with it came an ominous request.



6 - King Henry asks for Ireland

King Henry II of England, crowned in 1154, was quick to send a message of congratulation to Nicholas Breakspear on his election to the papacy. By the same post, as it were, he asked the pope to sanction his plan to invade Ireland and add it to his already vast domains. Ireland was a Christian island, and any intervention there would need the Pope's endorsement. How could Henry justify unprovoked aggression and annexation?

At that time Ireland was divided into five ancient kingdoms which constantly challenged each other for supremacy. The country was never for long at peace. In recent years Dermot, King of Leinster, had eloped with the wife of one of the rival kings and this had set off a fresh round of tribal violence. The Irish people were considered barbaric, rude and ignorant.

It occurred to Henry of England that this situation was a wonderful opportunity. If his intervention took the form of a moral crusade to rescue the Irish from strife and ungodliness, surely the pope would back him? He wrote to Adrian early in 1155 partly to congratulate him on his election and partly to seek his authority to invade Ireland. This letter has not survived, but from Adrian's reply it is clear that Henry gave the following as his reasons for wanting Ireland: to increase the area of the church's influence, to provide for the instruction of the ignorant Irish, to root out their vices and to extend to them the annual payment of Peter's Pence.

Adrian replied promptly. His bull *Laudabiliter* was issued in the spring of 1155 and begins, in Latin, "Adrian, Bishop, Servant of the Servants of God..... to his dear son in Christ, the illustrious King Of England, greeting and apostolic benediction." Adrian congratulates King Henry on his resolve to go into Ireland. He writes, "*In a praiseworthy manner* (that is, in Latin, *Laudabiliter*) your Highness is thinking of your reputation and of the increase in your eternal reward." Here is the key sentence of the document: "We hold it a pleasing and acceptable thing that you make a descent upon that island".

Despite the papal go-ahead, Henry dithered for years. Eventually he landed in Ireland and obtained some measure of allegiance from the Irish nobles, but his overlordship and that of succeeding monarchs was never secure. English rulers have never been acceptable as the rulers of Ireland, whose warm welcome is for friends, not for would-be conquerors. In Rome, Adrian had little time to follow Irish affairs. Trouble in Italy was pressing hard.

7 - Pope Adrian defies his enemies

Pope Adrian had not long to wait for a serious challenge to his authority. The Roman senate, led by the rebellious Arnold of Brescia, lost no time in demanding that the Pope should confine himself to spiritual matters and leave them to run the city. Adrian defied them absolutely. The Church was to be supreme, and he would in no way negotiate with the rebellious upstarts. When one of the cardinals was badly wounded in the streets of Rome, Adrian laid the city under the dreaded punishment of interdict. This meant total spiritual privation. It was too much for the citizens of Rome to bear. When after some months it was Holy Week, they forced the senate to do penance, submit to the Pope and expel Arnold of Brescia from the city.

Meanwhile Frederic Barbarossa was slowly but surely advancing through northern Italy. Knowing that the emperor too opposed Arnold of Brescia, Adrian sought his help in putting a stop once and for all to Arnold's seditious activities. Arnold was tracked down and brought captive to Rome where he was secretly put to death. His body was burnt and his ashes flung into the Tiber.

Eventually Adrian met Barbarossa face to face. Mutual courtesies were reluctantly exchanged, and it was agreed that Barbarossa should proceed to Rome. Amid pomp and splendour Adrian invested the emperor with the long-awaited imperial crown. When the celebrations were over Barbarossa took himself and his army back to Germany. But first he quelled with considerable bloodshed a final riot from the resentful citizenry, who would have preferred to have neither pope nor emperor over them.

For a few years there was peace between Adrian and Frederic Barbarossa. But trouble broke out again when Adrian signed a treaty with the Norman William I, King of Sicily. Adrian accepted William's authority over Sicily and parts of southern Italy, but Barbarossa felt as a threat any formal alliance between the pope and the near ubiquitous Normans. He began to make claims over northern Italy that were in conflict with papal prerogatives, and he also began to interfere in church affairs. This was a direct challenge to the pope's authority. Matters were bound to come to a head.

8 - Trouble to the last

Both Pope Adrian and the emperor Frederick Barbarossa regarded themselves as the legitimate overlords of southern Italy and Sicily. They were consequently suspicious of each other's dealings with the King of Sicily, William I. As long as William defied the Pope, Frederick was content. But when later on Pope Adrian and William entered into a treaty, Frederick was less pleased. He felt that Adrian was siding with William against himself, and he began to retaliate by chipping away at the Pope's authority. He forbade German bishops to journey to Rome and began to appoint bishops without consulting Adrian. When Adrian's old friend Archbishop Eskill of Lund was robbed and imprisoned by a band of lawless German knights, Frederick turned a deaf ear to Adrian's plea that he should do something to bring about the archbishop's release.

The uneasy peace between Adrian and Frederick Barbarossa therefore came to an end.. Adrian sent two cardinals to Besançon where Frederick had summoned an imperial assembly. Their mission was to deliver a strong complaint to the emperor. This they did, and in a manner which suggested to the emperor and his nobles that the the Pope had some kind of feudal right to the emperor's obedience. The message was fiercely rejected, and after some rough treatment in the council chamber, the legates were escorted to the German border. Pope and emperor then issued rival proclamations to the German church, each defending their actions. Surprisingly, perhaps, after a time and with not a little patience from Adrian, another reconciliation was patched up

In 1158, however, Frederick again descended on Lombardy, this time to besiege Milan for having destroyed one of his fiefdoms nearby. He also, without the Pope's permission, appointed a new Archbishop of Ravenna. But when he tried to foist his own repressive laws on the Lombardians and wrote to Adrian demanding approval for the appointment of the new archbishop, this was too much.. Letters were exchanged. From Adrian the letters were purposely calm; from Frederick they teemed with insult. Finally, in June 1159, Adrian sent the emperor an ultimatum. Lands and property legally bequeathed to the church but taken over by Frederick must be returned, the emperor must do homage to the Pope for his possessions in Italy and his edicts in Lombardy must be rescinded. Failure to comply would bring nothing less than excommunication. Frederick tried to negotiate but Adrian stood his ground. For security he withdrew to Anagni, 35 miles south of Rome, to be nearer the King of Sicily should he be needed as an ally. There he prepared for the war which would certainly follow excommunication.

pto

In those hot, nerve-wracking days of August 1159 Adrian must have thought often of his native land, and perhaps of far-off Abbots Langley. He had once confided to his close friend John of Salisbury, "The office of Pope is a thorny one, beset on all sides by sharp pricks..... I wish I had never left my native land of England, or at least had lived my life quietly in the cloister rather than have entered on this narrow path."

In the event there was neither excommunication nor war that year. Towards the end of that torrid August Adrian contracted a fatal quinsy, and on 1st September 1159, to the sorrow of those around him and the dismay of the whole church, he died.

Nicholas Breakspear, Pope Adrian IV, has been acclaimed for his integrity, zeal and decisiveness. Yet for all his efforts, the problems he faced remained unresolved at his death. Four years was never going to be enough for one man to sort out single-handed the deep-rooted rivalries that were part of the birth-pangs of modern Europe. Nicholas could only do his best to parry as they came at him the attacks on his papal authority.

During the 850 years since Nicholas Breakspear's death popes have learnt to heed the words of him whose vicar they claim to be, that "My kingdom is not of this world". Happily, papal states and papal armies have long disappeared. But back in the twelfth century Nicholas Breakspear could not avoid engagement with the kingdoms of this world. It was his lot to tread, however unwillingly, the narrow and tortuous path of political struggle.

Were he pope today, Nicholas's priorities would be different, but he would want today the same thing for his flock that he strove for all those years ago, namely, that they should be able to practise their faith in a community free from the oppression of dictators. This was the keynote of his pontificate. Throughout the four short years that he was pope, Nicholas Breakspear showed in both his name and his actions how the powerful of this world should deal with one another: the spear should be broken and differences resolved in calm words rather than bitter blows. For that, we, in his birthplace can rejoice and celebrate with pride the memory of the man born in our village 900 years ago: Nicholas Breakspear, Englishman and Pope.
