

# The Legendary Mother Shipton: the Truth behind the Predictions

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In the North Yorkshire market town of Knaresborough is the celebrated cave and petrifying well of the most famous of British prophetesses, Mother Shipton. It is in this cave, legend has it, that Mother Shipton, originally named Ursula Southill, was brought into the world around 1488. She was born illegitimately to a fifteen-year old mother, Agatha, who, some say, had a pact with the devil. She is reputed to have made prophesies on both local and national tragedies, such as the death of the Archbishop of York in 1530 and the Great Fire of London, a century after her death. Further celebrated predictions concern twentieth-century inventions such as the internet, cars, the railways and airplanes and, more dramatically, the year when the world would end.

Throughout history female soothsayers have been stigmatised and ridiculed as witches. Mother Shipton suffered the same. There have been many stories concocted, particularly in the seventeenth century by the unfortunately named Irish pornographer, Richard Head, of Mother Shipton being the spawn of the devil and having supernatural powers. She is presented as the wicked witch of fairytales, a character who could have been modelled on Mother Shipton's notorious ugly looks, her crooked nose, knobbly chin and wart-covered face. She was even depicted smoking a pipe.

Surprisingly, Mother Shipton also has another more benevolent side to her. She also appeared as a much-loved character in eighteenth-century theatre to be replaced by Mother Goose in the nineteenth century. She is reputedly the forerunner of the pantomime dame and was probably the first fairy Godmother. Her role in eighteenth-century pantomime was that of the good witch who comes to the rescue, using her supernatural powers, of those under the spell of the malevolent fairy.

The petrifying well, next to the cave, enhances the Mother Shipton legend by being able to turn objects into stone. The extremely high mineral content of the inexhaustible spring water in this well originates from a deep underground lake. The minerals contained in the water turn everything in its path to stone. Visiting children have made a tradition of throwing in their teddy bears which takes three to five months to petrify. In Mother Shipton's medieval age, with no scientific methods of explaining this phenomenon, this would have been seen as an act of sorcery.

As is the case with most legendary figures, there are certain stories surrounding her life that suggest that Ursula was destined for great things. At an early age, it became evident that the child possessed special powers. Furniture and crockery would mysteriously fly around the room in her presence and her dreams prophesized coming events. One story tells of her going missing as a baby. Villagers joined the search but were attacked by imps transformed into monkeys. Eventually the villagers discovered her suspended in air, high in a chimney.

Perhaps Ursula had not always been as ugly as people have made out for at the age of twenty four she married Toby Shipton. Soon after her marriage, Ursula, gift of clairvoyancy, revealed to her the identity of the thief of a neighbour's new smock and petticoat. This miraculous act was to gain her a reputation. Word soon spread and before long she was visited from afar by those wanting to hear her predictions and words of wisdom. Traditionally, the title of mother was bestowed upon wise women and before long Ursula became 'Mother' Shipton. Her prophesies were published from 1684 onwards but because they predominantly focus on regional affairs, they were never considered on par to those of Nostradamus until recently.

One of Mother Shipton's most famous prophesies concerned the unpopular Cardinal Wolsey, Archbishop of York. She said that though he was appointed Archbishop of York, he would never actually enter the city. Wolsey was appointed Archbishop of York after loosing his post as Lord Chancellor to Henry VIII for failing to annul the marriage between Henry and Catherine of Aragon. Mother Shipton's prophesy predicts that the Cardinal will never get to York. From, what is believed to be an original 1686 manuscript it states that she maintained that he would see York but "never come at it". These accusations were investigated by three lords in service to Wolsey and a legal man named Besely who threatened Mother Shipton that: "When he does come thou shalt be burnt". Wolsey probably did see York from the tower of Cawood Castle his Episcopal residence as the Archbishop of York. However, he never did reach York itself was arrested for high treason and on his way back to London fell ill and died in Leicester. Mother Shipton was not only saved from the pyre but her prophesy appears to have been accurate.

The most renowned of Mother Shipton's prophesies, by far, was the Great Fire of London in 1666. She made this prediction a century before it happened and is reported to have said:

*A time shall happen, when a Ship shall come sailing up the Thames, till it come against London, and the Master of the Ship shall weep, and the Mariners of the Ship shall ask him, why he weeps, since he hath made so good a Voyage? And he shall say, Ah! What a goodly City this was, none in the World comparable to it, and now there is scarce left an house, that can let us have drink for our Money.*

People in London were so sure of Mother Shipton's prediction that they took little or no precaution to prevent it. This fatalistic approach cost the lives of many and the destruction of 13,200 houses, including shops, inns and ale-houses and leaving 100,000 people homeless.

Over the centuries there have been various claims that Mother Shipton also predicted the year for the end of the world. The first known version of this prediction, published in 1862, gives the year 1881:

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

At the time this verse was believed to be a seventeenth-century copy of the fifteenth-century original. In 1873, a Charles Hindley then admitted to having fabricated it but this did not stop the instances of public alarm as the year 1881 drew nearer. From Somerset to Yorkshire, people prepared for the worst. In Yorkshire, for example, a special choir was set up, the Huddersfield Choral Society, to perform Haydn's *The Creation* in the hope that this would change fate.

Other sources suggest that Mother Shipton predicted Armageddon for 1991. According to J.W. Simpson, the landlord of the Mother Shipton Inn in Knaresborough, whose pamphlet published in 1910. This was again a hoax but at the time taken seriously in some newspapers. The latest Doomsday prophecy lists Mother Shipton along with the Mayan calendar, the I-Ching, Merlin, The Cybil, the Bible and Nostradamus as those who have predicted the end of the world for 2012. It would seem that predicting the end of the world seems something a soothsayer is obliged to do in order to be taken seriously.

What of Mother Shipton's predictions concerning the internet, cars, airplanes and telephones? Again, this can all be found in the same 1862 fabricated verse of Charles Hindley:

*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.*

For a nineteenth-century prank, this has turned out to be quite a prediction!

So what of Mother Shipton? Well, it can safely be said that Ursula Southill was genuinely the woman behind the legendary Mother Shipton. Her unfortunate looks and her ability to predict some national catastrophes have made her into the archetypal witch that has caught the imagination of many. Throughout the centuries we see

Mother Shipton's image change from witch to fairy godmother, from a local soothsayer to a millenarian authority. And the moral of the story seems to be that predictions (unlike teddies thrown into Mother Shipton's petrifying well!) are not set in stone but are there as warnings, to guide us to do the right thing.

Reference:

Arnold Kellett, *Mother Shipton, Witch and Prophetess* (Maidstone: George Mann Books, 2002)

The Mother Shipton cave and petrifying well in Knaresborough is well worth a visit.