



# The Real Robin Hood

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**Robert Leeson** on his new book.

There were outlaws in England in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. One, or more, may have been called Robin Hood. But he's a shadowy figure, despite much detective work by serious historians and many suspect 'pedigrees' (the latest was produced seven years ago and immediately demolished by a sceptical academic).

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But Robin Hood the legend, by contrast, is excitingly vivid, and has grown in size and detail over centuries, tended by many hands known and unknown. The legend has, with difficulty, been traced back to mid-twelfth century, which fits very well. Then royal forests covered nearly a sixth of England. Death, crippling injury, or fines waited those who hunted the deer. Lesser punishments were the lot of the poor who even cut leaf or branch without leave. Once a man had taken venison or 'vert', he accepted his penalty or was outside the law. He bore the 'wolf's head' and could be hanged on the spot.

Enforcing these harsh laws were the Sheriffs (at county level) and the Foresters (locally). Many earned a name for brutality. They took protection money like modern gangsters. At a time when feudal order was collapsing, they got a name for injustice and corruption. The Sheriff of Nottinghamshire became a legend in himself. Outlaws hated them since in the name of the King's Law they committed crimes. Hiding in the greenwood, outlaws made their own justice and it was rough.

But the depth of outlaw contempt fell on rich bishops and abbots who owned land and wealth and were as cruel as any secular officer. The men of the greenwood despised them because they preached poverty while living in luxury and urged goodness while practising deceit.

Out of this lawless age grew tales of robbers who, beyond the law, made their own justice. Robin Hood, the yeoman outlaw in his lodge of branches under his 'trysting tree', was more than a rebel. He was uncrowned king of a forest realm. He was courteous, absolutely fair and generous. In his kingdom, the sun always shone, the wine flowed and the food was inexhaustible. Every meal was paid for by the next traveller (unless he were ploughman, yeoman or knight who told the truth).

Where was it? Originally, in the earliest minstrel 'tellings', in Barnesdale, Yorkshire. At some point in the setting down of the oral tales it's thought Robin's legend and that of the wicked Sheriff of Nottingham were fused. Since then Nottingham and Sherwood have taken over the legend. There's a good deal more left of Sherwood Forest than of Barnesdale, and Nottingham's publicity machine is a powerful one. The Yorkshire sites of the legend are scattered and the crucial one - Kirklees Priory where the legendary Robin met his doom - is off-limits to sightseers. (I was lucky enough to get permission to go there and the ancient gatehouse by the dark stream still holds its spell.)

When I came to write my retelling of the Robin Hood story, I saw the outlaws as hiding in both Barnesdale and

Sherwood as the tales imply. The two places are not very far apart and the earliest tales give a picture of the deer moving from the high land to the low. There are only a handful of these first stories still existing. The story of Robin Hood's death was rescued from use as a firelighter and has crucial parts missing. But there are other late medieval sources of a fascinating kind.

Early in the fifteenth century, strangely, villagers celebrating their Summer (May) King and Queen began to substitute the figures of Robin Hood, Friar Tuck and Little John. A new figure - that of Maid Marian - appears (the only woman in the early tales, apart from the Sheriff's wife, is the Virgin Mary to whom, with her sister Magdalene, Robin was devoted). Robin and his friends paraded with the Morris Dancers on May Day. They danced round the tree felled illegally before dawn and carried home in triumph. Often the proceedings were so riotous it was forbidden by law to dress up as Robin or Marian. Robin, outlaw in the forest, became a rebel in the town - life imitating art. Thus the oldest minstrel tellings, the May Games or Plays, and later ballad poems form a fragmented folk epic of chivalry, violence, courtesy, justice, rough fellowship and good humour. It has been called the Arthurian Cycle of the common folk. This, I think, undervalues the Tales of Robin Hood. Their morality and merrymaking are of the real world; no giants, no dragons, but human villains bite the dust.

The legend was evolved through the late Middle Ages. But as the Robin of song drew further from the times, customs and concerns that gave him birth, so the blood of the ballads thinned through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Action was debased to knockabout combat in banal repetition and parody. Originality vanished, early tales were reworked and garbled by hack writers.

On the other hand, professional playwrights, from the 1590s onwards, tried to give Robin Hood a heroic stature in a style appealing to court and town. Later, Walter Scott and nineteenth-century romantic writers created a whole new 'noble' outlaw and handed him on to the twentieth century and Hollywood. In place of the yeoman outlaw and Summer King, came an earl, unjustly robbed of title and estates, or a Saxon nobleman fighting Norman oppressors (Walter Scott/ Errol Flynn) or a returned Crusader supporting Richard the Lionheart against wicked King John (who was also accused of raping Lady Matilda/Maid Marian). Kevin Costner's **Prince of Thieves** owes a lot to the fancies of seventeenth-century professionals.

There is no historical basis for any of this adornment except for one date given by a Scots historian (called John Major) in Tudor times. The rest is hokum. Nor is there any legendary basis. The oldest tales speak of a King Edward. Only one ballad (seventeenth-century) features King Richard, and Joseph Ritson, contemporary collector, described it as the work of 'some miserable retainer of the Press'.

In my retelling I've tried to penetrate beyond this curtain of fantasy to the original stories. Why? After all the later inventions are just part of the fiction, aren't they? My reason is a single, simple one. England's folk hero, the yeoman, needs no fabricated pedigree or motivation. He's one of us, not one of them.

I tried to remake the picture of Robin as seen by the people who lived at the time when the story was fresh and real. To attempt this I took six of the oldest 'tellings' (this includes the renowned 'Gest', containing four tales and nearly 14,000 words long). I added all or part of eight ballads of later date, choosing only those consistent in feeling and meaning with the original stories.

On this basis, I also took certain liberties and risks. To give flesh to Maid Marian, who exists only in fragments of May plays and one slender ballad, I drew on contemporary accounts and the haunting fifteenth-century 'Nut Brown Maid'. In foreshadowing and retelling the Death of Robin Hood, I gave more substance to the mysterious figure of the Red Priest-Knight, Sir Roger, a kind of symbol of autumn to match Robin's spring guise. Rather more recklessly I tried to fill the gap in the Death poem left by fire damage to the manuscript.

These slight additions apart, I held to my intention to retell those legendary tales first told some seven centuries ago, when villains were often in power and honest men sometimes on the run. The message of Robin Hood and his 'Meinee' - that truth, justice, courtesy should be defended, even against the 'Law' - is as valid for the twentieth/twenty-

first century as it was for the thirteenth/fourteenth.

In this re-creation, a vital part is played by the visual, and Barbara Lofthouse's illustrations and decorations to the book, with their gorgeous colours will, I hope, give it a long life in many hands.

**The Story of Robin Hood** will be published in September by Kingfisher (1 85697 254 2) at £9.99. It is Robert Leeson's fifty-first book for children and young people.

Further reading:

**Robin Hood** by J C Holt (Thames and Hudson, 1989)

**Rymes of Robin Hood** by R B Dobson and J Taylor (Heinemann, 1976)

**The Early Plays of Robin Hood** by David Wiles (Brewer, 1981)

**The Quest for Robin Hood** by Jim Lees (Temple Nostalgia Press, 1987)

**The Outlaw Robin Hood, His Yorkshire Legend** by Barbara Green (Kirklees Cultural Services, 1990)

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