



A Superhero in Lincoln Green

Tales of Robin Hood have been told for 700 years – and our fascination with this world-famous outlaw continues into the 21st century. The romantic image of Robin Hood is of a medieval hooded figure in Lincoln Green, a master Bowman with a quick mind and mischievous sense of humour. Dispossessed by greedy Norman overlords, he is forced to live beyond the law in the leafy depths of Sherwood, a royal hunting forest. From his forest lair he ambushes rich travellers, fights corrupt officials, and shares the spoils of his outlawry with poor, oppressed peasants.

Down the centuries this image has been elaborated and enlarged upon by literature, theatre and – more recently – film and TV shows. Many famous actors have played the people's hero. Some films have taken a less serious look at the time-honoured tale, including a Walt Disney cartoon and a gangster style musical. Did a real outlaw ever actually exist? To find out, we need to go back in time to look at the first documents that bear Robin's name.

Robin in rhyme: how the legend began

***"Robyn hod in sherewod stod
hodud and hathud and gosu and schod
four and thuynti arrows
he bar in his hondus***

Translation:

*"Robin Hood in Sherwood stood
hooded & hated and hosed and shod.
Four and twenty arrows he bore in his hands."*

Dating from around 1400, this poem is one of the earliest surviving written references to Robin. The original document is preserved in the library of Lincoln Cathedral and clearly associates the outlaw with Sherwood Forest.

The early ballads of Robin Hood were recited, embroidered and elaborated as they were passed on. Later, some of these ballads were written down. One of the earliest was 'A Lytell Gest (poem) of Robyn Hode', which is thought to have been handwritten during the 14th century. In it, the characters of Robin Hood, Little John and Will Scarlock (Scarlet) are all introduced, along with Robin's arch enemy, the Sheriff of Nottingham. The now familiar story of the silver arrow archery contest and the death of Robin are also included. Running to a massive 456 four-line verses, later printed versions of the ballad were circulated.

May Day was one of the most popular folk festivals in medieval and Tudor England, celebrated with dances, plays and 'may games'. A tree was sometimes felled and

dragged from the forest to be decorated as the focus of the festivities. Names given to the central male figure in old May Day celebrations are 'Jack-in-the-Green' and 'Robin Goodfellow'. Some folklorists view this as evidence that the legend of Robin Hood contains echoes of pre-Christian belief in a forest god or nature spirit.

Who was Robin Hood?

No-one knows for sure whether the legend of Robin Hood was based on a real or historical character. There have been several candidates. A certain Robert Hod, later called Hobbeshod, was a tenant of the Archbishop of York in Henry III's time. Legal records show him to be an outlaw. He was summoned to appear before York Assizes in 1225 and 1226 but fled, and is described in the records as an outlaw or fugitive.

In 1852, Victorian scholar Joseph Hunter claimed to have located the 'real' Robin Hood – Robert Hood, recorded in the royal household records as a servant of King Edward II. Later, Hunter discovered the same name (but was he the same man?) in the court rolls for Wakefield, which included Barnsdale in South Yorkshire, one of the outlaw's legendary homes.

The search is complicated by the fact that Hood, Hod and Hode were all common surnames in medieval England. Robert or Robin were equally popular Christian names. The phrase 'Robinhood' became a nickname used in court records for an outlaw, and there is evidence of at least eight people before 1300 who adopted it or were given it as a pseudonym. The real identity of Robin Hood will probably remain as elusive as the legendary outlaw. But one thing is sure: his popularity is as great as ever.

Robin on film

Robin has always been a popular subject with Hollywood. Here are some of the films that helped make him a hero of the silver screen:

- Robin Hood Outlawed, Starring A. Brian Plant. 1912
- Robin Hood, Starring Douglas Fairbanks & Enid Bennett. 1922
- The Adventures of Robin Hood, Starring Errol Flynn & Olivia de Havilland. 1938
- The Story of Robin Hood, Starring Richard Todd & Joan Price. 1952
- Robin Hood, Starring Richard Greene (TV series). 1955-1958
- Sword of Sherwood, Starring Richard Greene. 1961
- Robin Hood, Full length cartoon film by Walt Disney. 1973
- Robin & Marian, Starring Sean Connery & Audrey Hepburn. 1975
- Robin of Sherwood (English TV series), Starring Michael Praed and Jason Connery. 1984-86
- Robin Hood, Starring Patrick Bergen. 1991
- Robin Hood, Prince of Thieves, Starring Kevin Costner. 1991.

Robin Hood's Nottinghamshire

Robin Hood has left a trail across Nottinghamshire.

Knotted and gnarled, fenced off and propped up, 800 years old and still going strong – **The Major Oak** of Sherwood Forest was the base for Robin Hood and his Merry Men as they stole from the rich and gave to the poor – you can imagine the hole in the trunk may have been big enough for an outlaw to hide in.

From early Medieval times until the later Stuart era, **Sherwood Forest** was a carefully defined area stretching from just north of the city of Nottingham in the south to Worksop in the north, and covering about 100,000 acres, over which special "forest laws" held sway. These were designed to protect the valuable resources of timber and game for the crown. The boundaries of the royal hunting forest were first defined in 1218.

So many films have been made of the Robin Hood story that we tend to imagine the Royal Hunting Forest just as Hollywood pictured it – a vast expanse of dense and continuous woodland. In reality, the poor, sandy and acidic soils of Sherwood, areas of broadleaf forest alternated with open heathland, characterised by heather, gorse, bracken and broom. Neither was Sherwood Forest ever an unpopulated wilderness. There were several villages and woodland pasture provided grazing for sheep and pigs.

Robin Hood stood up for the poor and the oppressed against the tyranny of bad King John and the villainous Sheriff of Nottingham. At the time – the end of the 12th century – the Sheriff would have been no more than a bureaucrat, Nottingham's top civil servant. He wouldn't even have lived at **Nottingham Castle**, the giant fortress built on a high rocky outcrop overlooking the town and, at the time, one of the most formidable military buildings in the land. This is where any search for Robin Hood begins. The vast edifice which was continually enlarged through the Middle Ages fell into disrepair in Tudor times, was demolished after the Civil War, and eventually made way for a Georgian Palace built within the castle walls.

Along the River Trent lies **Newark Castle** where King John died. On the night he died, in 1216, a great storm raged in Sherwood Forest which locals believed was the devil claiming the king's soul.

Creswell Crags, an impressive limestone gorge on the border with Derbyshire, has a series of caves, one of which bears the name Robin Hood. It was here that Edward II was said to have pursued Robin Hood after first imprisoning several peasant families in the dungeons of his palace at Clipstone. The King was outwitted and outlaws released the hostages.

Within magnificent **Southwell Minster**, one of the few complete buildings to survive from the time of the Norman conquest is the ornately decorated medieval Chapter House. It features famous stone-carvings known as The Leaves of Southwell, and among the carvings of foliage, a number of enigmatic faces peer down. Sometimes termed Foliate Heads, these curious carvings show a man's face enmeshed in greenery, some spouting leaves from the mouth. This "Green Man" imagery is often interpreted as a symbol of fertility and regeneration. Historians and folklorists have linked the evolution of Robin Hood to the Green Man and other figures from the cycle of the seasons such as Jack in the Green, John Barleycorn, the Wild Man of the Woods and the mischievous sprite Robin Goodfellow.

Pub names in **Blidworth** show that this is a village with strong Robin Hood connections. In the churchyard, a curious stone monument marks the supposed grave of Will Scarlet.

Papplewick village once lay within Royal Sherwood Forest. The ornate village church, described as a "Georgian Gothick jewel" has in its floor two ancient stone slabs. With their carvings of longbows and hunting horns, these are thought to mark the graves of foresters – medieval officials of the royal hunting forest.

For the more energetic visitor, **The Robin Hood Way** is a way marked footpath which links many of the Nottinghamshire sites associated with the legendary hero. Starting from the Castle Gate House in the city it weaves through splendid countryside to reach its destination in Sherwood Forest. Over 100 miles long, the route is readily broken into easy stages. A comprehensive guide is available from Nottinghamshire County Council. Tel: 0115 982 3823.

Life in medieval Nottinghamshire

At the time of the Norman invasion in 1066, Nottinghamshire was part of the Saxon kingdom of Mercia. For the previous two centuries this frontier land had been increasingly under attack by armies of Vikings and Danes based in the Northumbrian town of York.

A third of the county was covered by forest. Three hundred villages and hamlets supported a population of approximately 6,000 people. Of these, probably only a third were free peasants, owning their own small plot of land, the rest were little more than slaves to local gentry or lords. Most domestic goods were created within the community. Payment would be "in kind" or barter: few people would ever see a coin.

With continuous wars and feuding, contagious diseases, lack of hygiene and very limited medical knowledge, life was short. Hard labour in forest and field brought crippling arthritis. Most adults died in their forties, to live longer would bring veneration and respect. The daily diet of the peasant would be a thick soup of grain and vegetables washed down with weak ale. Meat was eaten occasionally, though mutton and pork were considered to be a staple of the very poorest folk. The River Trent and its tributaries would supply eels, trout, pike and lampreys, with salmon in the spring and autumn. Prolonged periods of bad weather would destroy the harvest, forcing most people to face a winter of foraging for roots, herbs and wild grasses. Bark and acorns would substitute for flour in bread and dough cakes.

Despite the hardship, the forester and peasant were cheered by song, story-telling and faith in God, though the works of the Devil were often close at hand and superstition was rife.