

Hoodwinked

DAVID E. NORRIS says that if we only associate Robin Hood with Nottinghamshire then we've had the wool pulled over our eyes. Here he outlines the Pennine connection with this romantic bowman.



Robin Hood's grave in the grounds of Kirklees Estate.



The Elizabethan/Jacobean Gatehouse where Robin Hood supposedly died.

*Both illustrations are taken from postcards dating from the early 1900's.
(By courtesy of Kirklees Library Services)*

Folk heroes get a rough ride these days. In an age of reason scholars research so often demolishes the accepted tale but, in the case of Robin Hood, even the accepted truth is kept secret — in Yorkshire.

The story we all want to believe makes Robin Hood a vagabond and an outlaw who found refuge in Sherwood Forest. We imagine that he

could summon up the likes of Little John, Will Scarlett, Alan-a-Dale and Friar Tuck with a blast on a silver hunting horn. These men formed part of his 100-strong band of merry men who spent an unending summer in the greenwood hunting the King's deer, ambushing the rich, distributing money to the poor and generally taunting the Sheriff of Nottingham. We make

Robin out to be handsome, brave, courteous, just and chivalrous, especially to his beloved Maid Marian.

When it comes down to facts, or rather ballads, one has a number of conflicting stories to choose from.

He was either the Earl of Huntingdon, married to the alluring Marian Fitzwalter, or the son of Robert Fitzworth of Locksley Hall. Robert went to his death in the Crusades, leaving Robin with an uncle, who put him in the care of a Mansfield forester. Later in life he regained his lands and title — and Maid Marian into the bargain.

Alternatively, he was born Robert Hode, in Wakefield, in 1290. Married to Mathilda, he was called up along with other local men to fight for Thomas, Earl of Leicester, at the Battle of Boroughbridge. As one of the vanquished, he took to the forest to escape being charged with treason by the King, Edward II. This same King later pardoned Robin on condition that he enter royal service — but when this was not to Robin's liking, he returned to the forest life.

A lesser known version makes Robin a man of Hallamshire in South Yorkshire. He apparently fled to the greenwood after fatally injuring his step-father whilst ploughing. His mother supplied him with food until the law caught up with him. All this took place about 1620, when he came to Clifton upon Calder (very near Kirklees) where he met up with Little John.

Agreement

All the stories of Robin Hood agree on one point, however, and that is the whereabouts of his death — and the way it happened.

He died at Kirklees Priory, near Mirfield, on the banks of the River Calder.

Sherwood Forest, around Edwinstone, has revelled in the legend, making a feature of the church Maid Marian and Robin married in, and adding a highly original museum on the fringe of the forest close by. The Major Oak makes a focal point for believing 'pilgrims' in this authentic setting of the men in Lincoln Green.

In contrast, to retrace the last part of Robin's life, you need to write to the estate manager of Sir John Armitage at his estate address of Kirklees, Brighouse, in West Yorkshire, simply because Kirklees Priory is on his private land.

At intervals throughout the year visitors can make a tour which pieces together the recognised sequences of

Robin's beautifully theatrical death.

By no means the dashing hero, Robin was 80 and suffering from senile decay when Little John brought him to Joanna de Stainton (Sister Ursula), Prioress of Kirklees in 1248. She was reputedly related to Robin and said to be knowledgeable about medicine — so far as it is possible to be knowledgeable about an art which thought blood letting the cure to all ailments.

The Prioress gave Robin her own room in the gatehouse of the Priory, where she opened a vein, took some blood and bound it up again. Robin may have been too old to withstand such treatment, but such is not the stuff of legends. Today, that self-same gatehouse miraculously still stands. It is adjacent to a working farm and despite the rotting oak beams and the missing tiles, the sight of the mullioned windows — especially the west facing ones — guarantee a cold shudder down the back of any die-hard romantic.

In the meadows behind the gatehouse, stone blocks mark out the position of the former priory nave and transepts. Standing there with Mr Dyson, the Estate Manager, one simply takes ones pick as to the motives for Robin's death. Since the Prioress had been offered money and the promise of more for treating Robin, added to the facts that she was a religious woman and on the very next day poisoned herself, one would think she was genuinely aggrieved at Robin's death, but the popular story line makes her a friend of Roger of Doncaster, who in turn, bore Robin a grudge — so that cause of death became murder.

Seasoned romantics like myself accept the skullduggery simply because one has to abandon reason for the next stage of the guided sequential tour.

Close to death, Robin stopped Little John from burning down the Priory. Instead, he asked for his bow and after painfully fitting an arrow, shot it through those west windows, asking to be buried where it landed.

Arrows

In fact, or rather presumably, he shot three altogether.

The first landed in the River Calder. Another is reputed to have landed at Haigh Cross in Huddersfield, but perhaps it is as well to ignore this second arrow, as Haigh Cross is five miles away!

The one that mattered landed 580 yards from the window. Further than the present English Longbow record, it might well be, and I might add it seemed even longer than that, never-

theless I'm sure I was not alone in witnessing a definite quickening of the pulse rate as we paced out the flight.

Up the hill we trudged, past the cows and over the electric fence, to the copse at the brow of the hill, which overlooked the main road and the River Calder. Our guide with an assiduous sense of history pointed to a circle of stones which had nothing to do with Robin Hood, but in doing so he lost his sense of direction and could not find the track to Robin's grave.

Elusive

How apt this was! Even when dead, Robin, in his native habitat of trees and undergrowth was elusive.

When we eventually did find the grave, it set off a chain reaction of attitudes. Reached through neglected undergrowth, there is not even space to stand back and gape. The grave is no more than a walled, inscribed stone. The inscription reads:

“Here underneath dis laitl stean
Laiz robert earl of Huntingtun
Ne'er arcir ver az hie sa geud
An pipil kauld im robin heud
Sick utlaz az hi and iz men
Vil england nivr se agen.
Obit 24 kal! Dekembris 1247.

As we leaned on the wall and read this our guide dryly pointed out that it was the wrong date anyway.

Bars completely enclosed the grave like some circus lion's cage at one time, but these are now bent and gaps occur. Ask anyone born in the vicinity and they will tell you that the grave and the woods were a common venue for playing — despite the property being private.

Should the decay be allowed? Should not the gatehouse and the grave be developed; sold off like other parts of the estate have been — perhaps to the Yorkshire Tourist Board. It is easy to get indignant about the shabbiness and neglect. Surely our greatest folk hero deserves a better monument than this — if only because the un-authenticated parts of his life are so much more accessible to the public.

On the other hand I, for one, have a mischievous liking for the way it is. To see the grave you have to make a definite effort. To get there you have to “come prepared for a good deal of walking”, as the letter of invitation warns. The fact that no charge is made has a distinct Robin Hood ring about it, but it is not that that fixes my visit permanently in my memory.

It is the fact that it is the best kept secret tourist attraction in the whole of England! ■

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