

The Robin Hood Factsheet

THE LEGEND Robin Hood lived in the 1100's during the reign of Richard I. He is best known for his bravery and agility in his fight for justice, for the poor and oppressed.

MAN OR MYTH To answer the question "Who was he?" is very difficult. Apart from a few references in medieval chronicles and court transcripts - there is very little original evidence for his existence. Instead, most of the information is derived from tales told before 1500 and ballads sung by minstrels after 1600. These have been adapted for audiences throughout the world in the form of films and stories.

HIS FRIENDS Robin Hood was the leader of a band of fellow outlaws who helped in his fight against the sheriff and were also his loyal friends. Little John was Robin's right hand man and faithful companion. Don't be fooled by his name - he was famous for his great strength and size. Robin was romantically linked with the beautiful Maid Marian - legend has it that they married at Edwinstowe Church on the outskirts of Sherwood Forest. Friar Tuck - the jolly round friar who loved feasting and fighting! Also mentioned in the ballads are Will Scarlet - Robin's trusted henchman and kinsman, and, Allan A Dale who entertained the group with his songs and harp.

HIS HOME Robin Hood roamed Sherwood Forest in Nottinghamshire as an outlaw in order to avoid being captured by the Sheriff. During this time, it was one of England's finest royal forests, reserved exclusively for the King's hunting.



THE ORIGINAL TALES Only 5 tales are known to have existed before 1500 'A Gest of Robin Hood', 'Robin and the Monk', 'Robin Hood and the Potter', 'Robin Hood and Guy of Gisbourne' and 'Robin Hood, his death'. These tales are the main source of evidence for his existence.

HIS FOES The Sheriff of Nottingham was Robin's arch-enemy throughout the tales - a man to be hated and feared. As the King's representative, he terrorised the people into giving him money for taxes. Surprisingly, The outlaws respected the King and saw him as a source of justice. He even eventually pardoned Robin and offered him his blessing for his wedding.

The Robin Hood Legend

The stories relating to Robin Hood are apocryphal, verging on the mythological. His first appearance in a manuscript is in William Langland's *Piers Plowman* (1377) in which Sloth, the lazy priest boasts "I ken [know] 'rimes of Robin Hood."

The next notice is in Wyntown's *Scottish Chronicle*, written about 1420, where the following lines occur—without any connection, and in the form of an entry—under the year 1283:—"Lytil Jhon and Robyne Hude Wayth-men ware commendyd gude: In Yngil-wode and Barnysdale Thai oysyd all this tyme thare trawale."

In the year 1439, a petition was presented to Parliament against one Piers Venables of Aston, in Derbyshire, "who having no liflode, ne sufficeante of goodes, gadered and assembled unto him many misdoers, beyng of his clothyng, and, in manere of insurrection, wente into the wodes in that countrie, like as it hadde be Robyn Hude and his meyne."—*Rot. Parl.* v. 16.

The first historical mention of Robin Hood is in a passage of the "Scotichronicon", written partly by John Fordun between 1377 and 1384, and partly by his pupil Walter Bower, about 1450, who largely interpolated the work of his master. Among his interpolations, is a passage translated as follows. It is inserted immediately after Fordun's account of the defeat of Simon de Montfort, and the punishments inflicted on his adherents:

"At this time, [sc. 1266,] from the number of those who had been deprived of their estates arose the celebrated bandit Robert Hood, (with Little John and their accomplices,) whose achievements the foolish vulgar delight to celebrate in comedies and tragedies, while the ballads upon his adventures sung by the jesters and minstrels are preferred to all others."

Printed versions of Robin Hood ballads appear in the early 16th century — shortly after the advent of printing in England. In these ballads, Robin Hood is a yeoman which, by that time, meant an independent tradesman or farmer. It is only in the late 16th century that he becomes a nobleman, the Earl of Huntington, Robert of Locksley, or later still, Robert Fitz Ooth.

His romantic attachment to Maid Marian (or "Marion") (originally known as Mathilda) is also a product of this later period and probably has something to do with the French pastoral play of about 1280, the *Jeu de Robin et Marion*. Aside from the names there is no recognizable Robin Hood connection to the play.

The late 16th century is also the period when the Robin Hood story is moved back in time to the 1190s, when King Richard is away at the crusades. (See Mair, *Historia Majoris Britanniae*). One of the original Robin Hood ballads refers to King Edward (Edward I, II, and III ruled England from 1272 to 1377). The idea of Robin Hood as a high-minded Saxon fighting Norman Lords originates in the 19th century, (see e.g. Thierry, *Histoire de la Conquête de l'Angleterre par les Normands*, livr. xi) most notably in the part Robin Hood plays in Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* (1819), chapters 40 - 41, where the familiar modern Robin Hood—"King of Outlaws and prince of good fellows!" Richard the Lionheart calls him—makes his debut.

The folkloric Robin Hood was deprived of his lands by the villainous Sheriff of Nottingham and became an outlaw. The Sheriff does indeed appear in the early ballads (Robin kills and beheads him), but there is nothing as specific as this allegation. Robin's other enemies include the rich abbots of the Catholic Church and a bounty hunter named Guy of Gisbourne. Robin kills and beheads him as well. The early ballads contain nothing about giving to the poor, although Robin does make a large loan to an unfortunate knight.

In the ballads, the original "Merry Men" (though not called that) included: Friar Tuck, Will Scarlet (or Scathlock), Much the Miller's Son, and Little John — who was called "little" because he wasn't. Alan-a-Dale is a later invention in Robin Hood plays.