

ROBIN HOOD AND THE BATTLE OF BOROUGHBIDGE

It was in the plays and romances of the 16th and 17th centuries that the story-tellers transposed Robin Hood from his true time in the reign of the first three Edwards to the time of Richard the Lionheart. At the same time they used their artistic license to ennoble him as 'Robert, Earle of Huntingdon' – but then, they also changed King Richard's Queen, Berengaria, into a Katherine.

One thing they did get right was that 'Robin' was a 'Robert' before he was outlawed. He was born Robert Hood in Wakefield, Yorkshire, in 1290.

His father, Adam, was a forester to Earl Warrenne, Lord of the Manor of Wakefield. Wolf and boar were still common in Yorkshire at this time (but became extinct within a hundred years) and it is certain that Robert learnt his skill with bow and arrow from his father.

The Court Rolls of the manor for 6 December 1315 have 'Robert Hoode' paying one shilling for a licence to hold a half-acre of land. In the following month the handmaid of 'Robert Hood' was fined tuppence for taking wood from The Old Park.

In that same year Robert married Matilda (later Marian). They gave two shillings for a 30ft by 16ft piece of land at Bichill on which to build a five-roomed house and so they became tenants of the Manor of Wakefield.

The conscript

In November of the following year, at the command of Edward II, Earl Warrenne called on a number of his tenants to join with other contingents to take up arms and stop the depredations of the Scots raiders. Robert Hood failed to comply with the order and was fined at the manor courthouse.

There was a similar call to arms in 1317 and, again, those tenants who did not respond were fined. On this occasion Robert Hood's name does not appear in the court records so it may be assumed that, this time, he joined the forces of the King in the failed siege of Berwick.

The wrong side?

Meanwhile Warrenne granted the Manor of Wakefield to Thomas, Earl of Lancaster, cousin to the King. Robert, in common with all the Wakefield tenants, was obliged to change his allegiance to Lancaster. (It was by this kind of mischance that many Yorkshiremen found themselves fighting for the wrong colour during the Wars of the Roses.)

When Lancaster issued his call to arms in 1322, Robert Hood became an archer in this rebel army arraigned against Edward II.

When Lancaster's depleted force was driven north and finally routed at Boroughbridge on the River Ure (see the companion leaflet 'The Battle of Boroughbridge' ref: RW7H) those of his followers who were not killed or captured fled. These lucky few were outlawed and were officially known as Contrarians.

Robert escaped into Barnsdale Forest. Although later chroniclers based him and his band entirely in Sherwood Forest, it was in Barnsdale that he began his career. John Leland wrote that: "betwixt Milburne and Feribrigge I saw the woodi and famos forest of Barnesdale wher they say that Robyn Hudde lyvid like an outlaw". Some of the adventures do place him in Sherwood, which was no great distance from Barnsdale, but it was in Yorkshire that he was born and in Yorkshire (at Kirklees Priory) that he died.

It was in Barnsdale Forest that he became Robin and his wife became Marian – the rest, while not perhaps history, is legend. — Ronald Walker

This brief account of the true identity and early life of Robin Hood is based on the researches of Joseph Hunter and J W Walker in the Court Rolls of the Manor of Wakefield, the Contrariant Rolls of Edward II, the Household Expenses Account of Edward II, The Lyttel Geste (the oldest known ballad of Robin Hood, written in the late 14th century when the life and adventures of Robin were still within living memory) and other sources. For the full story see The True History of Robin Hood by J W Walker (ISBN 0 85409 889 5) published by E P Publishing Limited, East Ardsley, Wakefield, Yorkshire.