

ROBIN HOOD OF SHERWOOD FOREST

BY MARGARET BRENTNALL

*Then taking them to rest, his merry men and he,
Slept many a summer's night under the greenwood tree.
From wealthy abbots' chests, and churls' abundant store,
What oftentimes he took, he shar'd amongst the poor.*

MICHAEL DRAYTON (1563-1631)

CHRISTMAS is the time for story-telling, and for British children there are few better-loved tales than that of Robin Hood and his gallant band of outlaws, who lived in the fastnesses of Sherwood Forest and robbed the rich to help the poor. It does not really matter whether the details are true or not, for Robin and his Merry Men (not forgetting the intrepid Maid Marian and Friar Tuck) are far too popular with the boys and girls of this country to fear oblivion from the delving of sceptical historians. And if we really set about it, we can find plenty of theories to prove that this endearing set of outlaws did indeed exist.

One reason for the affection in which Robin Hood is held is simply that he was so likeable a personality, for never has a dastardly deed or unkind thought been attributed to him. Thomas Fuller, the 17th-century antiquarian and divine, wrote in the Nottinghamshire section of his *History of the Worthies of England* (1662): "Camden calls him *praedonem mitissimum*, the gentlest thief that ever was; and know, reader, he is entered into our catalogue, not for his thievery but for his gentleness . . . His principal residence was in Shirewood Forest in this county, though he had another haunt (he is no fox that hath but one hole) near the sea in the North-Riding in Yorkshire where Robin's Hood Bay still retaineth his name: not that he was any pirat, but

Right: ROBIN HOOD AT THORESBY HALL. This statue of the famous outlaw is in the grounds of the great mansion which is the home of the Countess Manvers. Thoresby Hall is four miles north of Ollerton, and the richly wooded estate which surrounds the house forms part of Sherwood Forest. The State Apartments and terraces are open to visitors four days a week in spring and summer.



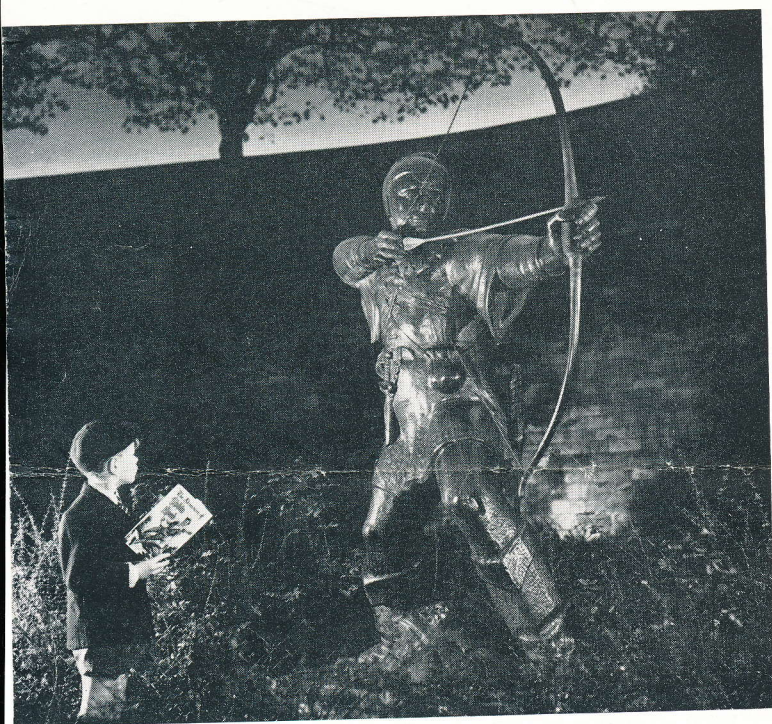
a land-thief, who retreated to those unexpected parts for his security . . . He was rather a merry than a mischievous thief (complimenting passengers out of their purses), never murdering any but deer, and this popular robber feasted the vicinage with his venison. He played his pranks in the reign of King Richard the First, about the year of our Lord 1100."

So Fuller, at least, had no doubt at all that Robin Hood existed. Another 17th-century writer gave the year and place of his birth as 1160 at "Lockesley in Yorkshyre" (the hamlet of Loxley, near Sheffield), thus placing his adventures during the reign of Henry II. Yet another authority developed the theory that he was a supporter of Simon de Montfort, whose opposition to Henry III and defeat at the Battle of Evesham in 1264 placed many of his followers in such sore straits that refuge in the greenwood was the safest place for a very long time to come. Again, it has been claimed that he lived in the reign of Edward II, aided Thomas, Earl of Lancaster, in the rising of 1322, and later entered the King's household. The latter supposition seems to be

Ballads provided the first record of the adventures of Robin Hood and his Merry Men, to be followed in 1495 by a composite story, compiled from the ballads, entitled *A Lytell Geste of Robyn Hood*. This was printed by Wynkyn de Worde, a disciple of Caxton. In the "Geste", Robin Hood's background was the neighbourhood of Barnsdale in Yorkshire, and Sherwood Forest did not become the setting of the tale until the 16th century. But today it is with Sherwood Forest that his story is always most closely associated.

During the period in which the tale is set, Sherwood Forest would have covered an area of about 200 square miles, stretching northwards from Nottingham. It was a royal forest, containing within its boundaries a favourite hunting box of the Plantagenet kings. The glades of Sherwood were therefore rich in royal deer. Here lived Robin Hood and his followers, the chief of whom were Little John (so named on account of his great size), Will Scarlet, the minstrel Alan-a-Dale, Much the miller's son, George-a-Green, Friar Tuck – and, of course, Maid Marian. Their life was carefree (when the Sheriff of Nottingham left them alone!) and they enjoyed a plentiful diet of royal venison, with sufficient money removed from the purses of wealthy wayfarers to meet their own needs and also to relieve the hardships of the neighbouring poor.

Robin Hood lived to a good age, and in the end his death was due to the treachery of a kinswoman, the Prioress of a Yorkshire nunnery to whom he came for the cure of blood-letting. The Prioress – surely the most evil character in the whole story, beside whom the Sheriff of Nottingham is mildness personified – conspired with a certain Sir Roger of Doncaster who desired the outlaw's death. This she brought about by severing an artery. As soon as he realised that he had been betrayed, Robin seized his horn and, before his strength failed him, blew a mighty blast which reached the ears of Little John in the nearby forest. This trusty henchman forced his way into the room in the Priory Gatehouse where his leader lay, and found him already half dead



based on the rather slight testimony that in the royal household accounts of Edward II a certain "Robin Hode" is recorded as having received 3d. per day for his duties as one of the King's "vadlets". But if the era in which Robin Hood lived is to be determined in this way, there is a better case to be found in the reign of Henry III when, in the Pipe Rolls of 1228, 1230 and 1231, the Sheriff of Yorkshire is reported to have owed 32s. 6d. for the chattels of "Robert Hood, fugitive". In Elizabethan times the story gained ground that he was of noble birth – the dispossessed Earl of Huntingdon.

Whoever Robin Hood may have been, and when and wherever he may have lived, the story of his adventures has become part of the heritage of Britain. From very early times he was impersonated during the May Day celebrations, and in the collected letters of Sir John Paston there is a record, dated Good Friday 1473, of a servant having been retained for three years "to play Robyn Hod in Maytime". By the time another century had passed, however, the May Day celebrations of Scotland had fallen beneath the forbidding eye of John Knox and his followers, and in 1577 the Scottish General Assembly requested that a royal prohibition should be placed on "plays of Robin Hood, King of May, on the Sabbath". In the early May Day festivities Friar Tuck and Little John were also impersonated, but the character of Maid Marian did not appear until about 1500.





Above: ROBIN HOOD'S BAY, a fishing village on the Yorkshire coast near Whitby. It is said that Robin Hood took refuge here when planning escape to the Continent.

from loss of blood. The last words of Robin Hood are recorded in an old ballad:

*Give me my bent bow in my hand
And an arrow I will let free,
And where that arrow is taken up,
There let my grave digged be.*

Supported in the strong arms of Little John, Robin drew his long bow and the arrow winged its way to a spot on the edge of the forest; and there they buried him, his grave marked by a great boulder which Little John set above it.

Today there are reminders of Robin Hood in many parts of Britain, but most of all in Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire where the tale is most firmly rooted. Sherwood Forest itself is no longer so extensive as in the old days, but considerable expanses do still survive, especially in the Dukeries (an area named for its great ducal homes). The village of Edwinstowe, between Nottingham and Worksop, is traditionally the place where Robin Hood and Maid Marian were married, and half a mile to the north stands the Major Oak, a great monarch of the forest whose trunk measures 30 feet in circumference but is completely hollow, with space for a dozen people to stand within it. It was in the thick foliage of the Major Oak that Robin and his friends concealed themselves and outwitted the Sheriff's men. Some distance away, in the part of the forest known as Birklands, is the Shambles Oak, a tree more popularly referred to as "Robin Hood's Larder", for here, so tradition tells us, he would hang his venison from the branches. Eight miles from Edwinstowe, on the outskirts of Worksop, is the beautiful little 11th-century Steetley Chapel where the reputed meeting between Friar Tuck and the King took place.

Nottingham itself has a strong Robin Hood tradition, and the story is told that Robin was imprisoned in the castle and rescued by Little John and Much the miller's son – also that the network of caves still existing beneath the city provided hiding-places for the outlaws. Appropriately, a statue of Robin stands on Robin Hood's Green, near the Castle Gateway, and here can also be found representations of Friar Tuck, Alan-a-Dale, Will Scarlet and Little John. Incidents from their adventures are depicted in bronze plaques on the Castle wall.

Another statue of Robin Hood stands in the grounds of Thoresby Hall, the magnificent mansion in the Dukeries which



Above: THE MAJOR OAK, a venerable giant of Sherwood Forest whose foliage was the legendary hiding-place of Robin Hood and his Merry Men when sought by the Sheriff of Nottingham. It stands near Edwinstowe, the village where, according to tradition, Robin Hood and Maid Marian were married.

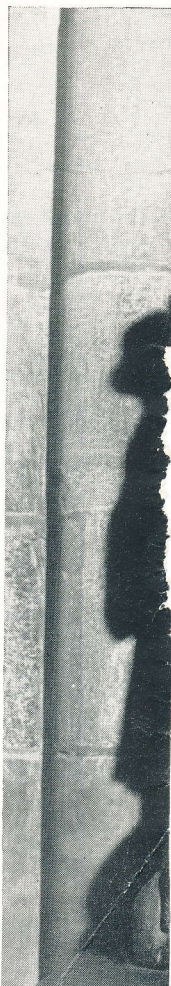
Left: A CHIMNEYPiece OF SHERWOOD OAK in the Library at Thoresby Hall. The overmantel depicts a glade in the forest, dominated by the Major Oak, while on either side of the fireplace are statues of Robin Hood and Little John.

Extreme left: BY THE WALLS OF NOTTINGHAM CASTLE, Robin Hood draws his bow beneath the fascinated gaze of a small admirer. Nearby are statues of Little John, Will Scarlet, Alan-a-Dale and Friar Tuck, and plaques on the wall depict their adventures.

CARVING THE

PHOTOGRAPHS BY J. C. D. SMITH

IN medieval times, the ability to read the Bible was the privilege of the educated few. The ordinary parishioners, especially those who attended the village churches, could neither read nor write, so the lessons of Scripture had to be presented to them in pictorial form – in stained-glass windows (such as are described elsewhere in this issue), in wall paintings, in sculptures and woodcarvings. Many such pictorial lessons survive in churches and cathedrals as a treasured heritage from earlier times, and on these pages we show some examples of the art of the woodcarver in depicting the story of Christmas. Also included are two illustrations of woodcarvings which celebrate, in more secular spirit, the arrival of the New Year and all the promise that it holds in store.



Eight Centuries of Stained Glass

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inspires no less admiration than those in the cathedral itself. Similarly, visitors to York may be reminded that the church of All Saints in North Street, a few hundred yards from the cathedral, has numerous windows of fine 15th-century glass. These include two well-known series, one depicting scenes from the 14th-century poem *The Prykke of Conscience* by Richard Rolle, the other illustrating the Corporal Acts of Mercy and particularly interesting for the contemporary costumes and objects of everyday life which are depicted against a rich background of blue and ruby.

There are wonderful windows, too, even in the small country churches. Here pride of place may well be claimed by Fairford in Gloucestershire, where the windows, dating from about 1500, represent perhaps the greatest treasury of the glass of that period to be assembled in one place. They tell the story of the Redemption from the Fall of Man to the Judgment, the latter being depicted in the great West Window, and provide yet another excellent example of the early use of stained glass as a means of Biblical teaching. In the same way, the early glass at Madley, Herefordshire, shows scenes from the life of Christ, and the same church is also the possessor of a "Tree of Jesse" window (a more famous example being that at Dorchester, Oxfordshire). Stanford-on-Avon, Northamptonshire, and Waterperry, Oxfordshire, are other village churches specially noted for their glass; and Stoke D'Abernon, Surrey, shows what is probably the most representative collection of medieval and Renaissance glass (15th to 17th centuries) of any parish church in the London area.

The church at Great Witley, Worcestershire, which is of outstanding interest for its rococo decoration, is also noted for the 18th-century windows designed by Joshua Price; these remarkable examples of pictorial work, which have the effect of enhancing the beautiful ceiling of the church, depict scenes from the New Testament, including the Draught of Fishes, the Supper at Emmaus and the Resurrection. The latter is also the subject of the extremely fine 19th-century window by Joseph Beckler in the parish church at Dudley in the same county.

Of the many memorial windows in village churches, mention should be made of the Lewis Carroll window at Daresbury, Cheshire, where the author of *Alice in Wonderland* was born. In this charming composition, Carroll is seen with Alice herself and many of the well-loved Wonderland characters. Finally, to end this necessarily incomplete survey, we will return to London to see the five modern heraldic windows in the Queen's Chapel of the Savoy, just off the Strand. Heraldry has been featured in stained glass ever since 1270, and these windows – notably the one over the altar, designed by Joan Howson and incorporating the arms of King George VI as Duke of Lancaster, Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother as Grand Master of the Royal Victorian Order, Queen Mary, Queen Victoria and the Prince Consort – are well worthy of the long tradition that lies behind them.

Robin Hood

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is the home of the Countess Manvers. It is open to the public on certain days of the week in summer, and in the library visitors are intrigued by the elaborately carved chimney-piece of Birklands oak which depicts Sherwood Forest and the Major Oak, while on either side of the hearth are statues of Robin Hood and Little John.

The prowess of Robin Hood as an archer has been the subject of many a tale. For instance, there is an eminence near Ludlow, the castle town in Shropshire, from which Robin is said to have shot an arrow for a distance of a mile and a half to land in the roof of Ludlow's church.

Reminders of Robin Hood and his Merry Men are to be found in widely separated areas. Near Winstan, in Derbyshire, there are castellated crags known as Robin Hood's Stride; between Studley Royal and Fountains Abbey in Yorkshire, is

Fountain's Dale, the fabled scene of Robin Hood's meeting with Friar Tuck, which resulted in the portly friar joining the Merry Men; and Robin Hood's Bay, near Whitby, on the Yorkshire coast, is the place where Robin is said to have remained in hiding when contemplating escape to the Continent.

Where were the last resting-places of these heroes of our childhood? It is said that Will Scarlet lies at Blidworth in Sherwood Forest; and in the Derbyshire village of Hathersage is the reputed grave of the faithful giant, Little John. His height is believed to have been 7½ feet, and when the grave was opened a century or so ago a thigh bone measuring 32 inches in length was found. The traditional burial place of Robin Hood himself is at Kirkstall, near Cooper Bridge in Yorkshire, where—significantly—the remains of a Cistercian nunnery may still be seen.

When Handel Lived in Brook Street

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Theatre under the direction of Thomas Arne, composer of *Rule Britannia*, and Arne's young sister sang the part of Galatea. With Arne and other composers, Handel was one of the original supporters of the Royal Society of Musicians of Great Britain; and when the Foundling Hospital was established by his friend, Captain Thomas Coram, in 1740, Handel showed his interest in this charity by presenting an organ to the Hospital. This he inaugurated with the first performance of the anthem "Blessed are they that consider the Poor" in the presence of the Prince of Wales. The Hospital has since been moved to Hertfordshire, but in the Coram Foundation Museum at 40 Brunswick Square visitors may see the keyboard of Handel's organ. (The organ from his house in Brook Street is now in the Victoria and Albert Museum.)

In 1742 came Handel's greatest work, *Messiah*, which received its first performance in Dublin on April 13th. There followed a long series of large-scale compositions including *Samson*, *Judas Maccabeus*, *Theodora* and the *Occasional Oratorio*, most of which were first heard at Covent Garden Theatre, predecessor of the present Royal Opera House. In 1749 Handel was called upon to provide music for the celebrations marking the Peace of Aix-la-Chapelle, and his Royal Fireworks Music, played by a band of a hundred musicians, provided an impressive accompaniment to a brilliant display of pyrotechnics. A previous public rehearsal of the music attracted an audience of 12,000 – eloquent testimony to the esteem in which Handel's music was universally regarded.

During his last years Handel became ill and blind, and many were moved to tears, during a performance of *Samson*, at the sight of the blind composer seated near the organ and listening to the poignant aria:

*Total eclipse, no sun, no moon,
All dark amid the blaze of noon.*

He died in 1759 and his funeral at Westminster Abbey was attended by three thousand people. His grave is in the South Transept, alongside that of Charles Dickens. So passed one of the most illustrious figures of the Augustan Age, honoured in death as in life by the people of the city he adopted as his own.

PHOTOGRAPHS

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