

Robin Hood -notes by Jeffrey Stafford

These notes were provided to me by Jeffrey Stafford prior to his being taken ill. He wished that they be published on the web. Many of his ideas coincide with my own and confirm the notion that Sayles was in the valley of the Skell. [T.M. October 2006]

Few historical mysteries have aroused so much scholarly interest in the last thirty years as the question of who was Robin Hood, its discussion has whet the appetites of numerous historians, both amateur and professional, whose attempts to explain the origins of the legend often raised more questions than they answered. The first theory to be seriously advanced, apart from the wild speculation of the eighteenth century, was the Wakefield theory. The Wakefield theory is the child of Joseph Hunter. He saw behind the legend a tenant of Wakefield, a supporter of Earl Thomas of Lancaster, outlawed after the battle of Borough Bridge and pardoned and taken into royal service when Edward II visited Nottingham in 1323. To add substance to his theory Hunter identified the Wakefield Robin Hood with an individual of the same name who appears as a porter in royal service in the spring of 1324. Hunter's thesis was later taken up and developed by a number of twentieth century historians, notably, J W Walker in *The True History of Robin Hood*, and P. V. Harris in *The Truth About Robin Hood*.

One of the chief strengths of the Wakefield theory lay in the remarkable coincidence between the story in the Gest and the historical record, namely, Edward II's visit to Nottingham in November 1323 and the appearance of a Robin Hood in royal service early the following year. While this was long one of the chief supports of Hunter's thesis, the argument was completely shattered by Professor Holt's discovery in the domestic records of Edward II. This provided the hitherto unknown fact that the domestic Robin was already in the king's service prior to his visit to Nottingham. Despite this, the Wakefield theory continued to find favour. It was discussed in John Bellamy's *Robin Hood An Historical Enquiry* and further explored in Graham Phillips and Martin Keatman's work, *Robin Hood: The Man Behind the Myth*. In his book Bellamy argued that Robin could have entered royal service towards the end of April 1323. To add substance to his argument he advanced a new candidate for the role of the sheriff of Nottingham, Henry de Faucumberg, who held the office of sheriff when Edward II visited Nottingham. He then went on to connect Faucumberg the sheriff with Wakefield, through the fact that he was able to point to a number of references to a Henry de Faucumberg in the Wakefield court rolls between 1313 and 1328.

Bellamy had no knowledge of the new discovery made by David Crook when he formulated his theory about the origins of Robin Hood in 1985. But even in the light of perhaps the most significant find in Robin Hood research for many years, Phillips and Keatman were unwaveringly certain that the Robin Hood unearthed by Joseph Hunter in 1852 was the Robin Hood of the Gest. And unsurprisingly they supported Bellamy in his argument that Henry de Faucumberg was the historical sheriff of the legend

But Bellamy's identification of the sheriff of Nottingham with his Wakefield namesake fails for two reasons: the former died around January 1332 and the latter was still alive a year later.

At a court held at Wakefield on Friday 11 November, 6 Edward III, Henry de Faucumberg was fined 6d for blocking up a watercourse with tan. The second entry I found relating to him was in a court held at Wakefield on Friday, the Morrow of Ascension Day 7 Edward III, when he was fined 2d for escape in the old park. It is safe, therefore, to assume that whoever de Faucumberg of Wakefield may have been he was not the sheriff of Nottingham.

In fact, the argument on which the whole Wakefield theory is based can be proved to be wrong as well, as the unpublished manor court rolls provide a number of hitherto unpublished references to Robert Hode of Wakefield in the reign of Edward III.

The first entry to Robert Hode under the township of Wakefield, is on 18 October 5 Edward III

[1331] when he was fined 6d for dry wood. He was at the same court on 27th* June 7 Edward 111 [1333] when he was fined for taking firewood This entry is significant, because it specifically refers to Robert Hode the baker, making a clear distinction between the other two Robert Hode's who are always recorded as Robert Hode of Sowerby and Robert Hode of Newton. In October at the same court Matilda Liffast was fined 6d for the blood of Joanna, daughter of Robert Hode.

[This should read 25th June 1333 - T.M.]*

This brings us to an entry in the court roll of 1335 when several local bakers were brought before the court for not baking their bread in the lord's oven. Robert Hode's name does not appear among them. The entry reads: William Nundy public baker is assigned in full court for not baking his bread in the lord's oven. William says he is a freeman and can bake his bread any place he chooses. He afterwards comes and acknowledges the trespass. William Thrift, Robert Wolf, Robert Capon, Matilda Nelot, John Roger, common bakers in mercy for the same. William Pollard, summoned before the steward, does not come. He afterwards comes and is fined 6d And in answer to the charge of not baking his bread in the public oven, says he is a freeman, but afterwards acknowledges the trespass. These entries, while they have no direct bearing on our investigation, provide a comparison between the manorial obligations of those who were free and those who were personally un-free.

Entries, which relate more, clearly to Robert Hode's profession occur in the rolls for the court of Wakefield on Thursday after Michaelmas 10 Edward 111 when he was fined for baking bread contrary to assize. The following year on Thursday 13 October he was fined sixpence for baking In the margin the clerk of the court has written:

Farmers of the town of Wakefield This entry makes it clear that Robert Hode the baker was a tenant of the town of Wakefield and not one of the outlying townships

In doing their research other writers must have given the court rolls more than a fleeting glance. They were bound, therefore, to have seen the entries I found why then had they not mentioned them in their work? One can only suspect that previous researchers either ignored what they found because it did not suit their argument, or they just relied upon the observations of others.

Historians must decide for themselves whether or not Robert Hode the baker and his namesake who bought a plot of land on Bickill, in 1316 are one and the same. The argument in favour gains strength from two references in the Wakefield court rolls for 1357 and 1358, which mention a tenement on Bickhill, formerly Robert Hode's. The word "formerly" would clearly appear to apply to the last tenant of the property with far greater force than it would to one who had lost his property thirty five years earlier makes the identification inherently probable.

Granted, nothing in the way of conclusive proof is possible, but I am content that historians should study the facts and judge for themselves where the greater weight of probability lies.

In a book entitled English Surnames published thirty years ago but strangely neglected, C. M. Matthews drew attention to a Robertus Robehod, who appears at Walsham le Willows, Suffolk, in 1283. She pointed to the close link between popular folklore and surnames and how one can influence the other. At the same time she concluded that the Robin Hood from whom Robertus Robehod acquired his surname had to be a figure from the first half of the thirteenth century.

The book made very little impression on anyone. Historians appeared unprepared to make connections between popular folklore and surnames. Quite simply, it did not occur to a specialist in medieval history that surnames might, in some way, shed light on the Robin Hood legend. But when a second person, who is an historian~ made the same link and published it in 1982, other scholars could no longer ignore it.

The second person was J C. Holt, a known and respected historian. Holt argued that the rare combination of the famous outlaws Christian name and Surname, and the appearance of a 'Gilbert Robynhod' in a Sussex subsidy roll Jo r 1296, indicates that the Robin Hood legend was already

known in Southern England by the second half of the thirteenth century. Professor Holt's argument received further confirmation in the form of an allusion, discovered by David Crook on the exchequer memoranda roll for 1262, to a 'William Robehod fugitive ' whose real name can be proved to be William son of Robert Le Fevere. The earliest positive reference to Robin Hood then known was the Piers Plowman reference written in 1377. The implication of David Crook's discovery is therefore clear enough. It means the earliest reference to 'Robin Hood' must now be taken to be over one hundred years earlier.

In 1995 authors Phillips and Keatman rejected the surname evidence put forward by Professor Holt. They argued that the surnames Robehod and Rabunhod were not actually Robin Hood and yet Graham Phillips in his book *Act of God* (1998) wrote: Remarkably one sixteenth dynasty Hykos pharaoh was called Yakobaam, a name in which a number of biblical scholars have seen a striking similarity to the Hebrew name Jacob. With this name variant Phillips had no quarrel, and yet he failed to see any similarity between the name or nickname Robehod and Robin Hood. The reason for this is elementary namely, the name or nickname was clearly a problem for himself and Keatman who wished to place the archetypal Robin in the fourteenth century. In short, Keatman and Phillips were hopelessly biased. Stephen Knight also discussed the surname evidence in his book *Robin Hood - A Complete Study of the English Outlaw*. On the whole, Knight tended to be shamelessly cavalier in his criticism of Holt's surname thesis. He argued that the reference to William Robehod was a slender basis on which to assume that by 1262 the outlaw legend was already flourishing. He shrugged off its possible relevance with the comment that the surname is simply the result of a careless copyist. But when the objections to Holt's surname evidence are put under a microscope they can be comprehensively demolished. The similarity of Robehod and Rabunhod to 'Robinhood' cannot be dismissed as mere coincidences. The three are too similar for coincidence. Experience has taught me that collections of coincidences do not occur easily. Coincidence is a word used by many writers when they cannot explain a convergence of certain events and facts. What is coincidence to some, is not so to those who understand the links between the events and the facts. The names Robehod, Rabunhod and Robinhod, are too similar to be detached from one another.

As all readers of medieval archives know there were many variations in the spelling of names. So it is hardly surprising that in an age of vague and imprecise spelling, the form of a name should vary, sometimes dramatically, from writer to writer and region to region. J. W. Walker, for example, found more than fifty ways of spelling Wakefield in the court rolls he examined. During his research John Bellamy found seven variant forms of Scarlet. More importantly, in the very late fifteenth century or, more probably, early sixteenth century version of *Robin Hood and the Potter*, the Christian name of the legendary outlaw varies slightly from the spelling in the *Gest*, being set down plainly as Roben. This is an especially striking example of the slight variation in the spelling of names. What is significant however is that when the spelling is combined with the outlaws surname to form Robenhod /Hood generally spelt with a single 'o' the combined form of the name differs little from Robehod and Rabunhod, and sounds uncommonly like both.

Secondly are we to believe that a careless or sloppy copyist happened to stumble upon a combination of the famous outlaws Christian name and Surname by sheer accident? The odds are surely much against it. But if we assume for a moment that the name is the result of a copyist error, we would still be left to fathom out from whence came the element 'Hood', which never formed any part of the real name of the individual concerned. Whether willfully or through negligence, this fact seems to have been ignored by Knight.

And in any case to combine it with the diminutive of the father's Christian name to form a nickname or surname would have been a fairly pointless exercise, unless of course, the combined form of the name was in some way special. On the other hand, even if William Robehod's nickname is put down

to a clerical error, we are still left with the other 'Robinhood' surnames, which have come to light since 1982. From that time onwards seven further examples of the surname have come to light from a variety of medieval records. Out of a total of eight names, five are criminals or outlaws. Perhaps one clerk working with one or two documents alone, and not checking his sources might readily misconstrue a name. But it is hardly possible to acquit five different scribes of making the same error. Any responsible historian must, like Sherlock Holmes, pursue whatever clues come to hand, however slender or circumstantial. One must not dismiss material out of hand because it threatens to lead into unfamiliar territory. For while documentary proof may be hard to come by it is self evident that Christian names and surnames are genuine guides to popular taste and it is this that gives them their special importance.

For whereas the chief topics of the Gest could just as easily belong to the fourteenth century as to the thirteenth, the rise of the surname or nickname Robin Hood, in its various spellings, can be pinpointed precisely to the second half of the thirteenth century. From 1262 onwards references to the use of the combined form of the outlaws Christian name and surname proliferate in a variety of government records. Yet before 1262 there is a thunderous silence. Had the combined form of the name existed either as a surname or nickname half a century earlier, it is surely likely that some stray example would have filtered down to us.

It is probably no accident that the first recorded references to the use of 'Robinhood' as a criminal nickname comes from the years previous to the first appearance of criminals who are described as 'Roberdsmen' in the 1331 Statute of Winchester. This denotation is, in itself both significant and intriguing. Could there possibly be some connection between the two apparently discordant elements. In itself the appellation 'Roberdsmen' might be provocative but hardly conclusive. Taken in conjunction with the appearance of the 'Robinhood' criminal nickname, however, there is not much room for doubt it would seem fairly indisputable that the term 'Roberdsmen' was in fact applied specifically and exclusively to criminals using 'Robinhood' as a nickname or alias.

But why was this particular nickname or alias chosen out of a million possibilities? However far fetched flights of human imagination may be, ideas must have some original impetus, some spark to light the flame. How, we may ask, did thirteenth century criminals light upon the name 'Robinhood' as a nickname? And how is one to account for its use as a whole surname by individuals who were to all appearances law-abiding members of the community? The name is too widespread and used by too many criminals for it to be the error of a sloppy copyist or the invention of one man. Phillips and Keatman have tried to explain away the appearance of the whole surname 'Robinhood' by arguing that Gilbert Robynhod appearing in the Sussex subsidy roll of 1296, derived his name from a famous relative who gave his name to the Robin Hood Inn in 1294. This is all very well, except that there is absolutely no evidence whatsoever to connect Gilbert Robynhod with the owner of the Robin Hood Inn. But the evidence that really seals the matter is provided by the appearance of Robertus Robehod, eleven years before the first recorded reference to the Inn and its famous owner.

There is only one possible answer to the question that those who took the name 'Robinhood' either as a nickname or surname knew something of the Robin Hood legend

At present there seems to be some debate about whether the knight was north or south of Doncaster when he was ambushed and taken to Robin's camp. According to Jim Lees, a writer obsessed with the belief that Barnsdale was part of Sherwood Forest, both the knight and the monk were accosted south of Doncaster. However, the argument put forward by Lees to support his claim is simply gobbledegook. His breakdown of Nottinghamshire place names in Barnsdale in the nineteenth century

will simply not do, for they reflect nothing more than an attempt to bring the names into conformity with places recorded in the Gest. In fact I can find little, if anything in Lee's book to interest any serious student of the Robin Hood legend

Professor Holt has proposed a more plausible explanation. He suggests that when the outlaws first encounter the knight he is travelling in the direction of Doncaster, namely south. He only turns north after Robin has provided him with the four hundred pounds to repay the abbott. With this suggestion we have the advantage of knowing why the knight changed his travel plans, but the explanation is more ingenious than convincing. Surely no sane person would attempt the journey to York twice in one day nor is there anything in the narrative to suggest that the knight was on his way to Palestine. He only hints that he might go off to the Holy Land if he can't find the funds to repay his debt. In any case, there are other discrepancies, apart from the sloppy geography. For instance, in 81 and 84, Little John is the knight's sole companion. He is loaned to the knight in 81 and with him on the road to York in 84. And yet, when the knight arrives at St. Mary's abbey, he is accompanied by a large escort dressed, like himself in threadbare clothing. There is no mention of Little John. He seems to have vanished completely, and is never mentioned again.

There is only one possibility that has not yet been examined and which goes some way in reconciling the contradictions between the information in fittes one and two, namely that two quite different stories have been cut up and combined to form a continuous whole. It can hardly be doubted that the thread, which holds the stories together, is the chronological sequence of the events described. When the two narratives were first combined, almost certainly by the compiler of the Gest, he mutilated the beginning and conclusion of the first story and the beginning and conclusion of the second. He then skillfully worked the corresponding pieces into a continuous whole by adding material of his own. Thus two separate events were fused into a single occurrence. At the beginning of this combined interwoven story, the compiler of the epic narrative then set out Robin's social objective. The compiler was both a writer and editor.

If there is anything in the argument I have advanced in favour of a combination of sources, there would seem to be a strong probability that most of the editorial alterations were made after the knight's departure from Robin's camp - stanza 81. The conclusion, which I should suggest, is that stanzas 84 and 85 have been introduced by the compiler of the Gest, to make two stories that were never meant to go together, flow comfortably. It can hardly be doubted that these insertions bear the main weight of the author's intention, whose purpose is to present the journey interrupted by the outlaws in fytte one and the journey to York in fytte two as a single and continuous journey. However, there is a problem with this. As I have said elsewhere, the knight was travelling south, namely in the direction of Doncaster. Indeed there is nothing in the first part of the story to suggest that he might have been bound for York. The only evidence is for a journey further south still - Blyth stanza 27. The conclusion, which I should suggest, is that the story of the knight's visit to St. Mary's abbey as intruded into what was originally a single journey from York to Verysdale. The fact that the compiler of the Gest appears confused about the direction of York, from Barnsdale, is consistent with the view that he was combining material, which, at a distance of place and time, he did not fully understand finally, did it bother him that the knight's escort multiplied enroute to York? apparently not. This is not an indictment of his logic or of his skill. He was simply able to live with some contradictions, as were his readers for the next five hundred years~

To this day scholars puzzle over the movements of Little John in the first three sections of the Gest. As Professor Holt points out 'Little John moves about in mercurial fashion'. But Little John's movements, like the change of location from Barnsdale to Nottingham, become intelligible once it is accepted that the story in fytte two is not the continuation of the story in fytte one. The most probable account of the

matter is that the original sequel to the story in fyfte one is the story in. fyfte three, where Little John who is still in the knight's service takes part in an archery contest.

The location of the knight's home is described as being in Verysdale, thought by some to be Wryesdale in Lancashire. However, the fragment of itinerary stanza 27' would seem to suggest that the knight's home should be sought in Nottinghamshire in the south rather than Lancashire in the north. In fact, there is another possible location for Verysdale - a location that fits somewhat closer to the locale of the Gest. The location is Ferresdale in Nottinghamshire [Rufford Charters Vol. 3] The form of the name of Ferysdale need make no difficulty as the spelling of place-names varied from writer to writer. Ferysdale lies on the western bounds of Boughton, about half a mile from Ollerton and the main road from Blyth to Nottingham, which in the thirteenth century formed the eastern edge of Sherwood forest. The un-named knight in fyfte one was on his way to Blyth when the outlaws waylaid him in Barnsdale. A mile or so to the south-east of Ferysdale lies Laxton, the home of the king's justice Robert of Lexington, who was to have tried Robert Hod at York in July 1225. However, it would be a mistake to go looking for a castle 'Double dyched and Walled' in Ferysdale. The reason for this is simple, the compiler of the Gest has taken the unnamed knight of his Barnsdale story and transplanted him into a Nottinghamshire location, to all appearances, solely as an excuse to move the location of his narrative from Yorkshire to Nottinghamshire.

To sum up: it is highly probable that in the original story of Robin Hood and the Knight, the loaning of Little John to the knight for twelve months was merely a plausible means of getting the outlaws to Nottingham. But because the compiler of the Gest combined two events whose separate stages took place twelve months apart, the story of Little John and the Sheriff has lost its original place, and now stands in a chronologically unsuitable position.

Fyfte's four and five are separated from each other by a short transitional stanza, which provides some measure of continuity between one complete section of the narrative and the next. The stories that follow in fyfte's five, six, seven and eight are completely reliable and have preserved their original form and suffered no additions or mutilations. They are free of contradictions, and are quite intelligible in their present form. They flow continuously on moving from stage to stage, beginning with the sheriff's treachery at an archery contest, emphasising Robin's loyalty to the king and closing with Robin's death at Kirklees.

In view of all this, we should therefore have to postulate that each episode has been written up by the compiler of the Gest himself and grafted on to a number of thirteenth century narratives. I should also hold it very possible that some sheriff, from the town of Nottingham figured in the original Yorkshire tradition. The supplementary episodes say nothing of Robin's Yorkshire haunts. They dwell exhaustively on events in Nottingham and Robin's feud with the sheriff. That the writer shows no knowledge of the topography of Nottinghamshire is a decisive argument in favour of the view that he was dependant on his older sources for his information. The only topographical contribution which the compiler of the Gest makes to his narrative is Plumpton Park. It is generally assumed by the supporters of the Wakefield theory that this was Plumpton Park near Knaresborough. But Plumpton Park did not exist in the fourteenth century. However, Sir William Plumpton obtained a license from Edward IV to embattle his manor house at Plumpton and to enclose a park there, with the liberty and warren of the chase. There can be little doubt that this is the Plumpton Park of the Gest.

The only other original contribution which the compiler of the Gest makes to his narrative is the naming of the unnamed knight of the first section. The fact that the knight is un-named in fyfte's one and two and identified as Sir Richard in fyfte five proves that we are dealing with two different

writers. The explanation that lies to hand is that the compiler of the Gest has taken over the unnamed knight from his oldest source and developed him for his own purpose.

Another clear characteristic of the stories in the first, second, third and fourth fytte's is the author's use of the word 'God'. It occurs at least sixteen times in fytte one, twelve times in fytte two, eleven times in fytte three, and fourteen times in fytte four. This stands in sharp contrast to its use in fytte's five, six, seven and eight. It occurs only once in fytte five, four times in fytte six; and only three times each in fytte's seven and eight. The preponderance is clear. In all eleven instances, the word occurs in expressions, which are identical or closely similar, to those that are found in fyttes one, two, three and four. It would seem, in short, that the compiler of the Gest has borrowed much from his older materials.

Finally, why does Robin not remain in the king's service? Because no matter how much the compiler of the Gest may have tried to emphasize the divine aspect of royal mercy by giving Robin a fictional pardon, the author could not change history. That is, the much older tradition of Robin's death at Kirklees by treachery. The writer therefore had to invent some excuse that would take Robin back to Barnsdale. The ploy of Robin's wish to visit the fictitious chapel in Barnsdale accomplished that. This too, fits in with the abbreviated version of Robin's death, which forms the climax to the Gest. The case is not entirely proven, but I would submit that this hypothesis explains more of the facts and leaves fewer difficulties unexplained.

I would also submit that the compiler of the Gest did not have a free hand in the arrangement of his oldest sources because they already lay before him in the form of independent but interrelated stories. This is made all the more probable in view of the fact that all the contradictions at the beginning of the Gest are to be explained as arising from the author's rearrangement of the original chronological order of his oldest source materials. Admittedly there are still a number of loose ends. But these can be explained by the fact that the person, who created the Gest cut his older sources into several parts and then interspersed these parts through his work. So we get an oddly placed account of a wrestling match at the point where a bridge crosses the river Went. Furthermore, the original concluding and introductory formulae to the stories in fytte's one and two are missing so whole blocks of material have completely vanished.

The stories in fytte's one and four say nothing about Nottingham. They dwell on events in Yorkshire and reflect what appears to be first hand knowledge of Barnsdale prior to 1300.

It has been theorized by most modern scholars, with the basis of very little tangible evidence that the Watling Street of the Gest is the section of road that runs north from Barnsdale Bar via Wentbridge and Sherburn in Elmet. But this is thoroughly at odds with the works of historians and chroniclers writing at the time, and the internal evidence of the Gest. First, according to Matthew Paris, the main route through Barnsdale during the thirteenth century followed the course of the old Roman highway (Roman Ridge) from Doncaster to Pontefract. More significant is Gough's map of about 1300 which complements Paris's route from Doncaster to Pontefract. Secondly, in the Gest Little John, Scarlock and Much are sent off to Watling Street to find a guest. A little later, the Gest states explicitly: 'But as they looked in to Bernysdale. bi a derne street.' So according to our author the knight was sighted on 'derne strete'---- commonly interpreted as meaning 'secret way'. But the reference might equally refer to a secluded or partly abandoned highway. The question then arises, where in Barnsdale was derne strete'? My argument - based on the internal evidence of the Gest and the maps of Paris and Gough, is that the road, which many scholars have taken for, granted to be the Watling Street of the Gest, is in fact derne strete'. It would not have appeared on any medieval map because it was insignificant

compared to the main road, which ran from Doncaster to Pontefract. For while this route was well trodden', the road via Wentbridge had been partly abandoned by the Normans with the building of Pontefract Castle, the centre of the Lacy estates in Yorkshire. I should also add that this section of road was not described as Watling Street until the mid 15th century, which is much too late for a legend so well established in Barnsdale by 1422. On the other hand, the main road from Doncaster to Pontefract was termed Watling Street as early as the thirteenth century. These are the facts. The reader will make of "them what they will. It is my opinion, as I indicated at the outset that the geography and contents of the earliest sections of the Gest put their composition at a date prior to 1300.

Is there any further evidence to support this argument? To begin with, as Professor Holt was the first to note, there is no direct mention of Wentbridge. Yet if my general argument is sound, both the knight and the monks would have crossed the Aire at Ferrybridge. They, should therefore, in theory at least, have followed a direct line via Wentbridge to Barnsdale Bar. There is therefore, quite simply no reason why both the knight and the monks should not have dined at Wentbridge. In fact, it defies credibility that they would have carried on to Doncaster had food been available at Wentbridge. According to Henry de Bracton, writing in the mid thirteenth century, 'a reasonable day's journey was twenty miles'. This raises one extremely crucial question. What would impel the knight and the monks to travel the extra distance to Doncaster after what must have been a difficult and tedious journey from York? There may be one simple answer. Wentbridge did not actually exist when the earliest stories were composed. It is, for example, scarcely mentioned in any medieval document before the end of the thirteenth century. I favour the view that prior to 1300, Wentbridge was little more than an isolated hamlet on a partly abandoned track way which offered travellers a convenient shortcut to York and vice - versa. According to Dobson and Taylor, 'the Sayles' of the Gest lies on the northern fringe of Barnsdale', five hundred yards to the east of Wentbridge, and this view has been followed by all subsequent researches. If, as I believe, there is substance to my arguments and suggestions and my identification of Watling Street with the main road that runs from Doncaster to Pontefract is to be made watertight, it must be shown that the argument put forward by Dobson and Taylor in 1976 is wrong. Theoretically the sayles could apply aptly to a windmill. There was in the thirteenth century a windmill in Campsall next to a small piece of land owned by Adam de Neumarch. As windmills were usually built on mounds or hills to catch the wind, the windmill at Campsall must have been a well-known landmark. Of course, one must not forget that windmills in England were still uncommon as far as authoritative documentation is concerned, the first windmill in England was one at Weedly in Yorkshire dated 1185. In itself, this strongly suggests that the windmill near Campsall would have drawn attention to itself and been used to identify the plot of land on which it stood. In Bernard's survey of the Honour of Pontefract, 1577, Thomas de Brayton held a tenement in the Sayles, and at the time it was in the hands of William Fletcher of Campsall. It therefore seemed obvious to me that the place to look for the Sayles of the Gest was not to the east of Wentbridge but close to Campsall itself. Indeed it has often been demonstrated, not the least by Dobson and Taylor, that the legend has left a wealth of evidence in the form of wells and stones lying to the south of Barnsdale Bar. Armed with this basic knowledge, I decided to investigate the matter further. At first my research yielded nothing. But I persisted and was soon to discover the true location of the legendary Sayles. Although it does not occur on any modern map, it is shown on the 1854 OS map, lying about a quarter of a mile south east of Barnsdale Bar, and only three quarters of a mile north of the most significant of all memorials to the outlaw tradition ---Robin Hood's Well. Now there can be little doubt that when the three outlaws stood at the Sayles and looked into Barnsdale, they were looking north to where the road from York (derne street) merged with the main highway' through Barnsdale (Watling Street). Needless to say this was the ideal place to practice highway robbery for

whichever road the traveller followed he had to pass Barnsdale Bar, where the Great North Road forked in two, one leading to Pontefract, the other running to Ferrybridge. Roger Dodsworth, the great Yorkshire antiquarian of the seventeenth century, wrote; The high ground of the Sayles, 120 feet above the surrounding plain, commands an extensive view, even to Market Weighton and the East Riding. Dobson and Taylor, of course, jumped to the conclusion that Dodsworth was describing the view from Sayles Plantation. If this is so, one insurmountable problem arises, the landscape does not conform to Dodsworth's description, namely Market Weighton and the East Riding are not visible from Sayles Plantation. On the other hand, the view from the high ground between the modern A1 and Campsall does conform precisely to Dodsworth's description. It is beyond doubt that when Dodsworth stood at the Sayles and looked to Market Weighton and the East Riding, he was looking beyond Campsall and Norton. Even today the view from the high ground of the Sayles, between the A1 and Campsall, is still as it was described, three hundred years ago by Dodsworth. Another difficulty with Dobson and Taylor's location is that it necessarily requires the outlaws to spot their victims then run half-a-mile to the highway to intercept them. It just doesn't make any sense

My identification may not naturally be congenial with those historians who support the location made by Dobson and Taylor in 1976. However, I am content that each should form his own judgment. In fact, if modern historians can overcome their prejudices and preconceptions on the matter, they will discern that with my discovery of the exact location of the historical Sayles, we have recovered the geography of Barnsdale, as the composer of the earliest sections of the Gest knew it.

Some writers have suggested the references within the Gest provide clues to its dating. Focusing in particular on the antique middle English forms and vocabulary which the Gest preserves, most researchers hold that the whole composition could have been put together by 1400 at the latest. The spuriousness of this reasoning is self-evident. In fact, it is highly probable that the compiler of the Gest deliberately attempted to reproduce the style and vocabulary' dating from the time of this earliest sources. But it must be said on the other hand that the scribe who compiled the Gest may well have acquainted himself with the language of his tutor in his youth, and what he had learned emerged years later when he came to compile the Gest.

I have elsewhere argued for the likelihood that the tales in the fifth, sixth, and seventh and eighth fyttes have been written up, almost certainly by the compiler of the Gest, and appended to a number of earlier tales, which embody the earliest or more authentic accounts of Robin's activities in Yorkshire. The overall picture of the last four stanzas in the Gest is that they are profoundly tied to their author's world and the reign of Edward IV.

It is in the historical context of the fall of the house of Lancaster and the reunion of a divided country that we find someone forging a single story that might serve the reunited community. The argument in favour of a late fifteenth century date for the composition of the Gest might begin ex-silento. It is, for example extraordinary that the first two Scottish chroniclers to comment on the legend make no mention of Robin's meeting with king Edward. Andrew of Wyntoun mentions nothing of the sort, and the better-informed Walter Bower writing in the 1440's, had presumably never read or even heard of Robin's meeting with the king. One would expect Bower, writing forty years after the first edition of the Gest was supposedly composed, to make some mention of Robin's pardon. How, one may ask, could the outlaws pardon and move into royal circles, have escaped Bower's notice. It seems incredible, yet he says nothing. Why should both Wyntoun and Bower have overlooked something of such importance? The omission from both chronicles is extraordinary. No less important is the fact that Bower assigns Robin to the period following the rebellion of Simon de Montfort, that it to say to

the reign of Henry 111. But why should Bower ascribe the exploits of the outlaw to the reign of Henry? In the Gest the king is implicitly named as comely king Edward. There would seem to be no apparent explanation as to why Bower should ascribe the exploits of Robin to the reign of Henry unless he had never read or heard of the Gest of Robyn Hode. If this were the case, the Gest had to be written later than 1440.

Is there anything else in the Gest that seems to point in the same direction? The most impressive evidence comes from the following two stanzas:

Lythe and listen, gentylnen,
And herkyn to your songe;
Howe the proude shyref of Notyngham
And men of armys stronge
Full fast cam to the hye shyref
The contre up to route,
And they besette the knyghtes castell

here, then, is the answer. The author was clearly describing something that was existing practice, which would support the proposition that the Gest was compiled in the second half of the fifteenth century, as two sheriffs were not appointed in Nottingham until 1449. The recognition of this makes irrelevant all arguments, which have otherwise been advanced to support a date as early as 1400. For the compiler is unlikely to have invented two sheriffs

The author of the Gest was not just fashioning a story about Robin Hood, he was fashioning a story with a purpose and a message. So it would not have been enough for him just to write up the last four stanzas, he had to go back through his original sources and make changes at critical points. So he developed the idea of making Little John a native of Holderness. This makes sense. For the writer assumes his readers acquaintance with the rebellion of Robin of Holderness in 1469. The place name is otherwise not mentioned in the Gest; and I can see no reason why it should be introduced in a tale localized in Barnsdale and Sherwood, other than in the minds of the general populace it was a northern name associated with insurrection and lawlessness. Moreover, before 1469 the general populace would have scarcely been aware of or interested in, such an obscure place name. This brings me to another point. It should be noted that the archery contest in fyfte fyve duplicates the archery practice in fyfte three, which is exactly what one should expect a later author to do. The only difference is that in the first tale there is only one sheriff in the story. This makes it clear that the story in fyfte three had to be written before the story in fyfte fyve, and the story in fyfte fyve had to be written after 1449. Indeed, it may be best to think of the compiler of the Gest writing up the tale in fyfte fyve with the tale in fyfte three on the table in front of him.

The Gest is a particularly useful means of making a point. The writer portrays an outlaw attacking the rightful authority - and then pictures the king as compassionate and forgiving. One possible explanation for this is that the person who compiled the Gest was pandering to the king. In the Gest the king is merciful, compassionate, strict and forgiving. In addition the writer emphasizes his good looks and his readiness to forgive his enemies. Why then the emphasis on Edward? Because he was the king when the Gest was compiled, and he had to be presented as sympathetically as possible. So whoever compiled the Gest was someone who was alive after 1469, and someone who was representing the king's interest. We know of a man who was alive and close to Edward IV in precisely those years: the printer William Caxton. Caxton had the literary skill needed. He was in England during the reign of Edward IV In 1468, moreover, he was hired as advisor to the former Princess Margaret of York,

sister of Edward IV. By then Caxton was already a celebrity. Eight years later in 1476 he was appointed the king's printer. One must, of course raise the question whether Caxton was the compiler of the *Gest*. To me it is possible that whoever compiled the *Gest*, if it was not Caxton himself was someone working for him. In one sense, that would not make much difference. The main point would still be that the person who put the story together was still associated with Caxton. Indeed, it may be best to think of the *Gest* as a collaboration, with Caxton as the inspiration, and some unknown scribe, as the writer who wrote under Caxton's instructions.

Until very recently it seemed as if nothing could help pin down the Robin Hood legend to its period of origin. Then, in 1982, Professor Holt suggested that some element of reflection had to exist between the appearance of the surname and nickname 'Robinhood' at the end of the thirteenth century and the genesis of the outlaw legend. Perhaps not surprisingly, believers in a fourteenth century date for the origin of the legend have steadfastly refused to accept Holt's argument. Even so, these writers have found it impossible to put forward a convincing case against it.

Before the appearance of the Robin Hood surnames and criminal nicknames, those in favour a fourteenth century dating could argue that the evidence of the chief topics of the *Gest* put the argument in their favour, but now the scales have tipped the other way and the only way in which Holt's argument can be undermined is for the sceptics to provide a satisfactory explanation for the plethora of 'Robinhood' surnames which surfaced during the second half of the thirteenth century. R. B. Dobson, a well known and respected Robin Hood historian, has suggested that the name was merely a nickname given to fugitives and criminals, but in reaching this conclusion, Dobson neglected to take account of the fact that out of a total of nine 'Robinhood' nicknames, four are not either criminals or fugitives. In any case, the nickname 'Robinhood' would have been a fairly pointless designation unless it was the name of someone special. As I have pointed out elsewhere, ideas must have some original impetus, some spark to light the flame. From whence came the spark, which ignited the legend of Robin Hood?

The evidence presented so far suggests that if we are going to point to the original Robin Hood, the claims of Robert Hood, or to be more precise Hobbhod --for it is by that name he is identified in the Pipe Rolls of 1227-1228, who fled the jurisdiction of Robert of Lexington's court in July 1225 are at present supreme. The form of the nickname 'Hobbhod' need make no difficulty, as Hob was the English colloquial form of Robert just as Robin was for those who spoke French or Norman. For the inescapable fact remains the Robin is a purely French name, and it is difficult to believe that the more aristocratic French rendering of Robin would have been habitually used by the English as the common colloquial form of Robert during the early thirteenth century. Even one of the earliest known examples of the use of the name Robin comes from a French pastoral play *Robin et Marion*, composed about 1283. Clearly, the only way the case against 'Hobbhod' can be undermined is by showing that the surname or nickname existed at least before the earlier date limit of 1227.

The question why Robert Hood fled the jurisdiction of the king's justices in 1225 is solely a matter of speculation. But perhaps we might find a solution to the mystery if we take a closer look at the career of Robert of Lexington. Robert of Lexington was raised in a milieu close to the corridors of power - three of his brothers were ecclesiastically prominent and his father was a royal servant. In fact, there is a strong possibility that Robert's father, Richard, may have been the illegitimate son of Richard de Caux, first husband of Matilda de Caux of Laxton. Whether this was actually the case or not there is no question that the Lexington's

rise to prominence owed a lot to their connections with Ralph Fitz Stephen, the second husband of Matilda de Cauz.

As a young man, Robert worked as a clerk to Brian de Lisle, chief forester of Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire. In 1215, he obtained his first ecclesiastical appointment when the king presented him to the prebend of the great Minster church of the archbishop of York at Southwell. Although not a cathedral church in the thirteenth century, Southwell did have canons that held prebends in much the same way as cathedral dignitaries. These prebends were not always manors, so it is not always easy to be sure which canon held which prebend, certainly Robert of Lexington's surname does not refer to the prebend he held, as there was no Laxton prebend at Southwell. In fact, the Lexington family held the manor of Laxton from the king and had done so since 1204.

About the same time Robert was given the custody of the estates of the archbishop of York. In effect, he was responsible for the administration of the archiepiscopal estates while the see of York was vacant. This is thus one context in which he could conceivably have come into contact with Robert Hood before 1225. On the other hand, there can be no question that the position gave Lexington the opportunity to hobnob with the hierarchy of the archbishopric. Clearly, this factor alone would have been sufficient to spur Robert Hood into action some ten years later. Whether this last assertion is true or not, there is no question that Lexington was closely associated with the archbishopric, and this could hardly conduce to balance or impartiality in his handling of the trial of a tenant of the archiepiscopal estates

Certainly Robert Hood could have viewed Lexington as the church's hatchet man. That he fled the jurisdiction of the court because he didn't believe he was going to receive a sympathetic hearing is not impossible. This may explain why 'these bishoppes and archbishoppes' incurred the wrath of the Barnsdale outlaw. Whether he was warned in advance or whether he simply sensed what was in the wind, Robert Hood fled and his goods were forfeited.

Purely as a surmise, it may be suggested that Lexington is the unnamed justice who appears with the untitled sheriff and the abbot in the first section of the Gest. If Lexington was indeed the prototype of the justice there is a ready candidate for the role of the sheriff Eustace de Lowdham. For not only was Eustace the acting sheriff of Yorkshire when Robert Hood fled, he was a neighbour of Lexington in Nottinghamshire, and may have acted with him on official business. For sheriffs were regularly sought out by judges of their home districts for their help in judicial proceedings. More importantly, judges regularly received retaining fees from private patrons, including ecclesiastics. That Lexington and Lowdham might have been instrumental in making sure Robert Hood's case never reached court is not impossible.

So far as popular tradition is concerned, the sheriff of the legend was of Nottingham. But in reality the sheriff may only have been verbally connected to Nottingham because he was domiciled there, and became associated with the shrievalty of the town by confusion. History makes no mention of a sheriff of the town of Nottingham until the middle of the 15th century. Not only that, but the evidence of the legend leaves one with the overall impression that it is the sheriff's verbal connection with Nottingham that afforded the midland market town such a prominent role in the legend. It is thus conceivable that in its original context the term 'sheriff of Nottingham' meant something quite different.

It will have been noticed, for example, that the sheriff who appears in the episode of the abbot's loan is untitled. The reason for this is elementary. The stories were originally written for a Yorkshire audience, and the assumptions of the audience precluded any recital of the sheriff's name or title. For the episode dwells exhaustively on events in York, and for the audience this betrays and establishes the sheriff's connection with Yorkshire. In the case of the sheriff of the legend, however, the compiler had to make sure that his audience made no such assumption. He therefore had to emphasize that the sheriff was a man of Nottingham. Very briefly I would suggest that the original sheriff of the legend

was living in Nottingham when the legend came to birth, but had been active in Yorkshire sometimes previously. This would explain how a sheriff of Nottingham came to occupy such a central role in the legend of a Yorkshire outlaw.

Finally, this brings strongly to mind the suggestion that the Gest is an amalgam of two originally distinct story cycles (one centred on Barnsdale) the other on Nottinghamshire. This is the opinion of a number of scholars. The two sources Y and N, were written by two people, the author of Y came from Yorkshire and the author of N from Nottinghamshire. However, the various topographical references provided by the Gest do not support the two-cycle theory. Very briefly, if a Nottinghamshire ballad cycle (and not merely) a Yorkshire one had influenced the compiler of the Gest, we should expect to find within the Gest various references to places in Nottinghamshire. But apart from Nottingham itself Blyth is the only place in Nottinghamshire known to the compiler of the Gest. As Professor Holt points out 'None of the forest townships are mentioned, none of the roads and none of the monasteries. It is perhaps conceivable that an author writing within a Nottinghamshire environment might fail to allude to one or two places, but that he should fail to mention such places as Sherwood forest or even perhaps Nottingham castle is quite incredible. At the same time, one would equally have expected the author of the Gest to salvage every scrap of topographical detail for his epic composition. But as I have already pointed out elsewhere, the compiler of the Gest appears well informed about the topography of Barnsdale, and less well informed about the topography of Nottingham and Sherwood, Nottingham's true position in the legend can thus be discerned.

The compiler of the Gest, in the days of Edward IV assembled his composition out of a number of texts that were available to him. At the beginning of his narrative he outlined Robin's social objectives, and at the conclusion tacked part of the story of Robin's death at Kirklees. The text that came in between was linked by short insertions carefully worded and artfully inserted. This gives a sort of continuity to his narrative. The story of the knight's meeting with the outlaws in fyfte one and the story of the archery practice in Nottingham in fyfte three were once a continuous whole. However, the compiler of the Gest cut the story into two pieces at a point where Little John is sent off with the knight. He then united the first section of the story with the story of the knight's arrival at St Mary's abbey. This gives some measure of continuity to the knight's journey. The compiler's contribution included adding stanzas 82-83 to enhance the transition. By doing this, he gave continuity to the two separate sections. One may ask: why was the story cut and the first fragment combined with the fragment of the repayment of the knight's debt. This is probably to be explained on the grounds that they deal with the same subject, namely the knight's debt. But in addition, the compiler of the Gest had to make sure that the original continuation of 1-81 followed as directly as possible upon the loaning of Little John to the knight; hence he was compelled to begin fyfte three with it. This explains why, as Professor Holt points out, 'Little John moves about in mercurial fashion.'

No study of the outlaw legend can avoid dealing with the handful of writings, which distort the truth—either through ignorance, or the sheer lack of integrity. The first of these spurious offerings was Jim Lees's ingenious theory, which would like to link a certain Robert de Kyme with the outlaw legend.. Perhaps the most objectionable part of his sales pitch is his technique of twisting the linguistics to suit his argument. But as stated elsewhere, the linguistics simply will not do. Now this is not simply an opinion of mine, it is a bald statement of fact. In my view Lees's book distorts the facts in an unacceptable fashion. Nor is there any evidence to suggest that Robert de Kyme was outlawed for rape or any other misdemeanour. In fact; a pardon for a felony of this kind certainly does not imply outlawry; de Kyme could have been out on bail or in prison.

For the sake of completeness we must include the argument that Robin was gay. This was another Stephen Knight inspired piece of dottiness. In my researches I have found no historian writing either

at the time or more recently, who have put a homosexual interpretation on the legend In fact; homosexuality is tot ally absent from the legend. What is more, it is clear that the stories of Robin hood, as they were known in the middle ages, had no more to do with homosexuality than did the stories of Hereward the Wake and Fulk Fitzvarren. To sum up: Stephen Knight seems more interested in publicity than the truth, and appears to have no scruples about the sort of claptrap he churns out for the sake of controversy

POSTSCRIPT

In 2003 Stephen Knight published yet another book Robin Hood A Mythical Biography. Needless to say Knight still tended to downplay the surname evidence. Although the copyist error had now been dropped from his argument, he still sought to dissociate the surname 'Robinhood' from the legend Of the outlaw. The name, he suggested was merely a term applied to fugitives and criminals.

On the lace of it, there are no grounds for Knight's argument. Legal records before 1261 contain no references to the nickname or surname whatsoever. Had the name been a term habitually associated with criminals and. fugitives before 1261, it is surely likely given the vast number Of outlaws before that time, that some allusion to the surname or nickname would have surfaced. But there is nothing. It is thus certain that the first example dates from the second half of the thirteenth century, around 1261/2

Perhaps the time has come when Knight should he asking the obvious questions. Why does the name not figure in earlier criminal cases? More provocatively still, why did the name surface precisely when it did-just thirty years after the one individual bearing the same name (or its variant) had fled the jurisdiction of the king's justices at York. Was it coincidence that this name, ostensibly none existent as a surname or nickname before 1261, should suddenly surface at the very time it did And why should someone in the civil service deliberately change someone's given name?

Quite simply there would be no point in giving someone a new name unless, of course, it was the name of someone special, someone well known. The first batch of *'Robinhood' criminal nicknames are all dated between 1272 and 1294, which suggests that by then the name was widely known. This may well explain the criminal examples, all could have adopted the name of a famous predecessor, for there is no evidence whatsoever to suggest that any of them had their given names altered by someone working in the civil service. These criminal 'Robinhoods' are the rogues and thieves colloquially described as Robert's men, men of the same ilk*

And what of the four Robinhoods' who were to all appearances law abiding members of society? It would seem, in short, that the name had a diverse social appeal, a hero to those who broke the law and to those who kept to the letter of the law.

Names tend to catch on with everyone at the same time, and this suggests a certain element of fashion. For example, in the Victorian period, the rise of the name 'Albert' was linked to the Prince Consort of the time. Herein must lie the clue to the sudden popularity of Robinhood' as a criminal nickname or surname in the late thirteenth century. It is the product of a very specific time and a very specific historical factor. How did two diverse social groups in the late thirteenth century light upon the surname and nickname Robinhood'? From whence came the spark that lighted the flame of imagination? There is only one possible, and very obvious, answer to both these questions - that those who adopted the name as a nickname or surname knew something of the outlaw story. Stephen

Knight's attempt to dissociate the matter of the surname evidence from the Robin Hood legend cannot be sustained.

The notes of Jeffrey Stafford end here [T.M.]



[Previous page- http://www.geocities.com/Heartland/Lane/8771/skelbrooke.html](http://www.geocities.com/Heartland/Lane/8771/skelbrooke.html)