

The Legend and Legacy of Robin Hood



Being a medieval thief not only meant robbing people along trails; it also involved poaching the king's deer from royal forests. (Painting of Robin Hood and Little John stealing a deer from the king by F. Taylor, 19th century)



The man behind the stories of archery and theft

By Jim Heffelfinger

Each pastime and sport has at least one famous figure who provides a source of inspiration or entertainment. Gunslingers have Clint Eastwood, long-range shooters have Chris Kyle, and muzzleloader hunters have Daniel Boone. But archers can claim the most legendary figure of them all: Robin Hood, whose name is synonymous with skilled archery craft and is recognizable to nearly everyone, whether or not they have an interest in bows and arrows.

The Robin Hood character appears quite often in popular media, yet most people don't know anything about the legend beyond childhood stories that tell of a guy in green tights and a funny hat.

Although he was admittedly an outlaw, Robin Hood is always cast as a likable guy who means well. And what's not to like—batting with the authorities, camping out all the time, shooting his bow and hanging out in the forest with like-minded guys, punctuated by a few trips to spend a little time with Maid Marian? He generally sounds like someone who would be in my close circle of friends.

As it turns out, the legend of Robin Hood is not as clear, nor as pure, as we have been told. Robin Hood's true past eludes today's historical scholars, just as Robin, himself, evaded the frustrated Sheriff of Nottingham.

THE ORIGIN OF ROBIN HOOD

The earliest reference to Robin Hood is in a 1377 publication by William Langland titled *Piers Plowman*, in which a character says, "but I know rymes of Robyn Hode." Although no earlier documentation exists of Robin, it is evident that he was already famous enough to have people talking about him. Soon after this publication, we have a variety of early "ballads" that tell many tales about Robin Hood's exploits. (These ballads were like poems or songs. They may not have all been sung, but they were a popular written form of storytelling used at the time.)

As famous as Robin Hood is, it has not been possible to determine exactly who he was and when he lived. There are very few clues about what time period these ballads refer to, but it is thought they were written after his death in the 1400s or 1500s. One ballad mentions King Edward, but that could have been any number of King Edwards who reigned in England over hundreds of years.

Many scholars have spent years pouring over ancient medieval texts trying to figure out who the real Robin Hood was. There are some interesting leads, but no agreement. Part of the problem is that the names, "Robert" and "Robin," were very common in medieval England, and last names were not always passed down through generations; rather, they were given

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depending on a person’s occupation. “Hood” could be one who wears a hood, or makes and sells them. “Robehod” and “Rabunhod” appear in the English legal records of the 1200s but with no other information about who they were.

Robert Hod from York is recorded to be living in 1226, and when his belongings were confiscated, he became an outlaw with a bounty on his head. This is one of several potential sources of the legend, and it helps that he was known to be an outlaw on the run from the local sheriff.

Another interesting lead is one Robyn Hode, who was said to be a skilled archer; and, he dressed in green—as many woodsmen and foresters did at the time.

There is also evidence that the name “Robin Hood” was a common label or alias used by thieves and criminals. The records show that “Robehod” was applied to a man who was found to be an outlaw. It isn’t clear if the practice of referring to thieves as Robin Hood was the origin of the legend or if the legend was already known and that is why thieves adopted, or were given, the name. In fact, scholars have found evidence of at least eight people before 1300 who were using, or given, the name Robin Hood. Some of these people were known to be fugitives, and a few were even living near Sherwood Forest.

Most scholars think the ballads featuring Robin Hood were based only partially on a real person or the activities of certain types of people in the early Middle Ages. Despite all the uncertainty about when, where and who formed the basis of the Robin Hood legend, it was too exciting to escape the eye of future writers and moviemakers.

From the few medieval ballads that



There began a gest of Robyn Hode
 The and listin gētilmen þe of fre boze
 blode ꝛ thail you tel of a gode pema his
 name was Robyn Hode Robyn was a pude our
 law as he was one was neuer non foide to
 lþi stode i bernevale ꝛ lenyd hþi to a tre ꝛ bi hþi
 Hode litell John a gode yeman was he ꝛ alsoo
 dyd gooe Scarlok and much þ milkers to The
 re was none puch of his bodi but it was wat
 sh a grome. Than bespake hþell John all un
 roo Robyn Hode Maister and ye wolde dyne
 let pme it wolde doo you moche gode. Thā be
 spake hþi gode Robyn to dyne hauc ꝛ noo lust
 till char ꝛ haue tobolde baro or som vnhoug
 gest that in appay for þ best or som knyght or

The *Gest of Robyn Hode*, printed around 1500 A.D., is one of the oldest-known tales of Robin Hood.

exist, successive writers used those core facts to embellish stories packed full of brand-new “facts” about Robin Hood. One of the first written works to greatly expand the Robin Hood story was Sir Walter Scott’s 1819 novel, *Ivanhoe*. This story depicted Robin Hood as a cheerful and likeable outlaw who ran around harmlessly with a band of merry men; but that spin is not exactly consistent with the original description of Robin Hood and his “hoodlums.”

HERO OR VILLAIN?

Sometimes, the lines between hero and villain become blurred—and authors of popular media contribute to that. Throughout the last 700 years, Robin Hood has certainly enjoyed a cult-like following, despite being widely recognized as a criminal. A

children’s book, *The Merry Adventures of Robin Hood*, written by Howard Pyle in 1883, continued the 19th-century tradition of sugarcoating Robin’s criminal ways and portraying him as a hero only motivated by equality, helping the poor and battling corruption.

In spite of this popular depiction of Robin Hood as a happy-go-lucky fellow, the original ballads are full of accounts of him engaging in violent and brutal actions we have come to associate with the Middle Ages. In *A Gest of Robyn Hode*, written around 1400, our merry man in green tights tells companion Little John that if he meets a bishop, archbishop or the sheriff, he should “beat and bind” him. Later, Little John does, indeed, capture and behead a monk who apparently had betrayed Robin Hood earlier in the story.

In another original ballad, 15 of the king’s foresters mock Robin’s ability with a bow, so he nocks arrows as fast as he can and kills 14 of them before turning to the last man standing and splitting his head in two with his last arrow:

You said I was no archer, said Robin Hood,

But say so now again:

*With that he sent another arrow,
 That split his head in twain.*

None of these accounts sounds like the happy-go-lucky archer in green tights and funny hat I remember reading about as a kid.

Interestingly, there is no mention in any of the original Robin Hood ballads of him ever robbing from the rich to give to the poor. He was known from the ballads to cheat priests out of their cash, but the only hint of such a notion is a quote from Robin Hood about his intention to “rob” the next rich person to come down the trail:



The Robin Hood Memorial near England's Nottingham Castle. The statue of Robin seems to be forever ready to let loose an arrow at the sheriff. (Photo by Olaf Benutzer)

"... or if he be a pore man, of my good he shall have some."

It was not until the late 1800s that he is portrayed as some sort of agent of wealth redistribution. Outlaws of the day were mostly stealing from the rich by poaching venison from royalty: "In sooth to be brief, thou lookst like a thief, that comes to steal our king's deer."

Under forest law, no one could cut vegetation or kill game in the king's forest without permission. Forest guards (foresters) patrolled the woods. They had the authority to arrest anyone for simply carrying a bow in the forest. Every six weeks, a forest court would convene to try all those accused of poaching. Some poachers were caught—but had already taken care of their predicament by bribing the foresters (usually, the bribe was a share of the deer meat).

Even though the mystery and missing pieces in the origin of the Robin Hood story remain, his skill as an archer (and poacher) is a common thread throughout all subsequent stories:

*Robin he bent up a noble bow,
And a broad arrow he let flye,
He hit the mark a hundred rod,
And he caused a hart [stag] to dye.*

Considering that "a hundred rod" is 550 yards, that is not a bad bow shot! (Perhaps medieval archers were just as prone to overestimating such distances when retelling the story as we are today!)

A record of Robin Hood's obituary says, "Never archer there as he so good, and people called him Robin Hood." According to legend, he was wounded in a fight and fled to a nearby church, where his cousin, a nun, double-crossed him and let him bleed out. Before he died, he reportedly shot one last arrow out of the abbey window, and he was buried where it landed.

FROM LONGBOWS TO CAMS

Robin Hood's legend and legacy began immediately in the early Middle Ages, and he still enjoys somewhat of a reputation as a national hero. Springtime May Day celebrations were very common in England from 1500 through the 1700s; during those festivities, medieval Brits danced and drank off their cabin fever. It was very common for a character named Robin Hood to preside over these celebrations as the master of ceremonies. Sometimes, celebrations were even called "Robin

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“A record of Robin Hood’s obituary says, ‘Never archer there as he so good, and people called him Robin Hood.’”

Hood games.” These festivals became an important tradition in England, and archery contests were an increasingly important component.

With the advent of firearms, the interest in archery as a primary weapon diminished. Nevertheless, it saw a resurgence as a recreational pursuit in the 1600s. The Company of Scottish Archers, founded in 1676, is one example of the growing interest in the sport. Momentum grew to a point that it became fashionable for the upper class and was an important part of British society. Competitions and tournaments were organized, and local chapters of archery clubs met locally to discuss competition rules and awards.

In the mid-1800s, the Grand National Archery Society held its first meeting in England and developed a structured set of competitions to test competitors’ skills. These competitions harkened back to the May Day festivals that cemented the Robin Hood legend in English folklore. Horace A. Ford, considered the greatest target archer of this period, developed and improved many archery techniques that led him to claim 11 consecutive Grand National titles with his long bow.

In the United States, archery was continuously in use by Native Americans eons before Robin Hood allegedly lived. However, they were too busy trying to bring food back to camp and could not afford to waste arrows frivolously on social competitions.

With the growing success of our country’s great system of conservation, we enjoy abundant populations of game animals. It was only natural that some hunters would return to the roots of hunting and start pursuing game with more primitive weapons to challenge their skill as hunters. Archers such as Fred Bear and Howard



Today’s interest in archery and the explosion of the industry in the last few decades is the legacy of Robin Hood and all who have kept his legend alive for 700 years. (Photo courtesy of Precision Shooting Equipment)

Hill became household names to those who chose to hunt with bow and arrow.

Fred Bear helped found the Pope & Young Club and went on to harvest many animals with a bow (including a Bengal tiger, African lion, polar bear and cape buffalo) and six different archery world-record big-game animals. Howard Hill won nearly 200 archery field tournaments and is said to have harvested 2,000 animals (including an elephant) with his 115-pound bow and 4-foot-long arrows.

Perhaps not surprisingly, Hill was hired as a stunt archer for Errol Flynn during the filming of *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938). During one scene in the movie, Hill made an incredible stunt shot, splitting an arrow (although a stuntman on the set later said a guiding wire was used to guarantee a perfect shot). The act of splitting one arrow with another is widely recognized by modern bowmen as a “Robin Hood.” Errol Flynn’s movie was a classic, but there were about 70

other movies or TV series made with the Robin Hood legend as their themes.

Interest in archery and hunting with bow and arrow has seen a tremendous resurgence in recent years. In the last Olympics, NBC reported that during the first few days of Olympic coverage, more viewers watched archery than any other sport aired on their cable networks. An average of 1.5 million viewers tuned in when it was on TV.

To what do we owe this flurry of interest? Enter main character Katniss Everdeen and *Hunger Games*, in addition to other productions such as *Game of Thrones*, the animated feature, *Brave*, and a multitude of other, mostly female, archers. Lately, Hollywood is offering several popular features with main characters slinging arrows—and the public absolutely loves them.

In 2001, the National Archery in Schools Program (NASP) began to

teach kids target archery skills. This program has been so successful that it has expanded into 65 states, provinces and countries and is currently enjoying an increasing participation because of the "Katniss Effect." This year, the program held the 2015 NASP United States National Tournament in Louisville, Kentucky. It drew youth participants from as far away as British Columbia, Alaska and Washington, D.C. During the three days of competition, 12,045 young archers from 763 schools in 42 states competed for awards and college scholarships. Tournament attendance increased 15 percent from the previous year!

THE ARCHER'S LEGACY

The question is not whether Robin Hood and his stories are true; they are not. A mixture of historical facts and vague references to individuals was continually expanded and embellished until an increasingly clear (but fictitious) picture of Robin Hood emerged and gained momentum in popular culture. The 700-year-old legend of Robin Hood weaves an unbroken thread from the murky writings of the Middle Ages through the May Day celebrations, driving the development of modern bowhunting and setting the stage for this recent resurgence in archery interest. Additionally, because of the success of wildlife conservation in the United States, our inherent interest in archery was easily incorporated into our hunting culture. So began this country's great passion for bowhunting.

Simply put, archery is "hot" today and popular with young and old, alike. Its popularity shows no sign of slowing down any time soon. This is the legacy of Robin Hood, not his thievery.

Today, the name, "Robin Hood," is synonymous with the best archers, not the best thieves. No other person or character can claim to have had so much influence on the past, present and future popularity of archery and bowhunting. We owe more than we realize to the legend and legacy of Robin Hood. 🍀



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