

**MEDIEVAL ENGLAND
(410-1485): ROBIN
HOOD: LEGEND, MYTH
OR REALITY?**



MEDIEVAL ENGLAND (410-1485): ROBIN HOOD: LEGEND, MYTH OR REALITY?

Description

Through an in-depth analysis of various primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain the different stories relating to Robin Hood, and using those stories will then be able to take a position as to whether or not Robin Hood and his “Merry Men” were real historical figures.

Subjects

English / Language Arts, European History, World History

Grade Level

11-12

Duration

90 minutes

Tour Links

- Sherwood Forest
- Nottingham Castle

Essential Questions

- Who was Robin Hood? Was he a real historical figure?
- When do the stories of Robin Hood appear in English literature?
- How do accounts of the different characters of the Robin Hood story change over time?

Academic Summary

About this time it was, as I conceive, that there flourished those most famous robbers Robert Hood, an Englishman, and Little John, who lay in wait in the woods, but spoiled of their goods those only that were wealthy. They took the life of no man, unless he either attacked them or offered resistance in defense of his property. Robert supported by his plundering one hundred bowmen, ready fighters every one, with whom four hundred of the strongest would not dare to engage in combat. The feats of this Robert are told in song all over Britain. He would allow no woman to suffer injustice, nor would he spoil the poor, but rather enriched them from the plunder taken from the abbots. The robberies of this man I condemn, but of all robbers he was the humanest (sic) and the chief.

From John Major, Historia Majoris Britannie (History of Greater Britain), 1521
But in an olde and auncient Pamphlet I finde this written of the sayd Robert Hood. This man (sayth he) discended of a nobel parentage: or rather beyng of a base stocke and linage, was for his manhoode and chivalry advaunced to the noble dignité of an Erle. Excelling principally in Archery, or shootyng, his manly courage agreeyng therunto: But afterwardes he so prodigally exceeded in charges and expences, that he fell into great debt, by reason wherof, so many actions and sutes were commenced against him, wherunto he aunswered not, that by order of lawe he was outlawed, and then for a lewde shift, as his last refuge, gathered together a companye of Roysters and Cutters, and practised robberyes and spoylyng of the kynges subjects, and occupied and frequented the Forestes or wilde Countries. The which beyng certefyed to the King, and he beyng greatly offended therewith, caused his proclamation to be made that whosoever would bryng him quicke or dead, the king would geve him a great summe of money, as by the recordes in the Exchequer is to be seene: But of this promise, no man enjoyed any benefite. For the sayd Robert Hood, beyng afterwardes troubled with sicknesse, came to a certein Nonry in Yorkshire called Bircklies, where desiryng to be let blood, he was betrayed and bled to deth. After whose death the Prioressse of the same place caused him to be buried by the high way side, where he had used to rob and spoyle those that passed that way. And upon his grave the sayde Prioressse did lay a very fayre stone, wherin the names of Robert Hood, William of Goldesborough and others were graven. And the cause why she buryed him there was for that the common passengers and travailers knowyng and seeyng him there buried, might more safely and without feare take their jorneyes that way, which they durst not do in the life of the sayd outlawes.

From Richard Grafton, Chronicle at Large, 1569

Robin Hood! Robin Hood! a lawgiver good,
Kept his High Court of Justice in merry Sherwood.
No furr'd gown, or fee, wig, or bauble had he;
But his bench was a verdant bank under a tree!
And there sat my Lord of his own good accord,

With his Peers of the forest to keep watch and ward;
 To arbitrate sure between rich and poor,
 The lowly oppress'd and the proud evil doer.
 His nobles they are without riband or star,
 No 'scutcheon have they with a sinister bar;
 But Flora with leaves them a coronet weaves,
 And their music is -- hark! when the horn winds afar.
 The chaplain to shrive this frolicsome hive
 Is a fat curtail Friar, the merriest alive!
 His quarter-staff, whack! greets a crown with a crack!
 And, 'stead of rough *sackcloth*, his penance is *sack*!
 The peerless in beauty receives their fond duty,
 Her throne is the greensward, her canopy flowers!
 What huntress so gay as the *Lady of May*?
 The Queen of the Woodlands, King Robin's, and ours!
 His subjects are we, and 'tis centuries three
 Since his name first re-echo'd beneath this roof-tree!
 With Robin our King let the old rafters ring!
 They have heard their last shout! they have seen their last spring!
 And though we may sigh for blythe moments gone by,
 Yet why should we sorrow, bold foresters, why?
 Since those who come after their full share of laughter
 Shall have, when death's sables have veil'd you and I.
George Daniel, "Robin Hood" from Merrie England in the Olden Time, 1842
 The sheriff dare to love me? me who worship Robin the great Earl of
 Huntingdon? I love him as a damsel of his day might have loved Harold the
 Saxon or Hereward the Wake. They both fought against the tyranny of the
 kings, the Normans. But then your sheriff, your little man, if he dare to fight at
 all, would fight for his rents, his leases, his houses, his moneys, his oxen, his
 dinners, himself. Now your great man, your Robin, all England's Robin, fights
 not for himself but for the people of England. This John--this Norman tyranny--
 the stream is bearing us all down, and our little sheriff will ever swim with the
 stream! but our great man, our Robin, against it. And how often in old histories
 have the great men striven against the stream, and how often in the long sweep
 of years to come must the great man strive against it again to save his country
 and the liberties of his people! God bless our well-beloved Robin, Earl of
 Huntingdon!
(Marian speaking), from the play The Foresters: Robin Hood and Maid Marian
by Alfred Lord Tennyson, 1892

Robin Hood...

To many people in modern western countries, the mention of "Robin Hood" brings with it
 images of an English nobleman, after years of fighting for God and King Richard the
 Lionheart in the Crusades, after suffering through the hell of a Moorish prison, finds
 himself finally making it back to Britain to find Richard's evil brother John has usurped

the throne. His family lands have been unjustly confiscated by the Sheriff of Nottingham and the love of his life, Lady Marian, in a deep despair over the state of the kingdom. Once a headstrong and argumentative young man, years of hardship have changed Robin. He has lost his youthful enthusiasm for war and bloodshed, which was so deeply ingrained in the young man when he left to follow his king to Jerusalem years earlier. Finding himself suddenly destitute and heartbroken, Robin ends up in Sherwood Forest, a wild and perhaps even haunted wood, where he meets up with other “outlaws”, mostly peasants of common birth. “Robin of the Hood” organizes the “Merry Men” into a force for good. They subsequently go about waging a campaign of thievery and robbery against wealthy travelers, a campaign designed specifically to hurt the Sheriff of Nottingham and his minion, Guy of Gisbourne. When the sheriff’s men try to stop the outlaws, Robin and his men outsmart the forces of evil and simply slip back into the woods like ghosts.

In this story, instead of keeping the money they steal, Robin and his men give everything away to the poor and destitute peasants and townsfolk in Nottingham. It is a gesture of Christian charity that rivals the ancient apostles and early Christian martyrs. Called outlaws and brigands by the authorities, Robin and his men see themselves as enjoying a freedom and a sense of equality not often seen in medieval society. It is almost as though they understand that every man, regardless of his position at birth, is equal under the sight of God and should therefore have equal opportunities. Even Robin’s main weapon, a longbow, was a weapon wielded by common men, as opposed to the broadsword of a knight.

Eventually, in order to avoid the sheriff’s romantic advances, Marian joins Robin in the woods and they create an idyllic, utopian and almost democratic micro-society based on true Christian values in Sherwood Forest. There is even a possibility that Maid Marian might be related somehow to King Richard himself.

Is the story true?

Tales of a “Robin Hood” figure have been around since the late medieval / early Renaissance period (13th / 14th century). Some early writers and poets described him as a warrior fighting against the sheriff. Some depicted him as a yeoman. Others saw Robin as a peasant outlaw. Still others portrayed him as a lord, with his men kneeling before him in obedience. Even the outlaw’s name is not definitely known: Robin, Robyn, Robert, Loxley, Longshire and many others. By the 19th century, an age of Victorian romanticism when many writers looked back to a simpler time, Robin Hood’s story began to coalesce around the tale that many people know today. Over the last 100 years, many different films and television programs have been made about Robin and his men, including a cartoon version by Walt Disney studios in 1973. Since the 1980s, it has even been common in many stories for Robin to be accompanied by a Muslim warrior he befriended in the Holy Land, lending a sense of racial and religious equality to those accounts.

With dozens of different stories, is there a kernel of truth to any of them? Was Robin Hood a real historical figure? What about the “merry men”, the sheriff of Nottingham and Maid Marian?

Through an in-depth analysis of various primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain the different stories relating to

Robin Hood, and using those stories will then be able to take a position as to whether or not Robin Hood and his “Merry Men” were real historical figures.

Objectives

1. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain the basic story of Robin Hood and how the stories have changed over the centuries.
2. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain whether Robin Hood was a real historical figure, using evidence from the sources investigated to support their position.

Procedure

I. Anticipatory Set

- Writing / Question: How do legends and myths help define a society? (5 min)
- Handouts – Copies of the primary sources and readings from the websites listed. (5 min)

II. Body of Lesson

- Lecture / PPT – Brief overview of Robin Hood. (20 min)
- Video – Real Sherwood Forest (15 min)
- Independent Activity – Students read the primary sources and articles on Robin Hood and the stories surrounding the iconic character, taking notes as appropriate. (20 min)
- Suggestion: Have the students read some of these articles for homework to prepare for class discussion.
- Suggestion: Break students into groups and assign different articles to each group.
- Suggestion: Students should consider the writer’s possible bias when evaluating sources on each character to determine whether the writer has an agenda other than just relating facts.
- Group Activity – Socratic Discussion: Discuss the different stories relating to Robin Hood, and using those stories take a position as to whether or not Robin Hood and his “Merry Men” were real historical figures.

III. Closure

- Assessment – Essay / DBQ: Explain in detail the different stories relating to Robin Hood, and using those stories take a position as to whether or not Robin Hood and his “Merry Men” were real historical figures.

Extension

On tour: Nottingham Castle and Sherwood Forest

While on tour in Great Britain, students can visit Nottingham Castle and Sherwood Forest where they can see for themselves two important places connected with the story of Robin Hood. Sherwood Forest contains the Major Oak, a tree over 1000 years old that is connected to the Robin Hood legend. Many of its branches today are so big that they are supported by a system of wooden poles and planks. One can almost imagine the Sherwood Bandit and his love Marian lounging under its shady branches on a warm summer's eve (sounds idyllic). Nottingham Castle, only a few minutes away to the south of Sherwood Forest, is the traditional site associated with the Sheriff of Nottingham. Historical records show that in 1194, King Richard the Lionheart, recently back from the Crusades, led an army to Nottingham Castle, after rebels loyal to King John held out against the monarch.

Web Links

Lesson Plan Websites

- d.lib.rochester.edu/robin-hood
The Robin Hood Project (primary sources) – outstanding website and collection of primary sources on the Robin Hood legend, including full text copies of many of the Robin Hood stories from across the centuries. Produced by the University of Rochester – highly recommended for students and teachers.
- www.experiencenottinghamshire.com/robin-hood
Robin Hood (website) – from the official tourism website of Nottinghamshire
- www.boldoutlaw.com/rhbal/index.html
Robin Hood Tales (primary sources) – collection of ballads and stories about the Sherwood Bandit from across the centuries from the Bold Outlaw website
- www.boldoutlaw.com/realrob/
The Search for a real Robin Hood (website) – links to primary and secondary sources from the Bold Outlaw
- www.theheartoftherose.com/history.html
The Real Robin Hood (website)
- www.newark-sherwooddc.gov.uk/robinhood/
Robin Hood and Sherwood Forest (website) – from the Newark and Sherwood district Council
- www.history.com/topics/robin-hood
The Real Robin Hood (website) – from the History Channel
- www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/middle_ages/robin_01.shtml
Robin Hood and his Historical Context (website) – from the BBC
- www.sirbernardlovell.s-gloucs.sch.uk/e-portal/history/documents/RobinHood-Yr7.ppt
Robin Hood (PowerPoint) – from the Sir Bernard Lovell School (UK). Goes with the “Robin Hood Assessment” worksheet.
- www.sirbernardlovell.s-gloucs.sch.uk/e-portal/history/documents/ROBIN-HOOD-ASSESSMENTWriting-frameYr7.doc
Robin Hood Assessment Writing Frame (worksheet) – from the Sir Bernard Lovell School (UK). Goes with the Robin Hood PowerPoint.
- www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1
Reading Like a Historian: Primary Source Documents (video) – great 2-minute video on how to incorporate primary sources into the Common Core and history classes. From Shilpa Duvoor of Summit Preparatory Charter High School in Redwood City, CA. Highly recommended for teachers.
- www.youtube.com/watch?v=emAyyq93akmo
The Real Sherwood Forest (video) – 15-minute video from the Nottinghamshire County Council. Recommended for classes that need a shorter video.
- www.youtube.com/watch?v=CrlFZeGuZoE
The Real Robin Hood (video) – History Channel presentation of a 90-minute video that is probably too long for most in-class showings, but is well worth it. This documentary does a great job of explaining the different legends and stories surrounding Robin Hood. Highly recommended for both students and

teachers.

Background Information

- www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robin_Hood
Robin Hood – Wikipedia article
- www.passports.com/group_leaders/on_the_road/the_united_kingdom/country_profile
On the Road: Britain (country profile) – from Passports Educational Travel

Other Relevant Passports Lesson Plans

- [www.passports.com/lesson_plans/england/medieval-britain-chaucer-canterbury-
tales](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/england/medieval-britain-chaucer-canterbury-tales)
Medieval England – Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales
- [www.passports.com/lesson_plans/england/medieval-britain-henry-ii-and-
thomas-becket](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/england/medieval-britain-henry-ii-and-thomas-becket)
Medieval England – Henry II and Thomas Becket
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/england/medieval-britain-king-arthur
Medieval England – King Arthur and the Arthurian Legend
- www.passports.com/lesson-plans/england/norman-invasion-of-1066
Medieval England – Norman Invasion of 1066
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/england/magna-carta-of-1215
Medieval England – Magna Carta of 1215
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/england/medieval-britain-richard-the-lionheart
Medieval England – Richard the Lionheart

Key Terms

- Crusades
- Legend
- Maid Marian
- Merry Men
- Nottingham
- Robin Hood
- Sherwood Forest

