The Late And High Middle Ages

Despite its use of northern alliterative verse, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* seems to subscribe to the southern myth, still extant, that civilisation diminishes the further north one travels. The geography of the poem is identifiable until it goes north of the Wirral. After that appears to be nothing but wasteland... This section is designed to reveal something of the cultural and material wealth of York and Yorkshire in this period.

Robin Hood, York and Yorkshire

Robin’s Date

The historical Robin Hood, if he existed, is likely to have lived in the reign of Edward II. The earliest reference to songs of Robin Hood occurs in *Piers Plowman*, where Sloth boasts he knows ‘rhymes of Robyn Hode’ (*Piers Plowman*, ed. J. A. W. Bennett, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1972, Passus V, ln 402, C1377). The earliest surviving ballads however, come from the late Middle Ages to early Tudor period. Like Malory’s Arthuriad, *A Geste of Robyn Hode* assembles what were probably independent tales into a convincing chronological order. It is worth pointing out that many familiar features of the Robin Hood story are accretions that developed after the *Geste*, as the following list shows:

- Robin operates mostly in Yorkshire, not Nottingham, robbing travellers in Barnsdale.
- Robin is not a nobleman; the 16th century added this strand.
- There is no Maid Marian. She seems to have drifted in from May games.
- There is no Friar Tuck. He seems to have been added from May celebrations as well.
- Robin robs the rich but does not give to the poor.


Robin and Yorkshire

From the time of Joseph Hunter in 1852 it has been observed that the composer(s) of the ballads knew the area of South Yorkshire from Wakefield to Hathersage extremely well. If the ‘Saylis’ of The First Fytte stanza 20 is to be identified with the modern ‘Sayle’s Plantation’, it is in an area that was notorious as bandit country. The Great North Road, for this stretch known as ‘Watling Street’ (‘Watlinge Stret’ Fytte 1, stn 18), had to zigzag slowly down the deep valley cut by the River Went. During this time they would be vulnerable to any attack by robbers.
Map of the Went valley in the vicinity of the Great North Road.

The Went Valley. Sayle’s Plantation is on this side of the river on the far side of the bridge. The AI now vaults the obstacle on a high concrete fly-over. The numerous nettles that enjoy this setting sting rich and poor indiscriminately…

Robin’s Friends and Foes
Robin enthusiastically dislikes all higher clergy:

These bishops and these archebishoppes,
Ye shall them bete and bind
(The First Fytte, Stanza 15)
His main enemy is the Abbot of St Mary’s Abbey. His friend the ‘gentyll knyght’ says:

To-morrow I must to Yorke toune  
To Saynt Mary abbey.  
(The Second Fytte, Stanza 15)

This abbey stood in the heart of York. It is now a romantic ruin in the heart of the Museum Gardens and can be visited without charge whenever the gardens are open:

St Mary’s Abbey, north wall.

*Town vs. Habit*

Looking at the tranquillity of today it is hard to imagine the violent tension that often existed between the abbey and the townsfolk. In 1257 citizens attacked Holy Trinity Priory in Micklegate; in 1264-5 there were violent clashes in which several abbey men were killed and houses in Marygate and Bootham were burnt and looted (*A History of Yorkshire: City of York*, ed. R.B. Pugh, London, The University of London, 1961, p39). The riot date is given as 1262 in *City of York, Volume II, The Defences*, (Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, England, 1972, p.160b). The expensive walls built round the abbey from 1318-1325 (*City of York, Volume II, The Defences*, p56a) were mostly to protect against the Scots but would have provided some protection against local animosity as well.
Robin and Sir Richard
One of the striking features of the *Geste* is the friendship between Robin and Sir Richard. On the surface the enthusiastic collaboration and self-protection of knight and outlaw is unexpected. There are two possible explanations. The first is that the early ballads were eager to draw on the glamour of knighthood. The second is that the knights of English medieval history were far from law-abiding.
Like Robin, Sir Richard Dallingridge was an enthusiastic poacher (see The Knight, Chivalry and Yorkshire: below for more information on Dallingridge).

Consequently good hunting sites frequently had either castles or defended lodges built to house important guests during hunting and to protect the hunting ranges from poachers. Pickering Castle was mostly used as a base for hunting: http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/daysout/properties/pickering-castle/

A more humble structure is ‘John of Gaunt’s Lodge’, a cluster of stones and earthworks on a hill in Haverah Park, five miles west of Harrogate. http://www.geograph.org.uk/photo/16486

John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster, was lord of the manor of Knaresborough until 1399. His descendents included Henry IV, Henry V and Henry VI, who succeeded after Henry IV’s deposition of Richard II started the events that would lead to the Cousins’ War (War of the Roses).

What’s in a name?
In the spring and May of 1469 armed lawbreakers caused trouble in Yorkshire during the run up to the second phase of the Cousin’s War. Significantly the name ‘Robin Hood’ was sufficiently famous for the leaders of both outbreaks to call themselves ‘Robin’, ‘Robin of Redesdale’ and ‘Robin of Holderness’ respectively. The evidence is confusing but it is likely these ‘Robins’ were knights inciting local discontent about Edward IV’s taxes under orders from Robert Neville, Earl of Warwick. (Wagner pps 234-5).

Nonetheless the knight of the Geste ‘Sir Richard of Lee’ (‘Sir Rychard at the Lee’ The Fourth Fyte, Stn 310) is the hardest person for proponents of the ballad’s historical accuracy to identify. His ‘fayre castell’, which is ‘double-dyched’, (The Fifth Fyte, Stn 309) compounds the problem. Double moated
castles are rare; the most prominent example in Yorkshire is Helmsley Castle. Standing on the edge of the North York Moors, it would not have been handy as a refuge for outlaws fleeing an archery contest in Nottingham (The Fifth Fytte, Stn 289). In the late middle ages Helmsley Castle was bought by Richard Duke of Gloucester. The double ditches are prominent in this air view: http://www.northyorkmoors-stay.co.uk/tourist/Helmsley-Castle.html

Robin’s Death
According to another ballad from the Percy collection, Robin died at Kirklees Priory, treacherously bled to death by the prioress, a kinswoman of his:

And first it bled, the thicke, thicke bloode,
And afterwards the thinne,
And well then wist good Robin Hoode
Treason there was within.
(Child 120 A, stanza,17)

Sadly this ballad is fragmented. It has one of the most ominous build-ups of the genre but we never find out who the ‘old woman’ was or why she ‘was banning’ [cursing] Robin Hood. Robin Hood and Little John, the ‘two bolde children’ [men] who ‘shotten’ ['travel'] together seem to reach the division between this world and the next:

They two bolde children shotten together,
All day theire selfe in rank,
Until they came to the blacke water,
And over it laid a planke.

Vpon it there kneeled an old woman,
Was banning Robin Hoode;
‘Why dost thou bann Robin Hoode?’ said Robin,
.........................
(Child 120 A, stanzas,7/8)

Disappointingly all the sites associated with Robin’s death, the gatehouse of Kirklees Priory, where he is supposed to have died and his grave are on private land. The Gatehouse can be seen on http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kirklees_Hall ; the grave can be seen on http://www.britannia.com/tours/rhood/rhgrave.html