

HERITAGE CIRCLE

Graham Higgins, The Real Robin Hood

Graham Higgins explored the complex origins of the Robin Hood story at the January meeting of the Heritage Circle at Rickinghall Village Hall in an interesting presentation. He explained how the story of Robin Hood has fascinated people for centuries, and has been celebrated and embellished in literature, poems and films. The story we now have is an amalgam of the activities of a number of people who lived at the same time.

The Normans conquered England in 1066 and William I rewarded his supporters with grants of land across the country. However, there were many examples of wealthy people who fell foul of kings and either had to leave England or forfeit their lands, like Robin Hood. One powerful figure was Bishop Odo who had commissioned the Bayeux Tapestry. He controlled the southern half of England but allowed a gang of robbers to pillage and steal from the people to increase his own already considerable wealth. Eventually William I had him imprisoned but Graham Higgins suggested that 'Robber Odo' may have been a precursor of Robin Hood.

Another strand of the story of Robin Hood is derived from the Fitz Warin family who held Whittington Castle in Shropshire. Fulk Fitz Warin came into conflict with King John in 1200 and was declared an outlaw. However, the ill feeling between the two men had begun in childhood. John was the fourth son of Henry II and Eleanor of Aquitaine. He was known as John 'Lackland' as he was not expected to inherit any of his father's estates. His parents took little interest in him. John was brought up with other, non-royal, children, including Fulk Fitz Warin. John never forgave Fulk for hitting him during a dispute over a chess game.

In 1189 Henry II died and was succeeded by Richard I, his third son, as the older boys had died before their father. Richard was a warrior and almost immediately left England to fight in the Third Crusade. John was left in charge of England with his mother, Eleanor. In 1192 Richard was imprisoned in Germany while returning home from Palestine. He was eventually ransomed at great cost in 1194 and, on return, found his kingdom in turmoil. He raised an army to suppress opponents and sieged Nottingham Castle where two sheriffs stood against him. This offers another part of the Robin Hood story. Richard intimidated the occupants of the castle to surrender and taxed his enemies to fight wars in France. He left the country soon after and died in 1199 while fighting in France. He had spent just six months of his 10 year reign in England. Despite this, he has been immortalised by the title 'Lionheart.' Richard was succeeded by his brother John as he had no heir.

In 1200 John had the opportunity to gain revenge against Fulk as he would not allow him to inherit his father's estates. Fulk was outlawed when he clashed with John's retainers. He and his brothers took refuge in Babbins Wood near his former castle at Whittingdon for a year before fleeing to France where he was protected by the French King. These again are elements of the Robin Hood story. In 1203 John pardoned Fulk and restored his estates to him in exchange for his support.

Other parts of the Robin Hood story appear to come from the exploits of Eustace the Monk who was a French pirate who was executed by John. Similarly, Hereward the Wake, who resisted the Norman invasion in Ely c.1070, offers a Saxon versus Norman element. *Piers Plowman* written c.1380 by Langland mentions Sherwood Forest. In 1510 Henry VIII added to the story by introducing the character of Maid Marian when playing the role of Robin. Howard Pyle continued the myth making with his 19th Century novel for children showing Robin as a good man fighting evil. Finally, the 1938 Robin Hood film starring Errol Flynn is thought to have been influential in swaying US public opinion behind Britain in its conflict with Nazi Germany. In conclusion, Graham Higgins admires Robin Hood but thinks that John was not all bad and Richard not all good.

The next meeting of the Heritage Circle will be at 7.30pm on Wednesday 27 February when Pip Wright will give a talk about Lady Alice de Brynne, the life and times of 14th Century lady. New members and visitors are very welcome. Further information about the Heritage Circle is available on its website,

www.heritagecircle.onesuffolk.net.

Gerry Gurhy