

Robin Hood

Robin Hood has long been a household name, well known for his exploits protecting the poor and his battles with the forces of Prince John and the Sheriff of Nottingham. Even in the seventeenth century the fame of the legendary archer was commented upon, with one writer stating that there was scarcely a man in England who had not heard of 'Robyn Hode.' Modern adaptations of the Robin Hood story have grounded events within the boundaries of Sherwood Forest, now entirely within the county of Nottinghamshire. However the original ballads of Robin Hood – a series of songs and stories written mainly during the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries – contain several indications that outlaw was actually based in the area around Norton. One writer has even gone so far as to state that "Norton Parish has a unique claim to this legend, or fact." The link lives on in nearby landmarks such as Robin Hood's Well, which lies on the route of the Great North Road – now the A1 – to the south of the parish, and the Robin Hood golf course in Little Owston. There is evidence of the well being in existence from the seventeenth century, and its covering was designed by architect Sir John Vanbrugh. Robin's association with the parish centres on Barnsdale Forest, to the west of Norton, which is mentioned in several of the early ballads. In *Robin Hood and Guy of Gisborne*, for example, Robin tells his pursuers;

'My dwelling is in this wood,' sayes Robin,
'By thee I set right nought:
I am Robin Hood of Barnesdale,
Whom thou so long hast sought.'

Whilst Barnsdale, or 'Bernysdale' in this middle English translation, is also mentioned in another song as the outlaws' home;

He dyde him streyt to Bernysdale,
Under the grene wode tre,
And he founde there Robyn Hode,
And all the mery meyne.

Barnsdale Forest covered an area of thirty square miles during the middle ages, a size difficult to imagine given its location and dimensions today. A document from the twelfth century describes Richard I, whilst hunting, pursuing a stag from Sherwood Forest into Barnsdale, which suggests the two existed relatively close to one another at one point in time. Sherwood Forest was spread over an estimated 100,000 acres during the middle ages, although like Barnsdale it now covers only a fraction of its former size as a result of the widespread deforestation which occurred from the medieval period onwards. Whilst there have been attempts to prove that the 'Barnsdale' referred to by Robin is located in other counties, such as Rutland or Nottinghamshire, Barnsdale is cited in relation to local Norton landmarks in a number of ballads. In *A Geste of Robin Hode*, the oldest surviving copy of which dates from the 1470s, the writer makes reference to the Great North Road, now the A1, which runs alongside Barnsdale Forest. One of the most important roads in medieval England, the Great North Road would have offered ample opportunities for an outlaw such as Robin to target merchants and royal convoys.

But as they loked in Bernysdale,
By the hye waye,
Than were they ware of two blacke monkes,
Eche on a good palferay.

Joseph Hunter, in his 1815 history of Hallamshire and South Yorkshire, describes Robin as “support[ing] himself by slaying the wild animals found in the forests, and by levying a species of black mail on passengers along the great road from London to Berwick; occasionally seizing upon treasure which was being conveyed along the road, but with a courtesy which distinguished him from ordinary highway-men” – the road referred to is the modern A1, which passes next to Berwick-upon-Tweed.

A later verse in *A Geste of Robin Hode* links Campsall to the legend, with the Church of St Mary Magdalene mentioned by Robin when he tells a knight;

"I made a chapell in Bernysdale,
That semely is to se,
It is of Mary Magdaleyne,
And thereto wolde I be."

Legend has it that Robin and Marian were married in Campsall Church, although the claim has also been made by several parishes in Yorkshire and Nottinghamshire. Even so, taken together, these lines mean that the Norton area should be considered one of the more likely locations for the Robin Hood story. There remain major debates as to the identity of Robin or indeed whether he existed at all. However, the source material strongly suggests that the story, whether fact or fiction, was played out in this very area. As the writers of the various works describing Robin appear to have had a detailed knowledge of the local area, Norton has a claim to fame as either the haunt of Robin, or of the balladeers who wrote about him.

Population and Occupation

The first evidence of settlement in Norton can be traced from the discovery of a hoard of three hundred Roman coins, unearthed within the parish boundaries. The coins, dating principally from the reign of Emperor Constantine I (306-337 AD), indicate that there were wealthy Roman subjects populating the area by the fourth century. In 1840 the foundations of several Roman buildings were discovered by workers building a road in Campsall, providing further evidence of Roman residents in the area. It is probable that these settlers were drawn to what is now Norton parish due to its proximity to the road known first as Ermine Street, and later as the Great North Road. Constructed in the first century AD, Ermine Street eventually linked London and York (Londinium and Eboracum), the two principal settlements of Roman Britain, and became a major arterial trade route. Nearby Doncaster – known to the Romans as Danum – would have been another factor in the settlement of the area, as it developed into an important trading and administration centre for the region. However, despite this evidence of small numbers of inhabitants during the Roman occupation, the true history of Norton, Campsall and Sutton begins in the Anglo-Saxon period. Following invasions from the fifth century onwards, England was gradually colonised by Saxon settlers, who established a number of separate kingdoms. It appears that Norton first became a permanent unit in this period, as the name Norton is Old English in origin – meaning ‘North Town.’ Sutton’s name is Saxon for ‘South Town’, meaning that both settlements were closely linked to Campsall, which is situated between the two. The name Campsall has been said to have its origin in the Saxon words for ‘Hall of Warriors’, suggesting that some sort of garrison was once based in the area, and it is possible that Campsall was established as a station for soldiers moving northwards along Ermine Street, known by the Anglo-Saxons as Earninga Straete.

The first real indication of the extent of the local population comes with the Domesday Book – the record of an extensive land survey of England undertaken in 1086 in the wake of the Norman conquest of Britain. Domesday includes the names of the English tenants who held the land at Norton prior to the invasion – Elfi and Orm – and the details of Ilbert de Laci who inherited the manor, displacing the native Saxon landowners, in reward for his actions in William of Normandy’s army during the Battle of Hastings and the subsequent conquest. The recorded population of Norton (listed as Nortone) in 1086 was 10 villains and 15 borders, two classes of peasant farming differing amounts of land. From this, the overall population of the settlement during this period has been estimated at around 100. Campsall (or Cansale as it listed in Domesday), also owned by the de Lacis, was home to 16 villains and 3 borders by comparison. The de Lacis were a powerful and influential family, and also held substantial lands around modern-day Pontefract. There is evidence that the area suffered considerably during the Harrying of the North, a series of actions by the invading Normans in the years 1069-1070 designed to crush resistance in the north of England, which resulted in the deaths of around 100,000 people. The value of the manor of Norton had been valued at six pounds during the reign of Edward the Confessor (1042-1066), dropping to three pounds ten shillings in 1086. Similarly, whilst pre-conquest the amount of land cultivated was five caracutes – a caracute being the amount of land that one team of oxen could plough over the course of a year – by 1086 only three were being ploughed. This suggests that farmland, agricultural tools and animals had been destroyed or disrupted, leading to a fall in productivity from which the area took a significant time to recover. There is evidence that a mill existed at this point to the north of Norton on the River Went, established before wind powered mills reached England in the later Middle Ages.

Norton, Sutton and Campsall did recover, and there was a steady expansion of the parish population through the course of the Middle Ages. The lay subsidy of 1334, charged on the non-clerical population, returned 166 pounds 5 shillings from Campsall, compared to 54 pounds 7 shillings from Leeds and 107 pounds 5 shillings from Sheffield, indicating that the taxable population of the local area was greater than those two combined. This demographic expansion was coupled with a greater demand for more specialised occupations and services within the community. The Poll Tax records of 1379, one of a series of dues levied to raise money in order to pay for English armies fighting in the Hundred Years' War, show the presence of 12 craftsmen in Norton, ranging from carpenters to thatchers and blacksmiths – all essential for the development of a self-reliant local market economy. This was reflected in the establishment of a market at Campsall, first recorded in 1294, when Henri de Laci obtained a market charter. The market would have provided an opportunity for those living in the parish to purchase goods they were unable to produce themselves, as well as allowing them to sell their surplus wheat or grain. Medieval markets were also important centre of community – in Norton, an annual four-day fair was held each July during the festival of St Mary Magdalene, patron saint of the church at Campsall. As well as trading, fairs often involved communal activities such as feasts, dramas and archery contests.

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, from the 1811 census, the population had grown to 558 in Norton, 393 for Campsall and 105 for Sutton. The following ten years marked a period of relative growth, with the corresponding population figures for 1821 reaching 668, 389 and 145 respectively. The population of the three settlements remained at around this level for the remainder of the nineteenth century, with statistics from the 1840s showing the number of people in Norton as 628, indicating a slight decline. The majority of the local population still worked the land, as they had in 1086 and before, with 75% of Norton's population engaged in agricultural work in 1851. Following the confiscation of church land by Henry VIII and the division of the local land, included that previously considered to be commonly held by the population, between two gentry families based in Campsall – the Bacon-Franks and the Cooke-Yarboroughs – these workers were spread over 18 farms, six of which were larger than 100 acres, with the remaining twelve averaging around 50 acres. The latter were family farms, employing a few labourers at harvest time if at all. In contrast to Askern - which experienced some growth from tourism as a result of its spas – Norton remained land-oriented until the beginning of the twentieth century, with those not farming still largely involved with typical rural industries and services similar to those recorded in the poll tax of the 14th century. The community remained largely self-sufficient until changes in agricultural practice and local conditions forced a change in the first decades of the 1900s.

The sinking of the Askern pit in 1911 marked the beginning of a period of major transformation for the people of Norton and the surrounding area. The mine quickly exhausted the labour reserves of Askern, which remained a smaller settlement than Norton until the last half of the nineteenth century. The farm workers of Norton provided a ready source of men for the newly opened industrial works to the south-east and with the gradual mechanisation of the local farms, leading to less employment being available in the traditional agricultural sector, there was a general occupational shift from farming to mining. Following the First World War, which saw 125 men from the local community join the armed forces, the pattern of land ownership changed again. Eight of the smaller farms in the Norton parish were closed between 1917 and 1936, partly due to the global

agricultural depression. This was partly caused by an upsurge in wheat and other food production during the First World War, with Canada, Australia and the United States increasing their yields due to the problems of growing adequate amounts in Europe. With the return of peace the market was flooded and many small British farms, now competing in a global economic market for the first time, became increasingly unprofitable. As a result the land surrounding Norton became progressively more concentrated, as those surviving the effects of the downturn bought up the plots of those less able to withstand the pressure. The strip-field system, a remnant of earlier agricultural practice, was steadily transformed into the larger areas existing today – divisions more suited to the mechanised farming methods now utilised.

Despite the changes Norton retained its original character. The growing population of the twentieth century was integrated into the existing community and the shape of the settlement, centred on the High Street, retained the shape it had held for centuries. The impact of the mines, although providing employment for the majority of Norton's population for many decades, was less marked than in many areas. Norton has escaped the "rough and prideless existence" now unfortunately characteristic of many former mining towns, having successfully adapted itself to the twenty-first century - with many of the population of just over 4,000 now commuting to nearby cities for work.

Topography

Norton parish is situated, in broad geographic terms, in the area between the Magnesium Limestone Belt – which stretches across the north of England roughly from Nottingham to Newcastle – and the marsh flats of the Humberhead Levels. The Norton area occupies ground varying from sixty four feet above seas level in the west to an area lower than twenty-five feet to the east, whilst Campsall was described by one nineteenth century traveller as being “particularly pleasant, surrounded by a amphitheatre of gently rising hills.” The region as a whole is characterised by a mixture of small rises and extensive stretches of lowland. The latter were the cause of frequent problems for the residents of Norton, Campsall and Sutton, as areas such as Norton Ings were subjected to numerous instances of flooding. The term Ings, of Old English origin, refers to a field or meadow near to or below sea level, often liable to be submersed by water. The people of Norton are noted as having, in 1356, drawn to the attention of the local Sheriff the failure of residents of nearby Askern to dredge a drainage pool, which had resulted in widespread flooding of the surrounding area to the detriment of trade and farming. The *Topographical Dictionary of England*, published 1848, describes how for long periods of the history of Norton “a large portion of the township was frequently flooded in the winter time.” Despite the problems caused by this, there is evidence that the fen-like environment of the Ings sustained sizeable numbers of eels and waterfowl, which were used to supplement the basic agricultural diet of the local population.

Flooding continued into the nineteenth century when, to rectify the problem, a bill was put before the House of Lords with the intention of securing the drainage of land in Norton and other settlements throughout the county. Successfully passed in 1831, the “Act for draining and improving certain Low Lands situated within the several townships of Norton, Campsall, Askrew, Moss, Fenwick, Little Smeaton, Stubbs Walden, Womersley, Whitley, Baln, Pollington, Snaith and Cowick, and Fishlake, all in the West Riding of York” was part of a concerted effort to convert previously unusable plots into land which could be farmed and cultivated. The act resulted in the construction of numerous drainage ditches, which now crisscross the areas previously subjected to excess water retention. The scheme was a remarkable success; with one commentator stating that the area had been “effectually drained” in the fifteen years prior to 1850 - one unfortunate side effect of this development of the drainage system was the disruption of the wetland habitat, with the loss of the majority of the waterfowl population in the immediate region.

Deforestation and the clearing of land for agricultural production was another means by which the local geography of Norton was transformed. From around the thirteenth century onwards, the growing population of England and the loss of nutrients in existing plots caused by primitive methods of fertilisation necessitated the conversion of previously unused land into fields. Deforestation was often achieved through the use of controlled fires, whilst demands for timber for use in buildings and as charcoal in early industrial activities contributed to the decline of the great forests. As a result of these developments and continued agricultural expansion in the post-medieval period, the former presence of forests such as Barnsdale around Norton has been reduced to a series of copses and small woods. Whilst ensuring that food production grew to match the growing population of the settlement, the transformation of the landscape to suit local needs also resulted in wide-ranging changes in the local environment.

Religion

Although the Anglo-Saxon inhabitants of the Norton region had constructed a wooden church some time after the fifth century, it was only following the arrival of the Normans in 1066 that a more permanent structure was built, eventually becoming what one writer has described as “a striking contrast to the plain buildings that had been erected for worship in earlier times.” The foundations of the Church of St Mary Magdalene in Campsall were laid down in the century following the conquest, at the behest of two of the leading families in the area – the de Lacis, who owned the majority of land in the parish, and the de Reinevilles, wealthy tenants of the de Laci family who held land in the manor of Campsall. The church is a clear indication of the wealth of the early Norman settlers and the power they wielded over the area – the imposing structure would have dominated its surroundings. Until 1288 there were two rectors, one chosen by each family – following that year this was reduced to one, presented solely by the de Lacis. Unusually, the groundplan of the church was designed in the shape of the crucifix. David Hay, a historian of the region, has stated that the church of St Mary Magdalene can be considered “one of the finest examples of Norman ecclesiastical architecture in Yorkshire”, with features such as the tower, the decorated doorway, the gallery of arches and the nave of particular interest. Sections of the structure were rebuilt during the course of the twelfth century, whilst the aisles were added at some point in the 1400s.

Local legend implies that the tombstones held within the Warrior Chapel, and dated 1190, belong to members of the Knights Templar, a religious order founded in 1119 to protect pilgrims to the Holy Land. There is evidence that a Templar chapel was founded in Norton in the latter half of the twelfth century by knights from the preceptory (the local headquarters of the order) at Temple Hirst, roughly ten miles from Norton. The Temple Hirst preceptory was founded in 1152 on land donated by Ralph de Hastings, brother of the Templar Grand Master Richard de Hastings. Following the dissolution of the order in 1308 on charges of blasphemy, their lands in Norton were confiscated by the king. The Templars of Temple Hirst, possibly including those based at Norton, were accused specifically of worshipping a calf at their trial.

A Benedictine priory was established to the north of Norton in 1140 by members of an order based in Wallingwells, Nottinghamshire. Described by *The Askern Visitor's Guide* (1823) as “a once splendid monastic institution”, the priory was patronised by Edward IV (reigned 1461 to 1470 and 1471 to 1483), who gifted the rectory of Campsall to the order. At the dissolution of the monasteries in the reign of Henry VIII, the rectory was valued as having an annual income of £51 14s, a considerable sum. Following its disbanding, the lands of the priory were divided between the wealthier inhabitants of the parish – by that point the Ramsdens and the Yarboroughs.

By the nineteenth century, as nonconformist denominations gained support in the English countryside, a Methodist chapel had been constructed in Norton. Erected in 1818 at the cost of £200, the building was capable of holding up to two hundred worshippers and catered to tourists visiting the spas at nearby Askern.

Education

With the exception of small-scale, informal education offered by the earlier religious institutions, the first concerted attempt to educate the children of Norton came with the creation of a church school in the 1860s. Following the Education Act of 1902, which resulted in the setting up of Local Education Authorities to administer education at a local level, the existing institution was joined by a voluntary school. A further school was founded during the 1920s, replacing church and council establishments – this had what has been described as a “strong rural bias in training”, with the school owning an area of 314 acres on which to study agricultural methods and techniques, preparing those not destined for a career in mining with the skills necessary to work on the land.

Before the onset of these official developments, a unique institution had been established in Campsall for the education of girls from the local area. Financed, organised and administered by three daughters of one of the heirs to the wealthy Bacon-Frank residency at Campsall Hall, by the 1820s it was estimated to be teaching around 60 girls at any one time, in a building which had cost over £500 to construct. The *Askern Visitor's Guide* of 1823 states that the institution aimed to instruct its pupils “not only in knitting and sewing, but in reading, writing and arithmetic.” One of the Bacon-Frankes described the motivation behind the school when she wrote that she and her sisters “consider every method to assist and promote the instruction of the rising generation to be of vital importance, not only as it regards their own welfare, but the happiness of the community at large.” The school was in operation until its closure in 1934, providing, as hoped by its founders, both education and pride in many hundreds of young girls from the local area.

Education for the local area is now provided by primary schools throughout the parish, with secondary teaching based at Campsall Technology College, which was subjected to a serious fire in December 2009.