THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST TRANSCRIPTS

EPISODE 136:
THE REAL ROBIN HOOD

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Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 136: The Real Robin Hood. In this episode, we're going to look at the legend of Robin Hood – and the oldest ballads that survive to tell the story of the famous outlaw. Those ballads were written down in the mid 1400s, but Robin Hood was already a well-known figure by then. There are passing references to Robin Hood extending all the way back to the 1300s. And some scholars believe that the legend goes back even further than that. But in the mid-1400s, the ballads and stories were finally preserved in writing for the first time. So this time, we'll explore this early medieval version of Robin Hood, and we'll examine those earliest ballads. We'll also look at the language of the poems which includes evidence pointing to the early stages of the Great Vowel Shift. So we have a lot to cover.

But before we begin, let me remind you that the website for the podcast is historyofenglishpodcast.com. And you can sign up to support the podcast and get bonus episodes and transcripts at Patreon.com/historyofenglish.

A quick note about those transcripts. I started posting a transcript of each new episode at Patreon shortly after I set up the Patreon feature a few years ago. So those transcripts go back to around Episode 85. And for a while, I have been including citations to sources in those transcripts. Within an actual episode, it interrupts the narrative to constantly stop and mention a source. So I've just started putting those citations in the transcripts. And I mention that in case you want access to those citations for any reason.

I also wanted to mention that the Intelligent Speech Conference is going to be held online this year. The theme of the conference is 'Hidden Voices,' and I'm going to be giving a couple of presentations about the Indo-Europeans. A lot of other podcasters will also be presenting topics related to their podcasts, so if you're interested, go to intelligentspeechconference.com for more information.

Now, let's turn our attention to one of the most enduring literary figures of the Middle Ages. He was an outlaw who lived in Sherwood Forest and was surrounded by a band of merry men who stole from the rich and gave to the poor. Of course, that figure was Robin Hood, and in terms of medieval literary figures, his fame is rivaled only by King Arthur. But King Arthur and Robin Hood had very different origins, and they appealed to different audiences early on. Arthur was a legendary king whose story evolved out of Welsh, Latin and French before it was ever recorded in English. So the Arthurian legends appealed to the literate upper classes of England. But Robin Hood was a commoner and an outlaw whose legend passed in songs and ballads long before they were ever written down, and those songs and ballads were sung in English from the very beginning. His stories were never translated into French in the Middle Ages, and the evidence suggests that his stories were very popular among the common people of England. So in that respect, Robin Hood was a more inherently English figure than Arthur himself.

But the medieval Robin Hood wasn't the Robin Hood made famous by later writers and by Hollywood and Walt Disney. He wasn't a noble like the later stories suggest. There was no love interest – no Maid Marian. And there was no robbing from the rich and giving to the poor. The original Robin Hood was a true outlaw. He stole from people, and they weren't always rich, and he didn't necessarily give the stolen property to the poor. And he wasn't above killing someone if they got in the way.

The word *outlaw* literally means someone who lives outside of the law. It's is a very old word in the English language going all the way back to Old English, but it's not a native English word. It's actually a Norse word borrowed from the Vikings.

Outlaws were people who had been banished from society either because they were convicted criminals or because they were accused of a crime and didn't show up to answer the charges. Since outlaws lived outside of the law and outside of the protections of the law, they could be killed on the spot if they were captured. So that meant they had to go into hiding, and in medieval England, that usually meant they headed into the forest. In the Middle Ages, England had much more forest land than it has today. Many of those wooded areas hadn't been cleared yet. So outlaws could take refuge in the forest, and they could survive by living off the land and stealing from people who might be traveling through. The local sheriff had a duty to round up outlaws, but it was so difficult to find and capture them in the forest that the authorities often just let them be. [*SOURCE: 'Robin Hood: The True History Behind the Legend,' Nigel Cawthorne, p. 196.*]

Now sometimes those outlaws were truly violent people – robbers, murderers and the like. But in other cases, they were simply people who had run afoul of the authorities for financial, or political or personal reasons. And there must have been a sense that some of the outlaws had been unfairly treated and didn't deserve their banishment.

Several real-life outlaws actually became folk heros in the Middle Ages, and their stories certainly influenced the early songs and ballads about Robin Hood. In an earlier episode of the podcast, I mentioned the Anglo-Saxon rebel named Hereward the Wake who led an early resistence movement against the Normans in northern England. Hereward became an outlaw, and since he was fighting against the Norman authorities, he also became a folk hero. In the early 1100s, an account of his life was composed in Latin. It mixed fact and fiction, but some of those stories match some of the earliest accounts of Robin Hood. Hereward lived in the forest, and he surrounded himself with a band of fugitives, and in one story, Hereward disguised himself as a potter and infiltrated the king's court to discover their plans. Well, as we'll see, an early Robin Hood poem has Robin switching clothes with a potter so he can go into town in disguise, and once he is there, he encounters the Sheriff of Nottingham. These similarities suggest that some of those older stories about Hereward the Wake fed into the legend of Robin Hood.

There were also stories about other real-life outlaws that probably contributed to the narrative. There was a well-known French story about a French nobleman named Eustache the Monk who had his lands seized unjustly and was outlawed. He took refuge in the forest and donned disguises in order to take revenge on the local count. In one part of the story, he captured the count and later released him, which parallels an early Robin Hood story where Robin captures

the Sheriff of Nottingham and then releases him. Eustache also detained people and asked them questions. If they lied, he robbed them. If they told the truth, he let them keep their money. Again, this parallels some of the early accounts of Robin Hood where Robin does the same thing. [*SOURCE: 'Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales,' Stephen Knight and Thomas Ohlgren, p. 2-3.*]

There was also a well-known story about an English nobleman named Fulk fitz Warren. His story survives in a version written in Anglo-Norman – the early French dialect spoken in England. It tells of a man from a prominent family who had his lands taken away, and most interestingly, the lands were taken away by Prince John before he became 'Bad' King John. Once again, Fulk retreats to the forest with a band of followers, where they engage in trickery, deception and open warfare against the authorities.

Perhaps the most significant thing about the Fulk story is that it is set during the time of Prince John and his brother Richard the Lionheart. And that ended up being the same time frame used for most of the modern versions of the Robin Hood stories. Now that wasn't the case early on. The earliest Robin Hood ballads actually refer to the king as King Edward. It isn't clear which Edward it was, but all of the Edwards came after King John. So the story of this earlier outlaw Fulk fitz Warren pre-dated the original ballads about Robin Hood. But in the 1500s, a Scots writer named John Major set his account of Robin Hood during the time of Prince John, and many scholars think he borrowed that time frame from the account of Fulk fitz Warren. And that ended up being the setting used by most modern writers in their versions of the Robin Hood legend. [*SOURCE: 'Reading Robin Hood,' Stephen Knight, p. 70.*]

So those are some of the historical outlaws who may have influenced the legend of Robin Hood. But where did the story of Robin Hood actually begin? Well, no one really knows for certain. It's hidden in the murky history of England after the Norman Conquest. Some scholars think there was actually a real life Robin Hood who sparked the legend. That has led many historians to pour through the criminal records of medieval England to find an actual outlaw named Robin Hood.

The problem is that **Robin** was a common nickname for **Robert**, and **Robert** was a very popular name in England. So there were a lot of 'Roberts' and 'Robins.' The surname **Hood** was also widespread. So the records have revealed a lot of suspects and criminals with the name 'Robin Hood,' 'Robin Hode,' 'Robert Hode,' or something similar. Most of them were charged with minor crimes, but one of them is actually listed as an outlaw. His name was Robert Hod, and he lived in Yorkshire in the early 1200s. He incurred a large debt, and then failed to appear when he was called to answer for it. He was declared an outlaw, and he avoided the authorities for several years. In one year, he was listed in the criminal records as 'Hobbehod.' [*SOURCE: 'Robin Hood: The True History Behind the Legend,' Nigel Cawthorne, p. 39-40; and 'Robin Hood,' J.C. Holt, p. 53-4.*] **Hobbe** and **Bob** were both nicknames for **Robert**. So 'Hobbehood' literally meant 'Rob Hood' or 'Robert Hood' or 'Robin Hood.' So was this the original Robin Hood? Well, he was a Robin Hood, but there is nothing specific to connect him to the later stories.

The same is true for the other criminals that bear the same name or a similar name. It is intriguing though that records from the 1200s and 1300s also reveal several criminals that bear the surname *Robinhood*. So these aren't people with the first name *Robert* or *Robin* and the last name *Hood*. These are people that have a distinct first name – like *William* or *John*, and they have *Robinhood* as a surname. Since surnames during that period were often descriptive or occupational, the surname *Robinhood* implies that the person had some characteristic that reminded people of the legendary outlaw. So maybe the person was a thief or criminal or trickster. Again, some scholars think the existence of that surname implies that Robin Hood was a well-known character or figure in England by that point in the 1200s and 1300s.

The first known person with that surname – a William Robehod – is identified as a robber in two different sets of government records, one from the year 1261 and another from the following year. In the first record, he is identified by reference to his father. He is listed as "William, son of Robert le Fevre." But in the second record a year later, he is listed as a fugitive, and he is identified as 'William Robehod." It appears that a scribe who was responsible for keeping the records gave William the surname *Robehod* to reflect his fugitive status, and that implies that the legend of Robin Hood was in place by that point in the mid-1200s. [*SOURCE: 'Robin Hood: The True History Behind the Legend,' Nigel Cawthorne, p. 38-9; and 'Robin Hood,' J.C. Holt, p. 188-9.*] Historians have discovered references to at least seven other people with the same or similar surname in the late 1200s, and five of them were connected to criminal activities, including murder and robbery. [*SOURCE: 'Robin Hood,' J.C. Holt, p. 188.*]

All of that suggests that stories and ballads about Robin Hood existed in the late 1200s and early 1300s. But there is no hard evidence – just an assumption based on the use of that unusual surname. But near the end of the 1300s, we finally get our first clear and undeniable reference to the legendary outlaw. And that reference came in the poem by William Langland called Piers Plowman. Back in Episode 124, we looked at that poem, and I noted that it contained this first specific reference to the songs and ballads about Robin Hood.

Landland represented the sin of sloth as a lazy and ignorant monk named Sloth. In one passage, Sloth says, "I can nouȝte parfitly my pater noster as þe prest it syngeth, But I can rymes of Robyn hood," literally 'I can't say my Pater Noster or Lord's Prayer as the priest sings it, but I can sing the rhymes of Robin Hood.' This passage was composed around the year 1377, and it confirms that stories featuring Robin Hood were well-known by that point.

There's also another possible link between Piers Plowman and Robin Hood. Back when I covered that poem in the podcast, I discussed it in the context of a major peasant uprising of that period called the Peasants' Revolt. You might remember that one of the leaders of the Peasants' Revolt was a radical preacher named John Ball. He wrote a letter calling his followers to action, and I read part of that letter in that earlier episode. The letter instructed his followers to "biddeþ Peres Plouȝman go to his werk and chastise wel Hobbe þe Robbere," literally 'bid Piers Plowman go to his work and chastise Hobbe the Robber.' It's that reference to 'Hobbe the Robber' that's so intriguing.

A moment ago, I noted that a Yorkshire outlaw named Robert Hod has been suggested as an early inspiration for the Robin Hood legends. And I noted that he is mentioned in one of the surviving records as 'Hobbehod' – **Hobbe** being an old nickname for **Robert**. So 'Hobbehod' meant 'Rob Hood' or 'Robert Hood.' Well, here, we have the radical priest John Ball making reference to 'Hobbe the Robber,' literally 'Rob or Robert the Robber.' Now many scholars interpret this name as a reference to one of the government officials targeted by the rebels. He was the country's Treasurer named Robert Hales, and he was later executed by the rebels. So that may have been the Robert who was referred to as 'Hobbe the Robber.' But another popular theory is that it was a reference to Robin Hood, or perhaps, a reference to robbers in general. [*SOURCE: 'Robin Hood,' J.C. Holt, p. 157.*]

They suggest that the name **Robert** and its related nickname **Hobbe** were often used as synonyms meaning a 'robber.' In the 1300s, robbers were sometimes referred to as 'Robert's Men.' And an Act of Parliament in the year 1331 actually refers to robberies and other felonies committed by 'Roberdesmen.' [*SOURCE: 'Robin Hood,' J.C. Holt, p. 157.*] So there was this apparent association between robbers, criminals and the name Robert.

It's possible that the name **Robert** was associated with robbers because **Robert** and **robber** sound very similar. Another possibility is that the connection was derived from the Robin Hood legends. Perhaps Robert Hood or Robin Hood was such a well-known outlaw by that point that people just associated the name **Robert** or **Robin** or **Hobbe** with thievery. Or perhaps, it worked the other way. Maybe the name **Robert** was already associated with robbers and thieves, so this new fictional outlaw who lived in the forest was given the name **Robert** or **Robin**. And since robbers might wear a hood when they robbed someone, maybe that explains the surname **Hood**. Again, the linguistic links between **robber**, **Robert**, and **Robin Hood** are fascinating, but like so many aspects of the early legends, it's mostly just speculation. The actual connections are elusive. All we can say for certain is that names like **Robert** and **Robin** had an association with robbers, and the most well-known robber was Robert Hood or Robin Hood. And we can also say for certain that Robin Hood was a well-known figure in England by the late 1300s because the 'rhymes of Robin Hood' are specifically mentioned in Piers Plowman.

As we turn from the 1300s to the 1400s, we start to find more and more references to Robin Hood. There is a collection of religious works from the first decade of the 1400s called 'Dives and Pauper,' and it contains a reference very similar to the one found in Piers Plowman. A poor preacher speaks about people who prefer to hear a tale about Robin Hood than to hear mass. In the actual wording of the text, he refers to those who 'gon levir to heryn a tale or a song of Robin Hood or of sum rubaudry than to heryn masse or matynes' – literally those who prefer 'to hear a tale or a song of Robin Hood or of some such ribaldry than to hear Mass or the Matins.' [*SOURCE: 'Reading Robin Hood,' Stephen Knight, p. 18.*]

Around the same time as that passage, in the first decade or so of the 1400s, a short verse was scribbled in a manuscript at Lincoln Cathedral. [*SOURCE: 'Robin Hood,' J.C. Holt, p. 141.*] Here's the passage in Modern English:

Robin Hood in Sherwood stood, hooded and hatted and hosed and shod
Four and twenty arrows he bore in his hands.

Now here's the same passage in the original Middle English:

Robyn hod in scherewod stod, hodud and hathud and hosut and schod
Four and thuynti arowus he bar in hits hondus.

Notice that the passage uses the word ***shod*** which meant 'shoed' or 'wearing shoes.' It was derived from the word ***shoe***. It also gave us the word ***slipshod*** which originally referred to someone wearing slippers or very loose shoes. That led to a sense of something slippery or loose or untidy, and from there we got the modern sense of ***slipshod*** as something careless or shabby. But it all goes back to that earlier sense of the word ***shod*** as 'shoed' or 'wearing shoes.' And here, we're told that Robin Hood was 'hooded, hatted, hosed, and shod' in the early 1400s.

A decade or so later, we find another reference to Robin Hood in a chronicle composed in Scotland. The author was a Scotsman named Andrew Wyntoun, and his historical chronicle appeared in the year 1420. It was a yearly chronicle, and for the years 1283-1285, he included the following entry – first in Modern English, and then in the original Middle English:

Little John and Robert Hood
As forest outlaws were commended good,
In Inglewood and Barnsdale
All this time they practiced their trade.

Litil lohun and Robert Hude
Waythmen war commendit gud;
In lngilwode and Bernnysdaile
Thai oyssit al this tyme thar trawale.

So here we have a Chronicle in Scotland referring to the legends of Robin Hood. And interestingly, it refers to 'Little John and Robert Hood.' Little John was a major character in the stories from the very beginning, and here we see that he was closely associated with Robin Hood even before we have a surviving Robin Hood text. And note that the chronicle refers to Little John and Robin Hood as ***waythmen***, which meant 'mean who lie in wait,' so it was a common term for outlaws or bandits. And the passage says that they were "commendit gud," literally 'commended good,' but it meant highly regarded or well-renowned or well-praised. So that implies that they were considered folk heroes even though they were robbers.

The passage also says that they lived in "lngilwode and Bernnysdaile," which was Inglewood in the far north of England and Barnsdale which was a wooded area in north central England located directly north of Sherwood Forest. This points to another important aspect of the early Robin Hood tales. They weren't always set in Sherwood Forest. Many of the early stories specifically mention Barnsdale or Barnsdale Forest.

Now Barnesdale north of Sherwood wasn't actually a royal forest and the wooded area was so sparse that it never really attracted bandits, so modern scholars aren't entirely sure why it was mentioned in so many of the early references. But there was also another Barnesdale Forest south of Sherwood that was a royal forest, even thought it was smaller and further away. So there may have been some confusion about the two Barnesdales. *[SOURCE: 'Reading Robin Hood,' Stephen Knight, p. 45.*] But again, we see this older connection to Barnesdale in this early chronicle from Scotland.

A couple of decades after that chronicle entry, we get another reference to Robin Hood, this time in a petition to Parliament in the year 1439. The petition came from Staffordshire, west of Nottingham in the Midlands of England. A man named Piers Venables helped a prisoner escape from jail, and together, they both escaped into the forest. Venables was apparently part of a larger gang engaged in criminal activity in the region, and the petition expressed concern about their activities. The petition specifically said that Venebles 'gathered and assembled unto him many misdoers dressed in similar clothing and, in the manner of insurrection, went into the woods of the country, as if they had been Robin Hood and his men,' or in the original Middle English, he "gadered and assembled unto hym many misdoers beynge of his clothinge and, in manere of insurrection, wente into the wades in that contre, like as it hadde been Robyn Hode and his meyne." [*SOURCE: 'Robin Hood: The True History Behind the Legend,' Nigel Cawthorne, p. 52, and 'Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales,' Stephen Knight and Thomas Ohlgren, p. 21*.] So by this point, even petitions to Parliament were making reference to Robin Hood.

In the following decade – the 1440s – we got another historical chronicle out of Scotland. This time, it was composed by a man named Walter Bower. The manuscript was really an expansion of an earlier chronicle, and Bower's updated version contains annual entries. For the year 1266, he including the following passage, translated from Latin into Modern English:

> Then arose the famous murderer or cut-throat, Robert Hood, as well as Little John, together with their accomplices from among the dispossessed, whom the foolish populace are so inordinately fond of celebrating both in tragedy and comedy, and about whom they are delighted to hear the jesters and minstrels sing about above all other ballads.
> [*SOURCE: 'Robin Hood: The True History Behind the Legend,' Nigel Cawthorne, p. 35.*]

So here we get confirmation that these stories were being passed along in the form of ballads and songs. In other words, they were being spread in the oral tradition. Also, note that Bower is much more critical that his fellow Scots historian Andrew Wyntoun, who wrote his chronicle a couple of decades earlier. Wyntoun had described Robin Hood and Little John as **waythmen** or 'men lying in wait,' but Bower described Robin Hood with the Latin word **siccarius** which meant 'cut-throat' or 'murderer.' And whereas Wyntoun said that Robin Hood and Little John were held in high regard by the people, Bower said that the ballads were sung to a 'foolish' audience who were 'inordinately fond' of celebrating the outlaws. So we get a sense that some people like Bower didn't understand the fascination with robbers and murderers.

Bower followed the entry I just read with a short anecdote in which described Robin Hood celebrating Mass in the forest while being pursued by the 'viscount' or sheriff. Rather than fleeing, Robin Hood remains and finishes Mass before attacking his pursuers. Much like Wyntoun a couple of decades earlier, Bower places these events in Barnsdale, not Sherwood Forest. So we see that Barnsdale features strongly in these early stories, especially the versions that came from Scotland. And note that both of those Scots writers placed Robin Hood in the mid to late 1200s, not the late 1100s during the time of Prince John and Richard the Lionheart. So the time frame hadn't been moved back to that earlier century yet.

Now around the same time that Bower's chronicle was released in the 1440s, there was a small uprising against a local nobleman in Norfolk in the east of England. According to reports from the year 1441, a group of laborers blocked the streets of one town and chanted "We are Robynhodesmen, war war war!" [*SOURCE: 'Reading Robin Hood,' Stephen Knight, p. 18*.]

That takes us to the current point in our overall story of English in the mid-1400s. By this point, we've seen that there were several manuscripts that made reference to Robin Hood and his band of outlaws, but we haven't encountered any actual ballads or tales. But that finally changed around the year 1450. That was the same general time period when Gutenberg was inventing his printing press in Germany, and the Hundred Years' War was coming to an end in France. And around that time, the oldest surviving Robin Hood ballad was written down and preserved for history. It's called 'Robin Hood and the Monk,' and it's found in a manuscript that has been dated to the mid-1400s. [*SOURCE: 'Robin Hood: The True History Behind the Legend,' Nigel Cawthorne, p. 55*.]

It survives in the form of a relatively short poem about 350 lines long. It's composed in a Midlands dialect, and it gives us an early look at Robin Hood and Little John, but it's not the version we're accustomed to today. There's none of the lighthearted fare that we associate with the modern stories. Robin Hood's band of outlaws commit murder without much of a second thought.

In the story, Robin is deeply devout, and he decides to leave the forest and go to Nottingham to attend Mass, despite the risk of being caught. Robin makes his way to the church, and once inside, he is recognized by a monk who leaves to tell the sheriff. The sheriff's men arrive and sword fight ensues. And this points to the fact that most of the fighting is done with swords in these early ballads, not bows and arrows. During the sword fight, Robin kills 20 of the sheriff's men, but then his sword breaks, and he is captured and thrown in jail.

The monk is then sent out to deliver a letter to the king informing him that Robin Hood has been captured. The king isn't named, so the time frame of the story is left vague.

Now Robin's band of outlaws soon get word that Robin has been captured. Little John and another outlaw named Much the Miller's son head to Nottingham to rescue him. Along the way, they run into the monk who is carrying the letter to the king. The monk is accompanied by a young page. Little John kills the monk, and the other outlaw kills the page. Then they seize the monk's letter so they can take it to the king themselves.

Here's that passage where Little John and Much confront the monk and his page – first in Modern English and then in the original Middle English. It begins with Little John addressing the monk about Robin Hood:

> "He was my master," said Little John,
> "That thou has brought to jail;
> Thou shall never come to our king,
> For to tell him the tale."
>
> John smote off the monk's head,
> No longer would he dwell;
> So did Much to the little page,
> For fear that he would tell.
>
> There they buried them both,
> In neither moss nor heather ling,
> And Little John and Much together
> Bore the letters to our king.

Now in the original Middle English:

> "He was my maister," seid Litull John,
> "That thou hase browght in bale;
> Shalle thou never cum at oure kyng,
> For to telle hym tale."
>
> John smote of the munkis hed,
> No longer wolde he dwell;
> So did Moch the litull page,
> For ferd lest he wolde tell.
>
> Ther thei beryed hem bothe,
> In nouther mosse nor lyng,
> And Litull John and Much in fere
> Bare the letturs to oure kyng.

So Little John and Much head to the king with the letter informing him that Robin Hood has been captured, but they disguise their identity. They meet with the king, and the king instructs them to return to Nottingham to retrieve Robin Hood and bring him back to the royal court. The king gives them the royal seal which authorizes them to take possession of Robin. When Little John and Much arrive in Nottingham, they are welcomed by the sheriff. And when the sheriff falls asleep, they go the jail and kill the jailer. They free Robin, and all three of the outlaws return to Sherwood. And that's the end of the ballad.

So this short little poem racks up quite the body count. Robin, Little John and Much kill twenty-three different people over the course of 350 lines. And none of the victims really did anything wrong other than trying to capture an outlaw or simply finding themselves in the wrong place at the wrong time. So we can see why some writers of the period didn't really appreciate the public's affection for Robin Hood and his band of outlaws.

Also, unlike some of the other early accounts which place the outlaws in Barnsdale Forest, this poem specifically mentions Sherwood Forest. So both locations appear early on, but Sherwood eventually became the usual setting. And again, the poem mentions the king in several passages, but the king is never identified. So it's not clear when the events were supposed to have taken place.

So that's the oldest surviving Robin Hood story – 'Robin Hood and the Monk.' A short time later, a different Robin Hood story was also preserved in writing. Both of these poems were probably derived from ballads that were being sung at the time. The second poem is called 'Robin Hood and the Potter.' And like the other poem, it's a little over 300 lines long, so that gives us a sense of how long these early ballads were. It is also composed in a Midlands dialect.

The date of this second poem is somewhat uncertain. Some scholars place it in the 1460s and others place it a few decades later. [*SOURCE: 'Reading Robin Hood,' Stephen Knight, p. 17, and 'Robin Hood,' J.C. Holt, p. 15*.] Either way, it probably existed in ballad-form in the mid-1400s. This particular ballad harkens back to those earlier legends about the Anglo-Saxon rebel Hereward the Wake. Just like Hereward, Robin Hood disguises himself as a potter to spy on his pursuers.

The story begins when Robin ambushes a potter who is passing through the forest. The name of the forest isn't given in the poem, but Little John mentions that he had seen the potter before in 'Wentbridge.' Wentbridge is a small village in Yorkshire, and that puts it in the Barnsdale region. So it is generally assumed that the forest setting here is Barnsdale rather than Sherwood. But again, we see that early geographical split in these first two ballads with the first ballad set in Sherwood Forest and this second ballad apparently set in Barnsdale.

Now, Robin approaches the potter and demands that he pay a fee for safe passage though the forest. The two men start fighting, and the potter actually gets the better of Robin. With the fight concluded, Robin suggests that they exchange their clothes. Robin wants to travel to Nottingham, and he offers to take the potter's pots with him and sell them when he gets there. The potter agrees and Robin dons the potter's clothing and travels into town. While selling the pots, Robin meets the Sheriff and the Sheriff's wife. The Sheriff invites Robin to an archery contest, not realizing who he is really is. At the contest, Robin displays his skill with a bow and arrow, and when asked how he acquired such skills, he lies and says that he was taught by Robin Hood himself. That comment grabs the Sheriff's attention. The Sheriff asks Robin if he can take him to the famous outlaw, and Robin agrees. When they arrive at the forest, they're ambushed by Robin's men, and the Sheriff realizes that he has been tricked. Here's the passage – first in Modern English:

And when he came in to the forest,
Under the leaves green,
Birds there sang in their nest,
It was great joy to see.

"Here it is merry to be," said Robin,
"For a man who has anything to spend;
By my horn you shall discover
if Robin Hood dwells within."

Robin set his horn to his mouth,
And blew a blast that was full good:
It was heard by his men who were gathered,
Far down in the wood.
"I hear my master blow," said Little John,
They ran like they were fools.

When they came to their master,
Little John did not spare;
"Master, how did you fare in Nottingham?
Did you sell your wares?"

"Yes, by my truth, Little John,
Look thou take no care,
I have brought the Sheriff of Nottingham,
For all our merchandise and wares."

"He is very welcome," said Little John,
"These tidings are very good."
The Sheriff would have paid a hundred pounds
To have never met Robin Hood.

Now the same passage in the original Middle English.

And when he cam yn to the foreyst,
Under the leffes grene,
Berdys there sange on bowhes prest,
Het was gret goy to se.

"Here het ys merey to be," seyde Roben,
"For a man that had hawt to spende;
Be mey horne ye schall awet
Yeff Roben Hode be here."

Roben set hes horne to hes mowthe,
And blow a blast that was foll god;
That herde hes men that there stode,
Fer downe yn the wodde.
"I her mey master blow," seyde Leytell John,
They ran as thay were wode.

Whan thay to thar master cam,
Leytell John wold not spare;
"Master, how haffe yow fare yn Notynggam?
How haffe yow solde yowre ware?"

"Ye, be mey trowthe, Leytyll John,
Loke thow take no care;
Y haffe browt the screffe of Notynggam,
For all howre chaffare."

"He ys foll wellcom," seyde Lytyll John,
"Thes tydyng ys foll godde."
The screffe had lever nar a hundred ponde
He had never seen Roben Hode.
(Ll. 246-271)

So the Sheriff of Nottingham realizes that he had been tricked and the potter was Robin Hood all along. Robin's men take the Sheriff's horse and his gear, and they make him walk back to Nottingham on foot. The original potter had remained in the forest, so he is paid for his pots and allowed to go on his way. And that's the end of the ballad.

Note how this poem contrasts with the other poem. This time, we don't have any murders – just deception, trickery and theft. The sheriff is tricked and robbed, and the innocent potter is paid for his wares and is allowed to continue on his way. So Robin does steal from the rich, but he doesn't really give to the poor. Nevertheless, the Robin of this second poem is a little closer to the modern Robin Hood that we know today.

This second poem concludes with the following passage which reflects a very interesting development within the language. Here's the passage first in Modern English – and then in the original Middle English:

Thus parted Robin, the Sheriff, and the potter,
Underneath the green wood tree;
God have mercy on Robin Hood's soul,
And save all good yeomanry!

> Thes partyd Robyn, the screffe, and the potter,
> Ondernethe the grene wod tre;
> God haffe mersey on Roben Hodys solle,
> And saffe all god yemanrey!

So that final passage concludes with the request to save all good *yeomanry*. We are told through all of these early poems that Robin Hood is yeoman. In later stories, he is often depicted as a fallen noble. But early on, he wasn't a noble, nor was he a poor peasant. He was somewhere in between – among the rising middle class that emerged in the century after the Black Death. And this particular poem concludes with a specific reference to Robin's status as a yeoman.

But what's more interesting from a linguistic point of view is that the passage rhymes that word *yeomanry* with the earlier word *tree* – 'Underneath the green wood tree – And save all good yeomanry.' Now you're probably saying, 'So what? There's nothing wrong with that rhyme.' Well, that's true today, but it wasn't true in Middle English. And this type of rhyme points to something that was happening in the language at the time. And that 'something' was the Great Vowel Shift.

Now I'm going to delve into the Great Vowel Shift in some detail about two or three episodes from now, but we can see some of the early stages of the vowel shift in this type of rhyme, which is actually common in these early Robin Hood poems. Notice that *yeomanry* ends with a Y and *tree* ends with a double E, but it usually had a single E in Middle English – spelled T-R-E. So a word ending with Y rhymes with a word ending in E. The same poem also rhymes the word *yeomanry* with *me* (M-E). And it rhymes *Trinity* with *me.* The other poem – Robin Hood and the Monk – rhymes *Christianity* with the word *tree*. And it rhymes the name *Mary* with the words *be* and *see*.

Again, none of this is surprising to us today, but we have to keep in mind that the letters Y and E represented completely different vowel sounds in Middle English. In most of England, the sound of letter Y had merged with the sound of letter I, and they were both pronounced as /ee/. As I've noted before, those letters still have that sound in recent loanwords from other languages like *pizza*, *spaghetti*, *linguini*, and even the word *ski* (S-K-I). And the Y at the end of many words represents the same sound – *any*, *many*, *baby*, *city*, *easy*. Again, that is the same sound that the letter Y would have had in most of England in the Middle English period. And in the early Robin Hood poems, we hear that sound at the end of words like *yeomanry*, *Trinity*, *Christianity*, and *Mary*.

But the letter E had a completely different vowel sound. It was used to represent the sound /ay/. Again, we sometimes find the letter E representing that sound in Modern English in recent loanwords like *café*, *fiancé*, *resume*, and *saute*, as well as the vowel sound at the end of words like *ballet*, *buffet*, *beret*, and *gourmet*. That's the traditional sound of letter E, and its still the sound of that letter in most languages of continental Europe, which is why we find it those recent loanwords from other languages.

So since the letter Y was pronounced /ee/, and letter E was pronounced /ay/, words that ended in those respective vowel sounds didn't rhyme, and therefore, they were almost never used with each other to create rhyming verses in Middle English. But all of sudden, in the 1400s, we start to see poets using them together for the first time in rhyming poetry.

Shortly after the two poems that we've looked at in this episode, another Robin Hood poem appeared called A Gest of Robyn Hode. That title meant the acts, or deeds or exploits of Robin Hood. It's a very long poem, and it has generated a lot of interest from scholars over the years. Again, it appears to be slightly later than the two poems we looked at earlier, but not much later. It is usually dated to the late 1400s.

Well, this other poem, A Gest of Robyn Hode, has a lot of these rhymes where a word ending in a Y rhymes with a word ending in an E. For example, the poem rhymes the word *treasury* with words like *be* and *me*. It also rhymes the word *courtesy* with words like *he*, *see*, *me* and *tree*. The word *charity* rhymes with words like *the*, *tree*, *ye* and *be*. The word *country* rhymes with *he* and *the*. And the word *company* rhymes with *me* and *tree*. So you get the idea. All of these words ending in Y were rhymed with words ending in E, just like we might do today, but that was almost unheard of earlier periods of Middle English. So that tells us that the vowel sounds in those words were being pronounced the same way by this point in the mid to late 1400s.

Now there's also something interesting about all of the examples I just gave. The words ending in Y – *Trinity*, *Christianity*, *Mary*, *treasury*, *courtesy*, *charity*, *country* and *company* – are all French or Latin loanwords. The word *yeoman* is a native English word, but *yeomanry* uses a French suffix – 'R-Y.' Meanwhile, all of the words ending in E are native English words – *be*, *me*, *see*, *tree*, *he*, *ye* and *the*. And that distinction helps to explain what happened to cause those vowel sounds to merge together during the Great Vowel Shift.

First, let's consider those short little native English words like *be*, *me*, *see*, *tree* and *he*. They're all spelled with an E, and they were spelled with an E in Middle English. But remember that that E was pronounced /ay/ in Old and Middle English. So those words were originally pronounced /bay/, /may/, /say/, /tray/ and /hay./ Now let's focus on that /ay/ sound. It's pronounced in the front of the mouth. You can try it yourself. As you can tell, it's right up front, but there is a vowel sound that is pronounced slightly higher in the mouth, and that's the /ee/ sound. If you say /ay/ and then /ee/, you can feel how the sound moves slightly higher.

Well, that's what happened to most of the long vowel sounds during the Great Vowel Shift. They moved slightly higher in the mouth. So words that had been pronounced with an /ay/ sound started to be pronounced with an /ee/ sound. The vowel was slightly raised. But the spelling didn't really change. The letter E was retained. So B-E – pronounced /bay/ – became *be.* And M-E – pronounced /may/ – became *me.* And S-E or S-E-E — pronounced /say/ – became *see*. You get the idea. And that's how the letter E came to represent the /ee/ sound in Modern English. In fact, that's why we call it the letter ' in English because that's the long vowel sound that it represents today.

That is one of the basic sound changes of the Great Vowel Shift. But there is one important caveat here. There were already a lot of words with a vowel sound that was pronounced as /ee/. And as I noted earlier, that /ee/ vowel sound was traditionally represented with the letters I or Y. Again, we have lots of modern loanwords that still work the same way like *pizza* and *ski*. But now people were starting to raise that lower /ay/ sound up to /ee/. So did all those vowels just crash together? Well, no. Remember that the Great Vowel Shift was like a game of musical chairs. All the long vowels shifted around. So at the same time that people were raising /ay/ up to /ee/, they were also shifting /ee/ as well. So all those words that had an /ee/ sound now were getting a new sound. But people couldn't raise /ee/ up any higher. Phonetically, that's as high as you can go in the front of the mouth. So they shifted that sound back towards the center of the mouth, and it became a diphthong, initially pronounced /eh-ee/ and over time it shifted back even further and became /ah-ee/. And that's how the letter I came to represent the /ai/ sound in Modern English. And that's why we call it the letter I in English because that is the long vowel sound that it represents today.

So these two vowel changes go together. And many linguists think that that high /ee/ sound shifted first – from /ee/ at the top of the mouth back to /ai/. I actually discussed that shift back in the episode about Sir Gawain and the Green Knight because there is evidence of that shift in that poem. Then next, the /ay/ sound shifted up to fill the gap that was left behind. As a result, /ay/ shifted up to /ee/, and /ee/ shifted back to /ai/. Thus, the word spelled B-E went from /bay/ up to modern *be*. And the word spelled B-Y went from /be/ back to modern *by*. That's why all of those words remained distinct from each other even though the vowel sounds were shifting around.

So that's a lot, and it explains a lot. It explains why all of those words ending in letter E were now being pronounced with an /ee/ sound. Because the old sound was raised up slightly. But it doesn't explain what happened with all of those early French loanwords like *courtesy*, and *charity*, and *country* and *company*. Why didn't they follow along with native English words like B-Y where the /ee/ sound shifted back and became /ai/, thus shifting from /bee/ to /by/? So why didn't we end up with /courtesai/ and /charitai/ and /countrai/ and /companai/? Well, the answer lies in the fact that they were French loanwords, and they were actually pronounced with a slightly different sound at the end in Middle English. It wasn't the pure /ee/ sound found in the native English words. It was a slightly different sound.

Those words had entered English from French with a slight diphthong at the end – pronounced /ee-eh/. So *courtesy* was originally /cur-teh-see-eh/. That's how it was pronounced in the time of Chaucer, and that's actually how I pronounced in those earlier Chaucer episodes. Then, probably in the early 1400s, the little /eh/ sound at the end disappeared, and those words started to be pronounced with a short /ih/ sound. So it was something like /cur-teh-sih/. But that short vowel hanging on at the end of a word tends to get stretched out by speakers, and over time, it tends to be pronounced long. So /ih/ became /ee/. And that's how we went from /cur-the-see-eh/ to /cur-the-sih/ to *courtesy*. That process affected all of those early French loanwords.

So at the same time that the vowel sound in words like /bay/, /may/ and /tray/ was being raised up to *be*, *me* and *tree*, a completely separate process was at work on those French loanwords. The short /ih/ sound at the end was being stretched out to /ee/. And /cur-teh-sih/, /chair-eh-tih/, and

/coun-trih/ were becoming *courtesy*, *charity*, and *country*. Again there were two completely different and separate processes at work. But the end result was the same vowel sound at the end. We ended up with native words like *be*, *me* and *tree* and French loanwords like *courtesy*, *charity*, and *country*. And so, for the first time, those English words rhymed with those French loanwords. And we can assume that these changes were widespread by the mid-1400s because we find these types of rhymes throughout these early Robin Hood poems. We find three or four examples in each of the two earliest Robin Hood poems, and then in the slightly later Gest of Robyn Hode, we find over 30 examples. And that's partly because the Gest is a longer poem, but it's also apparently because the merger of these sounds was well-established by the time of the Gest, and it was therefore easier to find examples of French loanwords that rhymed with native English words. So that allowed the Gest poet to use a lot more of those types of rhymes. And today, we rhyme those same words all the time without even giving it a second thought.

So I hope you found that interesting. Again, we'll explore these shifting vowels in more detail in a more comprehensive way in upcoming episodes. I just wanted you to see that these early Robin Hood poems reflect some of those early vowel changes that were taking place in the mid 1400s.

As we've seen, the two earliest ballads, Robin Hood and the Monk and Robin Hood and the Potter, were apparently written down some time in the 1450s or 1460s. That larger third poem, A Gest of Robin Hood, was apparently written down a short time later. The oldest copy survives in a book from the 1490s that was printed shortly after the printing press was introduced to England. Some scholars think it was composed around that same time, but others think it was composed a few years earlier closer to the earlier two poems. *[SOURCE: 'Robin Hood,' J.C. Holt, p. 15, and 'Reading Robin Hood,' Stephen Knight, p. 48-9.]* This third poem does make a reference to "our comely king Edward" which meant our 'handsome king Edward,' but that type of reference was common for both Edward III in the 1300s and Edward IV in the late 1400s. So that reference doesn't help very much to establish the time frame of the poem, other than to provide a setting that is well after the time of Richard of Lionheart and Prince John. So again, we see that these earliest Robin Hood stories were set a little bit closer to the time they were composed, and modern versions have pushed the setting back to the 1100s.

Also, as we've seen, the original Robin Hood was a rougher character – a yeoman, not a noble – more likely to fight with a sword than a bow. It also isn't clear how or why Robin became an outlaw in these early ballads. He and his merry men were much more willing to kill people than in modern versions, and they robbed from the rich, but they didn't necessarily give to the poor.

Also , as I've noted, the early ballads aren't clear about the location of the forest where the outlaws live. Some refer to Barnsdale and others refer to Sherwood, which were neighboring, but distinct locations. Of course, Sherwood Forest emerged as the preferred setting over time.

The early ballads also feature the Sheriff of Nottingham as a major character, but he is not given a name. And the king is often referenced, but again, he is not given a name except for that one reference to 'our comely king Edward.' But even that reference is somewhat vague since there had been four different King Edwards by the late 1400s. None of these ballads mention Richard the Lionheart or Prince John.

Among Robin Hood's band of merry men, some of the well-known outlaws are there from the beginning, and some were added later. Almost all of the early ballads feature Little John as a major character. In fact, he and Robin often seem like joint leaders of the band of outlaws. The outlaws also include Much the Miller's Son and Will Scarlet, even though Will Scarlet's name varies quite a bit in the early ballads.

Friar Tuck also appears in the late 1400s, but he doesn't really emerge as a major character until the following century. It's possible that Friar Tuck came out of a separate outlaw tradition. There are surviving records from Sussex in the early 1400s that show that local authorities were pursuing an unknown forest outlaw who was calling himself Friar Tuck. Two royal writs were issued for the man in the year 1417, and they both state that he had assumed the name 'Friar Tuck' and that the name was widely known in common parlance. The man was later identified as a former chaplain named Robert Stafford. [*SOURCE: 'Robin Hood: The True History Behind the Legend,' Nigel Cawthorne, p. 187-8, and 'Robin Hood,' J.C. Holt, p. 58-9.*] But the fact that he was using the name 'Friar Tuck' as an alias indicates that it was a common name for an outlaw at the time. But none of these early Robin Hood ballads that we've examined mention a Friar Tuck.

However, there is a short fragment from a play about Robin Hood that has been dated to around the year 1475. Again, all that has survived is the short fragment, but it is contemporary with these other ballads that we've examined. And it does refer to a 'ffrere Tuke' who is among the band of merry men who try to rescue Robin from jail after he is captured by the Sheriff of Nottingham. [*SOURCE: 'Robin Hood: The True History Behind the Legend,' Nigel Cawthorne, p. 188.*] So Friar Tuck was apparently added to the Robin Hood legend around that time, even though he may have originated as part of a separate outlaw legend.

The fact that he first appears in a fragment of a play is notable because plays featuring Robin Hood were very common in the 1400s and 1500s. They were usually a part of seasonal festivals like the May Games, which also featured pageants and parades. During those celebrations, people would dress up like Robin Hood and the other characters and act out the stories. *[SOURCE: 'Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales,' Stephen Knight and Thomas Ohlgren, p. 5.*] Friar Tuck became a common character in the plays presented at those seasonal festivals. And by the 1600s, he was a regular part of Robin's band of outlaws.

The same thing basically happened with Maid Marian. Robin didn't have a love interest in the early ballads, but the springtime festivals introduced her to the legend, and she became part of the regular cast of characters. It appears that she was adopted from a popular French story called 'Robin et Marion,' but the Robin in that story wasn't Robin Hood. He was a completely different Robin. Nevertheless, it appears that some people in England couldn't help but make the connection with Robin Hood, and over time, she emerged as the Robin Hood's companion in the English plays and stories. [*SOURCE: 'Robin Hood: The True History Behind the Legend,' Nigel Cawthorne, p. 181, and 'Robin Hood,' J.C. Holt, p. 160.*]

In those springtime festivals, Maid Marian and Robin often presided over the games with Marian serving as the queen of May and Robin serving as the king. [*SOURCE: 'Robin Hood,' J.C. Holt, p. 160.*]

Those festivals and plays and dances are also notable for another reason. As I noted, people dressed up like Robin Hood, and Maid Marian, and Little John and the other characters in the Robin Hood stories. And in the plays, it was also common for someone to don a horse costume and play the part of a horse. It was a wicker costume in the shape of a horse that hung from a person's shoulders and was worn around the waist. As the person walked around, it looked like he or she was riding a horse. And that horse costume, or the person wearing that horse costume, became known as a *hobby horse*.

And that term *hobby horse* was then extended to the child's toy that consisted of a stick with horse's head on the end. Small children would pretend to ride that toy hobby horse in the same way that performers pretended to ride a horse while wearing the hobby horse costume in those springtime plays. The use of the term *hobby horse* for both the costume and the child's toy are both documented in the 1500s. In later centuries, toy makers made small wooden horses that children could pretend to ride, and that gave us the more modern sense of the term *hobby horse*.

Children loved their hobby horses. They spent a lot of their free time pretending to ride them. It was a favorite pastime, and in the 1800s, the term *hobby horse* was extended to any favorite pastime or pursuit, whether done by children or adults. And a short time later, the *horse* part was dropped from the term *hobby horse* when used to refer to a favorite pastime. That left us with the word *hobby*. And today, most of us have a hobby that entertains us and occupies our spare time. So that word *hobby* is actually derived from the term *hobby horse*, and *hobby horse* is a term that originated during the popular festivals and plays held in the late Middle Ages that featured characters from the Robin Hood stories.

But why was that horse costume and that child's toy called a 'hobby' horse? Where did the word *hobby* come from? Well, earlier in the episode, I noted that there was an early Yorkshire outlaw named Robert Hode, and he was sometimes referred to as 'Hobbehod.' And the radical preacher John Ball urged the peasants of England to chastise 'Hobbe the Robber.' And the word *Hobbe* itself was sometimes used to mean a robber or a bandit. Well, believe it or not, those uses of the word *Hobbe* have the same root as the word *hobby* in '*hobby horse*' and in your favorite *hobby* that you do in your spare time. They are all derived from the name *Robert* – or *Robin*.

As I noted earlier in the episode, the name *Robert* had a lot of variations. *Robin* was a variation. And it was often shortened to just *Rob*, and then other names that rhymed with *Rob* were coined as nicknames. Those nicknames included *Bob* and *Bobby* which we still use today. Other rhyming names included *Hob* and *Hobby*. All of these variations acquired an association with robbers in the Middle Ages as I noted earlier, and that association may or may not have a connection to Robin Hood.

But for some unknown reason, some of the nicknames for Robert also became associated with horses. It may have been peasants who started the practice, but it become more and more common over time. Another nickname of *Robert* formed in the same manner as the others was *Dobbin*. And you may know that a draft horse or a farm horse is still sometimes called a *dobbin*. And for similar reasons, a small horse was sometimes called a *hobby* or a *hobyn*. That usage

appeared in the 1400s, and that's why those small horse costumes and those small toy horses were called a '*hobby horse*.' It literally meant a 'small horse horse.' And as I noted, it also gave us the word *hobby* for a pastime.

So all of that means that *hobby*, *hobby horse*, *dobbin*, and *Robin* are all words derived from the name *Robert*. And thanks to those springtime festivals, *hobby horses* and *hobbies* have a direct historical connection to the legend of Robin Hood.

Next time, we're going to move our story forward to the second half of the 1400s. With the Hundred Years War now over, England suddenly found itself mired in an altogether new war – a civil war known as the Wars of the Roses. So next time, we'll explore that fascinating civil war, and we'll see how it impacted the English language.

Until then, thanks for listening to the History of English Podcast.