

	Robin Hood – Bonus Episode	THE	
		NATIONAL	
		ARCHIVES	

ON THE RECORD



Robin Hood



Robin Hood

Since the 13th century the legend of Robin Hood has featured in folk songs, tavern stories, pageants, and royal festivals — even Henry VIII once dressed up as him. But what lies behind the legend? And what do our stories of robbing from the rich tell us about life in medieval England?

In this episode Chloe Lee speaks to Kathryn Maude, a medieval specialist, and Sean Cunningham, head of medieval records, both at The National Archives.

Join them on a journey through a forest of medieval historical records, and perhaps even discover the 'real' Robin Hood.

Documents from The National Archives used in this episode: [NSC 5/1054](#), [SP 2/A](#), [E 159/8](#), [E 372/70](#). For more information about the records covered in this episode, look at our research guide to [Outlaws and outlawry in medieval and early modern England](#). For help navigating our catalogue, you can watch our [top-level tips on using Discovery](#).

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	Robin Hood – Bonus Episode	THE	
		NATIONAL	
		ARCHIVES	

Transcript

Chloe Lee: Please be aware this episode contains one instance of language that some listeners might find offensive.

Everyone has their favourite Robin Hood — Kevin Costner, a comedy figure in fetching green tights, dark and brooding, or... A fox in a hat! Who's yours?

These are just the representations of Robin Hood from the 20th and 21st century, but his story goes right back to the 13th. He's been featured in folk songs, tavern stories, pageants and royal festivals — even Henry VIII once dressed up as Robin Hood.

I'm Chloe Lee, a Migration and Citizenship Researcher at The National Archives.

I want to go deeper into the supposedly well-known English legend of Robin Hood...

This is On the Record at The National Archives, uncovering the past through stories of everyday people.

What was life actually like for the everyday English person in the 13th century? I think the story of Robin Hood might give us some clues. In this episode of On the Record, I've invited my colleagues to guide me into the woods, and through the myths surrounding Robin Hood, using some of the incredibly ancient collections we hold here at The National Archives in Kew.

My guests today in this episode are Kathryn Maude, a medieval specialist at The National Archives... And Sean Cunningham, head of our medieval records.

	Robin Hood – Bonus Episode	THE	
		NATIONAL	
		ARCHIVES	

Hello Kath and Sean! Great to have you here to discuss men in tights.

Kathryn Maude: Absolutely. I can't wait. As a millennial, my favourite Robin Hood is of course fox Robin Hood. But I'm willing to hear other options.

Chloe: Sean, any favourites?

Sean Cunningham: I Suppose Looking At The Garish Colours Of Errol Flynn And Basil Rathbone, Having At It In 1939 Or Whenever It Was, The Heyday Of Technicolor. It Kind Of Sets The Scene For What We're Going To Talk About All That Green Stuff. Absolutely.

Kathryn: Lovely.

Chloe: So Kath, can I start with you, and the legend of Robin Hood? What is the legend?

Kathryn: The legend as it will be familiar, I think to a lot of our listeners, is the man in green clothes, the outlaw who lives in the forest with his band of merry men, and who loves to shoot bows and arrows, in particular, the archery the is very key. And he robs the rich to give to the poor. These are the kind of key elements of this legend that I think everybody will be familiar with.

But one of the things that I think is quite interesting about this legend is that this changes quite a lot over time. A lot of the elements that we think of as key to the legend now are Victorian, as with many medieval stories, he is linked to Nottingham. He's linked to Sherwood Forest, he's linked to Nottingham. But a lot of our medieval narratives about Robin Hood come from different parts of the country. So we see these in Yorkshire, we see these actually all over the country, we see these different Robin Hoods so the kind of localisation to a place is much more contemporary. But also we have all of these elements, things like his archery that aren't so well known in the medieval

	Robin Hood – Bonus Episode	THE	
		NATIONAL	
		ARCHIVES	

stories, those seem to come around later. And a lot of the things that we know about the Middle Ages are Victorian inventions, the Victorians were very, very interested in creating a kind of Legend of the Middle Ages that had these particular characteristics. That was rural, that was kind of anti city that was in the forest. And that happened, often linked absolutely to this kind of specific place of Sherwood Forest that then became and still is a tourist destination. I went as a child with my parents.

Chloe: So that's the kind of core story, but it's kind of collected elements. And those elements are actually quite modern.

Kathryn: A lot of them are kind of 18th 19th 20th century, they kind of collect over time.

Chloe: And can you tell me a bit more about some of the records that we have about these cultural traces of Robin Hood in the archive?

Kathryn: So we actually have a surprising amount of records about Robin Hood in the archives that come about more contemporarily? So I think my... i've got two favourites. The first one is we have a label from a piece of knitting wool. And this is a company from Nottingham, Jacksons of Nottingham that created, that made knitting wool, it's from 1892. Then it's got an image on the front a figure all in green with tall boots and tights, shooting an arrow. Over the top it says Jackson's Robin Hood, soft spun knitting wool. And I think this is a really nice example of that link to place that I was talking about. So we have this late Victorian 1892, this late Victorian knitting wool label. And they're obviously trying to sell this link to Nottingham, using the myth to sell the knitting. And it actually does say perfect for stockings on the label, which I think it's great.

Chloe: I guess we don't have any traces of the actual wool. Do we just have the label?

	Robin Hood – Bonus Episode	THE	
		NATIONAL	
		ARCHIVES	

Kathryn: Unfortunately, not. We did find a jumper in one of our collections recently. That's in our High Court of the Admiralty, our Prize Papers Collection that was seized from ships. But unfortunately, we don't have any traces of this knitting, we don't have it.

Chloe: Why would we have a label from a wool producing company in our collection?

Kathryn: So that's a really good question. So this is in our COPY 1 collection and COPY 1 is a collection of copyright. So if you wanted to make sure that nobody else was selling Robin Hood knitting wool, you would copyright it in our copyright collection, just as you would copyright things now, and we would keep it on file to make sure that nobody, nobody copied those. And nobody was also selling wool under that branding.

Chloe: So some pretty cosy tights. What about the second record you mention?

Kathryn: Yeah, so this is a series of images from a production of a Robin Hood operetta in 1885. And the operetta as far as we can tell, again, like with the knitting wool, we don't have the music, we've only got these still images.

Chloe: Promotional material, I assume?

Kathryn: I think so and particularly interesting. So this happened in Huddersfield, a centre of theatrical arts. Don't write in if you're from Huddersfield. And this is a kind of, set of I think promotional images that were taken in a forest. And so it's a series of still images from the play, from the operetta, standing and all of the different still images show a different moment in the play, in the operetta. So there's one for example, which is the wedding of Robin Hood and Maid Marian, and they've got Friar Tuck standing over them. And Robin Hood is wearing, I'm gonna say quite a cheap looking costume. He's wearing what looks like a belt made of tinfoil, but he is

	Robin Hood – Bonus Episode	THE	
		NATIONAL	
		ARCHIVES	

wearing high boots and tights. But in the images, he is shown with a sword, rather than with a bow and arrow. So I think that's a kind of interesting difference. But the thing I like most about this is it incorporates a Morris Dance. So it's got a still image, which is of the Morris Dance.

Chloe: We've really got an example of English folk history weaved into that representation...

Kathryn: Exactly. So I think that that is kind of why I think it's interesting because I think it's a really good example of that kind of Victorian medievalism. So we see this with, for example, William Morris, those kinds of Victorian prints of medieval colours. William Morris actually created The Canterbury Tales, a beautifully illustrated medieval Canterbury Tales....

Chloe: Lots of foliage, floral patterns, you see that kind of cultural tradition of the forests kind of coming through too...

Kathryn: Yeah, so this kind of rural forest. And this kind of actually, I think, very interesting link between Englishness, the medieval and the rural. And in particular, the forest.

Chloe: That's great, are there any other culture traces you've got in the archive that you can share with us?

Kathryn: So I think one that might be more familiar to some of our listeners is the National Savings poster. Which is a reference to the 1952 Walt Disney film, it has an image of Robin Hood. And it says, "Let your target be prosperity". And so it's used to advertise that National Savings product.

Chloe: So that's nearly 400 years after those records that you just mentioned in the COPY collection.

	Robin Hood – Bonus Episode	THE	
		NATIONAL	
		ARCHIVES	

Kathryn: Absolutely. Yeah, it's mid-20th century, 1952.

Chloe: You really see the evidence of the longevity of the myth through the kind of collection in the archives.

Kathryn: Absolutely.

Chloe: So Kath, how did a medieval legend end up in advertising savings accounts in the 20th century?

Kathryn: So the legend shifts and changes a lot over time. Our earliest kind of literary references in 1381, which is to rhymes of Robin Hood, in a poem called The Vision of Piers Plowman. And so it's clearly really widely known already by this point.

We have a series of 15th century narratives about Robin Hood, including one called Robin Hood and the monk in which Robin is saved because he prays to the Virgin Mary most efficiently. I think that's kind of an interesting one because it really demonstrates his relationship with whatever's going on at the time. There's a lot of stories of knights being saved, particularly because they pray to the Virgin Mary. And so Robin Hood is being taken into that tradition. So it really again demonstrates that way in which the way the story can be taken up by all of these different traditions.

Then we see this figure taken up in ballads throughout the 16th century and the increase in those ballads being printed. Samuel Pepys was a collector of Robin Hood ballads, perhaps not just Robin Hood, but ballads in general. And so we have a lot from his collection. And these were kind of ephemeral, more and more people could read. So they would pick up these ballads, and they would sing them, you know, like to imagine them singing them in the pub, or singing them in the

	Robin Hood – Bonus Episode	THE	
		NATIONAL	
		ARCHIVES	

town square. And then that kind of moves across in the 19th century, to a more, I guess, upper class audience, it becomes a kind of literary narrative, as well. We see this in novels, in short stories, in poems. There's some kind of famous poets that wrote Robin Hood ballads and Robin Hood poetry. So yeah, so we really see this kind of move throughout time, it's a kind of cultural touchstone. He is a cultural touchstone.

Chloe: So we've heard a bit about the myth, the figure of Robin Hood, through the records and the kind of cultural traces. But I want to turn a bit to the truth, if that's even possible. Sean, can you tell me about the real history that all those cultural versions of Robin might be based on?

Sean: I suppose we have to start talking about the outlaw and what an outlaw was. And the framework that people understood the story within, was what could happen to them, if they fell up against the law, fell out of the law, had an opponent in the law who was powerful. So anyone could become an outlaw, if they didn't follow the rules of the law and didn't obey the people who are responsible for implementing it, which was mainly the sheriffs.

Chloe: So you're saying it's quite easy to be an outlaw in the 13th century...

Sean: You could be an outlaw for serious crimes like theft, and murder and rape, or for debt, and different ways of becoming an outlaw stem from the crime you are alleged to have committed. So if you were an outlaw for debt, basically, you didn't turn up in court to answer the accusation. And after five goes, and lots of letters and writs and instructions, you'd be declared an outlaw - that really is taking you outside the protection of the law, this is what it means. So women would be waived, waived of their rights under the law, men would be outlawed and that just basically meant you didn't have any kind of status. Legal status.

Chloe: You couldn't take someone else to court?

	Robin Hood – Bonus Episode	THE	
		NATIONAL	
		ARCHIVES	

Sean: Yes exactly, you lost all of those rights you had as a citizen or a subject already. And that meant you were prey to even worse kinds of conditions, because you weren't protected by the law, even though the law was out to get you for being an outlaw in the first place.

Chloe: I see. And if we want to find out a bit more, how can we? Does the archive have any guidance?

Sean: Here we've got a good research guide to what outlaws were and how all of the records come together, about the process of becoming an outlaw, what you had to do deliberately to become an outlaw.

Kathryn: So it's outlaw guidance for our audience, for today!

Sean: But in the past, you know, how the stages you'd go through, what kind of documents were created each stage, and then where you can go to find things like seized goods, because outlaws would forfeit their property and the crown would take that. And that's partly, again, why the sheriff's role comes into this story, because seizing the goods of an outlaw and keeping them was the sheriff's responsibility. So we can see how these elements in some real stories in the 13th century kind of begin to shape up into the legend of Robin Hood that we know.

Chloe: Yeah, and I'm just thinking now like the way that we think about Robin Hood's version of Outlaw is it's kind of romanticised. There's that band of merry men, they all kind of hang out. There's a brotherhood. I'm assuming that the reality of that wasn't like that?

	Robin Hood – Bonus Episode	THE	
		NATIONAL	
		ARCHIVES	

Sean: Yes, there's quite a few cases of outlaw gangs and people who escape the judicial, the legal system and flee to the woods to live the kind of rebel life. So in 1311 in Cheshire, there's the highwayman group, who've got some amazing names, but the most amazing one of all is probably Roger F*ckedbythenavale, which is from 1311. He's outlawed because they don't... they can't be found by the sheriff. And these are, kind of pseudonyms...

Chloe: Would they give themselves those kinds of names?

Sean: Yes, both to awe and inspire.

Chloe: Because they're trying to create a bit of a name for themselves?

Sean: Yes, so that's in 1311 and by the 1420s there's a case in Staffordshire, where some people escape on the way to the castle to be locked up and flee to the woods. Like, like Robin Hood and his Merry Men. So the idea of...

Chloe: I'm assuming these groups of men aren't robbing from the rich to give back to the poor?

Sean: Absolutely not. Robbing from anyone they can rob, to fill their own pockets, basically.

Chloe: I see. I see. Okay, so we've heard about merry men and people escaping the law. But what about individuals? What about the Robin Hood? Who was here? Do we have any knowledge of that in the archive?

Sean: Well, first of all, I'll say something about people who have the name Robinhood, or Robehood. Because clearly, the idea of being named as Robin Hood is something which enters the record, regardless of whether there's a real origin for the actual Robin Hood as a person. So

	Robin Hood – Bonus Episode	THE
		NATIONAL
		ARCHIVES

there's a Gilbert Robynhod, in a Sussex tax record in 1296. There's another John Robynhode, who's involved in various property deeds, in the end of the 14th century, it was actually a guy called William Robehod, who's actually son of a man called Robert Lefevre. So he's actually a nickname, because he's taken Robehod as a surname, which isn't his actual surname. And his father was called Robert. So he's actually, you know, William, son of Robin Hood, if you want to play like that.

These crop up in the records quite regularly, either a reflection of the legend because it's part of popular culture, and people can see a connection that they want to have represented in the way they name themselves and how they fit into their communities. Or the earliest ones might be part of the generation of the legend, just because the name has such connotations and such connections with this outlaw figure.

Chloe: I mean, this is coming from the perspective of a modern historian, but I'm assuming there's a tradition of taking on certain names, people would use names, but they do - Tall Simon? That was a terrible example.

Kathryn: I loved it.

Sean: Absolutely. And you see that in the legend, you know, Little John, being a giant and you see that, in other records like, you know, John Blank the Black Trumpeter being called John White, basically, because it's a play on kind of inversion of his characteristics in his name. So that's, that's clearly the thing. And other outlaws or rebels such as Owain Glyndŵr, the rebel Prince of Wales against Henry IV at the start of the 14th century, his name crops up in Welsh kind of rebels much later in the 15th, 16th century. Because immediately by using that name, you kind of stamped exactly what you want to be to the public, you're kind of broadcasting your status and what you

	Robin Hood – Bonus Episode	THE	
		NATIONAL	
		ARCHIVES	

want to achieve in your campaigning. So using these shortcuts through names is often a very clear way to advertise what you're all about.

Chloe: That's so fascinating. Do you have any traces of the real Robin Hood in what you've found in the archive?

Kathryn: So this is kind of always a question, historians love to go back and kind of try and pinpoint the real Robin Hood. But one kind of likely lad, I guess, is an outlaw called Robert of Wetherby. Now, we don't know much about Robert of Wetherby's crimes. He terrorised South Yorkshire and North Nottinghamshire in the 1220s. He assaulted royal officials. And we know that he was involved in very serious crime at about the same time that the legend was taking root. And we've got quite a lot of references to him in the archives, but mostly to do with his capture. And the reason that we think he was such an important outlaw compared to other kinds of outlaws is because the amount of money that was spent in order to capture him.

Chloe: He was elusive?

Kathryn: Yeah, absolutely.

Chloe: Which is part of the fun of the myth, right?

Kathryn: Yes exactly. They kind of disappear off into the forest. Right. That's why they wear green, that kind of camouflage. And so we've got a writ to the exchequer, so the Treasury, the money house of government, to allow the Sheriff of Yorkshire expenses to capture Robin Hood, he was allowed to hire men. So we have to imagine him desperately attempting to capture this elusive robber figure. And then we've also (and this is a bit more grim) after we caught him got a payment for the chain that was used to hang him, in our Exchequer Records. So he did come to a sticky end.

	Robin Hood – Bonus Episode	THE	
		NATIONAL	
		ARCHIVES	

He didn't escape. But I think that's one of the main elements of this Robin Hood story, is that he always gets away, right?

Someone jumps in and kind of comes to save him. And so the element that he was captured, I think, really diminishes this particular outlaw, but perhaps lead to the narrative of outlaws that weren't ever captured, I think.

Chloe: Thank you. So I guess we've got this kind of interesting picture of potential Robins, possible Robins. Stories that kind of match up with what we know, from myth and legend, but also are not that. So we don't know who he really was, or if he really even existed?

Kathryn: One of the things, I think that especially as medievalist that we're quite comfortable with is never getting the full story, right Sean? There are so many fewer records for our time period that even for someone like a king, who we have a lot of records for, we're never going to know everything about him. And so in some ways, Robin Hood is just another, and really excellent example, of a figure that for which this is true. But this is also true of many medieval figures, right, we never have as many, we don't have as many letters in their own hands, for example, we don't have a lot of personal records sometimes.

Sean: And I guess the lower down the social scale you go, the harder it is to have consistency in finding the same person again, and again, in different records. Because you know, all men are called William or John or Henry. So it's really difficult to say that that's the right person at the right place at the right time in that locality. I think it becomes a kind of generalisation, I suppose, in that the system that all these lower level people are working in, has all of this on top of them all the time. The kind of bureaucracy, the local government, the representation of the king's power, it's kind of there all the time. They're either paying their taxes, or they're working for their Lord on the

	Robin Hood – Bonus Episode	THE	
		NATIONAL	
		ARCHIVES	

manor. So the idea of a kind of life oppressed is quite strong here. And the appeal of a world turned upside down, and the kind of free life in the forest and rebelling against that authority, it appeals to people a lot.

And we see that coming back in a lot of pageants and kind of May Day celebrations, and things like Twelfth Night after Christmas, where to some extent the controls are loosened, and things go a little bit haywire for a while.

Chloe: So that's a festival?

Sean: Very much part of the Christmas period. From Christmas spent in church.

Chloe: And we're talking in the medieval period.

Sean: Yeah and into the 17th century, as well. So certainly pre-Reformation before we get kind of lost the connection to the Catholic world. But anyway, it's about a big party, which ends on the sixth of January.

Chloe: I can imagine that Robin Hood would enjoy a good party. It's so fascinating to hear more. And also, I guess, the way that the story's been co-opted by different groups of people with the ballads, with more popular singing in pubs, things like that, and then moving through up into those higher echelons. So what is the cultural significance of this idea of Robin Hood? Can you talk a bit more to that?

	Robin Hood – Bonus Episode	THE	
		NATIONAL	
		ARCHIVES	

Sean: If we talk about springtime, May Day, rejuvenation, rebirth, which is, associates Robin with the green wood and the sort of spring growth. The Green Man that kind of renewal of life. So the idea of living a free life in the forest appeals because obviously he's shooting the kings' deer, and he's living outside of the law, but he's still surviving, he's still maintaining the kind of poor people of the neighbourhood.

You see this in a lot of May Day, riots, games, festivals, where things get out of hand, the beer, and the wine is flowing freely. And it becomes attached to this idea of a party time and a free time. So people are relieved from their grinding life on the fields, or in the woods doing manual labour. And for a brief period, they have a kind of celebration. So May Day is as we know, it's like yeah, it's become a kind of release, I suppose for people. And that's why Robin Hood is so interesting in that context, because you see it again and again, people either playing back the legends or performing the plays themselves.

Chloe: And I'm thinking about cultural portrayals of Robin Hood are often quite playful. It's often about tricks, as well as that kind of justice element. Kath, what do you think? I mean, Henry VIII played him in a Royal Festival. Why might that matter?

Kathryn: Yeah absolutely. So he's, he's a kind of ambiguous shapeshifting figure, right, Robin Hood. So he plays into this archetypal sense of freedom of escape of disobedience and ability to change the conditions of your life if you're poor. But if you're rich, like Henry VIII, right. One thing that I think that does is it enables him to escape the constraints of royalty for the day. So we have these festivals where things are turned upside down, where the king becomes a pauper or the pauper becomes a king. And that's very much these kind of Mayday festivities. And it was also very

	Robin Hood – Bonus Episode	THE	
		NATIONAL	
		ARCHIVES	

common on Twelfth Night that you would have these kind of festivals that turn things upside down. So when Henry VIII dresses up as Robin Hood, he leaves behind the responsibilities of court and the responsibilities of being a king. And he takes on that trickster element, he takes on that ability to kind of be free as you can actually never be as a king really, and he does it twice doesn't he Sean.

Sean: At least twice in the records, but they take it really seriously. So the first time we've got a record of in 1510, Catherine of Aragon is very pregnant, and Henry and his friends burst into her chamber dressed completely in green with green faces, and one of them is Maid Marian. We don't know who it is. But basically they perform what's called a gladness for the queen.

Kathryn: I bet she was terrified by all these.

Chloe: A short performance, a gladness?

Sean: To cheer her up because she's suffering the pangs of childbirth.

Kathryn: Because she's pregnant. I'm sure she was thrilled.

Sean: The guy who is responsible for the clothes kind of complains that Henry just gives the costumes to his courtiers as a present, because he wants to reuse them. So in 1510, sorry, 1515 a bit later there's a much more elaborate May Day celebration where there's a Lady May and the Robin Hood plays are performed at court. 124 of the King's Yeoman are dressed in green.

Chloe: Wow. So that's not a small performance.

	Robin Hood – Bonus Episode	THE	
		NATIONAL	
		ARCHIVES	

Sean: The courtiers are given green cloth to make clothes and hoods for themselves. And then we actually have the names of the actors playing the parts, Mr. Ghay plays Robin, Mr. Winnesbury plays Friar Tuck and Mr. Villiers plays Maid Marian. So Winnesbury is interesting, because he's clearly a larger than life character. He is often picked to be the Lord of Misrule at Twelfth Night. So he knows how to organise a party.

Chloe: The closest that I can think of it, is some kind of pantomime type performance.

Sean: I think that's it, another legacy for us is seeing it in those terms. It's the over the top performance, as you say, basically, to emphasise that this is a very different kind of feel to normal routine. So the performance is really to demonstrate that these things are being inverted and turned upside down.

Kathryn: And we see this a lot in Shakespeare's plays, too, right? If you think about As You Like It, you escape to the forest, and everything's turned upside down, or A Midsummer Night's Dream is a really good example of this, right, you leave.

And we know that Robin Hood was being played on the stage in Shakespearean times. In this kind of early modern period, there were plays that included Robin Hood, and Shakespeare mentions Robin Hood in one of his plays. This element of kind of misrule has come down to us, I think, in lots of different ways. I think the pantomime is a really good example where the principal boy is played by a woman and the old woman is played by a man. Julian Clary playing Widow Twanky, so we have that kind of inversion. And the Robin Hood, myth is really, really right for that because it's at its heart, as you say, that kind of trickster myth.

Sean: But I think there's something also about the rural or the pastoral idealisation of all of this. So the idea of a king and courtiers kind of divesting themselves of this high politics and wealthy

	Robin Hood – Bonus Episode	THE	
		NATIONAL	
		ARCHIVES	

lifestyle and kind of going back to something a bit more simple, is very appealing. It's quite intoxicating to some of them in the early 16th century, especially, which is a time of civil war. And the danger of losing control and letting your lower ranks basically reach up and try and pluck you from the throne. So this is all really important in terms of how... it's about maybe a pressure release, you know, for people always on the lookout for the next...rebellion..

Chloe: There is definitely something about that idea of the common man, isn't there? I mean, do you think we're more interested in this legend's sense of justice and distributing wealth? Is it more of a revolutionary kind of figure? Is it just play? What do you think is the main point of Robin Hood? What's his take home message?

Kathryn: Robin Hood in the Middle Ages was an outlaw. And he was an outlaw that won, he was an outlaw that escaped but he wasn't necessarily an outlaw that took from the rich and gave to the poor. In the early Robin Hood tales, we don't really see that narrative. And as Sean was saying about some of our specific characters, that could be Robin Hood, we see most of them are just taking money from the rich and keeping it for themselves. This kind of narrative that Robin Hood is someone who takes money from the rich and gives it to the poor becomes much more important the later we get in time. And so that is the kind of more modern element of redistribution, I guess becomes more important contemporarily...

Sean: There is something also in the role of the sheriff and the official who is plucking out the the wealth of the... the meagre pennies of the poor—

Chloe: That Intermediary between central figure and common man?

Sean: So yeah, the representation of the king's power through these officials like the sheriff of Nottingham, and how they're easily corrupted and corruptible, and they don't have the interests

	Robin Hood – Bonus Episode	THE	
		NATIONAL	
		ARCHIVES	

of the people at heart. So you can see why there's a kind of growing need to rebel against this to sort of push back and keep the grasping hand away. And I think we see that in a lot of the... well we mentioned 1381. But you see it in the Pilgrimage of Grace and the 1530s after the northern monasteries are dissolved there's an awful lot of moaning and groaning about the end of the way things were. This kind of precipice of a new life without monks and abbeys in communities. The way they react to this there's a lot of letters to the king about bad advisors, bad counsellors leading the king astray because they're not giving him a kind of direct route to the people and what people want. So they have to rebel as loyal rebels to basically say to him, we want the government we deserve. We want you to rule without these people whispering in your ear.

Chloe: It's the middlemen, middlemen with a fondness for leathers.

Kathryn: We'll see that in, we see that actually, I think in you know, Disney Fox Robin Hood. Wwhat happens there is that we've got... it's not that the real king who we're loyal to who is bad, it's this, you know, representative of the real king who's perverting his power. So actually, although it seems like a revolutionary story, it's not about taking or getting rid of the whole of the powers of the state. It's about getting rid of the people who are perverting the course of justice and the people who are perverting this course of the state. And we see that I think, with the relationship with religious figures, too, so in the early Robin Hood tales, we have the bad bishop, so the bishop is bad or the abbot is bad. But Friar Tuck is on the rebel side, he is the friendly priest. And so you have that kind of element of the power perverting people, the power being bad for people, but that there are people who can do that power properly, who can wield that power correctly.

Chloe: And there's still a hierarchy that needs to be respected and structures in society that need to be maintained. Even though we're hinting at this romantic... outside of the law. It makes me think, again, about how the story is used in different ways. It has a different function. So that first

	Robin Hood – Bonus Episode	THE	
		NATIONAL	
		ARCHIVES	

record that you mentioned, Kath the wool, it's an advertiser using this anti-capitalist legend to sell products.

Kathryn: Yeah, I think that's the thing about it is that it is a legend. And this is this, the same is true, I think, of the May Day and Twelfth Night festivals, and the pantomime. It's about letting off steam so that things can continue to work as they are intended to, it's not about actually changing things. It's about making space for those changes to be hinted at, but then actually to be brought back into the fold.

Chloe: So Robin is like an embodiment of that element.

I think I'm gonna have to wrap it up there. It's been a really informative episode and really dug into what we have in the collection, but also this enduring story through the archive, the legend of Robin Hood. I think it can tell us a lot more about the stories we tell ourselves than some hero in tights waiting in the treeline. So thank you, Kath. Thank you, Sean. We'll see you soon.

Chloe: Thanks for listening to On The Record from The National Archives. To find out more about The National Archives, follow the link from the episode description in your podcast listening app. Visit nationalarchives.gov.uk. To subscribe to On the Record at The National Archives so you don't miss new episodes, which are released throughout the year.

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	Robin Hood – Bonus Episode	THE	
		NATIONAL	
		ARCHIVES	

Finally, thank you to all our experts who contributed to this episode. This episode was written, edited, and produced by Tash Walker and Adam Zmith of Aunt Nell, for The National Archives.

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You'll hear from us soon!

Trailer Transcript

Chloe Lee: Everyone has their favourite Robin Hood — Kevin Costner, a comedy figure in fetching green tights, dark and brooding, or... A fox in a hat! Who's yours?

Kathryn Maude: Historians love to go back and kind of try and pinpoint the real Robin Hood. But one kind of likely lad, I guess, is an outlaw called Robert of Wetherby. Now, we don't know much about Robert of Wetherby's crimes. He terrorised South Yorkshire and North Nottinghamshire in the 1220s. He assaulted royal officials. And we know that he was involved in very serious crime at about the same time that the legend was taking root.

Chloe: He's been featured in folk songs, tavern stories, pageants and royal festivals—even Henry VIII once dressed up as Robin Hood.

Sean Cunningham: Catherine of Aragon is very pregnant, and Henry and twelve of his friends burst into her chamber dressed completely in green with green faces, and one of them is Maid Marian. We don't know who it is. But basically they perform what's called a gladness for the queen.

	Robin Hood – Bonus Episode	THE	
		NATIONAL	
		ARCHIVES	

Kathryn: I bet she was terrified by all these.

Chloe: A short performance, a gladness?

Sean: To cheer her up because she's suffering.

Kathryn: Because she's pregnant. I'm sure she was thrilled.

Chloe: I'm Chloe Lee, a Migration and Citizenship Researcher at The National Archives.

I want to go deeper into the curious English legend of Robin Hood...

This is On the Record at The National Archives, uncovering the past through stories of everyday people.

In this episode of On the Record, I've invited my colleagues to guide me into the woods, and through the myths surrounding Robin Hood, using some of the incredibly ancient collections we hold here at The National Archives in Kew.

The episode is coming soon, so hit follow or subscribe wherever you listen.

