

# Reynolds's News and Miscellany

HISTORY, LITERATURE, POETRY, AND LITERARY CRITICISM

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## Victorian-Era Robin Hood Conferences

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**SUMMARY:** This is the text of the talk which opened the 13<sup>th</sup> Biennial Conference of the International Association for Robin Hood Studies. This talk traces the Victorian origins of Robin Hood scholarship through early academic conferences and learned societies. It focuses on the British Archaeological Association, whose 1852 Newark congress hosted what appears to have been the first Robin Hood conference panel. The paper argues that Victorian antiquaries were not merely obsessed with finding a “real” Robin Hood, but formed an active scholarly community debating historical, literary, political, and even proto-ecological questions. Figures such as Gutch, Halliwell, Dwaris, Planché, Cuming, and Evans anticipated later debates in the field. The piece concludes by linking Victorian “widening access” to today’s international Robin Hood studies.

### INTRODUCTION

It’s a pleasure to present the first paper at this Biennial Meeting of the International Association for Robin Hood Studies. My paper isn’t a keynote; in the tradition of previous Robin Hood conferences—which reflects the democratic nature of our conferences—we don’t tend to have them and we’re not starting now. However, as my paper is not about strictly about Robin Hood, but rather about the scholars from the Victorian era who gathered at conventions to discuss Robin Hood and drive scholarship forward, then when Lesley Coote and I were deciding *where* to put my paper, it seemed a good idea to introduce *this* conference by talking about those times when our scholarly ‘ancestors’ gathered together to discuss all things Robin Hood. There’s no central argument as such, then, and this is really just a lighter introduction to the papers that follow.

### THE HISTORY OF THE CONFERENCE

The history of the academic conference was fairly under-researched prior to the 2010s. Although if we wanted to stretch things a little we might claim a heritage for the academic conference that stretches back to the *symposia* of the ancient world, most scholars seem to have had a vague idea that these events began ‘at some point’ in the 1800s. Anything meaningful in the way of scholarship has been published, not by historians, but by researchers in the events management sector. Even then, comments upon the growth and development of academic conferences seem to be limited to a short, ‘decorative’ pieces on the origins of the conference industry, much like these short lines from Tony Rogers’s remarks in *Conferences and Conventions: A Global Industry* (2013):

As the nineteenth century progressed, universities increasingly provided facilities for the dissemination of information within academic circles, while the boom in spa towns and, in the UK, Victorian resorts with assembly rooms, began to make available larger public spaces for entertainment and meetings. At the same time, the development of the railway network was accompanied by the construction of railway hotels alongside major stations. Many of these hotels had substantial function rooms available for hire.

It was not until a three-year project began in 2019, run by a consortium of EU and UK universities, titled ‘The Scientific Conference: A Social, Cultural, and Political History’, that historians began to seriously interrogate the history of the conference. The project asks the following questions: What happened at scientific conferences? How have they exchanged knowledge and shaped expertise? What forms of sociability have developed in these meetings, what rituals have been performed? How have scientific conferences embodied social hierarchies and international relations? How have they informed policies on relevant subjects? I think we can use some of this project’s questions to interrogate the history of early Robin Hood conferences and I will discuss what happened at early Robin Hood conferences and how they shaped knowledge and expertise, and how early Robin Hood scholars’ conferences and research dissemination not only reflected prevailing social hierarchies but in some respects challenged them.

### ***THE ‘RADICAL’ BRITISH ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION***

As far as I’ve been able to ascertain, the very first gathering of academics presenting Robin Hood-themed research papers occurred in a panel held at the Ninth Annual Congress of the British Archaeological Association, which began on 16 August 1852 and was held at Newark Town Hall. The association was founded in 1843 by Charles Roach Smith, Thomas Wright and Thomas Joseph Pettigrew—the names of the latter two men being familiar to Robin Hood scholars today.

The Victorian era was marked by the ascendancy of the middle classes over the aristocracy. Having become the most powerful class financially in the previous century, after the Great Reform Act of 1832 they became important politically as well. In cultural sphere, there were some places where they had yet to establish a foothold, and one of these areas was in learned societies which had traditionally been dominated by the aristocracy. Smith, Wright, and Pettigrew had all been members of the Society of Antiquaries but they felt that that society was too London-centric and too ‘aristocratic’ and unwelcoming to members of the educated middle classes.

The BAA’s founders also wanted to prove that good research from local historians and antiquaries could emerge outside London and Oxbridge. One way the BAA would do this was through the establishment of a new annually-published academic journal titled *The Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, which began in 1844. The central committee read all papers submitted to the journal prior to publication to ensure that only quality articles were published, so there was a rudimentary form of peer review,<sup>1</sup> and the journal would often critique the appearance of ‘new’ archaeological finds. In the third volume of the association’s journal, for example, J.R. Planché—the scholar and dramatist who adapted Thomas Love Peacock’s *Maid Marian* (1822) for the stage—denounced as ‘absurd’ the relatively recent discovery of a leather drinking pouch dubbed ‘Robin Hood’s Pocket

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<sup>1</sup> *The Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, vol. 1 (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1847), viii.

Pistol' found in St Ann's Well near Nottingham, the narrative of which had been 'tortured to accord with the notion of its being as old as the supposed age of the outlaw'.<sup>2</sup>

While the committee aimed for quality, they also wanted their journal to be read widely, so they opted, not for the expensive Oxford University publishers but opted for Henry Bohn, who had previously published a number of fairly cheap works of scholarship as well as literary works. So the BAA represented something of a revolution, displacing the hold of the aristocracy on antiquarian and historical research while widening participation for the middle classes.

Another manner in which the BAA promoted the study and research was through their annual congress, the first of which was held in 1844, a year after the society's formation. There seems to have been an effort to welcome members of the respectable working classes to these meetings as well, and it was the desired wish of one speaker at a later conference that 'the school and the lecture theatre ... take the place of the beer shop and the penny theatre'.<sup>3</sup>

In spite of the association's aims to promote research conducted by non-aristocrats, the aristocracy was welcome at their meetings. One aristocrat who took a great interest in the association's meetings was Henry Pelham-Clinton, 4th Duke of Newcastle under Lyne, Lord Lieutenant of Sherwood Forest whose country seat was Clumber Park. It was Newcastle who presided over the association's congress at which the first panel dedicated to Robin Hood was held in 1852.

### ***THE FIRST ROBIN HOOD CONFERENCE PANEL***

The 1852 conference made quite an impact in the local and national news, being covered in the *Times*, the *Morning Chronicle*—two famous national newspapers—as well as the *Caledonian Mercury*, the *Nottinghamshire Guardian*, and the *Sheffield and Rotherham Independent*. All of the newspapers which covered the event paid significant attention to the panel on Robin Hood, which, if it happened to a Robin Hood conference today, would be a significant publicity coup.

The scholars presenting papers included the famous Robin Hood scholar [J.M. Gutch](#), compiler of the 1843 *Lytell Geste of Robin Hood* anthology, as well as Mr J.O. Halliwell and Sir Fortunatus Dwarris. Gutch's paper was a review of the life of the 'real' Robin Hood, the content of which was likely inspired by Joseph Hunter's then recently published tract on Robin Hood's identity. However, Halliwell took a different approach and, anticipating Francis Child's 'ballad muse' argument later in the century, argued that Robin Hood was solely a figure of the ballads, and specifically of fourteenth-century ballads.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, Dwarris read a related paper on the Norman Forest Laws and he used the opportunity to make a political point. The Norman Forest Laws had, by his time, completely disappeared, yet some offices connected with them remained (such as the Duke of Newcastle's lord lieutenantship). What the government should do, in Dwarris's opinion, is to give the sinecures to scientists to promote research into forest conservation.<sup>5</sup>

Already, then, we have that divide emerging between the historians and the literary critics which I think most present would agree has remained ever since—more recently expressed in a meme battle between Mark Truesdale and I—and an early, highly politicised version of what we might call an 'eco-critical' paper.

As for subsequent years, records of Robin Hood panels at the BAA fall silent. During the 1860s and 1870s there was a bigger focus in the BAA's journal on commentaries on newly-discovered manuscripts, most likely owing to the government's establishment of the Historical Manuscripts Commission. But there were still several

<sup>2</sup> *The Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, vol. 3 (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1848), 251.

<sup>3</sup> 'British Archaeological Association', *Nottinghamshire Guardian*, 26 August 1852, 3.

<sup>4</sup> 'British Archaeological Association', *Caledonian Mercury*, 23 August 1852, 2.

<sup>5</sup> 'British Archaeological Association', *Nottinghamshire Guardian*, 19 August 1852, 3.

articles either relating to Robin Hood,<sup>6</sup> or on Robin Hood directly that were published in their journal. H. Sayer Cuming's article 'On English Arrowheads', for example, investigated the existence of 'two ancient broad arrows of Robin Hood' which were in the possession of Don Saltero's Coffeehouse in Chelsea.<sup>7</sup> Another article published during the 1860s, again by H. Sayer Cuming, investigated the output of the printers located on Old London Bridge, one of whom printed eighteenth-century criminal biographies of Robin Hood.<sup>8</sup>

Outside of the BAA the likes of J.R. Planché continued to present single papers on Robin Hood at public libraries in the 1860s.<sup>9</sup> Planché is in fact an unrecognised early Robin Hood scholar, who had been publishing scholarly articles on Robin Hood since 1828, when his first article appeared in the *very famous La Belle Assemblée*.<sup>10</sup>

More conferences were held by other archaeological associations held during the 1870s and some of these hosted papers on Robin Hood. At a meeting of the Birmingham and Midlands Institute held in 1877, for example, Sir John Evans read a paper on Robin Hood which one newspaper found most interesting. Evans anticipated the arguments of our modern-day Stephen Knight by arguing that Robin Hood was a 'poetical and mythical creation' and that 'Robin Hood and his men' were simply performers who, probably on May Day, who gave the money obtained by them to make the window in the church'.<sup>11</sup>

## OLD AMBITIONS, NEW DIRECTIONS

One might ask: Is it any of the above worth knowing and why should we care about stuffy old Victorians gathering together and talking about Robin Hood and publishing their findings? Aside from being interesting to *me* as a Victorianist, it is useful for us to know the history of our research specialism because in my opinion some modern scholarly works present a rather caricatured view that the Victorians were *only* interested in real Robin Hood.

Still less are Victorian Robin Hood scholars seen as a scholarly community in which people were in dialogue with each other, critiquing each other's arguments. Yet as a cursory glance reveals, some of these Victorian Robin Hood scholars anticipated the more 'literary' concerns of modern Robin Hood scholars. At the very least, perhaps we ought to check them to see whether we are mistakenly repeating some of their arguments.

But to conclude: When the BAA was founded and decided to host panels on Robin Hood and publish findings in their journals, they had a clear social and political goal in mind: To dislodge the aristocracy who had until then dominated historical and antiquarian research. This was 'widening access'—Victorian style! While a variety of approaches and interpretations were evidently welcome among early Robin Hood scholars, it was still all very British, and very (obviously) 'Victorian' (I would have loved it, to be honest).

I'm sure most people would agree, however, that this is not the case anymore. From at least the 1990s, it is scholars from the USA who have dominated the field (perhaps). Yet still our field keeps growing. The panels today feature people from the English-speaking world, and I'm sure many of us will recognise one another's names. But there are now scholars from other parts of the world like South America as well as scholars from Eastern Europe. So, it's a pleasure to welcome everyone here today to learn about the exciting new work going on in Robin Hood scholarship (and outlaw scholarship more generally) which I'm sure far surpasses anything our Victorian forebears could ever have dreamed of.

<sup>6</sup> *The Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, vol. 20 (London: Printed for the Association, 1864), 160–61.

<sup>7</sup> *The Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, vol. 16 (London: Longmans, 1860), 262.

<sup>8</sup> *The Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, vol. 53 (London: Printed for the Association, 1887), 239.

<sup>9</sup> 'Robin Hood', *The Gentlemen's Magazine*, October 1864, 506.

<sup>10</sup> J.R. Planché, 'Traces of Robin Hood', *La Belle Assemblée*, February 1828, 67.

<sup>11</sup> 'Birmingham and Midland Institute', *Birmingham Daily Post*, 26 January 1877, 6.

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