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'Comyth in Robyn Hode': Paying and Playing the Outlaw at Crocombe

John Marshall

At the end of the last century, *Medieval English Theatre* published a Cumulative Index for Volumes 1-20.¹ In addition to its usefulness as a resource, it is splendid testimony to the vision of the first two editors; Meg Twycross and Peter Meredith. Their decision to concentrate on medieval *English* theatre in such a way that Continental material and the early Renaissance would not be excluded, and to interpret 'plays' as 'any kind of dramatic activity', has been applauded by more than eighty contributors world-wide.² The editors' prediction that the journal's staple would comprise 'mysteries and moralities' turns out, not surprisingly, to be accurate, and their expectation that the 'material will mostly be from the late medieval and early Renaissance periods' fully realised. Furthermore, their belief that England would be illuminated by reference to the Continent was shared by contributors from the very beginning.³

With all this success, it is surprising that one area of medieval English theatre, through no fault of the editors, has received so little attention. For reasons that may be to do with the vagueness of some of the evidence, or the tendency to place the subject in the field of local history rather than drama, only a single article on the plays or games of Robin Hood has been published by *METH*. Moreover, John Wasson's account of the St George and Robin Hood plays in Devon is alone in being devoted to what might loosely be described as folk or traditional drama.⁴ This is in spite of 'Folk Drama' being the topic for the annual *METH* meeting in 1996. It is true that Meg, with her encyclopaedic interests, mentions Maid Marian twice but this, like the reference to Friar Tuck by W.R. Streitberger, is in the context of the royal household, not the village green.⁵

This under representation of the subject of Robin Hood in early performance is not peculiar to *METH*. It is rather a symptom of the wider neglect observed recently by two Robin Hood scholars. Jeffrey L. Singman, in the introduction to his study of the legend, acknowledges the value of David Wiles' book, *The Early Plays of Robin*

Hood (D.S. Brewer, Woodbridge, Suffolk, 1981), while recognising that in terms of reference it has been overtaken by the work of the Records of Early English Drama (REED) project. He maintains that Robin Hood scholars have been slow to absorb the new data, and that the 'subject remains in desperate need of a full-length study'.⁶ Similarly, in a paper delivered at The First International Conference of Robin Hood Studies, held at the University of Rochester in 1997, Stephen Knight appealed for scholars to examine the increasing detail of the Robin Hood games being revealed by the publication of drama records in order to improve our knowledge of these 'unusual events'.⁷ The full-length study must probably wait for the completion of the REED volumes for counties where Robin Hood games are known, or are likely, to have occurred. In the interim, REED editors themselves – John Wasson (Devon), James Stokes (Yeovil), Sally-Beth MacLean (Kingston-upon-Thames) and Alexandra Johnston (Thames Valley) – are doing much to provide the necessary elucidation of the records at a local level.⁸

This article attempts to do something of the same for the Robin Hood of the Somerset parish of Croscombe. It explores the role the revels may have played there in financing extensions to the church building, seeks to identify those named as Robin Hood players, and tries to locate the playing or game place. More speculatively, it questions the persistent, although not entirely unchallenged, view that Robin Hood's appearance in these games implies a level of conscious subversion on the part of the participants, or at least of carnivalesque inversion. This critical perspective, dominant in the late twentieth century, sees Robin as an embodiment of disorder and misrule, and the games as giving formal expression to repressed political tendencies.⁹ In contrast, I suggest that it is possible to reposition the role of Robin Hood, in late medieval England, as a champion of the ideals of communalism and local identity that underpinned the emergence of autonomous parish assemblies.

There are many reasons for choosing the Croscombe records, even though antiquarian knowledge of them goes back more than a century.¹⁰ They are the earliest lengthy sequence of surviving churchwardens' accounts to record the gathering of money in Robin Hood's name. In the fifty-year period between 1476 and 1526, collections are made on 18 occasions. Earlier references than this to Robin Hood plays or games are more isolated; Exeter in 1427, possibly Caister in Norfolk in 1469 or 1470, and Thame in 1474.¹¹ The parish of Croscombe engaged in a comprehensive round of annual collections that sub-divided almost the entire community into groups defined by age, occupation, and, on at least one occasion, marital status. It is thus possible to see the Robin Hood revels in the wider context of parish finance and administration. Croscombe was also part of an intriguing cluster of Somerset towns

and villages that hosted Robin Hood games; Glastonbury, Tintinhull, Wells, Westonzoiland and Yeovil.¹²

Croscombe is a relatively small village on the southern edge of the Mendip Hills (grid reference ST590444), lying in the valley of the Doultong Water (River Sheppey), midway between Wells and Shepton Mallet (Plate 1). In the period of the accounts, the parish occupied an area of 1,433 acres that has since been enlarged by a third.¹³ The population in the mid sixteenth century was probably about 300; an increase of more than a half over the likely population at the time of the 1377 poll-tax returns.¹⁴ The lordship of Croscombe was held by the Palton family from 1330 to 1449. They were responsible for rebuilding the nave of the parish church and for the establishment of the Palton Chantry Chapel in the east end of the south aisle. On the death of Sir William Palton, the estate eventually descended by marriage to the Fortescues of Filleigh in Devon, following temporary possession by Richard Pomeroy, a cleric from Wells who had married into the family. The wealth of the village was founded on the cloth trade, with a high proportion of inhabitants occupied in weaving and fulling. The village was granted a charter in 1343, confirmed in 1438, to hold a weekly market on Tuesdays and a yearly fair on the eve of the Annunciation and the two following days.¹⁵ The church, dedicated to St Mary the Virgin, is mainly of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, although the tower may be slightly earlier and the south doorway is thought to be late thirteenth century (Plate 2). It is particularly noted for the survival of extensive Jacobean church furnishings.¹⁶

The Croscombe churchwardens' accounts run from 1475/6 to 1560/1 and record outlay on the fabric and furnishings of the church, and the means by which this was funded. The income came, in part, from a few rents, some gifts and bequests of money, rings, gowns, woad, vestments, sheep and cows, but mainly from the annual collections and church-ales organised by the parish. The accounts were generally audited on the first or second Saturday after Epiphany and consequently cross two calendar years.¹⁷ This means that when a contribution from the sport or revel of Robin Hood is registered, it refers to an event held in the first year of the account. The wardens' record of these gatherings is disappointingly concise:

1476-7: Comes Thomas Blower and John Hille and presents in xls. of Roben Hod's recones

1481-2: Comes John Halse and Roger Morris for Roben Hod's revel, presents in . . . xls. ivd.

1482-3: Comys Robin Hode and presents in . . . xxxiijs. ivd.

1483-4: Ric. Willes was Roben Hode, and presents in for yere past . . . xxiijs.

- 1484-5: Comys Robyn Hode and presents in . . . xxiijs. viijd.
1486-7: Comys Robyn Hode, Wyllyam Wyndylsor, and presents in for the yere
paste iijl. vjs. viijd. ob.
1488-9: Comys Robyn Hode and presents in . . . iijl. vjs. viijd.
1490-1: Comys Robyn Hode and presentith . . . ls.
1494-5: Robyn Hode presents in . . . xlvjs. viijd.
1500-1: Comyth in Robyn Hode and Lytyll John and presentyth in . . . xvs.
1502-3: Comyth Robart Hode and presentyth in . . . xls.
1505-6: Presented in of the sport of Robart Hode and hys company . . . liijs. iiijd.
the wych resteth in the hands of W. Carter.
in the hands of W. Dunpayn to by ches . . . vjs. viijd.
1506-7: Presented in for the sporte of Robart Hode . . . xliijs. iiijd.
1507-8: The wardens present for the sport of Robart Hode . . . ix. viijd.
In the hands of Donpayn to by chese . . . vjs. viijd.
1509-10: The comyng in of Robyn Hode (John Honythorne) . . . iijl.
1510-11: Comyng in of Robyn Hode . . . iijl. vjs. viijd.
To J. Donpayne for by chesse . . . vjs. viijd.
1511-12: Itm. the Croke box . . . iijl. ix. jd.
" " Robyn Hode (J. Honythorn and J. Stevyn) . . . xxxvs. xd.
1526-7: Gifts. Robyn Hode . . . iiijl. iiijd.¹⁸

The descriptive evidence from these accounts, even when put together, provides only the barest outline of activity. Robin Hood and his company, that includes, but may not exceed, Little John, preside over occasional revels or sports that contribute a 'recones' to church funds. It is probably safe to assume that the references are, in the main, to a church-ale with a Robin Hood flavour. Contemporary accounts indicate that church-ales could include feasting, drinking, dancing, minstrelsy, archery and other competitive sports such as wrestling, and plays.¹⁹ Of these, feasting is the only item from the menu possibly to feature in the Croscombe accounts. On three occasions in the sixteenth century (1505/6, 1507/8, 1510/11) the churchwardens appear to reserve a sum in connection with Robin Hood for the buying of cheese. The connection, though, may be one of proximity in the records only, and the cheese meant for some other occasion, as it clearly was in 1508/9 when a similar payment occurs in a year without Robin Hood games.²⁰

The lack of documentary detail in the accounts is regrettable but explicable and does not necessarily reflect the level of activity. The expenses incurred by the Robin Hood revels, including items of costume, were probably accounted for independently

by the presenters, with only the profit to the church recorded by the churchwardens. Even so, such little information raises the question of what level of mimetic action is necessary to identify a church-ale or revel with Robin Hood. In some places, such as Kingston upon Thames, the connection was immediate and obvious with dramatic impersonation by costumed characters in dance or scripted drama.²¹ It would be a mistake, though, to assume from these references that all Robin Hood games followed their example. There is a danger in conflating widely dispersed evidence (of time and place) in order to create a prototype game where the sum of the parts exceeds any one whole. The church-ale ingredients listed above, combining feasting and fraternity with competition and conviviality, are already suggestive of Greenwood hospitality and Robin Hood's fellowship. All that need be added to make the suggestion explicit is the disguise of two parishioners as Robin Hood and Little John to oversee the festivities and collect the livery fee.

Whatever form the revels took, their impulse was clearly financial and their profit substantial. This was certainly the case at Croscombe where Robin Hood returns outstripped all other kinds of gathering. The parish was particularly well organised in raising money from all sections of the community. This it did through a mixture of individual and communal collections that fit into three broad categories. First there were the annual collections from parishioners for Easter ('paskall and fonte taper') and St Michael's Light. Second, the annual gatherings by sub-parochial groups or guilds differentiated by the occupation or status of their members. Third, the occasional gatherings open to the entire local and, very likely, neighbouring populations. Table 1 shows the frequency and level of contributions from the second and third categories during the period 1475 to 1538.

The churchwardens' accounts give no more information about the means that produced the guild returns than they do about the form of the Robin Hood revels. From evidence elsewhere in Somerset, it seems that the Croscombe Hogglingers were a group of men who, sometime during the twelve days of Christmas, conducted door to door gatherings of money, or food for church-ales, in return for possibly sung entertainment.²² It is not clear from the records whether the practice of hogging survived the period of the accounts. The last detailed record of a collection was in 1532/3, but this may reflect Hobhouse's decision to abbreviate the accounts for later years to 'usual entries' rather than the demise of hogging. It is possible that a vestige of the practice continued until the 1970s with the Old Year's Eve celebration on 5 January when a group of handbell ringers and singers toured the parish streets collecting for charity.²³

Table 1
Croscombe Parish Income From Communal Activity
1475-1538

Year	King's Revel	Robin Hood	St George	Hogglers	Young Men	Maidens	Weavers	Fullers
1475/6	✓			2s 10d	2s 2d		23d	23d
1476/7		40s		3s 10d	3s 9d	9d	22d	2s 2d
1477/8	20s			3s 8d	7s	9s 7d	18½d	2s 2d
1478/9	13s 1d			3s 1d	2s 9d	3s	21d	2s
1479/80						3s	20d	2s 2d
1480/1						4s 8d	2s	2s 1d
1481/2		40s 4d		3s 4d	9s 3d*	0 'yet'	0	3s 4d
1482/3		33s 4d		0	3s 8d	0	0	3s 7d
1483/4		23s		4s 4d	1s 5d (?)	9s 6d	0	3s 4d
1484/5		23s 8d		4s 1½d	0	16s 3½d	0	2s 11d
1485/6				6s 2d	8s 2d*	17s 4d	7d	2s 8d
1486/7		£3 6s 8½d		4s 10d		17s 4d		3s
1487/8				5s	3s 4d	22s	0	3s 6d
1488/9		£3 7s 8d		5s	3s 4d	20s 4d	0	4s
1489/90				6s 2½d	4s 6d	23s 4d	0	3s 6d
1490/1		50s		5s 3½d	4s 2d	25s	0	2s 9d
1491/2				4s 9d	3s 8d	16s 2d		4s 2½d
1492/3				4s 4½d	5s 2d	18s 3d		2s 5d
1493/4				6s 1d	5s			3s
1494/5		46s 8d		4s 5d	✓	35s 4d		2s 8d
1495/6				4s 7½d	6s 8d	25s 4d		2s 11d
1496/7				4s 9d		27s 4d		3s 2½d
1497/8				6s 5d	3s 5d	13s 1d		3s 7½d
1498/9				6s	3s 1d	22s 5d		2s 11½d

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Year	King's Revel	Robin Hood	St George	Hogglers	Young Men	Maidens	Weavers	Fullers
1499/00				6s 1d	5s 1d	20s 4d		3s
1500/1		15s		4s 6d	4s 4d			4s
1501/2				4s 6d	5s 4d	21s		3s 4d
1502/3		40s		4s 9d	41d	16s		3s
1503/4				5s	5s	18d†		3s 4d
1504/5	23s 10½d			6s 2d	5s	13s		2s 11d
1505/6		53s 4d		3s 9d	4s 8d	17s 5d		2s 10d
1506/7		43s 4d		4s 7½d	2s	9s 2d		3s 6d
1507/8		9s 8d		4s 5d	4s	13s 1½d		3s 10d
1508/9				5s	3s 8d	15s 6d		3s 4d
1509/10		£3		4s	3s 4d	16s		3s 4d
1510/11		£3 6s 8d		4s 2½d	4s 5d	16s 10d		3s
1511/12		35s 10d		4s 8d	5s 10d	20s		2s 11d
1512/13				4s 7d	4s 5d	18s 6d		2s 2½d
1513/14				✓	✓	✓		✓
1514/15								
1515/16				✓	✓	✓		✓
1516/17			12s	✓	✓	✓		✓
1517/18			16s 8d	✓	✓	✓		✓
1518/19				✓	✓	✓		✓
1519/20				✓	✓	✓		✓
1520/1			✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
1521/2				?	?	?		?
1522/3				✓	?	?		?
1523/4			13s 8d	✓	✓	✓		✓
1524/5				?	?	?		?
1525/6				✓	?	?		?
1526/7		£4 0s 4d						

Year	King's Revel	Robin Hood	St George	Hogglers	Young Men	Maidens	Weavers	Fullers
1527/8			33s 4d					
1528/9			57s 4d	✓	?	?		?
1529/30			26s 8d	✓	?	?		?
1530/1			13s	✓	?	?		?
1531/2			26s 8d	✓	?	?		?
1532/3			18s 4d	4s	2s 8d	17s 4d		21d
1533/4			✓	✓	?	✓		?
1534/5			?	?	?	?		?
1535/6			?	?	?	?		?
1536/7			?	?	?	?		?
1537/8			?	?	?	?		?
1538/9			26s 8d			4s		

KEY

- * Income from this and preceding year.
- † This small sum was returned to the Maidens as stock for the coming year. It suggests that they may not have collected in 1503.
- (?) Possibly an error; sums under two shillings are usually expressed in pence.
- ✓ Contribution noted but sum not recorded.
- 0 Nil return recorded.
- ? Contribution probably made but not transcribed by Hobhouse who gives only 'usual entries'.

NOTES

- After 1538/9 the only entries relevant to the table above occur in 1547/8 when the wardens received 22s 6d from 'the maydes ayl' and 17s 2d from 'The Ale att Wytontyde'. The latter may refer to the St George ale or its successor.
- A single contribution of 6s was received in 1483/4 from the 'wyfes dansyng'.
- In addition to the income from communal activity, there were annual collections for Easter ('paskall and fonte taper'), St Michael's Light (most years until 1503/4 and again in 1523/4) and twice for St Nicholas' Light (1475/6 and 1477/8).
- In the table, the Roman numerals of the accounts have been converted into Arabic.

The Maidens' collections may be from the festival of Hocktide. In a number of Croscombe accounts, the entry for the Maidens follows that for the paschal taper, suggesting a possible Easter connection.²⁴ The Young Men's involvement in these games is a possibility, as happened elsewhere, except that they usually make their contribution not with the Maidens but after the Weavers and Fullers. This might suggest a different activity on a separate occasion, but the accounts are not sufficiently consistent to draw conclusions about what was done from the order of presentation alone. The Weavers and Fullers, or Tuckers as they are referred to in the accounts, may have raised their contributions from a levy or through some social gathering.

Each year, the guilds were provided with a 'stock' by the churchwardens, usually 12d, with which to purchase votive lights. The amount the guilds raised above this sum, called the 'increase', was presented to the churchwardens as their contribution to church funds. Unlike these guild wardens, the Robin Hood presenters are never given a stock. This was presumably because they did not represent a specific membership with an obligation to provide candles each year. Moreover, as an irregular event, it would not always be known, from year to year, when the next revel would occur.

What emerges from analysing the accounts as a whole is that the annual guild contributions, for all the variation in amounts, were sufficient, along with rents, gifts and bequests, to maintain the lights and the predictable day to day expenses of the church. The occasional events of the King's Revel and the sport of Robin Hood, on the other hand, are either brought out to rescue the parish from potential debt or scheduled to finance extensions to church property.

From the table, a pattern to the Robin Hood sports emerges, with two intense periods of activity evident; one of four years beginning in 1481, and one of six years in a seven-year period between 1505/6 and 1511/12. At the end-of-year audit, the churchwardens calculated the balance of church funds after the payment of expenses. What was left is described as 'the remains in stock'. In 1481/2 the stock was at its lowest level since the records began: £1 15s compared with £15 1s 10½d three years earlier. Without the Robin Hood revel that year, the stock would have been in deficit. In 1503/4 the stock drops to £2 14s 10d from the previous year high of £16 17s 5d. It remains comparatively low (averaging just over £3) until picking up again to £13 in 1511/12. Neither instance is a case of mismanagement or unforeseen crisis. Both can be explained by an active programme of church building undertaken by the churchwardens on behalf of the parishioners.

In 1481/2 the sudden depletion in stock is accounted for by the payment of a 'bille for makyng of the Cherch house'. The wardens for the year, Roger Morris and

William Branch, settled the costs of a carpenter and a fellowship of masons amounting to £13 2s 6½d (the account miscalculates the sum as £13 2s 11½d). By 1485/6 the stock used to pay for this building, intended to enhance the social life of the parishioners, had been restored, in no small measure, by Robin Hood (Plate 3).²⁵ Unlike this remedial role, the clutch of Robin Hood revels beginning in 1505/6 exhibits a degree of financial foresight. In the accounts for 1507/8 appears the first reference to John Carter, 'Jorge maker', a free mason of Exeter who receives £4 'off the parech of Croscombe'. In 1509/10 he is paid 30s for 'the settingg oppe of the Jorge' and in 1512/13 the large sum of £27 11s 8d to settle the 'holle sume of all the coste' of the George. These payments, over a five year period, refer to the construction of the Chapel of St George at the north-east end of the church (Plate 4). It is possible that the sums paid to John Carter also include, but do not refer to, the contemporary building of the two-storey vestry and treasury at the south-west corner of the church (Plate 5). This is first mentioned in the accounts for 1510/11 and became the secure destination of the funds raised by the guilds. By 1511/12, the final year of this burst of Robin Hood revels, the church stock had not only coped with major extensions to the fabric of the church but had climbed back to a healthy surplus of £13.

At Croscombe, Robin was a victim of his own success. The generosity he inspired amongst the parishioners contributed to his downfall, or rather to his usurpation. The establishment of the Chapel of St George seems, predictably, to have promoted a new hero to headline the church-ale. Never as financially successful as Robin Hood, George makes up in consistency what he lacks in profusion. Robin makes a spectacular return in 1526/7 with the largest collection in the history of the Croscombe accounts. The churchwardens, or more likely Hobhouse, give little indication of why Robin was resurrected after a gap of fifteen years. The published accounts stop listing the stock figure in 1520/1. At £7 13s 4d, it gives little cause for alarm. Around the time of the revel, the only unusual expenses recorded are for the distraint of rent by the Lord of the Manor for all the parish in 1526/7 and for the 'mending of the horne of the cherch' in 1527/8. The reintroduction of Robin Hood may have been to cover these expenses or to replenish the stock reduced by not holding the St George Ale in the previous two years.

It would represent a crude negation of the social dimension of Robin Hood games to assume that they were only held to satisfy the financial needs of a parish. Nevertheless, at Croscombe and elsewhere this was a powerful motive and probably best explains why the revels were only occasional.²⁶ It certainly calls into question modern notions of Robin Hood as the Green Man or as an incarnation of spring.²⁷ For such ritual associations to be culturally meaningful, Robin would surely need to

appear annually.

The level of mutuality between Robin Hood and parish enterprise, revealed by the accounts, is supported by the identity of the presenters. That those named were the impersonators of Robin Hood, rather than just administrative wardens, can reasonably be assumed from the formulation in 1483/4 that 'Ric. Willes was Roben Hode'. From the Croscombe churchwardens' accounts, wills and other related documents it is possible to draw up a brief biography for each presenter.²⁸ The years of presentation are in square brackets.

Thomas Blower [1476/7]

- may have been churchwarden in 1475/6, only 'Thomas' transcribed.
- makes gift to the church of a gown, gold ring and kerchief in 1478/9.

John Hille [1476/7]

- churchwarden in 1476/7, 1477/8 and 1478/9.
- gatherer of paschal money on Easter Day 1477 and 1478.
- makes gift to the church of a ring and a towel in 1489/90.
- Jone Hill (probably sister) warden of the Maidens in 1480/1 and 1483/4.

John Halse [1481/2]

- churchwarden in 1484/5.
- witness to Joan Mayow's will in 1496.
- died 1500/1 leaving money to Our Lady, the Rood, the bells and his grave.
- 'Halses' (probably sister) warden of the Maidens in 1483/4.

Roger Morris [1481/2]

- churchwarden in 1481/2.
- Fullers' warden in 1477/8, 1478/9, 1479/80 and 1480/1 (possibly for the years 1475/6 and 1476/7 when only 'Roger' recorded).
- witness to Joan Mayow's will in 1496.
- supervisor of Richard Maudeley's will in 1508.
- overseer of William Carter's will in 1513.
- one of three patrons of the parish incumbent, William Morris LL.D (1498-1519), possibly his brother.
- will made on 9 Jan 1519, proved at Lambeth on 17 Feb 1519; occupation given as 'clothier'; buried in chancel of Croscombe church.
- John Mors (probably son) churchwarden in 1527/8.

Ric. Willes [1483/4]

- churchwarden (Richard att Wyll) in 1493/4.
- Young Men's warden in 1483/4 (possibly in 1482/3).
- Hogglers' warden between 1486/7 and 1492/3 (possibly for most years following until 1507/8 if Vowles, Vells, Volls, Wells, Woll etc. are the same person. If they are, he may also have been the Richard Vowllys who was churchwarden in 1487/8).
- Johan Wylls (possibly wife) makes a gift to the church of a silver and gilt ring in 1508/9.
- relative (?) John att Wyll churchwarden in 1551/2.

Wyllyam Wyndylsor [1486/7]

- churchwarden in 1482/3.
- gives/leaves vjs viijd to the church in 1503/4.
- 'Wyndelsor's servant' gives iiijd to the church in 1486/7.
- Margery Wynsor (possibly wife) makes a gift to the church of beads, rings and money in 1502/3.
- Edward Windore (brother?) Young Men's warden in 1488/9, 1491/2, 1492/3 and 1493/4, and churchwarden in 1504/5 and 1505/6.

William Carter [1505/6]

- churchwarden in 1513/14; died in office and replaced by his father John Carter, clothier, who was previously churchwarden in 1486/7.
- will made 15 Apr 1513 and proved 3 Nov 1513.
- Jone Carter (sister) warden of the Maidens in 1494/5.
- John Carter (brother) warden of the Young Men in 1495/6.
- Carters were also churchwardens in 1533/4 (John), 1544/5 (John) and 1550/1 (Joseph).

John Honythorne [1509/10 and 1511/12]

- churchwarden in 1521/2.
- J. Honythorne (father?) churchwarden in 1489/90 whose death may be recorded by the gift of two rings and viijd in 1502/3.

John Stevyn (aka Sadeler) [1511/12]

- churchwarden in 1537/8, 1542/3 and 1544/5.

The striking thing about this list is that all presenters, with the possible exception of Blower, were, had been, or would become churchwardens. At Croscombe, the churchwardens were, according to the account for 1476/7, elected by 'al the parresch'. Such democracy ought to ensure that they were respected by the community as responsible and capable individuals. The Robin Hood presenters may also have been chosen by parishioners or appointed by the churchwardens. The element of trust in handling money that a link between the presenters of Robin Hood and churchwardens implies is borne out by the evidence of other parishes.²⁹ In addition, all named Robin Hood presenters, except the first and last, either held office as wardens of other guilds or had relatives, male and female, who had done so. For these families, at least, commitment to the community went beyond mere obligation.

As far as it is possible to tell, the wardens of church and Robin Hood were neither the wealthiest nor the poorest parishioners. For the most part they were the craftsmen of middling status. Croscombe's two longest serving churchwardens, William Branch and Edward Bolle, were both fullers.³⁰ This profile of non-gentry wardenship is by no means uncommon.³¹ They were not, though, without ambition. Roger Morris, for example, seems to rise from the status of fuller in the years before he presented as Robin Hood to a clothier in his later years.³² William Carter, too, came from a family of clothiers. None of the men named were sufficiently wealthy to make endowments or large bequests to the church. Roger Morris, at the time of his death in 1519, was perhaps the most prosperous. In his will he leaves;

12d to the cathedral church of Wells
20d to the high altar of Croscombe for tithes and oblations
forgotten
20s to the chantry of Croscombe to pray for his soul and the souls
of his two wives
12d to the curate of Croscombe
a blue gown to his son, John
20d to his eldest daughter, Joanna
a dozen silver spoons, a maser, a flock-bed with tester and other
household goods to his youngest daughter, also Joanna
3 quarters of woad and a cloth with the residue of his estate to his
wife, Agnes³³

At Yeovil the Robin Hoods were drawn from among the 'relatively older rather than younger men of the parish.'³⁴ Chagford in Devon went to the opposite extreme

and entrusted the games to the 'yongemen off the parysche'.³⁵ Croscombe seems to have favoured something between the two. Assuming that Roger Morris became a warden of the Fullers only after serving an apprenticeship at 21, and that he held office in 1475, the latest year of his birth would be 1453. This would make him 65 or 66 at his death in 1519 and mean that he was 27 or 28 in 1481 when he became churchwarden and presented as Robin Hood. Richard Willes (sometimes referred to as 'att Wyll') represented the Young Men in the same year he was Robin Hood. It is not certain whether membership of this guild terminated at the coming of age. If it did, Willes was possibly 21 when he played Robin Hood, and 31 when he became churchwarden.

Although these crude calculations cannot be applied to the others named, a comparable age range of early to mid twenties can be guessed at for John Hille, John Halse, William Windsor and William Carter from the years their siblings were wardens of the Young Men and Maidens. It is tempting, from these ages, to draw conclusions about physical strength and prowess being criteria for the selection of Robin Hood. This, in turn, might suggest that the revels stressed the athletic and combative aspects of the character familiar from the early plays and ballads.

The uncertainty that surrounds the form of the revels extends to their location. The accounts give no indication of where they took place. On the basis of the large amounts raised by the relatively small population, it seems probable that the majority of Croscombe parishioners, and a substantial number of those from neighbouring villages, attended.³⁶ Perhaps the most likely setting for such a gathering is the field to the north-west of the church known as Fair Place (see the field to the left of the church spire in Plate 1). As the name may reflect, this was the site of the annual fair, at least during the Victorian period.³⁷ There is no way of telling if the field derived its name from the medieval fair granted a charter in 1343, or from its open and pleasing appearance. Nevertheless, the use of the site as a fair ground in the nineteenth century, and the absence of a suitable alternative elsewhere in the village, makes it by far the most likely venue. It is also only a few yards from the church and church house where the food and drink for the ales were probably prepared.

In spite of the lack of detail, it seems clear that the growth of the Robin Hood myth and its broadening appeal during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was, in large part, due to its dissemination through parish games. The relationship was not one-sided. Parishes increased their revenue by associating church-ales with a popular hero. This mutual alliance, and the social and economic interests it served, are revealing in understanding the distribution and orientation of the Robin Hood games.

The evidence for Robin Hood games in England down to 1550 is limited to an

area south of the Wash. Except for isolated instances, it predominates in the Thames Valley and the South West.³⁸ Particularly in respect of the West Country, the late medieval Robin Hood games coincide with an especially active period of church building.³⁹ Responsibility for the nave and tower rested with the parish and funds to pay for them had to be raised over and above the regular income of rents and gifts. In such circumstances, the Robin Hood game, or its equivalent, was a necessary source of extra finance. The games also tend to be found grouped in areas of the greatest growth in wealth during the period. By 1515, for example, Somerset had become the second wealthiest county in England (after Middlesex and excluding London), having moved from a position of 23rd in 1334.⁴⁰ Devon, Cornwall and Surrey also experienced outstanding levels of growth during the period that they held, or came to establish, Robin Hood games. In true Robin Hood fashion, it seems that in these places there was wealth to be redistributed.

More generally, Robin Hood games occur in the southern half of England where parish funds were generated largely by church-ales rather than by relying on the alternatives of patronage by the gentry, bequests or the levying of a church rate.⁴¹ In these circumstances a structure for charitable giving in a convivial atmosphere already existed on which to graft Robin Hood. The obvious similarity between the celebratory character of church-ales and the ballad descriptions of Greenwood hospitality was clearly visible then as now. Equally, it may be significant that the games flourish at a time when the middling or yeoman class, that represent the socially defining culture of Robin Hood, emerge as the source of parish government officers. It is possible that the inspiration for associating church-ales with Robin Hood rested with those who most closely identified with him.

These connections between form and content may be no more than coincidences. What is indisputable, though, is that the institutional principles upon which parish assemblies were founded bear striking resemblance to those underlying the Greenwood. The parish in late medieval England, like the Barnsdale or Sherwood of the ballads, sought to practise the ideals of independence and self-government. It has been described as a territorial unit that 'provided a framework for the solution of problems which affected all members of local society, but transcended their individual powers.'⁴² It was sustained by a system of shared values that emphasised the horizontal ties that bound its members, rather than the vertical line of hierarchy that divided them. In this political respect, the Greenwood mirrored the parish paradigm. In addition, Robin's legendary means of acquiring wealth for redistribution may only have been adopted by the parish at the symbolic level of game, but the charitable ends were practically the same. Robin is for the parishioner, then, not necessarily a conduit

for repressed political feelings but a hero of communalism and autonomy, where the individual derives strength from the mutual support of fellowship. The relationship between myth and parish was similarly reciprocal; it is why it lasted so long. In the games or revels, Robin Hood acquired a presence in performance that sustained and energised the myth. And the parish elected a heroic representative who successfully embodied the values of fraternity and charity. In the event, at Croscombe and elsewhere, these explanations count for nothing without the sheer fun to be had from dressing up in Lincoln green and brandishing a bow and arrows with a few friends.

'Comyth in Robyn Hode': Paying and Playing the Outlaw at Crocombe



Plate 1. Crocombe from the South with Fair Place field to the left of the church spire.

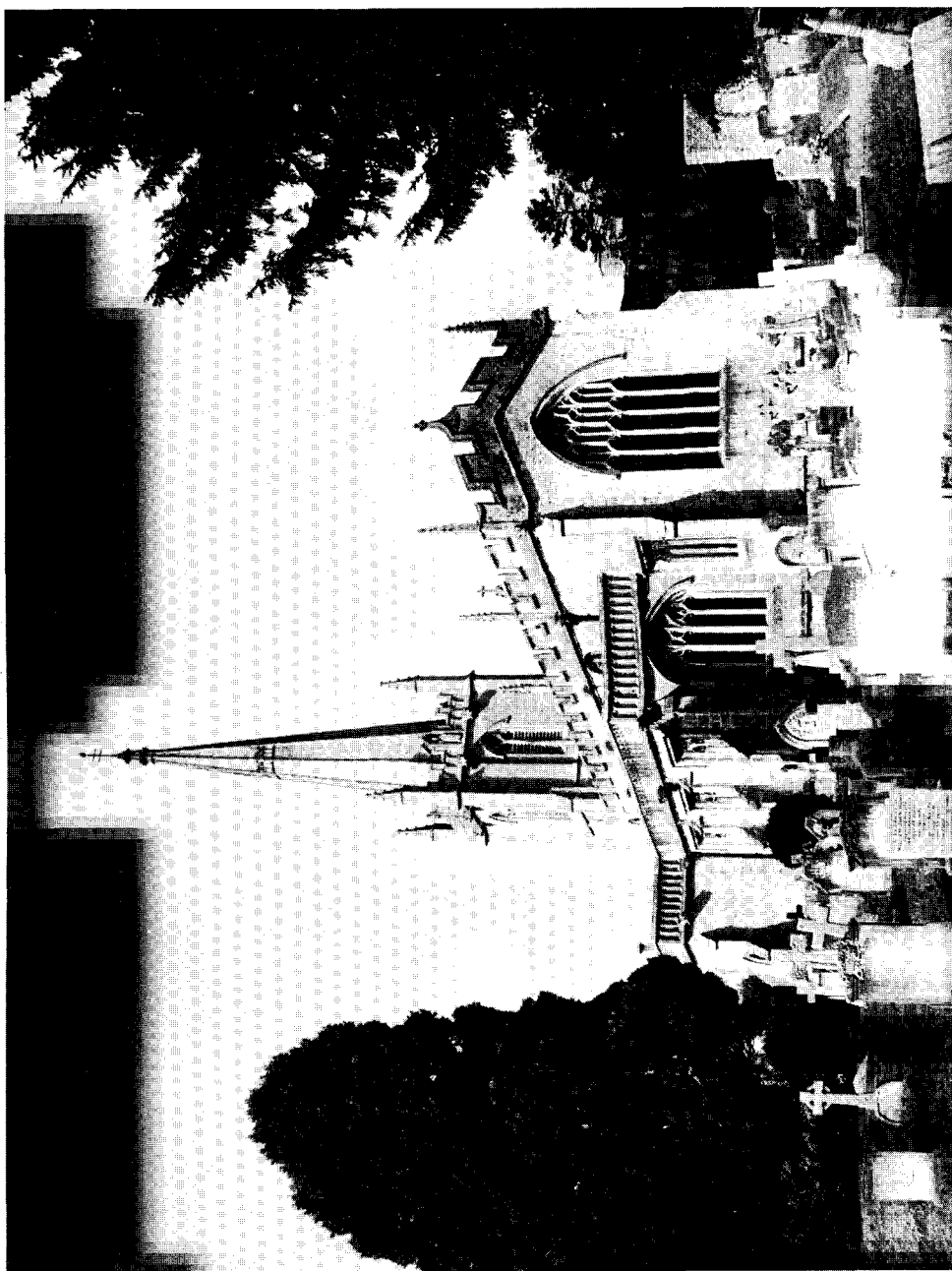


Plate 2. St Mary the Virgin, Crocombe.



Plate 3. The Church House.

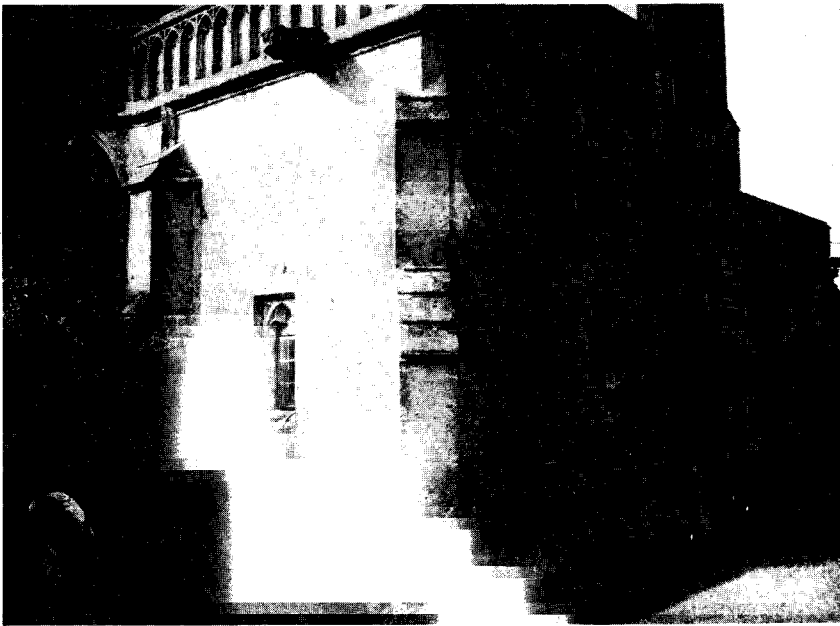


Plate 4. The Chapel of St George.

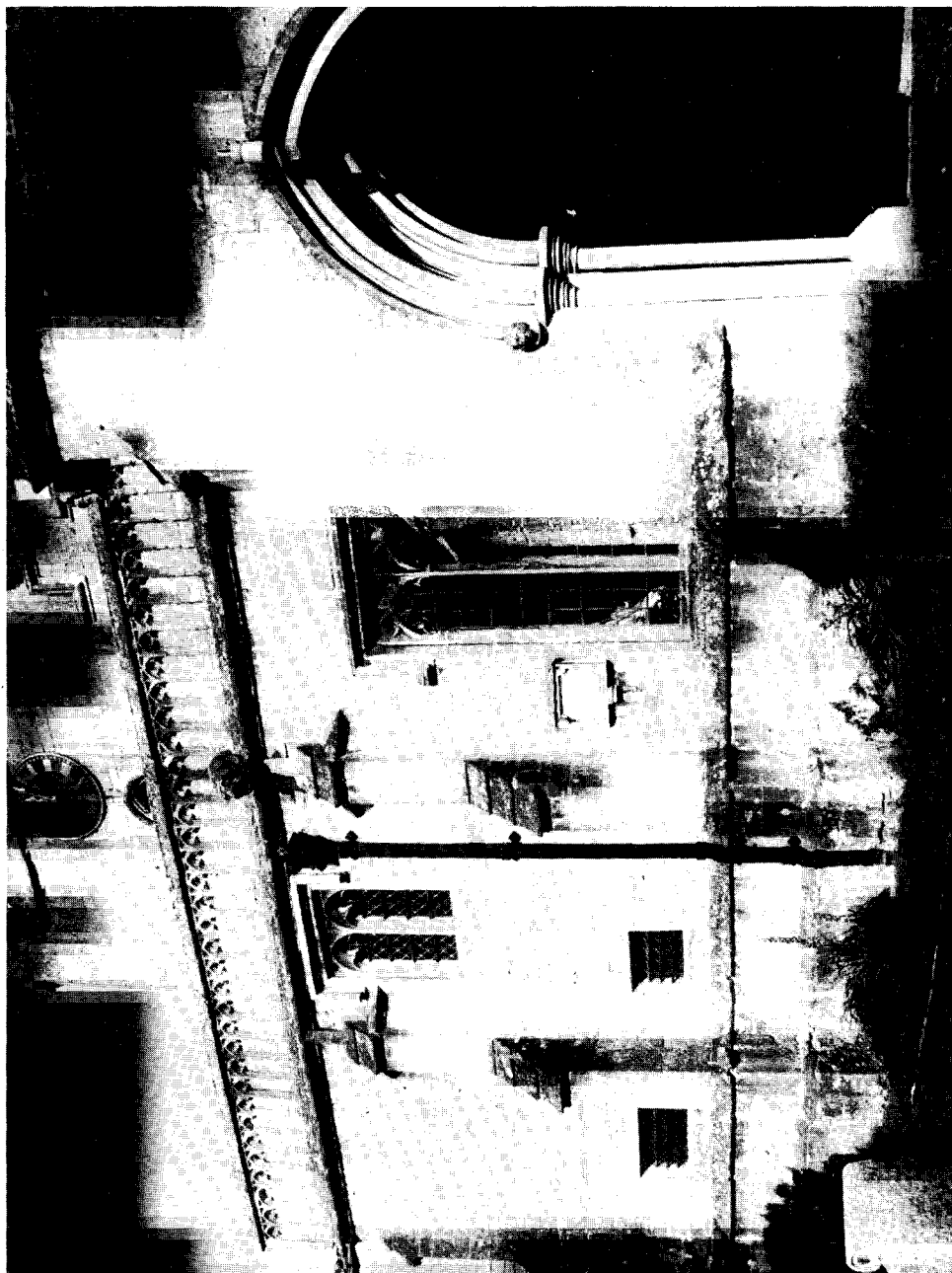


Plate 5. The Treasury and Vestry.

NOTES

¹ *METH* 20 (1999 for 1998), 127-38.

² Meg Twycross and Peter Meredith, 'Editorial', *METH* 1:1 (1979), 1-2.

³ Alan H. Nelson, 'Easter Week Pageants in Valladolid and Medina del Campo', *METH* 1:2 (1979), 62-70.

⁴ John Wasson, 'The *St George* and *Robin Hood* Plays in Devon', *METH* 2:2 (1980), 66-69.

⁵ Meg Twycross, 'Two Maid Marians and a Jewess', *METH* 9:1 (1987), 6-7; W.R. Streitberger, 'Court Performances by the King's Players, 1510-1521', *METH* 14 (1994 for 1992), 95-101.

⁶ Jeffrey L. Singman, *Robin Hood: The Shaping of the Legend* (Greenwood Press, Westport, Connecticut, 1998), p. 4.

⁷ Stephen Knight, 'Which Way to the Forest? Directions in Robin Hood Studies', in *Robin Hood in Popular Culture: Violence, Transgression, and Justice*, ed. by Thomas Hahn (D. S. Brewer, Woodbridge, Suffolk, 2000), pp. 111-28.

⁸ John Wasson (see note 4); James D. Stokes, 'Robin Hood and the Churchwardens in Yeovil', *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England* 3 (1986), 1-25; Sally-Beth MacLean, 'King Games and Robin Hood: Play and Profit at Kingston-upon-Thames', *Research Opportunities in Renaissance Drama* 29 (1986-87), 85-94; Alexandra F. Johnston, 'Summer Festivals in the Thames Valley Counties', in *Custom, Culture and Community in the later Middle Ages*, ed. by Thomas Pettitt and Leif Søndergaard (Odense University Press, Odense, 1994), pp. 37-57 and, more broadly, 'The Robin Hood of the Records', in *Playing Robin Hood: The Legend as Performance in Five Centuries*, ed. by Lois Potter (University of Delaware Press, Newark, NJ, 1998), pp. 27-44.

⁹ For a representative sample of these views see David Wiles, *The Early Plays of Robin Hood* (D.S. Brewer, Woodbridge, Suffolk, 1981), pp. 51-58; Peter Stallybrass, '"Drunk with the Cup of Liberty": Robin Hood, the Carnavalesque and the Rhetoric of Violence in Early Modern England', *Semiotica* 54 (1985), 113-45; Christine Richardson, 'The Figure of Robin Hood within the Carnival Tradition', *REED Newsletter* 22:2 (1997), 18-25; Claire Sponsler, *Drama and Resistance: Bodies, Goods, and Theatricality in Late Medieval England* (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1997), pp. 24-49; Peter H. Greenfield, 'The Carnavalesque in the Robin Hood Games and King Ales of Southern England', in *Carnival and the Carnavalesque: The Fool, the Reformer, the Wildman, and Others in Early Modern Theatre*, ed. by Konrad Eisenbichler and Wim Hüsken (Rodopi, Amsterdam, 1999), pp. 19-28.

¹⁰ The accounts were first published in *Church-Wardens' Accounts of Croscombe*,

Pilton, Yatton, Tintinhull, Morebath, and St Michael's Bath Ranging from A.D. 1349 to 1560, ed. by Edmund Hobhouse, *Somerset Record Society* 4 (1890). The original accounts are now lost.

¹¹ Exeter; *Records of Early English Drama: Devon*, ed. by John M. Wasson (University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1986), p. 89: Caister; John Marshall, '"goon in-to Bernysdale": The Trail of the Paston Robin Hood Play', *Leeds Studies in English* 29 (1998), 185-217: Thame; W. Patterson Ellis, 'The Churchwardens' Accounts of the Parish of St Mary, Thame', *Berks, Bucks and Oxon Archaeological Journal* 19 (1913), 20-24.

¹² For the records of these places see *Records of Early English Drama: Somerset*, ed. by James Stokes, 2 vols (University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1996).

¹³ Hobhouse, p. 3. For the history and topography of Croscombe see John Collinson, *The History and Antiquities of the County of Somerset*, 3 vols (R. Cruttwell, Bath, 1791) III, pp. 469-70; John East, *The Village* (J. Chilcott, Bristol, second edition, 1834); William Phelps, *The History and Antiquities of Somersetshire*, 3 vols in 2 (J.B. Nichols, London, 1836, 1839) I, pp. 228-36; Keith Armstrong, *The Story of Croscombe: A Somerset Village* (privately printed for the author by St Andrew's Press, Wells, n.d.).

¹⁴ Population calculations are notoriously difficult for such small parishes at this time. The figures are based on the 220 Croscombe communicants recorded by the Chantry Survey of 1548; *The Survey and Rental of the Chantries, Colleges and Free Chapels, Guilds, Fraternities, Lamps, Lights and Obits in the County of Somerset as Returned in the 2nd Year of King Edward VI: AD 1548*, ed. by Emanuel Green, *Somerset Record Society* 2 (1888), p. 137. Chantry certificates were frequently returned with crudely rounded numbers but this is perhaps less likely in areas of comparatively low population. To calculate the total population from the number of communicants I have used the Wrigley and Schofield formula. This estimates that in the mid sixteenth century 24.9% of the population was below the age of communion. Population totals are derived from multiplying the number of communicants by 100/(100-24.9). For Croscombe this gives a total of 293 in 1548. On such small numbers this can only be regarded as a very approximate figure. The calculation of a population of 178 in 1377 is produced by dividing 293 by the trimean of the ratios between the parish poll-tax returns and the chantries survey (1.645). See E.A. Wrigley and R.S. Schofield, *The Population History of England 1541-1871: A Reconstruction* (Edward Arnold, London, 1981), pp. 563-67.

¹⁵ *Calendar of the Patent Rolls: Henry VI Vol. III: AD 1436-1441* (HMSO, London, 1907), p. 163.

¹⁶ Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: North Somerset and Bristol* (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1958), pp. 177-79.

¹⁷ Hobhouse's dating of the accounts is slightly misleading and appears to be

consistently out by a year. I have followed the realignment proposed by Stokes, *Somerset* II, p. 532.

¹⁸ Records taken from Hobhouse, *Church-Wardens' Accounts*, pp. 1-48. See also Stokes *Somerset* I, pp. 86-90.

¹⁹ The most informative, and the most critical, near contemporary account of games and ales is Philip Stubbs, *The Anatomy of Abuses*, with an introductory note by Peter Davison (Johnson Reprint, New York, 1972).

²⁰ On this point see Stokes, *Somerset* II, p. 897 n. 89.

²¹ For the Kingston upon Thames accounts see Singman, pp. 181-83, Sally-Beth MacLean, 'King Games and Robin Hood', and John Forrest, *The History of Morris Dancing 1458-1750* (University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1999), pp. 156-67.

²² On hogging in Somerset see James Stokes, 'The Hoglers: Evidences of an Entertainment Tradition in Eleven Somerset Parishes', *Somerset and Dorset Notes and Queries* 32 (1986-1990), 807-17 and Stokes, *Somerset* II, pp. 641-708.

²³ Armstrong, pp. 122-23.

²⁴ On the festival see Sally-Beth MacLean, 'Hocktide: A Reassessment of a Popular Pre-Reformation Festival', in *Festive Drama* ed. by Meg Twycross (D.S. Brewer, Cambridge, 1996), pp. 233-41.

²⁵ As will be seen from the photograph, the church house has undergone some, mainly Victorian, alterations since the end of the fifteenth century. On the function of church houses see Patrick Cowley, *The Church Houses: Their Religious and Social Significance* (SPCK, London, 1970).

²⁶ At Glastonbury in 1500 a Robin Hood revel was held by the parish of St John to contribute towards new seats and the restoration of the St George image, and at Tintinhull in 1512 'robyne hoodes All' paid towards the acquisition of new pews. See Katherine French, 'Parochial fund-raising in late medieval Somerset', in *The Parish in English Life 1400-1600*, ed. by Katherine French, Gary G. Gibbs, and Beat A. Kümin (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1997), pp. 115-32 (128).

²⁷ For these associations see Wiles, pp. 19, 56; John Matthews, *Robin Hood: Green Lord of the Wildwood* (Gothic Image, Glastonbury, 1993); Lorraine Kochanske Stock, 'Lords of the Wildwood: The Wild Man, the Green Man, and Robin Hood' in Hahn, *Robin Hood*, pp. 239-49.

²⁸ The wills are to be found in *Somerset Medieval Wills 1383-1500 and 1501-1530*, ed. by F.W. Weaver, *Somerset Record Society* 16 and 19 (1901 and 1903). The patronage of Croscombe incumbents in *Somerset Incumbents*, ed. by Frederic William Weaver (privately printed, Bristol, 1889), pp. 76-77.

²⁹ See particularly the evidence from Yeovil in Stokes, 'Robin Hood'.

³⁰ William Branch served for 25 years between 1479/80 and 1507/8 and Edward Bolle, continuously, from 1507/8 to 1532/3.

³¹ On the professional status of churchwardens see Beat Kümin, *The Shaping of a Community: The Rise and Reformation of the English Parish c.1400-1560* (Scolar Press, Aldershot, 1996), pp. 37-39.

³² According to Heather Swanson, *Medieval Artisans: An Urban Class in Late Medieval England* (Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1989), p. 41, fullers were the most likely of textile artisans to become entrepreneurs. She is speaking specifically of Winchester and Colchester but Morris' elevation suggests that this might also be the case in some rural areas. It is not possible to tell from the 1481/2 account whether Roger Morris represented Robin Hood or Little John. His listing after John Halse may suggest the latter. Whichever part he played, the question of the age and status of the presenters is germane to both roles.

³³ *Somerset Medieval Wills 1501-1530*, p. 205.

³⁴ Stokes, 'Robin Hood', 4.

³⁵ Singman, p. 173.

³⁶ There were 220 Croscombe communicants in 1548. If a similar number attended the Robin Hood revel in 1526, they contributed the equivalent of almost 4½d per head. This might suggest that the participants were drawn from a wider constituency than the village.

³⁷ Armstrong, p. 123. The field is described as 'Fair Place' and designated 'pasture' in the Croscombe Tithe Map c.1840; SRO D/D/RT Croscombe A (Award List) and M (Map).

³⁸ See Singman, pp. 71-76, for a useful series of chronological maps.

³⁹ Colin Platt, *The Parish Churches of Medieval England* (Secker and Warburg, London, 1981), p. 97.

⁴⁰ R.S. Schofield, 'The Geographical Distribution of Wealth in England, 1334-1649', in *Essays in Quantitative Economic History*, ed. by Roderick Floud (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1974), pp. 79-106 (97).

⁴¹ According to Judith M. Bennett, 'Conviviality and Charity in Medieval and Early Modern England' *Past and Present* 134 (1992), 19-41 (34 n.40) there is no firm evidence for church-ales further north than Derbyshire.

⁴² Kümin, *Shaping of a Community*, p. 260.