

# KIRKLEES AND ITS NUNNERY.

## “The Bold Outlaw.”

The West Riding of Yorkshire abounds with material for the historian and the antiquary to work upon. Taking Leeds as a centre, within a radius of twenty miles may be found stately halls, religious edifices, Roman encampments, and other antiquities, many, however, of which are as yet but little known to the general public. References, generally slight, are made regarding them in local and national histories, but detailed accounts are too often wanting. Thanks to the public-spirited owners, many of our more remarkable Yorkshire antiquities, such as Fountain's Abbey, Kirkstall Abbey, and other ecclesiastical buildings are freely thrown open to the public, as also are many of the stately homes of our titled Yorkshiremen, such, for instance, as Castle Howard, Harewood House, Wentworth House, and many others. It was our privilege recently to pay a visit to one of the least known of our Yorkshire “homes of former days,” and we had a rare treat in inspecting all that is left of the ancient priory of Kirklees, and the temporary abode, as well as the last resting-place, of that daring outlaw and freebooter “bold Robin Hood.” The owner of Kirklees, Sir Geo. Armytage, Bart., has long been known as an enthusiast in antiquarian matters, hence, when application was made to him by a local historical and antiquarian society to visit Kirklees, the request was readily granted; and when the members, twenty-five in number, arrived at the entrance to Kirklees Park, they were met by Mr. G. J. Armytage, himself a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries, and a liberal contributor to the journals of various learned societies. Under the able guidance of this gentleman, a thorough inspection of the grounds was made, the first object visited being the reputed grave of Robin Hood. The stone which covered his remains is enclosed within a fence wall, with iron railing above it, and iron trellising over the enclosure. We inquired the reason for thus protecting the stone, and the reply was that some years ago a superstition existed in the neighbourhood to the effect that a piece of the tombstone placed under the pillow was an effectual cure for the toothache, and the consequence was that the stone, which was entire in 1750, soon diminished in bulk until not more than one-fourth of it now remains. A long conversation ensued as to the probability of such a person as Robin Hood having ever existed at all. Our guide, however, considered that there was sufficient documentary and other evidence to prove that such a person existed in the thirteenth century. Ritson says that Robin Hood was born in Locksley, about 1160, his extraction being noble, and his true name Robert Fitzooth, which vulgar pronunciation easily corrupted into Robin Hood. Without entering into the history of his life, we may speak of his resting-place, which is situated in a retired spot on the border of a wood, where noble beeches overshadow the tomb, and a deep silence is everywhere around you. The site is at a considerable distance from the nunnery, and not in what would be consecrated ground at the time of his interment. Iceland speaks of Kirklees as the place of Robin Hood's burial, “ubi nobilis ille exlex sepultus,” this testimony being satisfactory as to the tradition in the reign of Henry VIII. It is some confirmation of this opinion that his burial was in unconsecrated ground. He was buried as a robber and outlaw of the peace of the Church. Yet we were told that on the stone which covered his remains there was originally a cross of the precise form which was in use at the beginning of the 13th century--a fact which is somewhat perplexing, but which is explained as follows:—That, “at the dissolution of the nunnery many ancient gravestones would remain; and that, the place of the outlaw's interment being still notorious and popular, one of these might be removed thither to mark a place which perhaps an older memorial had ceased to record.” The stone, of which but a small fragment remains, never had an inscription, and therefore the epitaph on Robin Hood, sometimes spoken of in connection with this stone, is spurious; and the cross upon it proves that it could have covered none other than an ecclesiastic. Close to the stone is a headstone, evidently of comparatively recent origin, on which is inscribed the well-known epitaph—

Hear underneath dis lait stean  
Lait robert earl of Huntingtun  
near areir der az his sa gend  
an pipl Kauld im robin heud  
sick utlawz az hi an iz men  
Vil England nivr si agen.

abüt 24 (r. 14) Kal decembris, 1247.

One of our number questioned the spelling, as not being according to the dialect of the West Riding, and the opinion seemed to be that the epitaph was a fabrication. It would seem from the “Ducatus Leodiensis,” page 91, that Thoresby visited the place, for he says, “Near unto *Kirkless* the noted Robin Hood lies buried under a gravestone that yet remains near the park, but the inscription scarce legible.” Yet we find Dr. Whitaker writing that there was no lettered gravestone over Robin Hood when he visited Kirklees, which he did twice, with both pleasure and satisfaction. Leaving the grave of the notorious outlaw, we proceeded to the site of the Roman camp, which is well defined, though it was only what is known as a temporary post, the only great and undoubted Roman station between Manchester and Tadcaster being at Slack. We were pleased to learn from Mr. Armytage that it is his intention to take an early opportunity of investigating the camp by cutting through it, as cross sections which have been cut in similar camps elsewhere recently have proved most interesting and instructive. A short walk through the park brings us to the remains of the Priory or Nunnery, and to the tombs of the nuns, in a state of good preservation. The Nunnery of Kirklees is in the Chapelry of Hartshead, anciently spelled Hertsheved, and was founded by one Reyner in the reign of Henry II. This was afterwards confirmed by William, Earl Warren, and a second confirmation by Henry III., proves that the nuns of Kirklees had by that time received several other, though small, donations of land. Some of these ancient documents are in the possession of the Armytage family. Recent excavations (made in 1863) have resulted in the discovery of the probable positions of the chapel, priory, and other necessary buildings, a plan of which is deposited in the one remaining fragment of all the offices of the house, namely, a late and plaster edifice in the farm-yard. A window in this building is pointed out as the one from which Robin Hood shot his last arrow, reference to which is made in the old ballad:—

But give me my bent bow in my hand,  
And a broad arrow I'll let thee,  
And where this arrow's taken up  
There shall my grave digged be.

The arrow shot from this window would in all likelihood alight on the site where he is said to be interred. The incident of his death is recorded in the Sloane MSS. as follows:—“That being distempered with cold and age he had great payne in his lymnes, his bloud being corrupted, therefore, to be eased of his payne by letting bloud, he repayred to the prioress of Kyrkesley, wher some say was his aunt, a woman very skylful in physiq and surgery; who perceyving him to be Robyn Hood and waying howe fel an enemy he was to religious persons, toke revenge of him for her owne howse and all others by letting him bleed to death.” In the position of Kirklees Nunnery we can easily discover, as elsewhere, the admirable choice of situation which prevailed amongst the religious ecclesiastics of bygone days. In a warm and fertile bottom, on the verge of a deep brook to the south, and on an elevation just sufficient to protect the house free from inundations, stood this celebrated, though not wealthy foundation, of which many interesting outlines can now be traced, and yet from these outlines we see that it has been of considerable extent. A square depression in the ground distinctly marks the cloister court, nearly thirty yards square. North of this was the body of the church, and 18 yards or thereabouts to the east are the tombs of Elizabeth Stainton, Rathbone, and others, protected by iron rails. Immediately eastward the choir has evidently terminated. The nave, transept, and choir must have been at least 150 feet long. We were shown an engraving of the Nunnery, as it appeared about the year 1670, from which it seems that a large causeway, with corner turrets, was then standing. Having visited the farm, gardens, stables, &c., we took our departure, much pleased with what we had seen. Had space permitted, we might have added many more interesting facts connected with this interesting spot, but leave it for your readers to amplify at their leisure, from a personal inspection.—W. S. Morley.