

**GILCHRIST  
MURRAY**

THE DUKERIES

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*The Dukeries:*

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# Murray Gilchrist

## The Dukeries

### WORKSOP AND THE MANOR

Although within the last twenty-five years Worksop has suffered many changes, unfortunate enough from an æsthetic point of view, the Dukeries end of the principal street still suggests the comfortable market town in the neighbourhood of folk of quality. The only relic of notable antiquity is the quaint inn, known as the Old Ship – a building with projecting upper story and carved oaken beams that might have been transported from Chester.

The twin-towered Priory Church, a gatehouse of singular interest, and some slight, gracefully proportioned ecclesiastical ruins are the main features of interest. The Priory was founded by William de Lovetot, and used by the canons of the order of St. Augustine. Great men were buried there, notably several chiefs of the Furnival family, who had for town residence Furnival's Inn in Holborn. The interior of the church contains some excellent round and octagonal pillars, and one or two ancient effigies. The walls are coated with stucco, which detracts considerably from the beauty of this handsomely proportioned building. One of the most interesting things to be seen is a piece of a human skull,

pierced with an arrowhead. This hangs to the left of the doorway by which the vestry is reached. There is a weird superstition concerning the moving of this relic.

Near by is the ruined chapel, erected about the middle of the thirteenth century. It was dedicated to the Virgin Mary, and in olden times must have blazed with gorgeous colours. The roof has fallen; little remains of its former beauty save the lancet windows. The double piscina and the sedilia are still in fair preservation, and we are shown the round holes in the stonework once filled with the pegs of the canons' oaken seats.

In the churchyard are a few quaint epitaphs for such as delight to dwell upon the virtues of the forgotten dead. The Prioory Gatehouse at the farther end is perhaps one of the most interesting buildings of its kind in existence. The stonework is of soft grey, and the roof chiefly of well-coloured tiles. A roadway about fifteen yards in length passes through the building; the original ceiling of oaken beams with graceful braces is still in good condition. Above this was the Hospitium, or guest chamber, where may be seen the hooded chimney-piece and the hearth before which old-time travellers rested o' nights and told tales that Chaucer might have loved, before retiring to the smaller chambers, to sleep heavily after the good cheer provided by their priestly hosts. In front of this relic stands the old market cross; and near by, until within the nineteenth century, were the stocks for vagrants and refractory townsmen.

Camden tells us that in his time Worksop was "noted for

its great produce of liquorice, and famous for the Earl of Shrewsbury's house, built in our memory by George Talbot, with the magnificence becoming so great an Earl, and yet below envy". In Park Street, not far from the Priory Gateway, is one of the entrances to the Manor Park. The trees still remaining are not noteworthy in the matter of size, with the exception of a few cedars and beeches near the terrace of the house. As one approaches, the Manor Hills, gently sloping and well wooded, with heather-covered clearings, may be seen to the left. As for the house itself, the garden front of to-day, without being of great architectural interest, has a very pleasant air of unpretentious comfort and brightness. There is a flower garden whose beds are edged with box and yew. The chief object of note is a long and high wall, probably a portion of the ancient house; this is somewhat dignified with its worn coping, whereon stand various urns the carving of which time has softened. From the terrace one looks down on the sloping park with its mere, and scattered trees, and graceful groups of young horses.

Passing round the house, and entering a vast gateway surmounted by a lion, one sees, to the right, part of the manor built after 1761, when the house which replaced the Elizabethan palace built by the Earl of Shrewsbury and his Countess Bess, with its pictures and furniture and some of the Arundelian marbles, was destroyed by fire. To my thinking, the most suggestive view of the present edifice is gained from the Mansfield road, within a few minutes' walk of the town.

From an ancient engraving we find that the first house bore some resemblance to Hardwick Hall, the great Bess's most successful building. It contained five hundred rooms; in front was a fine courtyard, with a central octagonal green plot surrounding a basin with a fountain. The artist gave to this a touch of life by drawing a coach and six proudly curving towards the outlet; on the lawns beyond are ladies with fan-shaped hoops, and thin-legged gentlemen with puffed coat skirts.

Of this house Horace Walpole writes, in 1756: "Lord Stafford carried us to Worksop, where we passed two days. The house is huge and one of the magnificent works of Old Bess of Hardwick, who guarded the Queen of Scots here for some time in a wretched little bedchamber within her own lofty one: – there is a tolerable little picture ('The story of Bathsheba, finely drawn and shaded, in faint colours') of Mary's needlework. The great apartment is vast and *triste*, the whole leanly furnished: the great gallery, of about two hundred feet, at the top of the house, is divided into a library and into nothing. The chapel is decent. There is no prospect, and the barren face of the country is richly furred with evergreen plantations." In 1761 he records that "Worksop – the new house – is burned down; I don't know the circumstances, it has not been finished a month; the last furniture was brought in for the Duke of York: I have some comfort that I had seen it; except the bare chamber in which the Queen of Scots lodged, nothing remained of ancient time".

Not only was Mary Stuart well acquainted with Worksop

Manor, but later, her son, James the First, on his first progress to London, became the guest of Gilbert, Earl of Shrewsbury, her jailer's successor. In a letter to his agent, John Harpur, this nobleman writes forewarning him of the expected honour, and, after bidding him see to horses being in readiness, adds, as postscript: "I will not refuse anie fatt capons and hennes, partridges, or the like, yf the King come to me". We find that James left Edinburgh on the fifth of April, 1603, and reached Worksop on the twentieth, after leaving the High Sheriff of Yorkshire at Bawtry, and being met and escorted by his brother of Nottinghamshire. It is matter for surprise that the king accepted the Talbot hospitality, considering their melancholy connection with his mother's tragedy, but it is true that he never made parade of filial piety. At Worksop Park appeared a number of huntsmen, clad in Lincoln green, whose chief, "with a woodman's speech, did welcome him, offering His Majesty to show him some game, which he gladly consented to see, and, with a traine set, he hunted a good space, very much delighted: at last he went into the house, where he was so nobly received, with superfluitie of all things, that still every entertainment seemed to exceed other. In this place, besides the abundance of all provision and delicacies, there was most excellent soul-ravishing musique, wherewith His Highness was not a little delighted." One wonders if he was shown the royal prisoner's miserable little room. At Worksop he spent a night, and in the morning stayed for breakfast, which ended, "there was such store of provision

left, of fowls, fish, and almost everything, besides bread, beere and wines, that it was left open for any man that would, to come and take".

In the State papers relating to the Rebellion of '45 may be found a curious and interesting account of a secret hiding-place, reached by lifting a sheet of lead on the roof. A tattling young woman told the story upon oath, describing a staircase that descended to a little room with a fireplace, a bed, and a few chairs, with a door in the wainscot that opened to a place full of arms. Unfortunately, both history and tradition are silent concerning any shelter offered by Worksop Manor to proscribed folk.

After the burning of the new house, in 1761, the Duke of Norfolk, Lord Shrewsbury's descendant, laid the foundation stone of another in 1763. We learn that this was to have been one of the largest in England; but that only one side of the proposed quadrangle was completed, although five hundred workmen were employed, and closely supervised by the duchess in person. This stood for three-quarters of a century; then, the estate being sold to the Duke of Newcastle, the greater part of the house was pulled down and the present place built.

Of the original park, which Evelyn mentions as "sweet and delectable", nowadays there is but little to be seen. There still remains, however, a beech grove called the "Druid's Temple", a "Lover's Walk" for sentimental youth, and a wood of acacias and cedars, yews and tulip trees – once known as the "Wilderness",

but since the eighteenth century called the "Menagerie", because of a Duchess of Norfolk who kept an aviary within its precincts. Mrs. Delany, in 1756, thus alludes to this place: "We went there on Sunday evening; but I only saw a crown bird and a most delightful cockatoo, with yellow breast and topping". There is an air of pleasing disorder about the drives, and one is occasionally reminded of Irish demesnes.

Within a mile of the house once stood the celebrated "Shire oak" – a gigantic tree whose branches overshadowed a portion of Nottinghamshire, of Derbyshire, and of Yorkshire. Evelyn tells us that the distance from bough-end to bough-end was ninety feet, and that two hundred and thirty-five horses might have sheltered beneath its foliage. This tree disappeared entirely in the eighteenth century, and the exact site is now a matter of some uncertainty.

# SHERWOOD FOREST AND ROBIN HOOD

To savour the full charm of Sherwood Forest one must stray from the highroad, lose one's path, and wander in happy patience until a broad avenue is reached, or above the treetops one sees the slender and graceful spire of some stately church. The formal beauty of the frequented ways – trimly kept and splendidly coloured – precludes all illusion: only in the remote solitudes with their monstrous old trees is it possible to evoke a mind picture of Robin Hood and his devoted followers. And even in the most secluded places the imagined pageant of these folk suggests the theatre. The loveliness seems unreal – a background devised by some scene-painter of genius.

But Sherwood is always beautiful and always tranquil; to those who know aught of wood magic it is as fair in cold midwinter as in autumn, when the leaves are no longer green leaves, but a rich mosaic of russet and orange and sullen red. My most wonderful memory is of a November day when a fine snow was falling, and the leaves drifted downward in a continuous murmuring veil. Then, no rabbits played upon the grassy wayside or crossed the track, and the pheasants shivered in their hidden shelters. In early springtime one best realizes the antiquity; the first opening leaves call to mind pale lichen growing upon damp

castle walls: in summer the air is languorous, bringing a desire for rest and contemplation. Storms are impious there: the ancient oaks and birches and chestnuts must wail and protest, like dotards wakened from senility to cruel hours of actual life.

Of the old forest naught remains in perfection save the southern parts known as Birkland and Bilhagh, in the neighbourhood of Edwinstowe and Ollerton. Near the former village may be seen the famous "Major Oak" and "Robin Hood's Larder". The full glory departed several centuries ago; Camden himself writes of "Sherewood, which some interpret as *clear Wood*, others as *famous Wood*, formerly one close continu'd shade with the boughs of trees so entangled in one another, that one could hardly walk single in the paths," that "at present it is much thinner, and feeds an infinite number of Deer and Stags".

In British times the district was occupied by the tribe of the Coritani, and later the Romans built several camps here, various relics of which were discovered in the eighteenth century. Not far away, Edwin, the Saxon King of Northumbria, was slain in battle – fighting against Penda, King of Mercia, and Cadwallader, King of Wales; and in all probability his body was buried at the village of Edwinstowe.

The earliest definite notice of Sherwood dates from the days of Henry the Second, when William Peverel had control and profit of the district under the Crown. After his dispossession, a lady named Matilda de Caux and her husband held the office of Chief Foresters. In Edward the First's time this office was

seized by the Crown, and granted, as a special mark of favour, to persons of high station.

The *Charta de Foresta*, constructed in Henry the Third's reign, contains some curious information about woodland customs. We learn that "any archbishop, bishop, earl, or baron, coming to the King at his command, and passing through the forests, might take and kill one or two of the King's deer, by view of the forester if he were present; if not, then he might do it upon the blowing of a horn, that it might not look like a theft. The same might be done when they returned."<sup>1</sup> Courts called Swainmotes were held thrice yearly – one fifteen days before Michaelmas, a second about the Feast of St. Martin, and a third fifteen days before St. John Baptist's Day. At the same time the cruel punishments for offences against the forest laws were lessened in rigour. Thenceforth no man was punished with death or mutilation for illegally hunting, but if found taking venison was fined heavily. If he were unable to pay, he was imprisoned for a year and a day, and then discharged upon pledges; but if unable to find any surety, was exiled.

The chief officers were known as foresters, verderors, woodwards, and agisters. Each verderor had the liberty of taking a tree out of Birkland or Billhagh; but this privilege seems to have been abused, since in later years the officers were found to choose the best timber available, and in William the Third's reign the favour was withdrawn.

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<sup>1</sup> Reeves's *English Law*.

Until the sixteenth century the forest seems to have been infested with wolves: we read that one, Sir Robert Plumpton, in Henry the Sixth's time, held land called "wolf-hunt land" at Mansfield Woodhouse, seven or eight miles away, by service of horn-blowing to chase or frighten away these creatures. In 1635, from a survey taken by royal command, it was discovered that the forests contained 1367 red deer, 987 of these being "rascalds", or ill-conditioned. A few years before, the district had been ravaged by fire, and a contemporary writer describes the conflagration as one such as was "never knowne in menes memory; beinge four mille longe and a mille and a halfe over all at once". Later the gentleman tells how "ridinge on his way through the forest homeward, he saw a greate herde of faire red deere, and amongst them 2 extreordanory greet stages, the which he never saw the like".

Much of the forest oak was used for the royal navy, but more was allowed to decay. Folk of good birth but fallen fortunes frequently begged a grant of these trees from the Crown. In 1677 Thoroton writes that so many claims were granted that there would soon not be wood enough left to cover the bilberries! As time went on, the cleared portions, being of no further use for kingly sport, were sold to various noblemen. In 1683, 1270 acres were bought by the Duke of Kingston, to add to Thoresby Park; while early in the eighteenth century 3000 acres were enclosed for the making of Clumber Park. The last portions of the forest remaining were the hays, or enclosures, of Birkland and

Bilhagh, which were granted to the Duke of Portland about 1827, in exchange for the perpetual advowson of St. Mary-le-Bone. Bilhagh later became the property of the late Earl Manvers, its price being the manors of Holbeck and Bonbusk, near Welbeck. After the resignation of the Crown lands the waning historical interest of Sherwood ceased. Birkland and Bilhagh are still beautiful as in their prime, but the rest of the neighbourhood is nowadays naught but a wonderful pleasaunce, where drowsy pheasants wander unafraid, and where the chief signs of life are on holidays, when happy folk crowd from the neighbouring towns to view, awestricken, the wonders and the riches of the great houses, and the artificial beauties of perhaps the finest parks in England.

One or two literary men of some distinction have rhapsodized over the charms of Sherwood, notably William Howitt and Washington Irving. Lord Byron, whose house of Newstead lies not far away, displayed but little interest in the district. The only modern writer to whom the secret of the real Sherwood has been fully divulged is Mr. James Prior, whose books, inspired by the spirit of the woodlands, should delight all who love fresh and wholesome pictures of unspoiled country life.

Sherwood, as everybody knows, was Robin Hood's kingdom. Learned men have racked their brains concerning the great outlaw's existence. Joseph Hunter, the historian of Hallamshire, published in 1852 an ingenious tract concerning his period and his real character, which in short gives plausible enough details

of his adventures. There is a well known by his name not far from Doncaster, another near Hathersage, in the Peak Country; and more than one village prides itself upon the site of his "Shooting Butts". A cave, by legend ascribed to him, may be found on an "edge" overhanging the Derwent valley, whilst within an easy walk of Haddon Hall one may see two rocks known as his "Stride".

Langland, in the *Vision of Piers Plowman*, makes the first mention of his popularity: —

"I kan not parfitly my paternoster, as the priest sayeth,  
But I kan rymes of Robyn Hode and Randolf, Earl of  
Chester".

Again, in John Fordun's *Scottish Chronicle*, written about 1360, we find him described not only as a notorious robber, but as a man of great charity. In 1493 Wynkyn de Worde printed a sequence of old ballads treating of his adventures. This book, known as *The Lytel Geste of Robyn Hood*, became very popular, and brought into vogue the rustic pageants known as the Robin Hood Games, in which the adventures of the outlaw and his companions, Maid Marion, Little John, Will Scarlet, and Friar Tuck, were depicted for the admiration of the multitude.

In the public library of the University of Cambridge is preserved the manuscript of the finest and most ancient ballad. This, which is known as "A Tale of Robin Hood", may be cited in its quaint and dramatic picturesqueness as the most perfect and complete example of song literature extant. It begins

with Robin's desire to attend church at Nottingham, since "It is a fortnight and more sin' I my Saviour saw". Little John accompanies him, but on the way they quarrel about a wager, and Robin strikes him, upon which the faithful servant departs in high dudgeon. At Nottingham a hooded monk recognizes our hero and gives the alarm. He is surrounded by the sheriff and his followers, and, although he slays twelve men, is at last captured, and held in durance until Little John, who has quite forgiven him, accomplishes his release by a clever stratagem.

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