Outlaws!

(Or: How merry was it, really, in the 13th century?)

Tutor: I read some good stories, the other day.

*Student: Oh yes?*

All about outlaws.

*Outlaws?*

In the 13th century.

*Like Robin Hood and his Merry Men?*

Oh. Have you read these stories?

*Yes.*

They make it sound very romantic.

*It wasn’t really.*

I suppose not.

*And they aren’t really true, either!*

I did wonder.

*Robin Hood may have been a real person.*

And he may have lived in Sherwood Forest.

*As an outlaw.*

Yes, as an outlaw.

*But it wasn’t quite like in the stories.*

No.

*England was very different then.*

Very different.

*This was in the 13th century.*

About 1250, in fact.

*That’s almost 800 years ago.*

Yes.

*England was very different, 800 years ago.*

There were nothing like so many people.

*Nothing like.*

There were towns here and there.

*Quite small, though.*

Most of them were very small.

*Compared to today.*

Yes.

*And there was miles of forest between the towns.*

Most of England was forest.

*Miles and miles and miles of trees.*

Oak trees, mainly.

*Each town was like a little island.*

In a sea of forest.

*Most towns had a wall round them.*

And big gates.

*They had to.*

For safety.

*Well, it was dangerous outside town.*

Very dangerous.

*Little roads ran between the towns.*

Through the enormous forest.

*Rough roads.*

Full of potholes.

*Stony roads.*

Just tracks, really.

*Dusty in summer.*

*Muddy in winter.*

You couldn’t go at any speed.

*Everyone walked.*

Or rode a horse.

*Poor people walked.*

Some carts struggled along.

*Some rich people went by carriage.*

Some did.

*But it was very uncomfortable.*

Very bumpy.

*And very slow.*

It was also dangerous.

*Very dangerous.*

All sorts of people lived in the forests.

*Some of them were outlaws.*

They held travellers up.

*Especially the rich ones, I suppose.*

And stole from them.

*Sometimes they killed them.*

Yes.

*Each town had a sheriff.*

He was supposed to keep law and order.

*He was supposed to work for the King.*

But it wasn’t always like that.

*The Sheriff did what he wanted, really.*

Pretty much.

*And you did what he wanted too!*

You were in big trouble otherwise!

*A sheriff was usually very rich.*

Rich enough to pay for a small army of men.

*Who did what he told them to.*

The Sheriff’s Men.

*Yes.*

Outlaws were a big deal.

*A real problem.*

If they caught an outlaw, they usually hanged him.

*You could be hanged for stealing a sheep.*

Or killing a deer.

*Some sheriffs were better than others.*

Some were really awful.

*Yes.*

It was dangerous to get on the wrong side of the sheriff.

*Very.*

It was dangerous to break the law.

*Very.*

If you were caught, you might easily be hanged.

*Easily.*

You had to run!

*You had to get out of town.*

Then you had to live outside town.

*As best you could.*

You had to live in the forest.

*As best you could.*

You were now outside the law.

*You were now an outlaw.*

You could never be seen in town again.

*It wasn’t safe.*

No.

*It was hard to stay alive in the forest.*

That’s why so many outlaws took to crime.

*They more or less had to.*

Just to stay alive.

*They were hunted.*

By the sheriff’s men.

*Hunted and killed, sometimes.*

Some sheriffs were bad men.

*Some were very bad indeed.*

Treated the people badly.

*Pushed them around.*

Took their money.

*Or goods.*

Made them work for nothing.

*The people had no way to fight back.*

None at all.

*You had to be careful.*

Watch out.

*You could easily find yourself in jail.*

Or even hanged.

*So bad sheriffs were feared.*

And hated. Feared and hated.

*So people saw outlaws as heroes, sometimes.*

Some people, anyway.

*And some outlaws.*

Just because they were against the sheriff.

*The sheriff of Nottingham was one of the worst of all.*

Which is where Robin Hood and his Merry Men come in.

*Well, it’s where they may come in.*

Of course.

*Because Robin Hood may not have been a real person.*

It may have been a story.

*Told by people who hated the sheriff.*

People who wanted a hero.

*Someone against the sheriff.*

So a story grew up.

*About a band of outlaws.*

Who lived in Sherwood Forest.

*Yes.*

Close to Nottingham.

*They stole from the rich.*

But gave to the poor.

*Or so the stories say.*

A lot of people were very, very poor.

*And some people were very, very rich.*

This band of outlaws was led by Robin Hood.

*And the band was called his Merry Men.*

In the stories, anyway.

*Yes.*

There were loads of stories about them.

*And songs.*

Yes.

*Sometimes they hunted deer.*

Which was against the King’s law.

*Well, yes.*

The King owned most of the land.

*And everything on it.*

Yes.

*You could be hanged for killing a deer.*

So outlaws held up rich people.

*Travelling in the forest.*

And stole everything they had.

*Money*.

Jewels.

*Warm clothes.*

Whatever.

*Yes. Whatever.*

The sheriff’s men tried to catch them.

*But it was difficult.*

The Merry Men were very cunning.

*It was very difficult to catch them.*

At least in the stories.

*Sometimes one of them was caught.*

But the Merry Men always rescued him.

*Romantic!*

But maybe not quite true!

*No, maybe not.*

A lot of it is made up.

*Over the years.*

Maybe it was just exaggerated?

*Although there was an outlaw called Robert Hod.*

Was there?

*Yes.*

Around that time?

*Yes.*

In Sherwood Forest?

*Yes.*

Most stories like these have a grain of truth in them.

*Yes.*

Robert Hod, for example.

*Yes, poor Robert Hod.*

Poor Robert Hod?

*He was hanged, in the end.*

In the stories, the sheriff never catches Robin Hood.

*No, of course not! Not for long, anyway!*

But then the stories may have been made up.

*Or exaggerated.*

Or made up from stories about many different outlaws.

*And you can see why.*

People hated the sheriff.

*And they hated very rich people.*

Well, they made the lives of ordinary people so hard.

*Well, yes, they did.*

So everyone wanted a hero.

*A hero who was on their side.*

A hero to fight the Sherriff.

*So maybe they invented one.*

Maybe they did.

*Someone who robbed the rich.*

But gave to the poor.

*Romantic!*

But unlikely.

*Very unlikely.*

There is nothing to show that any outlaw ever did that.

*Nothing at all.*

Sad, really.

*Yes.*

It is true that many outlaws lived in the forest.

*And they did rob rich people.*

And probably some lived in bands.

*Probably.*

And they probably tried to help their families back in town.

*Maybe they gave stuff to them to sell.*

Stuff they had stolen

*They couldn’t sell anything themselves.*

No. It was far too dangerous to come into town.

*So maybe they gave it to someone to sell for them.*

They must have done.

*Family or friends.*

You can see how the idea might have grown up.

*The idea that they gave to the poor?*

Yes.

*Well, they did, in a way.*

It probably wasn’t much fun.

*Living in the forest?*

Yes.

*No.*

Not like the stories tell it.

*They must have been hungry a lot of the time.*

Not much food.

*And almost none of it was nice.*

No.

*They probably lived off pottage.*

Pottage?

*That’s a kind of porridge.*

Probably cold.

*Lumpy*.

Grey.

*Thin.*

No sugar.

*They wouldn’t have had sugar.*

No salt either.

*They might cook the odd rabbit.*

If they could catch it.

*Maybe a deer.*

If they were lucky.

*But they were on the run the whole time.*

They had to keep moving.

*If they were caught, they would be hanged.*

They must have slept out in the open.

*On the bare ground.*

They must been cold, too.

*And wet.*

Dirty.

*And bored.*

There wasn’t much to do.

*No telly!*

No smart phones!

*No X-box.*

And only pottage to look forward to.

*Pottage for breakfast.*

Pottage for lunch.

*Pottage for dinner.*

Pottage, pottage, pottage.

*How Merry is that?*