



Robin of Sherwood

In the first of our new features celebrating the finest television shows of our youth, Jayne Nelson salutes a series that turned a medieval myth into '80s fantasy...

It's impossible to remember *Robin of Sherwood* clearly. We mean that quite literally, too. Liberal use of coloured filters, smoke machines and soft-focus lenses gave the series a woozy, dreamlike quality that occasionally made you want to rub your eyes clean. Far from making you long for the hard, crystal clarity of hi-def, however, these hazy visuals still work a treat almost 25 years on. After all, this was supposed to be the Robin Hood legend as seen through your mind's eye; a fantastical realm of witches and wizards mingling with the solid crossbows and chainmail of Norman soldiers. Its nearest parallel is the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy: dirty



Did he just get him in the groin? That's a low blow, Robin.

England's most famous outlaw will probably never be bettered.

HIGHS AND LOWS

Alright, so *Robin of Sherwood* had its ups and downs – mostly towards the end of the show's three-series run – but ultimately it was a beautifully emotive, mystical adventure series. Putting aside the excellent writing, moody cinematography and haunting score, its main strength lay in its cast. No other Marion has ever managed to radiate innocence, delicate charm and quiet dignity like Judi Trott's flame-haired muse. Clive Mantle's gruff Little John was a growling beast of a fighter with a

Ray Winstone's depiction of Will Scarlet as a rough and tumble bully boy was one of the best things on TV

fingernails and muddy boots existing in the same universe as sorcerers and monsters. That's what made it so different. That's what made it so good.

No other adaptation of the legend has even come close. Forget Kevin Costner's chubby hero in *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*, or the green tights and derring-do of Richard Greene or Errol Flynn. Forget those countless Hollywood retreads or the daft primetime shenanigans of the BBC's current *Sherwood* series.

In fact, forget every Robin Hood (particularly the American ones who always insist on calling themselves "Robinhood"). This incarnation of

BEST EPISODES



1 THE GREATEST ENEMY (Series Two)

Michael Praed's parting story manages to outdo all 26 episodes of the series so far, with a beautifully-shot finale that tugs both bowstrings and heartstrings. When the Sheriff finally gets his act together and ruthlessly hunts down the outlaws, Robin of Loxley has to make the ultimate sacrifice (something Jason Connery's character never got round to). We defy you not to shed a tear.



2 THE SWORDS OF WAYLAND (Series Two)

This two-part episode is a riot of imagery and ideas, from the terrifying Hounds of Lucifer attacking an innocent village (actually men on horseback in flamboyant, Terry Gilliam-esque costumes) to the sight of Rula Lenska's mad priestess trying to raise Lucifer in an abbey full of crazed nuns. This was Saturday teatime viewing, by the way...



3 THE SHERIFF OF NOTTINGHAM (Series Three)

Not the flashiest of episodes, true, but a wonderful character study from Nickolas Grace. After one too many blunders, the Sheriff is dismissed and sent into Sherwood Forest in rags, where he's promptly captured by Robin and his merry mates. The Sheriff's impassioned speech about why he hates them all so much is the key to the entire series.



BEST GUEST STARS

1



JOHN RHYSDAVIES
(KING RICHARD)

In "The King's Fool" Robin and his cohorts rescue Richard the Lionheart from an ambush and find themselves pardoned by way of a thank you. Davies gives a stellar performance as the cocky King, dripping with dangerous charisma.

2



RULA LENSKA
(MORGWYN OF RAVENSCAR)

Long before her *Celebrity Big Brother* days, Rula Lenska proved she wasn't just a pretty face with this frankly terrifying performance as a deranged Abbess in "The Swords of Wayland". Never has a wimple seemed so chilling.

3



OLIVER COTTON
(LORD OWEN OF CLUN)

His face painted blue and his lust for Marion fiery red, Cotton's animalistic Owen was the bad guy the new Robin had to defeat in "Herne's Son". Cotton gave it his all with this ferocious turn – and so did Owen, who ended up impaled under a portcullis (that's just gotta be some kind of phallic revenge).



heart so soft it must have been stuffed with feathers. A pox on Alan Rickman's pantomime performance as the Sheriff of Nottingham on the big screen; Nickolas Grace's conniving, snakelike Sheriff not only takes the cake but all the servant wenches who baked it, too. And it's no surprise that Ray Winstone went on to conquer Hollywood, for his depiction of Will Scarlet as a rough-and-tumble bully boy was one of the best things on TV in the '80s.

Show creator Richard Carpenter and producer Paul Knight even managed to shoehorn in a brand new character, Mark Ryan's leather-clad Saracen, Nasir, then watched as popular culture vacuumed him up and absorbed him into the myth. Saracens have since popped up in *Prince of Thieves* and the new BBC series, proving how influential the

show really was. ("The idea of a Saracen prancing around in Sherwood Forest is a bit far fetched," says Carpenter wryly, "but it worked.")

Which brings us, of course, to Robin. Carpenter admits to casting Michael Praed because he had a "fey" quality about him, and that's exactly the aura that Robin of Loxley needed. He's the archetypal leader: a man of action, but also a dreamer, the perfect foil to Marion's otherworldly grace and more than capable of standing up to dissenters in his team as well as Norman soldiers. If you look beyond Praed's flowing '80s mullet and crisp, too-posh voice, you can plainly see why he commands such respect. For



Isn't that the Holy Grail prop from *Indiana Jones*?

It's set in the 12th century, history's Silly Helmet period.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Creator Richard Carpenter
"We assumed we were to do a fourth series and many loose ends would have been resolved. Gisborne would have discovered that he was Robin's half brother – there would have been more dissension within the band. It is possible the Sheriff would have been replaced and Much murdered. Who knows?"

many, Praed is still the definitive Robin i' the Hood, even though he made only as many episodes as his successor.

PRAED'S PARTING

When Praed left the series, Carpenter had to figure out a way of replacing him. "I revived the 16th-century idea that Robin Hood was the son of the Earl of Huntingdon," he explains. "And created the idea that Robin Hood was a kind of title – which it probably was anyway." Thus, Robert of Huntingdon left behind his riches and picked up a longbow. Jason Connery was a total contrast to Praed: stockier and more powerful than his predecessor, he possessed none of Praed's ethereal poise and, some might say, acting skills. However, while he can be a little wooden at times, he's actually a fine choice for the role, mooning over the widowed Marion and squaring his jaw as he comes up with scheme after scheme to thwart the Sheriff.

Robin of Sherwood focused, naturally, on the eternal battle between the Sheriff of Nottingham and the "wolfsheds" in Sherwood Forest. The Sheriff wasn't

BEST VILLAINS (Sheriff aside!)



GULNAR

Former right-hand-sorcerer to Owen of Clun and very nearly Robin's undoing in both "Cromm Cruac" and "The Time of the Wolf", Gulnar was brought to cackling life by Richard O'Brien in a performance that would've given Gollum a run for his runestones.



THE KNIGHTS TEMPLAR

Never, ever cross one of these guys. Tricked into thinking that Robin stole one of their sacred relics in "Seven Poor Knights From Acre", these fanatical Crusaders wreak havoc in Sherwood as they hunt him down. Think of them as plous Terminators on horseback.



BARON DE BELLEME

Anthony Valentine's dark-robed Baron might come across like some kind of Sirius Snape figure (all one-word answers and steely glares) but he had cool menace down to a fine art and nearly beat Robin in three episodes. He's very camp on the gag reel, though.



Little John was a growling beast of a fighter with a heart so soft it must have been stuffed with feathers



Almost as much hair on his chest as on his head.



The lovely Judi Trott married one of the show's camera operators: fact.



Nicholas Grace (right) is reputedly the only Sheriff ever to have killed Robin.

TRIVIA

► Neil Morrissey was originally approached to replace Michael Praed and was even told to "bulk up" for the role before blond hunk Jason Connery snagged it.

► The Sheriff's bling-tastic chain of office was apparently made from biscuits spray-painted gold and stuck together with glue.

► Wayne Michaels, who played Robin of Loxley's father Ailric in the very first episode, was the stuntman who did the spectacular bungee jump off the dam at the start of *GoldenEye*.

► The theme tune is on Clannad's eighth album "Legend", the first Irish soundtrack record to win a BAFTA award.



Never trust a nun from anywhere called Ravenscar.

their only foe, though. In fitting with the magical realism of the series, the Robins faced off with everything from wicked witches ("The Enchantment") to terrible, albeit suspiciously rubbery, monsters ("Cromm Cruac"). It wasn't all fantasy: as a history buff, Carpenter's scripts were gratifyingly rich with period colour. Some stories focused on such figures as King John or Richard the Lionheart, while the Crusades and the

machinations of the church provided further tension.

The series was shot almost entirely on location, much of it featuring countryside so beautiful that you find yourself longing for the kind of nomadic life Robin and his men lived. It's impossible to watch them gallivanting about in a summer meadow and not feel jealous; but then there are more than enough scenes of them fighting for their lives in freezing rain to redress the balance.

Similarly, the stone interiors of the great castles and palaces inhabited by the rich look dark, damp and bleak, filled with greasy smoke from fires. Because of this location filming, there's an authenticity in *Robin* missing from the vast majority of television shows to this day. Hell, Carpenter was such an expert on medieval times that he even made sure nobody in the series was ever seen writing with their left hand; in the old days, that was frowned upon as a sign of the Devil...

A FAMILY AFFAIR

After the company funding it got into financial difficulties, *Robin* was cancelled, after only three series, in 1986. Because there was no warning, the final script ended on a cliffhanger – something we've become only too used to in this day and age. For years the show was kept alive on video (for complicated contractual reasons, it never aired again on terrestrial TV) but it's only really blossomed since hitting DVD. The extras on the box sets are extensive, with every main cast member interviewed and commentaries

galore, and great gag reels: when you view them, one thing becomes clear.

Between the forgotten lines, horses farting and actors slipping over in the mud, it's obvious how well the cast and crew worked with each other; how the entire enterprise had that "family" feel that's become such a cliché in our cynical age. Not for nothing do all the Merry Men remain good friends a quarter of a century on – they really did become a band of brothers. It's visible when you watch the show, too: the series all but glows with the earnest joy of those involved.

In the long history of the legend of Robin Hood, *Robin of Sherwood* is just one tiny footnote; a firefly retelling of a tale that has already been told so many times. Don't take that to mean it's not important, though. Ignore the imposters: this is everything *Robin Hood* should be... and more. **SFX**



Gemma Craven as the evil witch Lilith, who casts a spell on Robin.

