

*"In the days of the Lion spawned of the Devil's brood, the Hooded Man shall come to the forest. There he will meet Herne the Hunter, Lord of the Trees, and be his son and do his bidding. The Powers of Light and Darkness shall be strong within him. And the guilty shall tremble."*  
(Prophecies of Gildas)

**R**ICHARD CARPENTER had successfully managed to turn legendary criminal and cut-throat Dick Turpin into a heart-of-gold-but-just-a-bit-roughish-around-the-edges good guy. If Turpin could be successfully presented to the nation as literally a Gentleman of the Road, then it would be no trouble for Carpenter to resurrect Robin Hood as a hero for our times — after all, legend was already on his side.

Throughout the centuries, tales of the outlaw had snowballed enough to turn

# Robin of Sherwood

him from a common thief and murderer into a freedom fighting hero, exercising his altruistic bow and arrow against the evils of Norman oppression. Errol Flynn

in technicolour tights, Richard Greene ('feared by the bad, loved by the good') and even a cute furry fox in the Disney movie had all contributed to the image of the people's hero, robbing from the rich to feed the poor. A classic tale.

If Carpenter no longer had the opportunity of presenting an infamous bad egg in a new light, then a new angle was needed. Being Carpenter, he found several.

## Fantasy and Magic

The most obvious liberty taken with the tales of the Greenwood was the generous helping of Fantasy and Magic in the series. The above quote is the basis for the series, strangely attributed to the Sixth Century historian, Gildas. Thus, Robin Hood is more than just the bold, idealistic, Saxon-blooded folk hero, he's also the spiritually empowered 'son' of Herne the Hunter, Lord of the Trees.

This more fantastic slant upon the legend may seem at odds with the second major departure from the traditional Robin Hood adventures — a move towards greater realism. However, the spiritual power imbued upon the outlaws does add credibility to their survival against the odds. The series never overplayed this and, indeed, the outlaws were as mortal as the next man. However, Herne occasionally intervened directly (for example, to save, on separate occasions, Robin and Marion from lethal crossbow/arrow attacks) and often acted as a warning to the outlaws, thus giving them the upper hand. These talents did not always prove enough, however, and along with numerous uncredited Sherwood martyrs, Dicken, Tom, and even Robin himself, lost their lives for the cause.

**Opposite page:** The quieter side of *Robin of Sherwood*, Marion (Judi Trott) and Much (Peter Lleyellyn)



The two Robins with Marion and the Merry Men, Michael Praed (above) and Jason Connery (below)









It is in the visuals that Fantasy and realism merge into one, making perfect bedfellows. On the one hand, villages and towns are breathtakingly reconstructed, and the people amassed for impressive crowd scenes are diseased and filthy. On the other, the visuals are far from real: they are ghostly, magical and ethereal. Utilising probably the most cinematic approach ever taken by a television series, the programme incorporates a whole livery of coloured filters (predominantly a blood red), frosted lenses and white mist. The camera work favours low angles; slow motion and composite mixes. A particularly impressive visual technique is a combined slow motion and zoom effect. Needless to say, as chief protagonist in many of these beautifully constructed visuals, the regular cast themselves are far from the rotting, shambling peasants that populate the villages and towns. Despite their lifestyle, there's not a black tooth in Sherwood and Jason Connery does particularly well to keep his fair hair so miraculously clean and shiny; a dazzling blonde beacon in the middle of the forest. Dramatic licence, yes, but no-one wants to see a diseased humpback buckling the swash.

## Traditional Elements

Among all the fantasy and magic there is, of course, a healthy dose of good old derring-do. No sorcery without sword, and no Robin Hood without the clashing of metal and twanging of bow strings. Ex-**Doctor Who** man Terry Walsh co-ordinated all the fighting, encompassing every cliché bar the slapping of thighs. Other traditional elements of the Robin Hood legend have been worked cleverly into the scripts, more than usually with the standard Carpenter twists: Little John may be the possessed sorcerer's servant, but he still gets to fight Robin on the log over the stream. The silver arrow may be a mystical object of the Gods, but Robin still gets the chance to enter the archery contest to win it. Other traditional lores have been more straightforward in their presentation, such as the encounter between King Richard (the Lion spawned of the Devil's Brood) and the outlaws, in the forest. Interestingly, the initial meeting between Robin Hood and Friar Tuck is not in the traditional manner of Robin discovering the Friar sleeping by the river. More through happy coincidence than good judgement, this allowed Jason Connery's Robin to meet him in this way.

The Gildas prophecy is indicative of a potentially controversial risk taken by the production team: a paganistic approach. Not only is Herne the Hunter a Pagan God,



The main enemies, above: Sir Guy of Gisburne (Robert Addie) in a tricky moment with Nasir (Mark Ryan) and below: Sheriff de Rainault (Nickolas Grace)



but the series is also influenced by the Pagan belief of two definite opposing factions: Good and Evil. This black and white approach is strong within the programme: "The forces of Light and Darkness" as Herne refers to them. Just as Herne is the representative of Good, Evil is also portrayed physically when, in *The Swords of Wayland*, Lucifer is summoned into actual corporeal existence.

The references to 'Light and Darkness' are typically dramatic. The series boasts a gratifying amount of dialogue that is stirring, lyrical and poetic. Take for example the words of Herne the Hunter, "We can all be Gods, all of us... I am Herne the Hunter and you are a leaf, driven by the wind... What binds the Hunter to the Hunted?"

Despite some occasionally corny statements from Robin, the dialogue on the whole is made up of a clever concoction of bombastic prophecies, mystical riddles, acerbic wit (notably from the Sheriff of Nottingham) and contemporary politics, all of which, combined with possibly the best soundtrack ever written for television (Clannad's **Legend**) make the series as pleasant to the ear as the eye.

## Rising Stars

**Robin of Sherwood** was one of the few high profile drama series to hand out its fair share of breaks to upcoming young actors. Michael Praed, Jason Connery, Phil Rose, Judi Trott and Peter Llewellyn were all virtual unknowns at the time of casting. Some of these paid off better than others: Michael Praed, after initial nerves proved himself to be a deliberately different Robin Hood — a more reserved and less certain hero than had previously been explored in the part.

Phil Rose and Clive Mantle, the closest thing in *Sherwood* to a double act, worked brilliantly well together, and Peter Llewellyn coped well with the admittedly undemanding Much. Judi Trott, on the other hand, was wont to show her inexperience, as was Jason Connery, whose gathering up of Praed's well-earned reins was a risk that never really paid off, with Connery's performance continually jarring throughout season three.

The programme covered itself, however, by littering the episodes with respected faces from the industry, such as Cyril Cusack, Rula Lenska, Anthony Valentine and Oliver Tobias. Unsurprisingly though, most praise seems to have been lauded upon the interplay between Nickolas Grace as Sheriff de Rainault and Robert Addie's Sir Guy of Gisburne. The misogynistic Sheriff and the heterosexually promiscuous Gisburne fight like



Gemma Craven, as the evil enchantress Liliith, bewitches Robin

cat and dog constantly, with Grace and Addie each trying their hardest to ham each other off the screen. Whilst this appreciation is justified, it is far easier to make an impression this way, and the distinctly underplayed Robin of Loxley should not be obscured in the handing out of honours.

**Robin of Sherwood** was probably Carpenter's most successful work, both commercially and critically. With the injection of resources from Goldcrest Films and Gatetran Productions, it had a cinematic quality rarely seen on the small screen. At times cited as the mainstay of Goldcrest, and others a contributing factor in its eventual collapse, **Robin of Sherwood**, as Philip Purser comments in Halliwell's Television Companion, 'returned Robin Hood to the league of first

class legends'. The eventual collapse of Goldcrest, a leading light in the British Film Industry, meant that the series never made it to a fourth season. With the increasing shift in focus towards more independent production companies in today's television, one such body should seriously consider an investment of funds in resurrecting these more-than-tales-from-the-greenwood. However, it would need to work hard to maintain the consistency of standard that the first three series exhaustively upheld.

If **Robin of Sherwood** is to be relegated eternally to memory, videotape and the dishes of satellite broadcasting, then it can at least find solace in the words of its protagonist: "Nothing's forgotten. Nothing is ever forgotten."

Paul Kirkley