

## **A talk about 'the life of St Robert', given at Knaresborough Library on the 16<sup>th</sup> August 2016 as part of the town's FEVA events...**

For everything 'St Robert' visit [www.strobertofknaresborough.org.uk](http://www.strobertofknaresborough.org.uk)



### **Introduction**

The story I want to tell describes the spiritual journey of a man who was torn between different ways of responding to a call that God had placed on his life. But he, gradually drew strength from following a path of discipleship in becoming like Christ in both suffering and in service. It's a story of setbacks but ultimately of hard-won triumphs, not only for Robert, but for those around him, which is why my historical fiction is about the people St Robert developed a relationship with – an approach that I also think brings the person himself into sharper relief.

It's a story with a backcloth of medieval England, the bustling economy, the vulnerability of ordinary people to the impact of poor harvests, and the inevitability of taxes and death. And because we face the same sort of struggles, power-plays, vulnerabilities and intrigue that surrounded St Robert, this, I believe, is a story for today too. And if for today, how fitting that it is told to the good people of Knaresborough, for whom St Robert gave up so much simply because his Lord and Saviour had given up so much for him.

I'm going to tell the story in five parts, so that you can keep track. And there'll be an image relevant to each part shown on the screen to provide a visual representation of a key point or theme. We're going to consider Robert growing up in York; seeking solitude; facing conflict; serving the people of Knaresborough; and finally speaking truth to power.

### **Growing up in York**

If you want to find a time when the North of England, and Yorkshire in particular, was the economic powerhouse of England you'd find a good contender for the title during the late 12<sup>th</sup> Century. It was then, 850 years ago, that Took and Siminima Flower gave birth to their first son, Robert.

Born into a leading family in York, growth was all around you, growth in population and in trade. If you walked the streets there would have been a bustle in the market, and particularly around the Minster with skilled stone masons and other craftsmen contributing to the on-going building work.

Robert was born into a family that were part of a growing group of merchants, oiling the wheels of the growing economy. Wealth likely to have come from the wool trade, or something similar. And trade that would have been international, with strong links to the continent via the North Sea and down to Flanders, modern day Netherlands or Belgium.

His family's wealth and standing made it possible for Robert to receive a good education, perhaps the best in St Peter's School, already 550 years old in his own time. He received a solid basis of teaching in Latin and in rhetoric, the art of logic, reasoning and debate.

I have imagined Robert as a lively and inquisitive young boy. Making friends with other children, sticking up for his younger brother Walter in the rough and tumble of play.

But, despite the economic growth, there were also the left-behinds, and the financially vulnerable – any slight knock from misfortune or illness, and hardship was only around the corner. Robert and Walter, running the streets, helping their parents with daily chores, couldn't have failed to notice both the wealth and the needs around them.

And as he grew older, perhaps even as young as 12, Robert would be spending time listening and learning from his parents about the world of business, politics and of course, of religion. And one of those stories of religious intrigue could well have influenced the young Robert. During the 1170's all the talk would have been about Thomas Becket – former archbishop of Canterbury, murdered whilst at prayer on the 29<sup>th</sup> December 1170, with the four knights responsible fleeing north to none other than the castle at Knaresborough.

You can imagine the ebb and flow of the debate and discussions. The cause of the dispute between King and Archbishop had been centred on the crowning of the Young King Henry in York, breaking all protocol, reflecting a north-south disaffection even then; then there would have been the local debates about how to deal with the Knights in the castle during 1171; and when Becket was made a saint in 1173 following reports of many miracles at his tomb there would have been few who didn't at least in public have sympathy for the murdered Archbishop.

We know that part of Robert's time as a boy was spent exploring the local churches, listening, thinking, praying about his future. And it was clear that despite the opportunities, and expectations of him following in his father's footsteps, Robert heard God's calling on his life and responded by setting his sights in a different direction. One of seeking to become more like Christ and serving those in need.

And so, to our first set of images, Holy Trinity Church, Goodramgate, where some of the 12<sup>th</sup> Century stonework can still be seen, and the impressive stone house, built between 1170 and 1180 and likely to be home to a wealthy Jewish family – moneylenders when the charging of interest was forbidden by the Church. An essential service at a time of economic growth.

## Growing up in York

*A bustling, growing and exciting place to grow up in the 1160's and 70's for young Robert*



**Holy Trinity Church, Goodramgate**  
*Some re-used 12<sup>th</sup> Century stone can still be found in the South Wall of this Church*



**The Norman House, Stonegate**  
*The earliest surviving example of a stone house in York, built between 1170 and 1180*

## Seeking solitude

But how, and in what way, should a young, wealthy son of a merchant present himself for service to God? There were options...

There was, of course, service in the local Church by becoming a parish priest, perhaps rising in time to become a bishop, although such positions were almost exclusively reserved for the progeny of Norman Lords, not local upstarts, however wealthy and influential their families. Maybe a rebellious trait in Robert's character made him think he could break the mould, bring the church closer to the people through such revolutionary ideas as having the Bible translated into the vernacular – something he could easily have heard from travelling merchants from Flanders, followers of Peter Walden.

But after taking his first steps in that direction he had second thoughts. Robert, still almost certainly in his mid-teens, made a change of direction – this time travelling 90 miles north to Newminster Abbey at Morpeth, where he set off on a new route to fulfil the calling he felt he had heard from God. The Abbey was Cistercian, who were a relatively new monastic order that had sought to rediscover some of the original vows of poverty and service that many thought the Benedictines had long lost, becoming lax in their devotions and service to those in need. The monastery had been sacked by Scots in recent decades but was now undergoing significant renovation and rebuilding. Perhaps this was the place for Robert to serve.

Exactly why Robert moved on again, apart from the feeling that he was led by the Holy Spirit, is unknown, but it was only a matter of months before he left Newminster, returning home this time for only a few days, and then setting off again, apparently without the knowledge of his parents, to Knaresborough.

Why Knaresborough, we'll never really know, but having turned his back on a life as a prosperous merchant, and then having explored different routes to fulfil his spiritual calling, something about this bustling little town, with its fortress castle and royal hunting grounds, a place of runaway knights and perhaps other intrigues drew the young man to 'see for himself'.

The life he chose at this point was closest to that of a hermit, although such a title covered a range of possibilities, from complete isolation and solitude, totally reliant on others to bring food and sustenance, through to life in a small community, close to, but not formally recognised as a Monastic House.

But Robert never lived the completely isolated life of the classic hermit. Indeed, it seems that he joined up with an existing hermit who longed for company – a knight who, it was said, was putting himself out of reach of King Richard due to some disloyalty or other.

In making this choice Robert was not so much committing himself to a life of solitude for its own sake, but rather as a life that sought more and more to reflect that of Jesus himself. Jesus, after his baptism, was led out to the desert where he was tempted, forty days and forty nights, only to emerge for his ministry having overcome those temptations. Robert knew his Bible, and he knew the world and its intrigues.

In these years of relative solitude – perhaps as many as 10, broadly the 1180's, he would have practiced the Christian disciplines, becoming 'more like Christ in his sufferings.'

And this is where the site itself perhaps has significance. As was quite common in his time, attempts were made to recreate the physical as well as the spiritual conditions that would enable spiritual progress to be made. The images we have here illustrate this clearly – the monastic buildings carved out of rock at the supposed site of Christ's temptations, and the striking similarity, though on a smaller scale, of the cave where Robert lived.

## Seeking solitude

*'Becoming like Christ in his sufferings'*



St Robert's Cave

The reputed site of Jesus' temptations



## Experiencing conflict

When the knight left, Robert sought new means of support and approached a local widow, and landowner, Helena de Plompton, a devout widow living nearby. Support was forthcoming, and at first, he continued to live in solitude, but now at the chapel of St Hilda at Rudfarlington.

At this point it seemed that he could be set on a path that would lead to what we typically think of as a hermit, though not in the cave but at the Chapel. But there followed a series of incidents that reflected the comings and goings and seeming indecision similar to when Robert was first setting out to be obedient to his calling.

First there was an external threat – what were described in his biography as thugs and robbers broke in to his food store in the night destroying everything. Seeing this as a sign to move on, Robert left and sought shelter near the castellated home of the Percy's in Spofforth, 3 miles further from the cave site. Not liking the notoriety and celebrity that this move seemed to attract he moved again to a small Monastery at Hadley, Tadcaster, 10 miles south.

Nothing, however, seemed to settle Robert in his seeking out of the life that he felt called to. This time he found the monks at Hadley too lax, and so, possibly with tail between his legs, he retraced his steps to Helena and Rudfarlington. She was delighted to see him, and it seems now that they hit on the right 'formula'. The sweet point that Robert felt God had been preparing him for. This is how his biographer described the life he settled into:

*Robert, then, returned to the place where he had lived before and to the same blessed matron whom we mentioned earlier. She greatly rejoiced at his glorious arrival and, without delay, assembled builders and all necessary materials for barns to store the fruits of the earth. Robert discouraged any kind of idle talk among his guests and servants, especially when he was taking a meal. He often spent the entire night in prayer and vigils and when he took his limited sleep it was prostrate on the hard floor. He had four servants: two were set on farming work and a third was*



*kept for all the other necessary jobs out in the fields. The fourth he retained by his side as he walked about the neighbourhood begging alms from the faithful on behalf of the poor and needy who gathered round his cell.*

And so, here was a small community, with Robert at its head. Prayer remained central, but here was a small but well-ordered community reaching out to serve the people of Knaresborough, not to mention listening to and praying with those who came to seek his advice.

But all was not well with King and Country, and there is no doubt that Robert both heard and understood what was happening, helped by his education and family experience in York. A perfect storm was brewing, and it would hit hardest on the marginalised and the poor.

Timing is not precise, but the early 1190's, just as Robert was likely to be establishing his small community at Rudfarlington, were characterised by a series of poor harvests at the same time as Richard, recently crowned in 1189, levied additional taxes for the purposes of launching the third crusade to the Holy Land.

Not only did this extract significant amounts of money from the local economy, which is usually associated with inflationary pressures – a double whammy when considering the poor harvests – but many knights, effectively the head of the households and cream of the youth, were also absent for two to three years.

Maintaining order, and the flow of funds to the king overseas, was left to local sheriffs, who had often bought the privileges of raising the local taxes and expected a good return on their investment. They were in turn supported by a range of local tax collectors who felt at liberty to pocket a portion of their hard-earned revenues on behalf of the king. Yes, this is the stuff of Robin Hood, but that's for a different story, and one that is far less reliable in the facts than our own story of St Robert of Knaresborough.

If there was one thing that 'got the goat' of the Sheriffs and other nobles or gave the opportunity for punitive action that might lead to additional revenues for the King it was spotting infringements of the strict and exacting Forest Laws. And so, when Sir William de Stuteville, one of the most powerful overlords with jurisdiction from Lincolnshire, through Yorkshire and up to Northumberland, was passing through the Forest of Knaresborough and observed Robert's small community at Rudfarlington, likely to have included the visitors and needy seeking sustenance, it was in his bones to be interested, and in his nature to be explosive with rage!

Reading from St Robert's biography once more:

*One day it happened that a certain Sir William de Stuteville the lord of that area, came by accident upon Robert's cell. When he saw these [new] buildings, Stuteville made diligent enquiry as to whom they belonged, and his servants told him that a hermit, called Robert, dwelt in that place and that he was most devoted to God. Stuteville, pricked on by diabolical ill-will, was extremely angry and said: "That is not the case at all! This man is an abettor and harbourer of thieves and robbers!" and he made an oath by the eyes of God that Robert should be cast out from his forest nor would he be allowed any further lodging in that place. So, full of threats, he burst out in fury to his servants: "Dependants, throw out this hypocritical Robert as quick as you can and, at the same time, tear down his buildings to their foundations. If he should have the arrogance not to clear out, then be sure to burn him alive along with his buildings!"*

*When William had gone away, his followers were unwilling to execute the immoderate orders of their lord but pretended that they had done so. However, a few days later that same William came back, fuming like a lion in his furious rage, and saw that his servants had done little to carry out his commands and had produced not the smallest effect. "By the eyes of God!", he swore, "I will tear out your eyes if my authority is ignored any longer!" So his followers, in fear of their lord's*

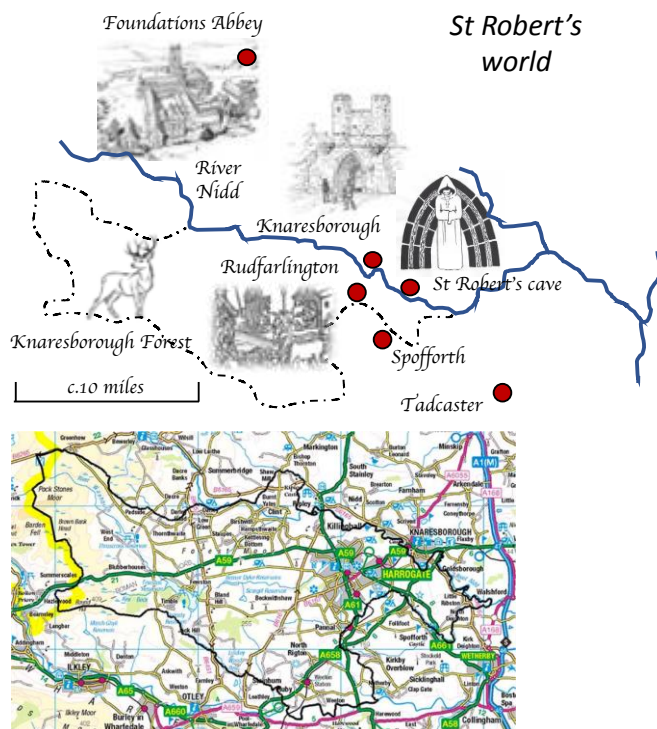
*retribution, levelled with the ground the buildings that were the property of Robert, that most blessed servant of God.*

*The humble hermit saw that his trials and tribulations were being multiplied by the Devil's action because it was that cunning enemy of the human race who had roused Stuteville against him and brought about the destruction of his buildings. His passion erupted in these words to the servants: "Go back to your lord and tell him that willy, nilly, my resting-place will be next to his tower for ever. I am not in the least afraid either of his malice or his threats. Because the Lord is my protector I have no fear of what man may do to me!"*

The story continues, but it seems that this incident, and what follows, marks a watershed for St Robert. Established and firm in his calling he did not run or change course but set his face to serve the people of Knaresborough. From Rudfarlington, from where William had in effect expelled him, St Robert now finds himself at what we now recognise as his cave, perhaps around the time 1193/5, now in his mid-30s but with still over 20 years of prayer and service to the local people ahead of him.

The image here shows the boundary of the Forest of Knaresborough and King John hunting (though of course John is yet to appear in our story). It shows the places that Robert was associated with in this period of conflict, but ultimately of a victory that set him in place for us to tell the next part of his story – serving others.

## Experiencing conflict



The Forest laws represented much of what was bad about how medieval England was ruled



King John hunting...


## Serving others

At the heart of St Robert's ministry was his devotion to the people of Knaresborough – but visits from 'ordinary' folk and Robert's listening ear, wisdom, prayers, healings and on occasion gifts to keep a family from going hungry, don't make quite such eventful episodes as some of his dealings with the nobility! His biography certainly indicates the nature of these actions on behalf of what he reputedly described as 'people of the tower', referring to the dominance of the castle at the heart of the town. But his day to day life from the time he settled at Rudfarlington to his death at the cave, about 25 years later, was full of these acts of kindness.


In my historical fiction I have tried to weave together some 'possible histories' of the people who met with, and were blessed by, St Robert. I've called that chapter 'Flashes of Hope', because for each individual that's what I believe a meeting with St Robert would have brought. And it's my belief that the despair and humdrum life that offered no such hope when things took a turn for the worse is no different today. And so my hope is that this chapter, because it has no person of note apart from St Robert himself, could be read as referring just as much to the twenty first as to the early 13<sup>th</sup> Century.

## Serving others

*The traveller, the sick and the needy*



*Pilgrims*



*Healing*

*Serving*



here layeth robert pious with the

For this fourth part of St Robert's story I therefore want to read an extract from my historical fiction – the voice is of Robert's friend and chronicler, Nathan, a Jew and a boyhood friend of Robert who moved to Knaresborough and reconnected with Robert. This is how he tells of a young man called John...

*The stories weren't all tales of smooth sailing, and Robert didn't shy away from what you might call 'the difficult cases'. One story was particularly hard to write, coming from one of the labourers working Robert's land to provide for those in need. His name was John, and I can remember him telling me his story.*

*'You might say I was feral. Delusions of emulating Robin Hood, but sinking quickly into robbing the rich to keep myself alive. It all started back in York where I grew up. I'd been left to run in the streets and was often in trouble. Petty little things, basically being a nuisance. It made me feel noticed.*

*When the madness happened, I was up for the game, thinking nothing of stuffing my pockets full of goodies as the Jews were rounded up.'*

*At that point John paused, suddenly realising what he'd said.*

*'I am very ashamed of what I did Nathan, that's the honest truth. And Robert has assured me that there is forgiveness in Christ.'* I nodded. He paused for a moment and stood. I wondered whether that was to be the end of the story, but he motioned for me to stay. I watched him enter a nearby hut, which I assumed to be his accommodation, and he returned with his hand closed around an object. Sitting down next to me again he opened his hand and said, 'you'll know what this is then.' To my surprise, I saw a mezuzah, one of the little boxes containing words of scripture that would have been fixed to the doorframe of each Jewish home in York. 'I tore it off the door of one of the houses. I don't know why. It had no monetary worth. It was more like a trophy to say I'd been there. To show off to the other boys on the street'.

*'York wasn't a nice place to be after that night', John had continued. Which is when I found myself caught up in the world of outlaws. Living on the fringe. Not in the forest you understand, that would have been far too risky. And the Great North Road was beyond us in terms of the calibre of people travelling and the body guards they used to protect their valuables. We lived in the in-between. Petty thieving, rarely noticed, lying low, never a nuisance for long before we moved on. That was our life. Carrying everything we had in our pouches – heaven knows why the mezuzah stayed with me, but it's small enough, and however rough my upbringing had been, it reminded me of the only home I knew. Touching the little object reassured me that I did have roots somewhere, which I suppose is what it would have done for the original owner.'*

*I was surprised at the insight John had, but then remembered that he'd been working alongside Robert for a good number of years. Plenty of time for these things to rub off on a willing learner.*

*He continued his story. 'We just about made it through our first winter in the wild, but then things got really tough. Illness took its toll, and arguments became more frequent. We were living more and more dangerously just to survive, and it was clear we'd need to disband. I couldn't go back to York. There were people there who didn't like me. And so, it just felt easiest to go to the nearest town where there was the possibility of picking up some scraps to live on. I was never going to be a credit to my new home of Knaresborough. Sleeping rough, picking up odd jobs, still prone to misbehave.'*

*'One or two people did look out for me, in a good way that is. But I was never able to repay them. I was the proverbial bad penny. And that's the state in which Robert found me, bouncing around from one little crisis to the next, teetering on the edge, ready to fall off at the slightest misfortune. I think somebody must have mentioned me to Robert. When he found me and we chatted over a bowl of soup in a local tavern, nothing I could say seemed to impress or alarm him. At the end of our meal he simply invited me to come and do some honest labour in return for a bed, and food enough to keep body and soul together. It didn't feel like I had much option.'*

*'It didn't work out well at first. I'd forgotten, if I ever really knew, what a day's labour felt like. I was troubled at nights with haunting images from my past, and the allure of the woods were strong. There'd be times when I'd disappear for a couple of days, only to come to my senses, listen to my belly, and return sheepishly to my hut. There were no punishments, apart from increased expectations of me to follow Robert's disciplines even more closely. Something that strangely I wanted to do, if only I could summon the strength.'*

*'I think it was people like me, if I'm not bragging, that got Robert the reputation of harbouring thieves, which I suppose was true. But Robert never saw me as such, and gradually I turned my life around.'*

*As I reflected on his story, which was certainly not an instant miracle of the sort you'd read in the Christian scriptures, I nonetheless realised the marvel of how Robert had worked with John. I knew*



*that much prayer had been offered for him even before he realised that something spiritual was transforming his life. This was an important story to capture for posterity.*

## **Speaking truth to power**

The story of King John's visit to St Robert early in 1216 has a simple and high impact climax and is probably one of the best-known stories associated with the saint. After initially pausing before rising from his prayers we then have Robert's opening, though clearly rhetorical, question to his Royal guest:

*Taking up an ear of corn, (he) held it out to the king with this question: "Is your power such, my lord king, that you can make something like this out of nothing?"*

There is of course a simple interpretation of this remark. Robert wanted to point out the choice he had made between the earthly and the heavenly rule, and that when it came to creating something out of nothing His God won! But everyone then believed that God made everything, and that the King, whilst ruling by divine right, was no God! So, whilst simple on the surface, the full meaning behind this statement perhaps remains a bit of a puzzle.

So, let's stand back a bit. First, to consider Robert's position, and his temperament! By now, his reputation as a wise man had spread across the land, and beyond. His care for the poor and his good works were also widely understood, both of which were good reasons why King John arrived at his door. Of his temperament, his biographer says that Robert *continued to be patient in vigils, industrious in spiritual works, gentle in word and gracious in his outward manner, kindly to the simple but harsh towards enemies and evildoers.*

And so to King John. The Kings of England had a decent track record for supporting religious orders, even if the motive was often to have someone to pray for their souls after death. But charity was a Christian virtue to be practiced by all, and so giving alms, whatever ones reputation in other spheres of life, would be expected. So, again at first sight, King John's visit could well have been one of virtuous intent, and Robert's response could be seen as a little harsh, if not disrespectful of God's appointed ruler in the temporal sphere.

But remember the year – early in 1216. Since June the previous year King John had been trying to wriggle out of an agreement with his disaffected Barons, nothing less than the Magna Carta! And those Barons had invited, and had accepted, the offer of the crown of England to Prince Louise of France, who had dallied, but was clearly preparing to cross the channel to secure the crown as soon as the spring came.

Between October 1215 and February 1216 King John had taken the opportunity of the delay to strengthen his otherwise weak hand by marching north with an army to sweep the rebellious northern barons in front of him, and to nip any threat from the Scots in the bud – a mission in which he was largely successful, as the map here indicates.

Perhaps you're starting to get the picture? An army marches on its belly, and food to feed any army in the middle of winter would have been stored away safely to see folk through to the next harvest. It's one thing to have rats eat your food reserves away, but an entirely different thing to have King John requisition such stores for his army. So, when King John visits St Robert on his return from the North early in March 1216 it's quite possible that whatever had been left behind by the army's march north would now be virtually non-existent.

Re-imagine the scene with me now when St Robert hears that King John is approaching to offer alms. What did those who came to Robert's door every day need most? Food, of course. And

now the very person who had spirited their food reserves away was standing at the mouth of his cave, perhaps even oblivious to the impact of his march north at the end of December. I can just imagine how Robert might have felt. Perhaps the pause before he came out to meet his earthly monarch was needed for him to bring a moment of anger under control. Had he rushed out at first sight of the King perhaps his words would have been less measured!

## Speaking truth to power



*King John's military expedition 1215/16*



In my historical fiction, staying close to the record provided by St Robert's biographer, the story continues. St Robert at first seems to be left empty handed, but then, after encouragement from Yvo, his devoted administrator, he seeks out a further audience with the King and receives generous alms in the form of land for future cultivation – perhaps an implicit recognition that silver coins at this precise time were pretty worthless and that at least land would be a greater insurance policy against hardship in coming years.

## St Robert's legacy?

St Robert's own story comes to a close, as we know, in September 1218. His immediate legacy is captured, and continued, by the faithful Yvo and other unnamed locals, and then by the Order of the Holy Trinity and the Release of Captives as they established the Abbey along what is now, of course, Abbey Road.

For whatever reason, whilst acknowledged as a saint in correspondence from Rome there was no formal canonisation. We have also heard during this year of celebration how St Robert's life continued to be held up as a lesson for subsequent generations. But perhaps for religious and practical reasons today's legacy seems to have slumped to one of a curiosity, perhaps even that the life of Robert has become overshadowed by the quirkiness of life in a cave! I hope and pray that retelling his story provides an opportunity to encounter the man, and perhaps through the man the God and saviour he served.