

St Robert of Knaresborough



Knarborough Schools Project 2019

Robert: Life after Newminster

ROBERT'S LIFE AFTER NEWMINSTER ABBEY

After Robert left Newminster Abbey, he returned to Yorkshire but not to his home in York. He was still determined to serve God even though he did not want to be a monk. He decided to live a life of prayer and service to other people as a hermit. A hermit is a person who lives like a monk but on their own and not in a community. There had been Christian hermits for over 800 years before Robert.

Robert chose to live in the countryside. He probably lived in the forest of Knaresborough but we do not know for certain. He needed a safe place to live, though, as there were many dangers from outlaws and thieves, gangs of raiders from Scotland, as well as the threat from wild animals. For some time, Robert was protected by a knight but we don't know who he was, where he lived or why he helped Robert.

This all seemed to work quite well for a while but then the knight left the area and Robert was on his own again. The knight might have been forced to fight in a war or he may have gone on a crusade but we do not know why he left. At this time, a noble lady called Helena who lived in Plompton came to Robert's rescue. She must have heard about Robert the Hermit and probably met him. It was popular for wealthy people to give money or land to holy men and women in return for their prayers.

Helena decided to help him by giving him a chapel and somewhere to live in the village of Rafarlington. It was called St. Hilda's, named after a famous nun who was in charge of Whitby Abbey five hundred years earlier. At St. Hilda's, Robert prayed and helped people. He farmed the land and a small community gathered around him, a little bit like a monastery. But as they settled down and did well, they attracted attention and their community was attacked by robbers. Robert saw this as a sign from God that they should move on. With Helena's help, he moved to the village of Spofforth and lived close to the home and castle of the Percy family, one of the richest and most powerful families in England. The problem was that Robert was popular and well known so crowds of people came to visit him, wanting his prayers and the chance to talk to him.

Robert found the crowds very difficult to live with. He did not like being well-known, like a celebrity, and wanted more time for prayer and silence so he moved on, this time to a community in Tadcaster. This still did not work for Robert, though, because the community was quite lazy and did not keep the rules properly. He wanted to give his life to God, just as the Cistercians did, but the monks in Tadcaster did not seem to care very much so he headed back to Rafarlington.

This time he went to live in the forest and, for a while, things went well. People could not get to him easily and he had time for prayer and silence. However, people did talk about him and, in the early years of the 13th Century, probably in 1202 or 1203, the High Sheriff of Yorkshire, William de Stuteville, heard about him. De Stuteville had to make sure the county was kept safe for the king and he worried that there were lots of rebels and outlaws in Knaresborough Forest. He thought that Robert might be one of those rebels or be someone who helped them, so he wanted to catch Robert and throw him out – or throw him in prison. However, something strange happened and William had a dream that made him change his mind. Instead of capturing Robert, William left him alone and gave him the freedom to carry on as a hermit. William might have been worried about upsetting the local people who treated Robert as a holy man. Robert's did not want to be famous and popular but it may have saved him.

Robert knew that William de Stuteville could easily come back to get him, though, so he decided to move out of the forest, just to the edge of it, and so it was that he came to live next to the River Nidd just south of the town of Knaresborough. He would live and pray in his little cave for the rest of his life.

TASKS

1. Pupils put together a short play or series of plays linked with events from Robert's life.
2. Pupils might write a series of imaginary diary entries for Robert, describing what has happened to him and giving his thoughts and feelings about them.
3. Pupils could produce a story board or a series of drawings to show some of the important moments in Robert's life.
4. The pictures below might be used as a starting point for these tasks. Pupils might come up with their own ways of describing these events from Robert's life.

The story of St Robert in pictures

	
<p>1 York</p>	<p>2 Family Life</p>
	
<p>3 Wine Trade</p>	<p>4 Running Away</p>
	
<p>5 The Cistercian Way of Life</p>	<p>6 A Helpful Knight</p>
	
<p>7 Plompton</p>	<p>8 Spofforth</p>

	
<p>9 William de Stuteville</p>	<p>10 Knaresborough Parish Church</p>
	
<p>11 Knaresborough Forest</p>	<p>12 Robert's Cave</p>
	
<p>13 Robert, the people and the animals</p>	<p>14 Money</p>
	
<p>15 King John</p>	<p>16 Remembering St Robert</p>