



LORDS, PEASANTS AND OUTLAWS

MEDIEVAL LIFE IN BERNWOOD FOREST

Information Sheets - Outlaws & The Forest

An outlaw in medieval times was someone had been put outside the protection of the law.

Only men over fourteen could be outlawed. (Women were said to be waived rather than outlawed although it really meant the same).

People were declared outlaws by the Manor or Forest courts. You could be declared an outlaw for serious crimes such as treason or murder. You could also be declared an outlaw if you did not come to Court when you were summoned or if you ran away when charged with a crime. In the Forest Courts people who could not pay fines often did not come when they were summoned and so were declared an outlaw.

An outlaw was not part of normal society. No one was allowed to give an outlaw food, shelter, or any other sort of support —if they did then they were also committing a crime and could be outlawed themselves.

People who came across outlaws were allowed, and even encouraged, to kill them – this wasn't seen as murder! An outlaw had no rights at all. Often your belongings and lands would be taken by the courts.

The only way to stop being an outlaw was to appear in person before the court and pay any money that you owed. They might also be able to gain a pardon from the King.

Because they could not live with other people in a village or town, outlaws would have to find somewhere else for shelter. Forests or woodland were a good place for outlaws to live – they were less likely to be caught and they could find food and shelter there.

Stories or legends of outlaws were very popular in medieval times. In these stories the outlaw was normally an innocent man, accused of crimes they didn't commit by powerful enemies. They were outlawed and had to live outside normal society. The outlaw lived in the forest, where they survived by robbery and poaching. These crimes were seen as necessary and not wrong. In time, the outlaw was able to get revenge and prove his innocence so that he could return to normal life – no longer an outlaw.

Probably the most famous story of a medieval outlaw is that of Robin Hood. He was wrongly accused of crimes by Prince John, but his behaviour was seen as a heroic defence of the rights of King Richard, on Crusade in the Holy Lands. On his return, Richard granted Robin a pardon.

The Outlaw's Song is a ballad written around 1300 AD and tells the story of an outlaw who hid in the forest. You can find the words for it in the Examples of Medieval Ballads in the Resources List.