

## Robert Thornton (c.1400 – c.1475)

Fifteenth-century Yorkshire gentleman Robert Thornton (c.1400-c.1475), lord of the manor of East Newton (Ryedale), is one of the most significant figures in English literary history. He was the scribe-compiler of two vast manuscript miscellanies (Lincoln Cathedral Library, MS 91 & British Library, MS Additional 31042) – more than 1,000 pages of text comprising 135 separate items. Thornton's manuscripts reflect a rich culture of religious devotion, political debate, pragmatic advice, plus serious and light entertainment, such as would have been enjoyed by members of a gentry household. Together they represent the largest, most diverse body of English texts associated with a named, localisable late-medieval layperson.

Thornton's manuscripts also preserve the sole surviving copies of some of the most important pieces of medieval literature (including: *Alliterative Morte Arthure*, and the only English version of French romancer Chrétien de Troyes' grail romance, *Perceval*). These two Thornton manuscripts were sources for Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur*, printed by Caxton in 1485. Malory's work in turn was used as a source by 19<sup>th</sup> century writers re-working the Arthurian legend. Most of the Arthurian legend we have today in films, books and works of art is derived from Malory's work, and thus from Thornton's writing. Thornton's manuscripts are also one of the most important witnesses to the work of Yorkshire mystic Richard Rolle, whose writings are among the classics of Western spirituality.

The manuscripts are in some cases the only surviving copies of books from monasteries, priories and abbeys which were later destroyed in the Reformation. He also copied works from the private libraries of local gentry, many of which were destroyed in the Civil War.

His life and manuscripts are a unique testament to the extraordinarily rich and vibrant cultural world of late medieval Yorkshire, readily rivalling that of the metropolis, and his importance to modern understandings of the middle ages and to the place of Yorkshire in it cannot be underestimated.



The plaque to commemorate Robert Thornton was put up in 2025. His original tomb in the north aisle of Stonegrave Minster was destroyed in the Victorian remodelling (1863). Funds for this memorial were raised from interested parties across the UK, Europe and the United States of America. The plaque is on the wall above the only remaining Thornton tomb, that of Robert's father and mother, Robert and Isabel, and is close to what is believed to be his original burial site.

A Google search for Robert Thornton will provide further information.