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Excerpt
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Part I

Life, times and work

I The making of a London citizen

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Thomas More, like everyone else, had thirty immediate ancestors stretching back to the generation of his great-great-grandparents: we know the names of only eight of these thirty men and women, but, even so, that is probably more than is known about the forebears of most middle-ranking Londoners in the late fifteenth century. We might think, perhaps, of these thirty ancestors forming a chorus line on a stage, each lit by a spotlight and all equally important. But twenty-two of the spotlights have broken and so only eight of the chorus are visible. In the epitaph which he composed for himself, More wrote that he was born ‘urbe Londinensi, familia non celebri sed honesta’ (*EE* 10:260).¹ And, indeed, those members of his family whom we can trace bear out this modest claim. Both his parents were Londoners, and so were his known grandparents, great-grandparents and great-great-grandparents. Such a long London pedigree is very unusual in the fifteenth century. The population of the City in this period – numbering about 50,000 – was replenished, indeed maintained, by a flow of immigrants from the surrounding countryside; so the thick London blood that coursed through Thomas’s veins was distinctive.

Thomas’s father, John More, was the son of a citizen and baker, William More, who died in 1467, a decade before the birth of his famous grandson.² John More’s mother, William’s wife, was Johanna, the daughter of a London brewer, John Joye, and his wife Johanna Leycester, the ‘graunt mother’ whom John More remembered specifically in his will.³ And he had good reason to remember his grandmother, because it was from her that he received a considerable inheritance, including the manor of Gobions in North Mimms in Hertfordshire and also substantial tenements in London itself.⁴ Johanna Leycester/Joye was the daughter of John Leycester, a chancery clerk who had come from Leicester in the 1430s and settled in London in the extramural parish of St Botolph Aldersgate.⁵ He, together with his son-in-law John Joye, the brewer, played a prominent role in the parish fraternity dedicated to

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the Holy Trinity in St Botolph's Church. John Joye served several times as a warden and master of the fraternity in the years between 1438 and 1463.⁶ He was often involved in property transactions on behalf of the fraternity and was frequently an auditor of the wardens' accounts.⁷ John Joye also served as a common councilman for the ward of Aldersgate in 1454.⁸ John Leycester, the chancery clerk and Joye's father-in-law, had probably come to live in the parish after John Joye had established his brewery there.⁹ Although he never held office within the Holy Trinity fraternity, Leycester acted as an arbiter in disputes and sometimes audited their accounts.¹⁰ In 1449 he lent the fraternity the considerable sum of £20, and some of this money was still owing to him when he died in 1455.¹¹ His executors, his son-in-law John Joye and Joye's son-in-law William More, arranged that the debt would be repaid by allowing Joye and his wife, Johanna Leycester, to live rent-free for fourteen years in their house, called the Falcon on the Hoop, which belonged to the fraternity.¹² The Falcon was a substantial brewhouse, fronting onto Aldersgate Street and lying just north of the church, and it later became the meeting hall of the fraternity.¹³ So these London ancestors of Thomas More were moderately prosperous men and women living purposeful and successful lives in this bustling London parish, and playing significant roles in its affairs. John Leycester the chancery clerk was clearly a man of some wealth (since he had the resources to lend money to the fraternity), and his daughter Johanna was his heir. Although she and her husband had several children, only *their* daughter Johanna appears to have survived, and it was she who married the baker William More and brought much of the accumulated Leycester and Joye inheritance to her eldest son John.¹⁴ Perhaps also young John More inherited from this line stretching back through a baker to a brewer and then to a chancery clerk, a commitment to the parish church, to the corporate activity of its fraternity of lay people and to industry and hard work.

More unusually, perhaps, we also know something about Thomas More's mother, because her husband carefully recorded that John More, gentleman, was married to Agnes, the daughter of Thomas Graunger, on 24 April 1474 in the parish of St Giles without Cripplegate.¹⁵ This Thomas Graunger was a London citizen and tallow chandler who had been one of the wardens of his craft in 1467 and can be found acting as a trustee, receiving gifts of goods and chattels and witnessing documents in the years between 1459 and 1474; and on most of these occasions, the property involved lay in St Giles Cripplegate parish.¹⁶ Conclusive evidence that Thomas Graunger the tallow chandler was the father of

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Agnes More would seem to be provided by the gift of goods and chattels which he made in January 1479 to three men: Richard Morley, a fellow tallow chandler; John Swerder, a goldsmith; and John More, gentleman.¹⁷ There were numerous reasons for making such gifts, which might provide security for debts or a means of avoiding legal liabilities. In this case, it is likely that Thomas Graunger may have been intending (with the help of his wily legal son-in-law) to forestall a forfeiture, avoid liability for a debt or prevent his executors having to pay death duties in the ecclesiastical courts.¹⁸ Thomas Graunger's will has not survived, so it is hard to trace the ancestry of his daughter Agnes More any further back, and there are no surviving medieval records for the parish of St Giles Cripplegate, which might have revealed the activities of the Graunger family. But it appears that members of the family were enrolled in the fraternity of parish clerks dedicated to St Nicholas. Membership of this fraternity (for which a small annual fee was payable) seems to have been composed of 'middle-ranking Londoners' who wished to secure the continual prayers of the fraternity priest after their deaths and also the attendance of professional singing lay clerks at their funerals.¹⁹ The death in 1481–2 of Thomas Graunger is recorded in the Bede Roll of the fraternity, and there are several other Graungers, possibly members of the same family, also recorded as members in the years between 1453 and 1506.²⁰ It is possible that the Agnes More inscribed as a member between April 1478 and May 1479 was Agnes Graunger, the wife of John More who, perhaps, chose to be enrolled following the birth of her son Thomas in February 1478.²¹

Brewers, bakers and tallow chandlers were not numbered among the great merchants of medieval London such as the mercers, drapers and goldsmiths, who supplied the city with a stream of wealthy aldermen and mayors. But these middle-ranking London citizens were, as Thomas More later claimed, respectable if not famous. And it is clear that those of More's ancestors whom we can trace were men of some substance, if not great wealth. His great-grandfather, John Joye, the brewer, ran a large brewhouse – sufficiently large to become, later, the meeting hall of the parish fraternity. His paternal grandfather, the baker William More, at his death was owed £87 – a very considerable sum – for bread he had supplied to the household of the earl of Northumberland. And Thomas More's maternal grandfather, Thomas Graunger the tallow chandler, had been involved in 1460 in the safe-keeping of property deeds and other documents for Sir Edmund Montfort, a Lancastrian supporter who fought at the battle of Towton and was attainted in July 1461.²² But, substantial as these men were, William

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More's marriage to Johanna Joye, the heiress of the Joye/Leycester wealth, moved the family up an economic and social peg.

William and Johanna appear to have had six children, and we know something about three of them.²³ Katherine married, first, a London fishmonger, William Howes, and then a grocer, John Clark, and her will drawn up in 1495 reveals a wealthy and substantial widow well established among the mercantile elite of the city, who appointed her brother, John More, gentleman, to act as one of her executors.²⁴ But the significant social shift is that of the two eldest sons, John More and his brother Abel. They did not follow their father into the world of the London trades but, instead, turned to the law, and to do this they must have had some significant financial backing, since training in the law, then as now, took many years and only slowly yielded financial rewards. Abel More appears to have gone to Oxford University, and by 1482 he had secured his doctorate of civil law and was earning fees for giving legal opinions and acting as an arbitrator. He was employed by Lincoln and Merton Colleges, and in 1486 he was retained by the priory of St Frideswide at the substantial annual salary of £10 13s 4d.²⁵ But this promising career was nipped in the bud when Abel died, in 1486; he was buried in the London parish church of St Michael Bassishaw, close to his brother John's London home.²⁶

John More, the eldest son of William and Johanna More, chose to pursue a career in the common law and was admitted to membership of Lincoln's Inn in 1474, the same year that he married Agnes Graunger.²⁷ He rose steadily through the hierarchy of offices of the Inn: butler in 1482–3, reader in 1489–9 and again in 1494–5, governor in 1490–1 and again in 1494–6, and in 1503 he was created one of the serjeants at law, a group of distinguished lawyers chosen for their legal skill to act particularly for the crown and the court.²⁸ It is difficult to know exactly how he made enough money to support his burgeoning family: by 1482 Agnes had borne him six children. Doubtless he picked up odd fees here and there for providing legal advice and serving writs for city companies and individuals, and in 1501–2, for example, he received an annual fee of 13s 4d for providing legal advice to the wardens of London Bridge.²⁹ An inspection of the various deeds enrolled in the Husting Court of London between 1481 and 1503 reveals John More, gentleman, acting as an attorney and, most frequently, as a feoffee, or trustee, holding tenements for groups of individuals before passing them on to other owners. Although he was never a salaried official of the City (unlike his son Thomas who became an undersheriff in 1510), he was frequently to be found acting together with men who were closely

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associated with City government such as Miles Adys, the City chamberlain,³⁰ William Dunthorne and Nicholas Pakenham, the common clerks,³¹ John Haugh, John Greene and Thomas Marowe, who all held the office of common serjeant at law,³² and Richard Higham and John Shelley, both undersheriffs.³³ John More in these years also acted frequently in association with leading London aldermen, many of whom went on to be lord mayor. In particular he seems to have worked with the draper Sir William Capell, the alderman of Walbrook ward and mayor of London in 1503–4, and the very wealthy merchant Sir Stephen Jenyns, who was an alderman from 1499 and mayor in 1508–9.³⁴

Although it is possible to gain some idea of John More's career as a jobbing lawyer working his way around the courts of the City (and doubtless also at Westminster), it is harder to gain an understanding of the genial *pater familias* depicted by Holbein in 1527. All Thomas More's sixteenth-century biographers draw attention to the role played by John More in his son's upbringing and education and emphasize the respect which Thomas showed to his father, notwithstanding that he had surpassed him in rank (Roper 221, Harpsfield 54, Stapleton 3–4). His perceived influence on his son may, in part, be due to the fact that he lived to be nearly eighty years old (marrying for the fourth and last time when he must have been seventy) and so was a well-known figure in the households of his children and grandchildren. And he was a man for whom family, in its widest sense, was important. After the birth of his second child and first son, Thomas, on 6 February 1478, John More decided to begin to record the births of his children.³⁵ The book he used for this purpose was his fourteenth-century copy of Walter of Bibbesworth's treatise on French vocabulary, doubtless a useful tool for a young lawyer at a time when legal proceedings (including those in parliament) were still recorded in French. But it was not a grand, or expensive or, indeed, a religious book – which suggests that, at this date, John More did not own many books.³⁶ He recorded the date and details of his marriage, the birth of his daughter Johanna in 1475, then Thomas in 1478, followed by Agatha in 1479, John in 1480, Edward in 1481 and Elizabeth in 1482. Agatha, John and Edward appear to have died young, but John More remained on close terms with his surviving children: Johanna, who married Richard Staverton (a lawyer who was admitted to Lincoln's Inn on the same day as his brother-in-law, Thomas More, in 1496³⁷); Elizabeth, who married the printer John Rastell; and, of course, with his son Thomas. In addition to recording the details of his marriage and the births of his children, John More also

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copied out a recipe for curing 'le agu' and a brief inventory of plate: two basins weighing 111 ounces, two ewers weighing 47 ounces, and one gold chain of 96 links weighing 11¾ ounces and worth £23 5s.³⁸

John More was making a reasonable success of the law, and he was determined that his able son should be given every opportunity to succeed and to shine. He sent him to the lively new grammar school at the Hospital of St Anthony in Threadneedle Street, where he was 'brought up in the Latin tongue' and where he soon 'farre surmounted his coequalls' (Roper 197; Harpsfield 10). The master of the school at the time was 'a famous and learned man, called Nicholas Holt' (CMore 15–16). There is no surviving record of Nicholas Holt at Oxford or Cambridge, but a Master Nicholas received wages of £10 p.a. as 'Master of the Grammar school' at St Anthony's in 1494–5, so this may be the same man who taught the young Thomas More some ten years earlier.³⁹

The grammar school at St Anthony's Hospital had been established in 1441 by the enterprising provost of Oriel College Oxford, Dr John Carpenter, who took over the nearby church of St Benet Fink to provide the revenue to pay the salary of a master who was to teach all boys who wished to learn, free of charge.⁴⁰ In the next decade the Hospital acquired a clerk who was to teach boys plainsong and singing (presumably polyphonic) with the organ, and the first song master was the notable musician John Benet.⁴¹ Whereas the singing children received their board and lodging in the Hospital (together with the Hospital bedesmen), the grammar school boys lived in their own homes and attended the school on a daily basis. We can know something about the school curriculum because a school book from St Anthony's has survived.⁴² Its contents suggest the style of teaching at St Anthony's: how to conjugate irregular Latin verbs; rules of syntax; the construction of Latin sentences and the use of cases; instruction in orthography; and lists of towns and countries with their names in English and Latin. But the book also contains some lines of music, notes on the moves in chess and references to the making of garlands on the feast of St Anthony, which was a day of celebration in the Hospital, when the glum daily diet of cheese and mutton stew was enlivened with chicken, custards and strawberries. The antiquary John Stow recorded that in his youth (in the 1520s) the boys of the different grammar schools in the City would dispute publicly in St Bartholomew's churchyard and compete to win prizes which, Stow sagely remarked, 'made both good schoolmasters and good scholars'. But

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when walking around the City the scholars, 'their satchels full of books', would get into fights when the boys of St Paul's and St Anthony's taunted each other as 'Anthony's pigs' or 'Paul's pigeons'.⁴³ It is likely that Thomas More was well instructed in the reading and writing of Latin, and he may also have taken part in some of the music-making that took place in the Hospital. In later life, although not a singer, More played the viol, and he emphasized the religious and recreational importance of music in his *Utopia* (*CW* 4:407, note to 128/15; *CU* 127, 143, 239).

But Thomas was not allowed to remain long at St Anthony's school. His father, 'being carefull for his farther good and vertuous education' (Harpfield 10), found him a place, in about 1490, as a page in the household of John Morton, the archbishop of Canterbury (and, from 1493, a cardinal), at Lambeth Palace. It is not clear how John More was able to achieve this coup for his son. It is possible that his legal services to Edward Stafford, third duke of Buckingham, who was a powerful member of Henry VII's council and an ally of Morton, may have enabled John More to secure a favour from his client.⁴⁴ Another possibility is that Master Nicholas Holt who taught young Thomas at St Anthony's may have spoken of him to his (supposed) relative Master John Holt, at that time an usher at Magdalen school in Oxford but by 1496 the schoolmaster of the boys in Morton's household. Thomas certainly knew John Holt, for he wrote Latin verses for his grammar book, *Lac puerorum* ('Milk for children'), and one of his first surviving letters is to him (*SL* 1–3).

The years spent in Morton's household had a lasting effect on Thomas. In the first place he greatly admired Morton, a wily Lancastrian at heart who reconciled himself to Edward IV but not to Richard III, joined the failed rebellion of Henry Stafford, duke of Buckingham, in 1483 and then fled to join Henry Tudor. More wrote of him that he had been 'whirled about by violent changes of fortune' with the result that he had 'learned practical wisdom, which is not soon lost when so purchased' (*CU* 55). Clearly he was an imposing man and More observed that in conversation 'he was not forbidding, though serious and grave'. He had a prodigious memory, a great knowledge of the law and spoke carefully and with polish. It is interesting that although Morton was an archbishop More does not comment on his spiritual or pastoral qualities. It is the statesman and lawyer whom More admires and who must have gone some way towards shaping his own career path and ambitions. And it seems likely that it was Morton (among others) who influenced More's hostile portrait of Richard III. The events of Richard's usurpation and

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death, and the accession of Henry VII, were less than a decade away when More was in Morton's household. It is inconceivable that such momentous events were not frequent topics of conversation among Morton's servants (see further below, 174). But there was another aspect of life in the archbishop's household which must have influenced young Thomas, and that was the entertainments put on for the household at Christmas and on other festive occasions. At the time that More was at Lambeth, the playwright Henry Medwall was a member of the household and wrote dramatic interludes, of which two – *Fulgens and Lucrece* and *Nature* – have survived.⁴⁵ It appears that Thomas on occasion would join impromptu with the players and win applause from the onlookers (although what the players thought of this is not recorded). It would seem that Thomas's natural talents in speaking and dramatic acting were fostered in Morton's household, and he clearly made an impression on the archbishop, who is recorded to have said, 'This child here waiting at the table, whosoever shall live to see it, will prove a marvellous man' (Roper 198).

But Morton must have perceived that this talented young scholar and actor needed to take his studies to a higher level, and so, when Thomas was about fourteen, he moved away from London and his family to study at Oxford. More's great-grandson Cresacre More records that young Thomas was 'placed ... in Canterbury College ... now called Christ Church' (CMore 18; cf. below, 26), and although this cannot be verified it seems very likely, since Archbishop John Morton took a particular interest in this college, which had been established in 1361 for the university education of Benedictine monks, particularly those from Christ Church, Canterbury. But there were also five scholarships for poor boys 'of free and legitimate birth', three of whom could be chosen by the archbishop of Canterbury. These *pueri collegii* received their board and lodging, but no allowance for clothes or books. In return for their scholarships, they had to assist in the chapel and wait on the wardens and fellows in hall, doubtless tasks similar to those More had already been performing at Lambeth.⁴⁶ Morton's concern for the education of young men at Oxford and Cambridge is evident in his will (1500), in which he left £128 6s 8d to provide exhibitions for poor scholars, two-thirds at Oxford and a third at Cambridge.⁴⁷ More remained at Oxford for barely two years, but, nonetheless, 'he wonderfully profited in the knowledge of the latin and greeke tonges' (Harmsfield 12; cf. Roper 198).

Although More's time at Oxford was brief, it was to have a profound effect on him. Doubtless Morton hoped that Thomas would find, in

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Oxford, a vocation to the priesthood, and More's father may have hoped that he would study civil law, although it seems clear that he really wanted his son to return to London to enter a legal inn and become a common lawyer. But what Thomas encountered at Oxford was men who were passionate about the study of classical authors and, in particular, the study of Greek. William Selling, the learned prior of Christ Church, Canterbury, had studied at Canterbury College before travelling to Italy, where he learned Greek at Bologna. Following his return to England, he was elected prior of Christ Church, in 1472. His influence over Canterbury College was strong, although the study of the classics and humanism did not form part of the official curriculum there of theology and canon law.⁴⁸ But there were others who had been at Oxford before Thomas arrived and had begun to infect the university with the 'new learning' (cf. below, 25–6). Thomas Linacre was a fellow of All Souls and had travelled to Italy with Selling, acquiring Greek books while he was abroad. William Lily had been at Magdalen in the 1480s and travelled to the eastern Mediterranean and Rhodes, where he studied Latin and Greek before returning to London and marriage in the 1490s. John Colet had originally studied at Cambridge, but he too travelled to Rome before returning to lecture at Oxford in 1496.⁴⁹ But the most direct intellectual influence on Thomas More while he was at Oxford is likely to have been William Grocyn, who had studied at New College and been appointed as a divinity reader at Magdalen before leaving England in 1488 for Italy, where he studied in Florence and met up with Thomas Linacre and William Latimer, another young English scholar who was travelling in Italy in the 1490s (*BRUO* 2:1106). When Grocyn returned to Oxford in 1491 he rented a room in Exeter College and gave the first public lectures on Greek in the university.⁵⁰ It may be fanciful to suggest that Thomas More heard these lectures, but there is no doubt that when he was brought back to London by his father c. 1494 he knew some Greek and was anxious to learn more. And there is a possible indication of a link at this early stage between Grocyn and More. When the vicarage of St Lawrence Jewry, the parish in which John More and his family lived, became vacant in 1496, William Grocyn was appointed to the living, where he remained until his death. It would seem that Grocyn lived in the vicarage at St Lawrence – where he would doubtless have kept his remarkable library of Latin and Greek books (*BRUO* 2:828–30) – and it seems likely that the friendship between the two men (Grocyn was thirty years older than More) may have flourished in this parish context. Indeed, the presence of Grocyn may