Thomas More's London

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in words and photographs, a tour of the places in London which figured prominently in the life of the remarkable Englishman whom Jonathan Swift termed “the person of the greatest virtue this kingdom ever produced.”

MILK STREET

This is where the story of St. Thomas More begins. It was here, a few yards from the teeming market of Cheapside, that he was born in February, 1478. The site of the house of his birth is unknown. In his time, there were two churches in the street—St. Mary Magdalene’s on the northeastern corner of Milk Street and Cheapside, and All Hallows’ on the corresponding corner of Milk Street and Honey Lane. It is probable that Thomas was baptized in one of them. Both of these churches were destroyed in the great fire of 1666 and were not rebuilt. The child was named after another Thomas—St. Thomas Becket—who was born in a house farther along Cheapside to the east, opposite the north end of Bucklersbury.

ST. ANTHONY’S SCHOOL

About 1485, the year of Henry VII’s accession to the throne, Thomas went to school. Every morning he walked east along Cheapside, past the long line of stalls thronged by London housewives intent on shopping, past the innumerable inns and the many churches

which lined the market, past the house where his great namesake was born, until he came to the road-junction we now call Mansion House Street. There he inclined left into Threadneedle Street where the buildings of St. Anthony’s School stood just past the junction with Old Broad Street.

This institution had been founded in 1254 to provide for a master, two priests, a schoolmaster and twelve poor men. In Henry VI’s time—he reigned from 1422 to 1461—a free school, endowed with scholarships to Eton and Oxford, was added to the foundation. Under Nicholas Holt, More’s headmaster, the school had become one of the most eminent in London and a rival to Dean Colet’s school at St. Paul’s. The boys of St. Anthony’s were known as St. Anthony’s Pigs because of an ancient privilege of their school. It possessed the right of impounding any pigs found wandering in the city streets. The animals were then marked and turned loose to forage for themselves as St. Anthony’s property. Nobody might interfere with them. When they were suitably fat, they were killed and eaten by the pensioners and boys. The boys of St. Paul’s inevitably received the title of Paul’s Pigeons.

It was at St. Anthony’s school that Thomas More was given the sound foundation of scholarship which stood him in such good stead later on. About 1490, his father, Sir John More, obtained a place for him as a page in the household of Cardinal Morton, Archbishop of Canterbury. In 1492, More was sent to Canterbury Hall, Oxford. This establishment was a house of studies founded and run by the monks of the cathedral priory at Canterbury, and occupied the ground now covered by the Canterbury Quadrangle of Christ Church. Thomas was at Oxford for three years and could only have covered the part of the course called the *trivium*, which consisted of grammar, rhetoric and dialectic.

**NEW INN**

In 1494 or 1495, Sir John More recalled his son to London to begin his law studies. There were at the time many inns where law students lived while they pursued their studies. The one chosen for Thomas was the New Inn, which stood where the Aldwych Theatre is now—on the northwest corner of Drury Lane and Aldwych. He was there for about two years.

**LINCOLN’S INN**

On February 12, 1496, when he was eighteen years old, Thomas More became a student at Lincoln’s Inn—a larger
and more famous Inn of Court. This institution, which still exists, stands on the site of the medieval London house of the bishops of Chichester, and was leased by them to Thomas of Lincoln, the King’s sergeant. He converted it to a student-inn for lawyers. More’s grandfather and father had both been connected with it. Mr. Lister Drummond, co-founder with Father Philip Fletcher of the Guild of Our Lady of Ransom, was a bencher of Lincoln’s Inn and was instrumental in the erection of a statue of St. Thomas More on the outer wall of the Serle Street-Carey Street corner of the inn.

It was probably in 1501 that More was called to the bar. He became butler of Lincoln’s Inn in 1507 and reader in 1511 and 1515. He sat as chancellor in the hall there several times after 1529.

FURNIVAL’S INN
More became a lecturer at Furnival’s in 1501. This inn stood on the north side of Holborn where the offices of the Prudential Insurance Company are now. It was founded in 1408 when Lord Furnival granted the site to law students.

THE CHARTERHOUSE
For four years following 1501, that is to say while he was lecturing at Furnival’s, Thomas lived at the London Charterhouse, combining his busy life with prayer and reflection. For some time it seemed that he would become a priest, maybe even a Carthusian.

The London Charterhouse of the Salutation of Our Lady was founded by Sir Walter Manny in 1371 to provide a body of priests to say Mass for the souls of the thousands of citizens who died in the Black Death of 1348-1349 and whose bodies were buried under what is now Charterhouse Square. The great cloister, surrounded by the cottage-cells of the monks, is completely gone, but it is still an open space and can be reached through the gateway at the northeast corner of the square. The buildings which survive are partly the outer courts of the monastery, and partly those of the hospital which was established by Thomas Sutton after the dissolution. This consisted of a home for eight old men, and a school. The pensioners continue to reside there, but the school is now at Godalming in Surrey.

The Charterhouse is holy ground for Catholics, for its prior, Blessed John Houghton, was the first of the English Martyrs and died at Tyburn for refusing to take the oath of royal supremacy on May 4, 1534. Fifteen other monks of this house also gave their lives for the Faith shortly afterwards.
THE BARGE

By the beginning of 1505, Thomas realized that he had no vocation to the priesthood or the monastic life and decided to marry. His bride was Jane Colt, daughter of John Colt of Netherall near Roydon on the Essex-Hertfordshire border. We do not know the exact date of the marriage, but it could not have been later than January, 1505. There were four children—Margaret born in 1505, Elizabeth 1506, Cecily 1507, and John 1509.

Thomas and Jane More lived at a house, called The Barge, which stood on the south side of Bucklersbury, just before its junction with Walbrook. It was part of an estate of the same name which originally belonged to the hospital of St. Thomas of Acon, a foundation which incorporated the house in Cheapside where St. Thomas Becket was born. The Mores lived here for some twenty years. After they moved to Chelsea in 1524, it was handed over to John Clements, one of More’s pupils, when he married Margaret Giggs.

In 1511, Jane More died and Thomas, a widower with a young family, felt it his duty to seek a second wife. Later the same year he married Alice Middleton. She was seven years his senior and may have been one of the Arden family.

THE POULTRY COMPTER

More became a member of Parliament for London in 1510. On September 3, in the same year, he resigned his seat on becoming undersheriff of the city. In this capacity he was responsible for
keeping order, and held his court at the Poultry Compter. Each of the sheriffs had his compter—a combined courthouse and prison. The Poultry Compter stood at the end of St. Mildred’s Court, a turning on the north side of Poultry Street, close to its junction with Prince’s Street.

THE BLACKFRIARS

On April 15, 1523, More was elected speaker of the House of Commons in the great hall of the Blackfriars. In those days the election was purely a matter of form. In fact, the king appointed him.

The hall in which the election took place belonged to the London Dominicans or Blackfriars. These friars came to the city in 1221 and settled in a house which stood on what is now the northern part of the garden of Lincoln’s Inn. In 1278, they moved from there to the southwest corner of the city, where they built a larger monastery in the eastern angle formed by the Thames and the River Fleet. The latter stream rises at Hampstead and enters the Thames under the northern end of the present Blackfriars Bridge. In More’s time it was a considerable river, but is now confined in a tunnel. It is interesting to visit the little gallery on the west side of the north end of Blackfriars Bridge when the tide is low. If you lean over the rail, you will see the grating which covers the Fleet estuary and the delta of the river clearly marked in the mud. The precinct of the monastery was enclosed by Carter Lane, Friar Street, Ireland Yard, St. Andrew’s Hill, the Thames and Blackfriars Lane. The church lay to the south of Carter Lane and parallel to it. Church Entry, which joins Carter Lane and Ireland Yard, represents the passage, which ran across the church between the choir and the nave, and the east walk of the cloister. The great hall stood south of Ireland Yard where the offices of The Times newspaper are now. The friars often let the hall for meetings of Parliament and for other important functions. The trial of John Wycliff for heresy and the hearing of Henry VIII’s nullity suit against Catherine of Aragon took place in it.

CHELSEA

In the sixteenth century, Chelsea was a small hamlet out in the country to the west of London. More began to buy land there in 1524 and, subsequently, to build a house. This building stood across the southern end of the present Beaufort Street. The Réparatrice nuns have a convent, built on ground which was once his garden, and claim to have a mulberry tree belonging to it. Here More established a communal life for himself, his wife Alice, his daughters and their husbands, and his son. Several protégés—virtually adopted children—and some servants also lived there. More was destined to oc-
occupy this house until his imprisonment in 1534.

Unfortunately, there is no drawing of the exterior of the buildings as they were at this time, but Holbein's sketch of the interior of the hall suggests a house similar to those inhabited by well-to-do merchants. After More's execution, the property passed through many hands, and was re-named successively Buckingham House and Beaufort House. It was demolished by Sir Hans Sloane in 1740.

On October 23, 1529, the thing which More dreaded happened. The king insisted on his becoming lord chancellor of England. Henry, in the midst of his campaign to rid himself of his lawful wife, Queen Catherine, fondly imagined that Thomas was the man to help him. They had been friends, and More's ambition would surely render him willing to carry out the king's wishes. But More was not ambitious and was the last person to go against his conscience. However, he did his best; he examined the case, decided that it could not be done without offending against the laws of God and, when the whole matter had become clear to him, he resigned. This he did on May 16, 1532, the day after Henry had successfully bullied the clergy of England into submitting to him. More knew that it was the end of Catholic England, there was nothing left now but his conscience. He saw clearly what was coming and settled down cheerfully at Chelsea to wait the end.

CHELSEA OLD CHURCH

The parish church of Chelsea was founded in the twelfth century. The modern version stands on the old site, a few yards east of the junction of Beaufort and Cheyne (pronounced Chai-ney) Walk. More, even after he became lord chancellor, used to serve Mass, sing in the choir, and carry the processional cross here. It was here that he and his family heard Mass and received the sacraments. In 1530, he paid for the building...
of the chapel at the east end of the south aisle. An inscribed tomb slab, made by More's orders in 1532—a significant date and a significant act—has given rise to the belief that he was actually buried in the church. This is, of course, nonsense. His body lies under the floor of St. Peter's Chapel in the Tower of London. This church was badly bombed in 1940, but the tomb slab has been replaced. It is now in the chancel.

ST. PAUL'S CHURCHYARD
On Low Sunday, April 12, 1534, More went with his son-in-law, William Roper, to listen to the sermon in St. Paul's Churchyard. These sermons were preached from the Cross, which resembled a small bandstand with a cross on top of it. It stood close to the memorial which now occupies the middle of that part of the churchyard between the north transept and the chancel of the present cathedral. The medieval St. Paul's was much larger than Wren's building and was, probably, the biggest church the world has ever known, being nearly a hundred feet longer than St. Peter's in Rome.

After the sermon, More and Roper went to dinner with John and Margaret Clements at The Barge in Bucklersbury. While they were there, a royal messenger arrived to tell Sir Thomas that he must present himself at Lambeth Palace on the following day, when he would be invited to take the oath of royal supremacy.

LAMBETH
On Monday, April 13, 1534, Thomas More, in obedience to the king's command, went across the river to Lambeth. That morning he had confessed to his chaplain John Larke, and then heard Mass and received Holy Communion. As he walked with his family down the path which led to his private landing-stage, he appeared depressed and silent. There was a gate which cut off the stage from the garden. He would not allow his family to pass it, but shut it firmly behind him and went with Roper into the boat. He
immediately cheered up and observed to his son-in-law: “Son Roper, I thank Our Lord that the field is won.” So did Thomas More conquer the natural temptation to say the word which would have set him free to return to the family and house he loved.

The archbishops of Canterbury had acquired the land, on which they later built their London house, in 1189. Since then, there have been many alterations and additions. The present chapel, built in the thirteenth century, is the oldest surviving part of the building. The house was conveniently situated, just across the Thames from the king at Westminster.

In going to Lambeth, More was returning to the scenes of his boyhood. Years ago, he had been a page to Cardinal Morton, and the old archbishop is said often to have remarked to his guests at dinner: “This child here waiting at table, whosoever shall live to see it, will prove a marvellous man.” Landing at the archbishop’s wharf, More found himself in the midst of a great company of notables assembled to receive the oath. In due course, he was taken before a commission composed of Thomas Cranmer, the man who had been given the archbishopric of Canterbury in the knowledge that he would prove a willing tool to Henry’s plans; Thomas Cromwell, an unscrupulous lawyer who was acting as the king’s chief secretary of state; Thomas, Lord Audley, who had succeeded More in the chancellorship, a weak man, only too anxious to please Henry; and William Benson, abbot of Westminster, who had been put in to bring about the surrender of the abbey to the crown.

The act of Parliament to which the oath was attached had been passed on the previous Monday in Holy Week, March 30. It deprived Mary, Henry’s daughter by Catherine of Aragon, of her right to succeed her father, and secured it for Elizabeth, the daughter of his uncanonical union with Ann Boleyn. The oath went much further, and contained a renunciation of the papal prerogatives. More read the oath and then asked for a copy of the act in order to compare them. As a private citizen, he could have no quarrel with the matter of the succession, and he told them that he would be prepared to accept it. But the oath was contrary to his conscience, though he would not condemn any who took it. Nor did the attempts which the commissioners made to cajole or frighten him into changing his mind have any effect. He was sent out to a broken-down garden-house to reconsider it. But he had nothing to reconsider and, when he was recalled, he refused again. He was kept in the custody of the abbot of Westminster for four days to give him further time to consider. On April 17, he was again before the commission and once more declined the oath. He was promptly sent to the Tower.

THE TOWER

The barge made its way down stream on a river crowded with boats—the splendid barges of the great, the humble wherries of ordinary folk. It ploughed its way through the thousands of swans which then ornamented the Thames, it passed all the splendours of Catholic London, with its hundreds of spires and towers clustering round the great spire of St. Paul’s, towering five hundred and thirty-four feet above the level of the ground.
It must have been a great part of More's agony to be called on to suffer amid these familiar and well-loved scenes. At Tower Pier, he landed, paid the tribute of his top garment to the yeoman gaoler as was the custom, and was taken to the lower cell in the Bell Tower and locked up.

There is no space in a short work of this kind to tell the history of the Tower of London. Suffice to say that the White Tower, the central keep, was built by William the Conqueror and that the rings of curtain walls were finished by Edward I's time, toward the end of the thirteenth century. These walls have seen more human suffering than any in England. With the permission of the governor, you can visit St. Thomas' cell, where the Guild of Our Lady of Ransom has installed a copy of Holbein's portrait of the martyr. Also with his permission, you can see the cell of his fellow-sufferer, St. John Fisher, which is on the floor above. More's cell is still very much as it was when he was in it. Fisher's has had its windows enlarged. It is a good thing to turn off the lights and to reflect what it must have meant to be shut up in a place like this for nearly fifteen months—the cold, the damp, the gloom. As More himself said, death itself would have been preferable to the "cramps" which these things caused.

At first, they were comparatively kind to him. He could hear Mass, even take a little exercise outside; he had his books; he could write. The Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation, the Treatise to Receive the Blessed Body of Our Lord, Sacramentally and Virtually Both, and the unfinished Treatise upon the Passion of Christ were written here. He had visits from his family and friends, deliberately allowed by the authorities in the hope that they, understanding little of the motives which made him adamant, would break him down.

Late in 1534, the royal supremacy over the Church was put into statutory form and, a little later, the Treason Act was passed, making it treason "maliciously" to impugn any of the royal titles. The net was now spread. Early in the following year, an act of attainder was passed on More. He was now no longer a legal person, his property was forfeit. His wife had to sell her jewels to make ends meet. On and after April 30, 1535, Thomas received many visits from members of the council. He was questioned in an endeavour to get him to convict himself out of his own mouth. All these attempts were unsuccessful. On May 4, while his daughter, Margaret Roper, was with him in the cell, he saw three Carthusian priors—John Houghton, Robert Laurence, Augustine Webster—Richard Reynolds, a Brigitine priest, and John Hale, vicar of Isleworth, lashed to hurdles beneath his window and start on their journey to Tyburn, there to be hanged, cut down before they were dead, and disembowelled.

The Tower of London
Margaret was terrified, but was calmed by her father. On June 12, he received a visit from the solicitor general, Sir Richard Rich, who made a valiant but unsuccessful attempt to betray him into making a rash statement. During the interview, two men also entered the cell and packed up all More's books and papers. He was left alone with his thoughts. On June 19, three more of the London Carthusians—Fathers Middlemore, Newdigate and Exmew—were taken to Tyburn and, on June 22, the venerable John Fisher was carried out and beheaded on Tower Hill.
WESTMINSTER

On July 1, More was taken by boat from the Tower to Westminster and put on trial in the great hall of the palace. He was charged with refusing to give an opinion on the king's supremacy and marriage with Ann Boleyn, with writing encouraging letters to John Fisher and with telling Rich that Parliament could not make the king head of the Church. To the first, he replied that he had acted according to his conscience, and that they must prove that his silence was malicious. To the second, that the letters had been burned; if they had been produced, it would have been seen that they were innocent. To the third he replied by a question: would he have told Rich, a well-known liar, what he had refused to tell anybody else? The witnesses failed to agree, but the jury, coerced by Cromwell, found him guilty and the chancellor, Lord Audley, began at once to pronounce sentence. More stopped him, telling him that it was the custom to ask the accused if he knew any reason why sentence should not be passed. He then said that he should not be condemned: the act was illegal and contrary to God's law; England had no more right to make laws which contradicted the law of God, than London had to make laws contrary to the laws of England; no temporal ruler could be head of the Church. Audley told him that bishops and several councils of the realm had decided that the act was legal. More replied that for every bishop they could name he could produce a hundred, and for every council, all those for a thousand years. But it was no good. It had already been decided that he must die, and sentence was passed on him. He was to suffer at Tyburn. He answered with one of the most noble speeches ever made: "More have I not to say, my lords, but that like as the blessed apostle, Paul, as we read in the Acts of the Apostles . . . was present and consented to the death of St. Stephen, and kept their clothes, who stoned him to death, and yet be they now both twain holy saints in heaven, and shall continue there friends for ever, so I verily trust, and shall therefore rightly pray, that though your lordships have now here on earth been judges to my condemnation, we may yet hereafter in heaven merrily meet together, to our everlasting salvation. And I thus desire Almighty God to preserve and defend the King's majesty and to send him good counsel."

You can visit Westminster Hall, where all this took place. It was built about 1090 in the reign of William Rufus and slightly enlarged and renovated in the late fourteenth century under Richard II.
It is the largest surviving part of the old palace of Westminster, begun by either Cnut or St. Edward the Confessor in the eleventh century. It has seen much of our history, ancient and modern, and was recently the scene of Sir Winston Churchill’s lying-in-state. Here again, More was on familiar ground for, in his time, it was used to house several of the principal courts of the realm. We are told that, when he was chancellor, he always bowed to his father, Sir John More, who was chief justice of King’s Bench, before taking his seat in Chancery.

THE TOWER AGAIN

After his condemnation, Thomas was taken back to the Tower by barge. Thousands watched him from the houses and wharves lining the Thames and from the great bridge which was London’s link with the south. In the prow of the barge, the yeoman gaoler’s axe was held aloft with its cutting edge towards him, a sign that he had been found guilty. This axe is still in existence and is kept in the office of the resident governor at the Tower. It is not a headsman’s axe, but a symbol of the royal power in the punishment of crime.

During the journey, there were many signs of people’s grief at the fate of this much-loved man. When the boat was passing Old Swan Lane, a turning out of Lower Thames Street a little to the west of London Bridge, Sir William Kingston, constable of the Tower, was so overcome that he could not hold back his tears. It fell to the condemned man to cheer him up. At the Traitors’ Gate—a water-gate, built in Henry III’s reign, so that prisoners could be taken to the Tower without the danger of their being rescued by their friends in the streets of London—More embraced his daughter, Margaret, who forced her way through the guards to take leave of her father, and gave his blessing to his son.

Back in his cell, he devoted himself to preparations for death. He had six days to live, but he did not know that. In those days condemned men were not told when they would have to die. He wrote a letter of farewell to his friend, Antonio Bonvisi, who sent him a silk suit in which to die. Margaret Roper was allowed to send her maid, Dorothy Colley, to the Tower each day and, on the occasion of her last visit, she brought away More’s scourge and hair shirt with a letter of farewell to her mistress.

Early in the morning of July 6, 1535, Thomas Pope, an officer of the Tower, later to be the founder of Trinity College, Oxford, told More that he was to die.

The Traitors' Gate
within a few hours. The execution at Tyburn had been remitted by the royal bounty. He was to die under the axe instead. The king wished him to be brief in what he said on the scaffold. All this Thomas accepted and expressed his thanks to the king—Henry was still his sovereign, whatever he had done. More began to array himself in the gown Bonvisi had sent him. But the lieutenant advised him against it. The executioner was a scoundrel and it would be his perquisite if the martyr died wearing it. More remarked that he would call no man a scoundrel who sent him so quickly to heaven, but he yielded to the lieutenant's persuasion and sent the man a golden angel—worth six shillings and eight-pence—instead.

He set out for the scaffold on Tower Hill, wearing an old grey gown belonging to his servant and carrying a small red wooden cross in his hands. On the way, he refused a draught of wine which a woman offered him. His Master had been given only vinegar, he said. Another woman worried him about some papers she had sent him. He told her to be content, for the king would shortly free him from all worldly business. A third woman reproached him for a judgment he had given against her when he was chancellor. He replied that he remembered her case quite well and he would make the same decision if he dealt with it again. A man from Winchester, who had continuous and severe temptations to suicide, asked his prayers. More promised his help, and the man reportedly was never tempted again.

The scaffold was a platform, raised on posts about twelve feet above the ground, and was reached by a ladder. More asked the lieutenant to help him mount, "and for my coming down, let me shift for myself."

We are told that "he spoke but little on the scaffold but said that he died the king's good servant, but God's first." After he had recited the Miserere, this irrepres-sible man began to joke with the executioner, telling him to cheer up: his neck was very short, the man was to strike carefully for his professional honour. At the very last moment, he called for delay, he did not want his beard to be cut. He pulled it aside, for it, he said, had never committed treason.

So died one of the noblest of England's sons. His head was put over the gatehouse at the southern end of London Bridge, but soon taken down at the instance of Margaret Roper, who had it buried in her husband's family vault in the south chapel of St. Dunstan's, Canterbury, where it still lies under a marble slab. His body was first buried under the threshold of the chapel of St. Peter ad Vincula in the Tower. In 1876, a royal commission supervised the exhumation of the skeletons of executed persons buried in this chapel. These included four of the English Martyrs—St. John Fisher, St. Thomas More, Blessed Margaret Pole and Blessed William Howard. Only the remains of Margaret Pole were certainly identified. Although there is no doubt whatever that the body of St. Thomas More is among those then exhumed, it is not possible to say which of them it is. All of them were reburied under the sanctuary of this chapel, and there they lie to this day.