I

Grantham

'Mahogany and child'

Phoebe Stephenson took her granddaughter Muriel Roberts upstairs. Through the bedroom door came the cry of a newborn baby. 'Can you hear something?' Phoebe asked the four-year-old Muriel. 'I said "no",' Muriel recalled more than seventy years later. 'I *could* hear something but I wouldn't say so.'[1] With this lack of fanfare, on 13 October 1925, the future Margaret Thatcher came into the world.

She was born Margaret Hilda Roberts, in the house of her parents Alfred Roberts and his wife Beatrice Stephenson – 1 North Parade, Grantham, Lincolnshire. They lived above the shop, a grocery that Alfred Roberts had bought in 1919. Muriel was Margaret's only sister. The Robertses had no sons.

The son of a bootmaker from Ringstead in Northamptonshire, Alfred Roberts had left school at the age of thirteen because of the need to make a living, but he longed for education, and acquired it by voracious reading and study. He had risen through the retail trade, having, early in life, been an assistant in the tuck shop at Oundle School. He was a local preacher (what Anglicans would call a lay preacher) in the Methodist Church, and a few notes for his sermons survive. In these, the only trace of his lack of formal education is the occasional misspelling – 'attemp', 'waisting your time', 'beleif', 'desease'.[2] The hand is elegant and the expression clear and fluent.

On one page of an old schoolbook, in notes for a sermon delivered after the Second World War,[3] Alfred Roberts reflects on 'The neglected length of mahogany counter' and what might be made of it: 'what a thing of beauty it became when the craftsman contributed all his skill of polishing. But the beauty was there, just waiting to be revealed.' On the same page, Roberts offers another example:

> The neglected child, ragged, dirty, unattractive, removed from the squalor of a home and parents who showed her no love or care, to foster parents who brought love, care and affection into its life. What a transformation.

The child was gloriously beautiful, a most lovable disposition, and infectious cheerfulness. These things were there all the time but only when someone made their full contribution did they become part of human experience.

When Alfred Roberts's younger child had made her 'full contribution' to her country, she re-read these notes, in preparation for her memoirs, and linked the two stories. On a yellow Post-it note stuck to the page, she wrote 'Mahogany and child'.

The mahogany counter with which Margaret grew up and across which she sometimes served customers was always beautifully polished. 'If you get it from Roberts's . . . you get – THE BEST' boasted an advertisement in the *Grantham Almanack* in 1925, and those who remembered the grocer's shop said that the boast was justified. Although North Parade is beyond the end of Grantham High Street, better-off families from the centre of town would make the extra journey for the extra quality. Mary Wallace, for example, whose father was the leading dentist in the town, and who was almost the only other Grantham girl of Margaret's generation to go to Oxford, remembered her mother doing so.[4] Margaret herself lovingly recalled: 'Behind the counter there were three rows of splendid mahogany spice drawers with sparkling brass handles, and on top of these stood large, black, lacquered tea canisters . . . In a cool back room . . . hung sides of bacon which had to be boned and cut up for slicing. Wonderful aromas of spices, coffee and smoked hams would waft through the house.'[5] Mary Robinson, who worked as an assistant in the shop, remembered that it had 'better biscuits' – a key quality indicator at that time – than Roberts's commercial and political rival, the Co-op.[6]

The shop stood on a corner between the richer and poorer districts of the town, and served both of them. As well as being a high-class provision merchant, Roberts's was also a post office, and therefore served the clients of the early welfare state. Poverty and bourgeois comfort lived close to one another, and Margaret used to walk past the labour exchange on her way to Kesteven and Grantham Girls' School, although by the time she entered KGGS in 1936 unemployment in Grantham had halved from its peak of 2,300 in 1933. Seventy years later, she remembered a widow in black entering the shop with two small children: 'She asked if she could have three small oranges for the price of two because she had to be so careful.'[7] She explained, 'Life was not something we did not know about. We were right in it.'[8]

The Robertses saw it as their duty to help in a small and discreet way where they found distress. Every Thursday afternoon, which was early closing day for the shop, Beatrice Roberts would have a 'big bake'. Two or three of the loaves would go out to 'people we knew' who were on hard times. The act of charity had to be obscured before it could be accepted: Margaret would hand over a loaf saying, 'Mother's had a big bake and she wondered whether you would like this. It is home-made, and it's better than bought . . . You had to be very careful. People . . . are very proud.'[9]* According to Muriel, fellow Methodists regarded Roberts as almost a soft touch: 'If they wanted money, "Oh, Alf will give us some." We hadn't got it but we gave it.'[10] But, like the man in the song, Alfred Roberts did well by doing good. The shop prospered. He added the premises of 2, 3 and 4 North Parade to those of No. 1 with which he had started, and not long before Margaret's birth he opened a second shop in Huntingtower Road, about a mile away towards the station. It was opposite this that Margaret attended her first school, Huntingtower Road County Elementary School. Roberts never became rich, and when he died in 1970 he left little more than his modest house and a few pieces of furniture: of the chattels, his famous daughter took only two chairs.[11] But he established a secure and respected business, which gave him the base from which to serve the town as a councillor, a Rotarian and a Methodist.

The base was quite austere. The house had no garden, no hot water, and an outside lavatory. After the war, during which Roberts's reliability and efficiency as a grocer had allowed him to increase his wealth in the era of rationing when these qualities were at a premium, Roberts could afford to buy a separate house, with a garden, at No. 19 in the same street. It was called Allerton, named, as suburban houses of that date often were, after an aristocratic seat, in this case that of the Stourton family in Yorkshire. But, all the time that Margaret was living exclusively at home, home was 1 North Parade. She was proud of the business and intensely proud of her father, but she could early see the limitations of where she lived. In 1985, she told Miriam Stoppard: 'Home really was very small and we had no mod cons and I remember having a dream that the one thing I really wanted was to live in a nice house, you know, a house with more things than we had.'[12]

Home was strict as well as small. It was dominated by work, and by religion. The shop was open until 9 p.m. on a Saturday and 8 p.m. on a Friday. Monday was washing day, and Tuesday ironing.[13] Because of the demands of the shop, Margaret 'never went on holiday with Mum and Dad',[14] and because of the prevailing atmosphere of constant work, she

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never daydreamed or was idle. As her daughter Carol put it, 'She never experienced nothingness.'[15] Sunday was a day of almost continuous religious activity. Alfred Roberts's preaching circuit was centred on Finkin Street Methodist Church, a handsome building in the middle of the town. The family attended Sunday services there, and sometimes at the much closer chapel in Brownlow Street. There was Sunday school at 10 o'clock, morning service at 11 o'clock, afternoon Sunday school after lunch and another church service in the early evening. For almost half the Sundays in the year, her father was out for part of the day preaching in surrounding villages. His role often meant that he brought visiting speakers home, and on more than one occasion these speakers, from far-flung regions where Methodism was spreading, were black, an extreme rarity in Grantham at that time.[16] It seems to have been meeting Methodist missionaries from India that inspired Margaret with her ambition, curious in someone little more than a child, to join the Indian Civil Service. After listening to them, she remembered, 'I wanted to be an Indian civil servant, because I thought that India was a remarkable place and I would love to be a part, a cog in the wheel, of this great empire. And I think my father said to me at one stage, "I'm not sure if it'll be part of the British Empire by that time."'[17] Margaret appreciated and even enjoyed many aspects of Methodism. She loved the 'powerful combination' of the teaching of John Wesley and the hymns of his brother Charles.[18] She participated fully in the musical life, as did her parents (she was a mezzo-soprano, her mother a contralto and her father a bass; both she and her mother played the piano, and when she was eighteen she learnt the organ). In her memoirs, she notes that she first learnt to play on a piano which was inscribed with the name of the maker John Roberts, her great-uncle, who also made church organs.[19]* And she also enjoyed the conversation on public questions which tended to take place in the parlour of the shop when Methodists repaired there after the evening service on Sunday.[20] 'Father taught me to like what he called "discussion",' she recalled.[21] Although she attended the Church of England in later life, appearing in her last years every Sunday at the services in the Royal Hospital, Chelsea, Margaret Thatcher never repudiated the Methodism of her childhood, with its reverence for truth-telling, hard work and putting into practice the teaching of Scripture. Her father's sermon notes

* This tradition of music mattered to the Roberts family. After he retired from his business, Alfred Roberts stayed with a friend and helped him repair the organ at Marston church. He wrote to Muriel about it: 'It's strange that I should be doing this sort of work following in the footsteps of the Roberts family' (27 April 1961). When his widow, Cissie (Margaret's stepmother), moved out of Allerton in 1982 she offered Margaret the piano.

are full of precepts and expressions which one almost can hear her own lips speaking: 'There is no promise of ease for the faithful servant of the Cross,' 'God wants no faint hearts for His ambassadors,' even 'We must avoid the principle of a Denominational Closed Shop.'[22] 'We were Methodist and Methodist means method,' Margaret told one biographer.[23] She always loved method.

She also studied her father's speaking technique. 'Have something to say. Say it as clearly as you can. That is the only secret of style,' he wrote in his sermon notes,[24] quoting Matthew Arnold, and she never diverged from this view. She watched him reworking the ideas of the Gospel: 'he always found a new way of putting the message . . . There aren't any new messages. There aren't any new sins. But you have to find a way of putting it which is in keeping with the times.'[25] She admired his methods, but also observed with a critical eye. Speaking of him in the present tense thirty years after his death, she said: 'He's not very demonstrative. He's very thoughtful . . . Sometimes I'd say, "Pa, that was your sermon voice, your sermonizing voice" and then it would be a bit lighter. If you're giving a message from the Old or New Testament you're conscious of a responsibility . . . If you're giving a message which is your beliefs you are also conscious of a responsibility but you're not necessarily interpreting your Maker but doing yourself.'[26]

Margaret was always very restrained in any criticism of her upbringing. She permitted herself only a few guarded remarks. She said that the family's religious life set them 'a little bit apart . . . from one's fellows' and that church 'can be slightly overdone'. 'You must never be like the parable of the Pharisees [Luke 18:9–14] . . . because you just really know how you fall short of the ideal.'[27] She indicated how much she enjoyed visiting her schoolfriend Jean Farmer, whose father was a builder at Fulbeck, 10 miles outside Grantham, where the atmosphere was freer and more joyful. When staying there, she told one biographer, 'they all went to tennis together. They all went to dances together. They would all do far more of those things – out with other people where there was laughter and fun!'[28] Jean Farmer in turn remembered a serious atmosphere in the Roberts household, with Alfred Roberts as 'one who didn't unbend'. She was 'a bit in awe of him'.[29]

Margaret's elder sister, Muriel, however, was harsher about the girls' religious upbringing. 'It was all church, church, church,' she said. 'We had an uncle every Christmas who sent us religious books. Oh God how we hated it. You weren't allowed to play games. That really is bigoted, isn't it?'[30] Roberts's grocery stood immediately opposite the Roman Catholic church of the town and Alfred Roberts had friendly relations with Father Leo Arendzen, the popular parish priest. But when Father Arendzen one

day invited him over to see the pictures in the church, Roberts refused, saying, 'No, no, no. I'll never put my foot inside a Catholic church.'[31] Later, when Margaret was the young candidate in Dartford, her parents worried that one of her friends was a Catholic, and that she might fall under her influence, though in fact the woman in question was a 'slave to Margaret' and not the other way round.[32]* Such attitudes were not at all uncommon at that time, and there is other evidence that Alfred Roberts was quite broad-minded about religious affiliation. Margaret's schoolfriend Margaret Goodrich, for example, recalled that his friendship with her father, an Anglican clergyman, was notable for its interdenominational warmth.[33] But it seems fair to say that the Robertses, being serious about all such things, made their daughters feel them more than would have been the case in most families. When Margaret came to have children of her own, Beatrice Roberts protested when she learnt that they were taken to the Church of England rather than to Methodist services.[34]† In the minds of the Roberts girls, the blame for restriction and narrowness fell on their mother, not their father. It has been written that Margaret was Daddy's girl, and that Muriel was closer to her mother. According to Muriel, this was not so, or rather the closeness to the father was true of both girls, not only of Margaret. Throughout his later years, particularly as a widower, Alfred Roberts kept up a closer correspondence with Muriel than with Margaret (this was partly a matter of time, because of Margaret's busy career, but then matters of time are often matters of something else as well): 'I think, if anything, I was closer to him than she was. It was always to me, even in later life if there was any trouble, that he came.'[35] In fact, Roberts's surviving letters (which are all post-war) show love for both his daughters, though sprinkled with small reproaches to Margaret for not paying him quite enough attention. And it is certain that in everything he did he tried to advance his girls. In the middle of the war, he went to Canon Goodrich, seeking help to prepare Margaret for the general paper in her university entrance. 'My great wish', he told Goodrich, 'is to get Margaret into Oxford. I wonder if you could coach her.'[36] This was not the action of a paterfamilias who wished to keep his daughter tied to hearth and home. 'He wanted me to have what he hadn't had,' his daughter recalled.[37]

* Margaret herself recalled being envious of Catholic girls because of the ribbons they wore for First Communion. In her childhood, she said, a Methodist girl caught wearing ribbons would be told, 'First step to Rome!' (Correspondence with John O'Sullivan.)

† Margaret was always very vague about the sacramental aspect of religion. When the present author asked her, at the baptism of Oliver Letwin's twins (to one of whom she stood godmother), about the baptism of her own twins, she said perplexingly, 'Oh well, they were christened, but they didn't have the water.'

In Muriel's view, Beatrice Roberts was 'a bigoted Methodist . . . Margaret and I weren't close to her . . . We just didn't click with her.' As a result, Muriel believed, Margaret grew apart from her mother as quickly as she could: 'Mother didn't exist in Margaret's mind.' Margaret always expressed herself more charitably and tactfully on the subject, but without much enthusiasm. Famously describing herself in *Who's Who* as '*d* of late Alfred Roberts', with no mention of her mother, she tended to speak of Beatrice, if at all, in a subsidiary role. Asked by Miriam Stoppard, 'What example did your mother set you, as opposed to your father?' Margaret Thatcher replied: 'Oh Mummy backed up Daddy in everything as far as you do what is right.' She explained her role by recourse to the Bible, or rather, the Bible as reworked by her beloved Rudyard Kipling in his poem which Mrs Thatcher referred to as 'The Mary and the Martha' (its actual title is 'The Sons of Martha'): 'Mary was the one who listened at the feet of Jesus and always was interested in what was going on and Martha was the one who always went, "Now is there enough to eat?" "Do you want fresh clothes?" "Would you like to lie down?" This was my mother . . . I still retain it.'[38]

It is telling that Margaret retained the Kipling version, because it is highly complimentary to the Sons of Martha (it is a pity that he had nothing to say about the Daughters of Martha). The Sons of Martha are the people in life who make sure that God's work is actually done:

> They do not preach that their God will rouse them a little before the nuts
> work loose.
> They do not teach that His Pity allows them to drop their job when they
> dam'-well choose.

Rather do they see things through to the end without pretension:

> Not as a ladder from earth to Heaven, not as a witness to any creed,
> But simple service simply given to his own kind in their common need.

There is nothing that Margaret Thatcher admired more than 'simple service simply given', and she believed that that was what her mother contributed.

But she did not like it much at the time. The letters she wrote to Muriel in the 1940s mention their mother often, but almost always in passing and usually in connection with some prohibition. In the summer of 1944, she asked Muriel: 'Do you think the person who makes the handbags could make me one in maroon leather like your blue one. I have decided that maroon would be the best colour for my wardrobe as I am having that pinky dress made up . . . I haven't told Mummy or Daddy about this as I am sure that Mummy at any rate would think it very extravagant.'[39] In the same

:ar, during the long vacation after her first summer at Oxford, she indicates
sense that she has become intellectually more sophisticated than her mother.
ıe went with Beatrice to see *Now, Voyager*: 'I have never liked Bette Davis
ıt nevertheless I thought she was simply marvellous in that film.' Mrs Roberts,
ough, did not like it so much: 'I think she would have preferred it to end
ppily ever after sort of style.'[40] Perhaps it is not surprising that Beatrice
berts had her reservations, since the film concerns a daughter's defiance
ıich so shocks her overbearing mother that she dies of a heart attack. 'I loved
r dearly, but after I was fifteen we had nothing more to say to each other.'
fore the age of twenty, Margaret was leaving her mother behind.

It would be a mistake, though, to think that the mother's influence was
er expunged from her daughter's character. Jean Farmer, the closest
end of her youth, thinks that 'Margaret probably absorbed more from
r mother than she realizes – she was a hard worker, ran her house really
ll and helped in the shop.'[41] Margaret Thatcher was herself always more
Martha than a Mary: she loved domestic labour, finding it therapeutic
cook, to sew, to decorate her house and to clean. She was an enthusiastic
me-maker. It was sad and touching, in her old age, for staff to find her,
t for something proper to do, clearing out and relining drawers which
re already spotlessly tidy.[42]

Beatrice Stephenson, the daughter of a cloakroom attendant at Grantham
tion, had been a professional seamstress before she met Alfred Roberts
ough the Methodist Church and married him in 1917, and she taught
daughters the finer points of sewing and how to adapt existing mater-
for new uses. Margaret followed closely her mother's precept, 'Never
ve the house looking untidy,'[43] and when Margaret Thatcher was bring-
up her own children in the 1950s she did not forget her practical
ons. One contemporary at the Bar remembered Mark and Carol wear-
duffel coats lined with their old nursery curtains.[44] In the more than
letters from her to Muriel that survive, clothes (quite often illustrated
rough drawings) are a far more common subject of discussion than
itics, and in her eighth decade Margaret could still remember minute
ails about what she had worn as a child. Thus she described the dress
her mother had made her for the Christmas party of the League of
(now the NSPCC): 'It was of soft pink satin: eight or nine rows of
ocking in pale blue and below, pink and blue ribbons, with a flat bow
he back . . .'* Nor did Margaret forget the more general example

is also true, however, that Margaret was a little embarrassed that she and Muriel always
the outfits that their mother had designed for them. It made her self-conscious 'that
hings were different from others' (Patricia Murray, *Margaret Thatcher*, W. H. Allen,
, p. 22).

behind these domestic accomplishments. Throughout her life, including at the zenith of her power, she liked to remember human need – for food, or comfort, or praise, or consolation, though not, unless heavily prompted, for sleep. The unanimous testimony of Margaret Thatcher's personal staff is that she noticed their small needs and took personal pleasure in satisfying them. Indeed, her fussing round people was her favoured way of showing affection and concern: she loved to be practical, to feel that she had helped in a tangible way. She might leave her husband each morning to go and run the country, but not before she had cooked his breakfast. All this was the legacy of Beatrice Roberts.

What bothered Margaret in later life, though, was a sense of guilt. She felt that she had been unappreciative of her mother, and, unlike with her father, whom she believed to be the greatest positive influence in her life, found it difficult to light on the right words in public to convey her belated appreciation. In the end, she said simply: 'I don't think I thanked my mother enough, because you don't realize . . .'[45]

What did others think of the Robertses? Alfred Roberts made a strong impression. He was 6 foot 2 inches tall, with piercing blue eyes and wiry blond hair that turned white quite young. The prevailing view in the town was favourable. To the young Margaret Goodrich, he was 'a dignified, unusual sort of chap'.[46] Rita Hind, another fellow pupil of Margaret Roberts at KGGS, remembered that 'whenever his name was mentioned, it was mentioned with great reverence.'[47] Another schoolfriend, Shirley Walsh, described Roberts as 'a delightful man'.[48] According to Nellie Towers, a fellow Methodist, the town librarian told her that Roberts was 'the most well-read man in Grantham'.[49] Roberts was chairman of the library committee, and one of his daughter's most often repeated memories is of going with him to the library every Saturday to borrow a serious book for him and a light novel for her mother.[50] Mary Robinson, also a fellow Methodist, was employed by Roberts in the shop to help her after her father's death. This was an act of kindness on his part which he compounded by paying her five shillings per week more than had been agreed.[51]

There are opposing views, though they are harder to find. Kenneth Wallace, son of the Roberts's dentist, was fond of Margaret and used to invite her round to listen to his collection of classical records – Sibelius, Beethoven. He thought her friendly and a 'good conversationalist' but he found her background 'very limited', and guessed (a surmise which is confirmed in her own correspondence with Muriel) that 'she enjoyed the company of a more cultured family than her own'. He found Roberts unnecessarily strict about allowing young men into the house (not that he was ever Margaret's

boyfriend) and thought his manner 'patronizing'.[52] His sister, Mary, found Roberts 'rather forbidding' and the speeches (which, as a local worthy and governor, he sometimes made at the school) almost unendurable: 'They said nothing whatsoever – he would just point his finger at us and proclaim "And what I say is true."'[53] Both of them give countenance to the theory, also supported by Nellie Towers, that Alfred Roberts had an eye for other women. Kenneth Wallace's wife used to say, 'I wouldn't trust that man an inch. If he had half a chance, he'd have his hand up my skirt.'[54] And Mary Wallace says he 'touched women in a way completely uncalled for'.[55]*

As for Beatrice Roberts, referred to by some as 'Bee' and others as 'Beaty', only rather distant and external impressions seem to survive. Kenneth Wallace considered that there was 'more to her than met the eye . . . she encouraged Margaret to get out and about. She appeared a little hen-bird, but she had quite a lot of steel.'[56] But on the whole Grantham regarded Mrs Roberts as shy, retiring, quiet and plain. Born in 1888, Beatrice was nearly four years older than her husband, and by the 1930s had no pretensions to good looks, style or display. 'She was completely under old Roberts's thumb,' said Mary Wallace. 'She was just there to do things for them. I got he impression that Margaret felt that too.' Madeline Edwards, who later ecame joint head girl of KGGS with Margaret Roberts, remembers Mrs oberts as 'a small woman. Had a bun. She always looked slightly worrited sic].'[57] Nellie Towers said that Beatrice Roberts was always 'very prim and roper'; 'she kept the children beautifully clothed with the little tailored oats, but in her own dress she kept no decorations about her, she was all

Much excitement was caused in Grantham by the appearance – and then the suppression – 1937 of a novel called *Rotten Borough*, by Julian Pine, the pseudonym for Oliver Anderson, e son of the vicar of Harlaxton, a neighbouring village. It is a spirited but nevertheless embar- ssingly bad burlesque of English provincial life, with thinly veiled caricatures of local aracters, including Lord and Lady Brownlow, the local grandees. In one incident in the book, e new paper in the borough, the *Weekly Probe*, exposes the conduct of a man named Tomp- ns, whom it calls 'the Naughty Councillor'. The Naughty Councillor ensures that the High reet is lit by gas rather than electricity because he has shares in the gas company. He insists at the new lights be 'erected smack outside' his own grocer's shop 'on the Ground that it was uated at a very Dangerous Corner and would save a lot of lives, but really he thought it ould sell a Lot of Hams, for He was a Grocer in a Big Way of Business'. One evening, says e *Probe*, Tompkins 'thought he would have a Bit of Fun with one of the Young ladies who rved behind the counter' but is unluckily noticed doing so by passers-by, because he failed, his haste, to draw the blind and is illuminated by the lights that he had himself installed. mpkins then 'hanged Himself with a pair of Woolworth's braces in a Public Convenience'. is widely believed, including by one witness who knew the author of *Rotten Borough* ll (private information), that Tompkins was modelled on Alfred Roberts who, as well as ing a grocer, with a shop on a busy corner, was involved in the running of the municipal gas mpany. There is, however, no proof, and there was certainly never any public scandal about berts.

very plain.' Developing the theory of the Robertses' marital unhappiness, Nellie Towers declared: 'I see where the fault was. It was Beaty that was cold.'[58] Jean Farmer saw Mrs Roberts as 'anxious to do her best for her girls' and also emphasized the pains she took in making up their clothes so well, including their school uniform. Like so many, she was struck by the huge amount of effort the Robertses put into everything, and the care they took with the results: 'Her parents had to work hard for their money and they valued every penny.'[59] All surviving impressions of Beatrice Roberts, even those from her daughters, are somehow exterior ones, as if no one really knew her.

The Grantham in which Alfred Roberts became an increasingly important figure was a modestly successful market town which shared the economic hardships of the 1920s and early 1930s and the definite recovery of the mid-1930s. In 1919, there were 19,700 people in the Grantham Municipal Borough; by 1938, there were 20,600. The parliamentary constituency had nearly 50,000 voters and so extended into the surrounding villages. The agricultural interest was still dominant, with factories in the town producing agricultural machinery. The Belvoir Hunt, the foxhound pack of the Duke of Rutland, always met in Grantham on Boxing Day. Roberts would take his daughters along. He was a keen supporter of foxhunting for the unusual reason that without it foxes would steal babies from prams.[60] The young Margaret enjoyed her rural walks out of the bowl in which Grantham sits to pick rosehips on Hall's Hill, and she particularly delighted in visiting friends like Jean Farmer, or the elegant rectory of Canon Harold Goodrich, incumbent of Corby Glen and father of her schoolfriend Margaret, but she and her family were really town mice. Although closely linked to the country, the town was by now large enough to have a distinctly urban character. In an early letter about a game of tennis in Grantham, Margaret disparages her unchosen partner as a 'yokel':[61] it was always towns, preferably cities, which allured her.

The most powerful local man – and the biggest landowner – was Lord Brownlow, whose Cust family had long been seated at Belton, just outside Grantham. He was so close a friend of the Prince of Wales that he was criticized for his association with him after his abdication as King Edward VIII in 1936. The young Margaret made a good impression on the Custs. According to her sister Muriel, Caroline Cust, Lord Brownlow's daughter, used to 'rave' about Margaret. A photograph reprinted in Lady Thatcher's memoirs[62] shows her at a Baptist Christmas party smiling brightly out beside the young and elegant Lady Brownlow. Although it was often said that the grocer's daughter was somehow antagonistic to the traditional Tory

aristocracy, this was not really so (although a few of them reacted snobbishly to her). The Brownlows were only the first of several grandees who looked favourably on her and whom she, in turn, admired. When she became prime minister, Mrs Thatcher arranged with the then Lord Brownlow to borrow silver from Belton, by this time owned by the National Trust, to improve the cutlery at Downing Street. She also borrowed a green enamel box, painted with views of Grantham, which had been presented to Lord Brownlow when he had completed his year of office as mayor of the borough.[63]*

It was the approach of war that brought strong economic growth to Grantham. The town benefited from its position on the main road and rail links between London, the north-east and Scotland – the opening sentence of Margaret Thatcher's memoirs is: 'My first distinct memory is of traffic'[64] – and it increased its industrial base. Between 1932 and 1943, rateable value (the basis of the calculation for property taxes) rose by 60 per cent, which was very helpful to Alfred Roberts in his capacity as chairman of the borough's finance committee. From 1934, new factories were being built in Grantham at the rate of about one a year. There was a good deal of engineering, the firm of Ruston and Hornsby, for example, which built engines. Aveling-Barford made steamrollers and tractors, and in 1938 the munitions company B.M.A.R. Co. opened a factory, run by Denis Kendall at the then astonishing salary of £10,000 per annum. Kendall, a glamorous, not to say flash, figure, drove a motorbike and had liaisons with prominent local women. In 1942, standing as an independent, he won the first wartime parliamentary by-election to turn out the National Government candidate (a Conservative), campaigning as a 'production man' critical of the 'gang' round Winston Churchill, though not of Churchill himself. During the war, Kendall displaced Lord Brownlow as the leading figure in the town, certainly in terms of local press coverage, and in the 1945 general election he was re-elected to Parliament, defeating the Conservative candidate by more than 15,000 votes. By 1939, full employment had returned to Grantham. Working shifts had to be staggered to avoid the traffic jams caused by the myriad bicycles.

* There was a popular theory in circulation that Margaret Thatcher had Cust blood. The story was that Margaret's grandmother Phoebe Stephenson had been a maid at Belton (even this fact has never been established). She was seduced, the theory goes on, by Harry Cust, a famous womanizer and, in all probability, the true father of Lady Diana Cooper. Her maiden name was Crust – almost Cust – and her granddaughter supposedly had 'Cust eyes'. Caroline Cust, now the Hon. Mrs Caroline Partridge, told the present author that she believed in the theory, though in her view Cust was Margaret's father, not her grandfather. This is impossible, since Harry Cust died eight years before Margaret was born. There is no evidence for the theory and its details don't add up, as shown by John Campbell in his biography *Margaret Thatcher* (2 vols, Jonathan Cape, 2000, 2003, vol. i: *The Grocer's Daughter*). It was widely believed, however, in grand Tory circles. When the present biographer put the theory to Margaret Thatcher, she answered, with a certain pride: 'Blue eyes aren't the preserve of the aristocracy.'

War also brought the armed services to Grantham in large numbers. There were four RAF bases locally, including the RAF College at Cranwell.* Margaret's letters to Muriel about dances in the area during the war always mention the hordes of flight lieutenants eager for a dance. Grantham provided the national headquarters for Bomber Command (Margaret Roberts's dentist, Mr Wallace, also treated 'Bomber' Harris); and from October 1943 there was a large USAAF presence in the town. Denis Kendall exploited the resentments to which the American influx gave rise. US servicemen were paid five times more than British ones, and were accused of immorality with local girls. Kendall complained that they were allowed to rent the Guildhall for entertainment when the same privilege had been refused to British servicemen. In Parliament, he caused a storm by alleging that Americans were accosting girls in the street. The accusation was promptly rejected by Lord Brownlow and by the Chief Constable. But it is certainly the case that the town became a place much fuller of young men and girls seeking one another. According to Terry Bradley, after the war a Labour councillor and opponent of Alfred Roberts, the High Street was known to have a 'five bob side', where officers picked up girls, and a 'half a crown side' for the other ranks.[65] It was in response to the problems of war that Roberts was prepared to unbend his Sabbatarian principles, defying his fellow Methodists by voting in favour of the Sunday opening of cinemas for the troops, because he believed that it was better for them to have entertainment than to have nothing. His daughter cited this as evidence of his pragmatism and independence of mind.[66]

Alfred Roberts began his career in local politics well before the war. He was first elected in the St Wulfram Ward, where he sat as an Independent Ratepayer from 1927. Although Margaret was always slightly evasive on the point, Muriel was quite definite that their father was originally a Liberal in politics,[67] but Roberts was also a strong supporter of the convention dominant at the time that national party allegiance should be kept out of local government, and he maintained this throughout his career, so much so that when he died in 1970 the local press could only speculate on his political affiliations. In the fluid politics of the early 1930s, Roberts became a supporter of the Conservative-dominated National Government – the coalition designed to deal with the slump, headed by the formerly Labour Prime

* The wartime atmosphere at these bases is best captured in Terence Rattigan's 1942 play *Flare Path*, which is set near one of them.

Minister Ramsay MacDonald – seeing himself as without clear party allegiance. In his address as president of Grantham Rotary Club in July 1936 he described himself as 'like a good many people, often hopelessly and utterly in the wilderness in the political world, sometimes believing in one party, sometimes in another as others had been doing these last few years. There was a feeling that one could not look to any particular party or creed for the salvation of men and ridding them of fear.'[68] When Margaret was chosen as prospective parliamentary candidate for Dartford in 1949, her father broke the habit of a lifetime by speaking at a party political meeting, in her support. In justifying his position, he told the meeting that the Conservative Party now stood for 'very much the same things as the Liberal Party did in his younger days' (see Chapter 5). Margaret offered her own explanation for his views in her memoirs: 'Like many other business people he had . . . been left behind by the Liberal Party's acceptance of collectivism.'[69]

Before and during the war, ideology did not intrude very much into the work of the council. In economic questions, for example, the only significant split occurred in early 1935 when a slum-clearance scheme was proposed which would knock down 106 houses and accommodate 415 people. The council divided over whether or not this should be done by a direct labour force, Alfred Roberts opposing. Roberts quickly attained, and then held for more than twenty years, the chairmanship of the finance and rating committee on the council. The *Grantham Journal* called him 'Grantham's Chancellor of the Exchequer'.* He was the efficient and careful guardian of the council's budget, not an ideologue or a campaigning politician.

But since Labour was the only party which defied the convention about political identification on the council, it is fair to say that, for Roberts, Labour was always his political opponent. The Chamber of Trade, with whose support he was first elected, existed in opposition to the Labour Party, and to the associated Co-operative movement. And in the 1935 general election Roberts decided to throw his growing influence in the town behind the Conservative candidate, Sir Victor Warrender,† despite the fact that many of his fellow Methodists had supported the Peace Ballot which ended in that year.‡

* Before she became Conservative Party leader, Mrs Thatcher always said that her highest ambition was to be the first woman Chancellor of the Exchequer. She regarded any political job to do with money as more 'real' than any dealing with what she sometimes called 'the welfare thing'. She may have derived this view from her father.

† Victor Warrender (1899–1993), educated Eton; Conservative MP for Grantham, 1923–42; government whip, and holder of minor ministerial posts; created Lord Bruntisfield, 1942.

‡ The Peace Ballot, organized in 1935 by the League of Nations Union to seek support for its international peacemaking in the face of rearmament, has been curiously misrepresented by

It was this that gave Margaret her first taste of politics. She helped fold Warrender's election addresses into envelopes, and on polling day she acted as a runner, taking information about who had voted from the tellers at the polling station to the Conservative Committee Rooms so that they could make sure that their canvass turned out to vote.[70] Margaret Thatcher was never quite sure exactly what generated her early and enthusiastic allegiance to the Tories: 'I don't know why I was so staunchly Conservative. I think it was the idea of my father that you can get on somehow.'[71] But she immediately took to Warrender: 'I'll tell you what struck me. He had a presence, a natural presence. He had an overcoat on. It was a good overcoat. Good, not flashy. He was rather a handsome man. When he spoke, you listened.' She felt pleased 'to be treated on an equal level by an unequal . . . He understood that personality attracted votes.'[72] As so often in her dealings in later life, she was susceptible to good-looking men, to elegant clothes, to what used to be called an air of breeding.*

In forming his views on the international scene, Alfred Roberts probably gleaned more from Rotary than from any political party. Rotary was, and is, a worldwide movement. It grew in popularity between the wars, having been founded in the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century. Grantham Rotary got its charter in 1931, and Roberts was a founder member. In 1935 he became its annual president. With its motto of 'Service above Self', Rotary was a thoroughly worthy organization, composed largely of businessmen and dedicated to social improvement and charitable endeavour. The records of its meetings, as detailed in the *Grantham Journal*, show a slightly comical list of improving subjects chosen for the club's lectures – 'modern psychology', a talk on road rollers (which were locally manufactured) and the history of tithes and rent charges. The organization's approach to politics was deliberately uncomplicated. It called for people to sink their political differences in the wider public interest, and this applied, too, on the international scene, where a sentiment of reconciliation was much stronger than one of confrontation with Hitler. Margaret Thatcher said that her family first realized that there was something wrong with Hitler 'when we heard that he had suppressed Rotary'.[73] She saw the wider world through Rotarian eyes.

history. It is true that most of those taking part supported peaceful negotiation, but 6.8 million voted that the use of force against aggression was justified, as compared with 2.4 million who said that it was not.

* The two corresponded in warm terms in the 1970s and early 1980s, and when Mrs Thatcher was prime minister, she often stayed at Schloss Freudenberg near Zug in Switzerland, the home of Lady Glover. One man to whom she made a pilgrimage at his family's home in Gstaad was the by then extremely old Victor Warrender. A witness says that their meeting was emotional and touching: Mrs Thatcher thanked him for being the foundation of her political ambition. (Interview with Richard Bowdler-Raynar.)

As the chairman of Grantham Rotary's international service committee, Alfred Roberts organized visiting speakers. Because of this, and his voracious ·eading, he was probably as well informed as any other member about world ıffairs. Both Margaret and Muriel remembered that he was given favourable ›amphlets about Hitler by his fellow Rotarian and local GP, Dr Jauch, whom hey believed to be a German;* but that Roberts had been unconvinced. Des›ite her respect for Dr Jauch as a doctor, Mrs Thatcher remembered him as 'very cold man'.[74] What is clear, though, is that Roberts's Rotarianism, and ›erhaps his Methodism as well, made him sympathetic to appeasement, paricularly as embodied by Neville Chamberlain, the Prime Minister since 1937, nd about as perfectly Rotarian a figure as ever reached 10 Downing Street.

As the speaker at the annual dinner of Grantham Rotary on 26 January 939, Roberts reminded his audience of Rotary's clear rule of avoiding polics and not recommending 'forms of government'. 'They [that is, Rotary] ›ok no sides as to whether there should be a dictatorship, monarchy or ›public,' said the report of his speech. Nor did they enter into controversy bout 'world personalities, either in attack or defence', but they did have rinciples of 'justice, truth and liberty' which drove them to say that 'weak ations have sacred rights too, and that they must be respected'. Since Rotarns were animated by these principles, said Roberts, 'It did not matter to ıem whether people were strongly armed or whether they were almost ıarmed. They had seen, quite recently, what one man could do, armed only ith a neatly-rolled umbrella, with his mind made up and his will intent on ›ace. (Applause.)'[75] Roberts was referring to Chamberlain's agreement with itler, signed in Munich in October of the previous year and later to become ›torious. It is fair to say that, in speaking as he did, Roberts was expressing sentiment shared by probably three-quarters of the British population. ppeasement' was not then a dirty word, but one used by the appeasers emselves; they believed that peace could be preserved by talking. Those, e Winston Churchill, who disagreed were attacked as warmongers. Rob›s's views were the conventional ones. At the same dinner, various speakers ›rried about the banning of Rotary in Germany and Italy, which they ›ributed to the international character of the organization, but they stuck the view that Rotary's concept of 'fellowship' offered the best 'pathway peace' in an increasingly threatening climate.[76]

Margaret Thatcher, of course, became famous for her dislike of appeas; dictators (she compared Western weakness towards Saddam Hussein 1990 with that shown to Hitler, for example)[77] and for her admiration of Churchill. For this reason, perhaps, she did not like directly to admit that her father had been a supporter of Chamberlain, but approached the subject rather more obliquely. Chamberlain, she later insisted, 'was a very honourable man ... I often thought he knew that in 1938 he must gain time to get us ready. I believe he gained more in that last year than Hitler ... it may be that we owe Chamberlain a great debt of gratitude for his judgment for what happened during those years. And it brought Winston forward that much more.'[78] She said that honourable men try to find honour in other, foreign governments: 'perhaps it has been one of the faults of British politicians that we look at other politicians through slightly rose-tinted spectacles thinking they are as we are.'[79]

›r Jauch was actually of Swiss parentage.

Once war came in September 1939, however, any hesitations were put on one side, and Alfred Roberts became a more and more important figure in Grantham as the town responded to the crisis. He was one of three councillors appointed, when war began, to the emergency committee which exercised the powers of the full council, becoming its vice-chairman in 1942, and he threw himself into numerous war-related activities. He had been involved in the council's original ARP (Air Raid Precautions) plans in 1938, and during the war he played a leading part in Civil Defence and became chief raid welfare officer, dealing with questions like the rehousing and care of those who had been bombed. In 1940, he set up a British Restaurant – part of a national scheme for places providing basic food where workers could eat without using up their ration allowances – first for munitions workers in Bridge End Road, and later a second restaurant at the school room attached to the Finkin Street Methodist Church where he preached. He was prominent in the National Savings Movement, whose Local Savings Committees encouraged thrift and helped finance the war effort. All this work was not only worthy but genuinely demanding when combined with running his two shops. In 1940, Roberts was offered the mayoralty of Grantham, but had to refuse owing to lack of time. In February 1943, he was made an alderman, a form of unelected councillor now abolished outside the City of London, appointed by the council itself as a mark of respect and local distinction. Roberts, aged fifty at that time, was probably the youngest Grantham man ever to be chosen for the office. The circumstances in which he lost it, more than ten years later, were to make a profound impression upon his daughter. Just after the war ended, Roberts was again offered, and this time accepted, the mayoralty. From the beginning of the war until her departure for Oxford in October 1943, with Muriel absent in Birmingham for her training as a physiotherapy nurse, Margaret was in effect an only child at home. She witnessed at close quarters the endless labour and public spiritedness of her father, a life which,

because of war, shrank the sphere of private pleasures even smaller. Duty, work, patriotism – and the sense of an enemy – dominated.

Even as he drafted his speech about peace and war to Grantham Rotary, Alfred Roberts was preparing to put his Rotarian principles to a practical test. It was the custom at KGGS that many of the girls had foreign penfriends: Margaret had a French girl called Cilette Pasquier* from the Savoie, but Muriel had an Austrian one called Edith Mühlbauer. Edith was Jewish, and at some point her parents, suffering persecution after Hitler's *Anschluss* of Austria in March of the previous year, wrote to Roberts asking if he would take Edith in so that she could escape the Nazis. He agreed, ind arranged with fellow Rotarians that she should stay with several amilies in turn. The correspondence between Roberts and Edith's parents loes not survive, but on 21 January 1939 Edith herself wrote from Vienna o Roberts saying that the permit for the visa to England which followed is invitation had arrived. Typing neatly, in uncertain English, she thanked im for his help – 'I will never in my whole live forgett it you' – and went n to ask practical questions about reaching the Roberts family: 'Have I o take the train from London to Grantham† or the ship?'[80] In fact, the ureaucracy of permitted escape took some time, and on 23 March Edith vrote again, saying there was yet more delay, but that she should be llowed out of Austria within a few weeks: 'First of all let me thank you or your kind letter and enclosed photograph. I am ever so glad that you elped me and that there are various other people which want to help me o, and take me into their nice homes. I really hope to be happy there.'[81]

Unfortunately, generous though the Robertses were, Edith was not terbly happy with them. Hints of the problem surface in the memories of Iargaret and Muriel. 'We didn't have a proper bathroom in those days,' id Margaret; 'she was used to better things.'[82] Muriel said Edith was a ice girl', but also that 'she had a wonderful wardrobe . . . and I think that ey were well breeched in Austria.' As if to protect her from possible reat, Edith's Jewishness was not mentioned, but it seems also to have ntributed to the provincial Robertses' sense that she was rather apart om them.[83] Edith didn't like the Robertses' Sunday-afternoon walk into e fields beyond Grantham: 'She said, "It'll ruin my shoes."'[84]

ady Thatcher mistakenly refers to her as Colette in her memoirs. She was known as Cilette, her baptismal name was Cécile. Cilette Pasquier was to marry Franck Sérusclat, a Socialist ator for the Rhône region from 1977 to 1999. She and Margaret never met, and she died 982, apparently without knowing that her former penfriend had become the British prime ister.

rantham is land-locked.

What seems to have happened is that Alfred Roberts was shocked by Edith's sophistication, her smart appearance and her tendency, at that time thought extremely dangerous in teenage girls, to wear make-up. In the slightly acid words of Madeline Edwards, whose family also accommodated her, Edith was 'a very grown-up seventeen-year-old'.[85] She would sit at the window of her bedroom in North Parade looking out on to the street and making Roberts feel, according to one of her contemporaries, that 'it was like Amsterdam'.[86] Edith told Mary Wallace that she found 1 North Parade a 'repressive household'.[87] She was 'patently unhappy' there.[88] This produced a major row between Roberts and his fellow Rotarian, Mr Wallace, the dentist. The two men started shouting at one another and Wallace told Roberts: 'You asked this girl over, and you're not looking after her properly and she's very unhappy.'[89] This version is implicitly confirmed by Muriel Cullen, who says that 'Daddy refused to accept responsibility too much and went round to all Rotarians in turn persuading them to have Edith . . . I sometimes think he regretted having got her over.'[90]

Certainly Edith did not stay in North Parade for long. She arrived some time in April, and by 16 May is writing to Muriel from the house of Madeline Edwards in Welby Gardens. She apologizes for not having replied earlier to Muriel's letter, but explains that she has already moved house twice before reaching the Edwardses: 'it seems to me as if I am a gipsy.' So she probably lived at North Parade for no more than a fortnight. The fact that she writes warmly to Muriel (mentioning Muriel's sister whom she germanicizes as 'Margit') shows that relations were not broken, and her letter states that 'I often go for a walk to see your dear father Mr Roberts, and ask if there are today any letters for me.' She was clearly grateful to the Robertses for helping her, and said so again when tracked down by journalists in old age, living in Brazil to which she and her family shortly afterwards escaped. But the experiment did not really work, and she finally came to rest in Grantham in the larger and more sophisticated home of the Wallaces, with whom she stayed for the best part of a year.

The story of Edith shows Alfred Roberts in an interesting light – a well-intentioned man, determined to live by his principles, genuinely kind, but also stern and forbidding. Perhaps it was easier to admire him than to live with him. Margaret, several years younger than Edith, did not know her well, but she was shocked above all by one feature she related of her life in Vienna: 'She said that Jewish women were being made to scrub the streets.'[91]

2

Scholarship girl

'You're thwarting my ambition'

In Margaret's earliest known letter,[1] of which only one sheet survives, she nalysed her exams. She had just sat School Certificate (the rough equivaent of the GCSE), in the summer of 1941, and found the pace intense – 'As ou can imagine this mean't [sic] a terrific amount of swotting.' The biggest roblem was presented by geography. The first paper, based on work with he Ordnance Survey map, was not too bad, but 'the other paper on the British Isles and one continent was very disappointing. For one continent ve did America and the questions on it were not at all bad, but out of the hree on the British Isles there was only one we could touch.' All of them nvolved a fairly detailed knowledge of Scotland and Ireland and their owns. 'Unfortunately we had not touched island [sic] and had had preisely two lessons on Scotland . . . However we managed to survive it and vent home to dinner hoping for a decent biology paper in the afternoon.' ven at the age of fifteen, the map of her future political sympathies is laid ut. England and America understood, Scotland little studied, Ireland *terra icognita* and Continental Europe not even mentioned.

Margaret's sister had just taken her own exams in Birmingham. 'CONRATULATIONS ON YOUR SPLENDID EXAM RESULTS I think veryone in the town knows about them by this time,' Margaret inserted t the top of the letter. Confident that the subject of her own School Cerficate is overwhelmingly fascinating to Muriel, she wrote, 'I will send you ie papers as soon as I can, but first I want Mr Marks to see them.' Harold Iarks was a master at the King's School, the boys' grammar school in rantham, for whom she had great respect. Her father had arranged for Iarks to act as Margaret's occasional private tutor. It is striking that she iould immediately have sought validation and advice from outside her hool: there were, of course, no men at KGGS.

In the event, Margaret need not have worried. She got a credit in geography. In her second letter, written to Muriel on 20 September 1941,[2] she

tabulates her full results. She got distinctions (the top grade) in chemistry, arithmetic and algebra, and credits in all other subjects with the exception of life drawing, in which she managed only a lowly pass. Having charted these, she lists the results of her fellow pupils. Although she does not make the point from the information she sets out, it is clear from the data that none of the other girls mentioned managed three distinctions. Indeed, eleven out of forty failed. This led to a parting of the ways, with some girls staying in a lower form to retake and others, such as Margaret, setting their sights on university.

With the ready nostalgia of the very young, Margaret laments the changes: 'Life in 6 Lower is not half as nice as life in form Va. Our crowd have broken up of course and several have left . . . There is not the form spirit that there used to be . . . we used to cling together . . . but now . . . so many of the old links are missing, there is nothing to hold us together.' The fall in numbers was astonishing. In V Lower, Margaret recorded, there had been fifty-three girls.[3] After Christmas 1941, there would be only four – Margaret, Madeline Edwards, Jean Farmer and Lorna Smith, who was new. Many girls had left due to the plentiful availability of jobs during the war. Margaret's old companions, Joan Orchard and Pat Maidens, had been held down a year; of her intimates, only Jean Farmer survived in the same class. Margaret and Jean were also the only remaining scientists. Always sensitive to possible condescension, Margaret considered the Sixth Form (the year above her) 'rather superior', though expressing pleasure that Margaret Goodrich (see previous chapter) had been made head girl, since 'she is one of the decent ones.'

To mark the last jolly time before school began once more, Margaret went to the pictures:

> . . . Jean came in, and Joan came down [from her parents' house on a hill outside Grantham], then we all went to the State [one of Grantham's cinemas] in the afternoon and stayed tea, as a last splash before we started school. We saw *This England* with Constance Cummings, Emlyn Williams, and John Clements. We enjoyed it, although it was a historical film, for the greater part. With it was *Romance of the Rio Grande* with Caesar [sic] Romero and Patricia Morrison. For tea we had salmon salad. We happened to strike a lucky day for there was also jam and chocolate biscuits.*

* To attend both films on the bill was an act of minor defiance against the wishes of Mr and Mrs Roberts. They thought that their girls should go only to those films properly chosen on their merits, rather than watching whatever happened to be on. (See Margaret Thatcher, *The Path to Power*, HarperCollins, 1995, p. 14.)

On returning to school, Margaret was not greatly impressed with all of the teaching staff: 'The new games mistress is not as young as we have been used to having. Her name is Miss Dales, and she looks about 30. The history mistress is very disappointing. She is quite middle-aged and very dowdy in dress.' And as for Miss Amor, the geography teacher who had also been her form mistress, she had now, in her new role of vice-head, grown 'too big for her boots', so much so that 'she would not come and take stock cupboard at all on Friday.' Margaret reserved a specially tart comment for the headmistress, Miss Gillies, about her handling of the exam results: 'There was no message of congratulation (or sympathy) from the Head, just a blunt "Pass" or "Fail".'

She set her shoulder to the wheel of work, however, and shared her thoughts about the future with her sister:

> When going into VI Lower you need not necessarily decide what career you are going to take up except that it would be helpful in choosing subjects ... Daddy does not like the idea of medical at all, but I am taking Biology, Chemistry and Maths main with French subsid. The next idea on the list is to go to University, and take a science degree then sit for a Civil Service exam for posts abroad. A degree is necessary for this for a woman. Of course I shan't be able to go to University at all unless I get a scholarship.

In the whole letter, there is no direct mention of the war, though at the time Germany was invading Russia and Britain was almost the sole champion of the free world, the United States not having yet entered the conflict. The historical moment in which Margaret was living impinges only indirectly and in small ways – the emphasis on the rare availability of salmon salad, a passing mention of the fact that the evacuated Camden School for Girls was sharing KGGS's facilities, the increasing age of the teaching staff. The war, which was to play so important a part in forming her beliefs and her idea of her country, was treated by her at the time only as a backdrop against which the life of school was played out.

Already, in her first words that posterity has left us, the fifteen-year-old Margaret Roberts shows herself clear, confident, ambitious, diligent, clever and slightly acidulous.

What was her education, and how did it form her? At her primary school in Huntingtower Road, Margaret did well. The story has often been told, in slightly differing versions, about the prize she won at the age of nine.*

* Russell Lewis, in his *Margaret Thatcher* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), says the prize was for poetry recital at the local eisteddfod, the festival of Welsh origin which was popular in

When the head congratulated her on her luck, Margaret retorted, 'I wasn't lucky. I deserved it.' The tale is sometimes taken to indicate big-headedness or arrogance, but more likely it shows the young Margaret's literal-mindedness.* She had not been lucky; she *had* deserved it, so she felt bound to say so. To say anything else would be to cast doubt on the entire judging process.

The first surviving motion picture – a short and jerky cine film – of Margaret Roberts dates from 1935. In that year, Grantham celebrated its centenary as a borough, and she paraded, with her school, to help form the word 'GRANTHAM' out of human bodies. In the film, the nine-year-old Margaret Roberts can be discerned preparing to do so: 'appropriately enough, I was part of the "M".'[4]

In the following year, Margaret won a scholarship to Kesteven and Grantham Girls' School. KGGS, as it is and was always known, was the best school in the area that a girl could attend. Founded in 1910, it was a fee-paying girls' grammar school, but with about a quarter of the girls attending exempt from fees. Scholarship girls entered after an equivalent of the later universal eleven-plus exam; fee-paying girls could enter from a much younger age. When Margaret arrived in September 1936, there were about 330 girls in the school, including Muriel, who was not a scholarship girl. Because of its high reputation, KGGS drew on families from quite far outside Grantham, as well as from the town itself. The social background of the pupils varied from the prosperous or highly educated (top managers in the engineering firms, the Anglican clergy) to daughters of poor families who had got in on their wits. In the financial scale, the Robertses probably stood slightly below the middle of the school; in the social, because of Alfred's growing role in the town, rather higher.

Despite her scholarship, Margaret went straight into the B Stream. This did not reflect any academic defect on her part, but simply the fact that an unusually large number of scholarship girls had been admitted in that year, and not all could be accommodated in the A Stream. The effect of this was to foster the slight but definite sense of separation from most of her peers that many felt Margaret showed. It also threw her together with Jean Farmer, the

Grantham at that time. Nellie Towers, in her interview for *Maggie: The First Lady* (Brook Lapping Productions for ITV and PBS, 2003), says she was being congratulated for this and for winning the church music festival piano solo prize. It is possible that the story conflates more than one occasion.

* Literal-mindedness was a quality that Margaret Thatcher observed in herself. In her memoirs, she says, 'I was perplexed by the metaphorical element of phrases like "Look before you leap". I thought it would be far better to say "Look before you cross" ...' (Thatcher, *The Path to Power*, p. 17).

builder's daughter from Fulbeck. Jean, too, was a scholarship girl, the only other one in the B Stream, and because of this, she said, 'we were a pair'[5] for the two years before they graduated to the A Stream, and, indeed, until Margaret went to Oxford and Jean to teacher training college in 1943. Jean was an easygoing, popular girl, known, in the parlance of the time, as a 'scream',[6] and it was she and her family that first gave Margaret the sense that life could be more fun than it was in North Parade. It was in response to Margaret's demand that she be allowed Sundays as free and jolly as those of the Farmers that Alfred Roberts produced his famous response: 'Margaret, never do things just because other people do them. Make up your own mind what you are going to do and persuade people to go your way.'[7] Margaret both kicked against such injunctions and imbibed them respectfully. She resented what her father taught, but generally believed that he was right.

Jean Farmer liked Margaret without reservation. She describes her as 'a very pleasant, happy, fun-loving girl', not at all under stress and even 'happy-go-lucky'. She was a 'slightly plump' girl who was 'polite, hard-working and joined in everything'. The two of them 'never had a cross word', and Jean was irritated in later years by the criticisms of Margaret which she felt were unfair, such as not having a sense of humour or being too imperious: 'I didn't find her at all bossy . . . she was exceptionally nice.' The two spent the odd weekend at one another's parents' houses, and the Farmers once took Margaret with them for a weekend in Skegness – a modest outing by modern standards, but quite a thing for the girls at the time. They were also excited by an expedition they made to Stamford Boys School to see *The Barber of Seville* performed in French ('though we couldn't understand a thing they said'). Jean did not regard Margaret as a genius, but she did note her 'marvellous powers of concentration' and one of her most famous characteristics as prime minister: 'she didn't need as much sleep as we did.'[8] Jean's parents were particularly fond of Margaret too, and it was Jean's father, Jack, who chaired the Conservative Party meeting in Fulbeck in the general election campaign of 1945 at which Margaret did the warm-up for the Tory candidate. This was one of the first public speeches that she had made.* The Farmers kept up with Margaret, writing to congratulate her on her public successes. In March 1974, following the Tory defeat in the general election the previous month, Margaret, who had seen Jean again while opening a comprehensive in

* Lady Thatcher told the present author that she spoke in public in the Grantham by-election of 1942, but this does not appear to be the case; it seems ...

Formby where she now lived, wrote back: 'It was good to see Jean when I opened a school. She looks marvellous. I think we have both "worn" very well!'* She went on, 'It seems a long time since I was "home" in Lincolnshire. In some ways, I think they were happier and fuller days than those I live now. The days in London are and always will be very busy – but there is not the warmth and the friendship of the small town and village.'[9] In reality, Margaret probably did not like Grantham excessively, and was certainly keen to get away from it, but she admired the values that she learnt there. And there is no doubt that she felt a real affection for the Farmers and the spontaneity of their village life.†

Jean Farmer was not alone in thoroughly liking Margaret. Another friend was Shirley Walsh (now Ellis), a pretty girl on whose doorstep in Avenue Road Margaret chose to arrive every morning ('she was always early')[10] so that they could walk to school together across the River Witham. It was Margaret who informed her, on one of these spring mornings in 1940, that invading German forces had parachuted into Holland. And it was Margaret and Shirley, when they were a bit older, who would work together at Toc H, the mission for servicemen, on a Saturday serving in the forces canteen. In Shirley Ellis's view, Margaret 'was never disdainful of her schoolfriends or peers' and showed a good sense of humour – 'She didn't instigate, but she joined in': she had 'no dislikeable characteristics'. Evidence of humour – the slightly dry wit which Margaret exhibited in later years – can also be found in her correspondence with Muriel. Writing about a bus trip back from a hockey match, she describes how the vehicle was so crowded that the girls had to sit on sacks of potatoes 'which by the time we arrived at North Witham were just about cooked and mashed'.[11]

And although all her contemporaries attest to a seriousness in Margaret which made her different from the others, she took part in all the normal interests and activities of a teenage girl of that period. She enjoyed tennis, and played hockey well enough (at centre half) to be in the school team. More striking, and more apparently at odds with her upbringing, was a strong interest in glamour, both in films and in fashion. Almost every letter to Muriel mentions the latest films to hit Grantham. In the letter in which she mentions going to the *This England* double bill with Jean and Joan, she discusses five other films. *Bittersweet* and *Pimpernel Smith* are coming soon,

* Note that Mrs Thatcher praises her own looks as well as Jean's. She never found it easy to hand out unreserved compliments to other women.

she says,* but she has just been to see *Rebecca*, which she thinks 'one of the best I have ever seen, with a well-concealed plot'.[12] She also went with her mother to *Love on the Dole*, she wrote, a film about unemployed Lancastrian cotton workers between the wars, 'the spectral army of three million lost men', unusual in the wartime period for addressing social problems of this kind. It was not to Margaret's taste: 'I can't say I enjoyed it, although it was a good film.' In the following month, a Deanna Durbin season at Grantham continued: 'I went to *Nice Girl* with Jean and Joan. I thought it was rotten.'[13] Films in Grantham were made more acceptable in the eyes of Margaret's parents by the fact that one cinema, the Picture House, was owned by the Campbells, customers and respected neighbours of Roberts in nearby, rather grand Welby Gardens. J. A. Campbell was a fellow Rotarian of Alfred Roberts. Their daughter, Judy, who lived there with her parents in the 1930s, was a very beautiful woman, and became a well-known actress and the first to popularize the song 'A Nightingale Sang in Berkeley Square'.† Margaret knew Judy a little, and greatly admired her. She also had a partiality for the films of Ginger Rogers, which led Jim Allen, Grantham's leading local historian of Margaret Thatcher, to ask her in old age if she liked Rogers because of her portrayal of a woman succeeding in a man's world in *Kitty Foyle*. 'No, it wasn't,' replied Lady Thatcher. 'I always wished I could have danced like her.'[14]

By Margaret's own account, the 'biggest excitement of my early years' was her only pre-war trip to London, at the age of twelve. She went to stay with Methodist friends of the family, the Revd Mr Skinner and his wife – the minister who was much later to marry her and Denis. The Skinners took her to the obvious London sights, including Parliament and Downing Street, and St Paul's Cathedral ('where John Wesley prayed on the morning of his conversion').[15] 'But the high point was my first visit to the Catford Theatre in Lewisham where we saw Sigmund Romberg's famous musical *The Desert Song*. For three hours I lived in another world, swept away as was the heroine by the daring Red Shadow – so much so that I bought the score and played it at home, perhaps too often.' Rather touchingly, she

* In her memoirs, Lady Thatcher says that her 'views on the French Revolution were gloriously confirmed by Leslie Howard and lovely Merle Oberon in *The Scarlet Pimpernel*' (Thatcher, *The Path to Power*, p. 14). This may be so, but the film came out in 1934, at a time when Margaret was a little young for it. It seems more likely that she is remembering *Pimpernel Smith*, also starring Leslie Howard, which updates the story of the Scarlet Pimpernel and places it in war-torn Europe.

† Judy Campbell, who died in 2004, was also the mother of Jane Birkin, equally famous for a very different sort of love-song, 'Je t'aime . . . moi non plus', in the late 1960s. Jane's daughter, Charlotte Gainsbourg, starred in the painfully explicit film *Antichrist* early in the twenty-first century.

writes of the trip that the Skinners' 'kindness had given me a glimpse of, in Talleyrand's words, "*la douceur de la vie*"'. For all her subsequent fame, she seldom had time throughout her life to savour this indefinable quality, but when she did, she loved it. She also thrived on the excitement of places that mattered. London traffic and crowds 'seemed to generate a sort of electricity', even the soot of the buildings lent a 'dark, imposing magnificence which constantly reminded me that I was at the centre of the world'. Except in political allegiance, the centre was always where she wanted to be.

Apart from films, the other way to bring glamour to unexciting Grantham was through clothes. Margaret would never have wanted to be trendy, even if the word had existed at the time, but she constantly sought elegance and quality in what she wore. It was a time, because of the war and later the post-war rationing, as well as her parents' careful budgeting, when these were not easily attained. Her correspondence with Muriel includes a constant series of requests for bits of material or nylons or buttons and so on, and a detailed discussion of fashion and beauty, of where it is possible to obtain the right things, and at what price. On 30 July 1944, a few days after the abortive Bomb Plot by German officers against Hitler, she writes to Muriel that, going to Lincoln with Jean, she had 'hoped to do a bit of shopping with odds and bobs thinking that tomorrow was August 1st and we should be able to use the new coupons, but now of course I have discovered that it will only be July 31st, and so I shan't be able to do much as I have only one coupon left.' Nevertheless, she went the previous day to Chambers in Grantham 'and bought two underwear sets that I am very pleased with. I got a white Kayser set and a pink rather dainty set of some other make. I also got pink uplift bras . . .' She then chose 'a Vogue pattern for a frock. I think there will be just sufficient material over to make a small berry [sic: she meant beret] shaped hat of the kind that are in fashion now. If that man can make me a handbag, it should be a nice set when it is finished.'[16] For her birthday in 1941, her father gave Margaret a pound so that she could buy a powder bowl, 'telling me to bring back the change'.[17] She found a nice but plain one for 10 shillings (50p) ('just ordinary glass with a little gold paint round the top'). 'There's one I should very much have liked,' she goes on. 'It was green, very large and cut glass. The only objectionable thing about it was its price – 32/6.'[18]

Margaret always exhibited a practical approach to things, whether to price or to friendship. Lorna Smith, who came into the school in September 1941, remembered her as 'quiet, hard-working, poised, calm and self-confident. Some people found her slightly irritating, and even rather conceited, but I fear there was an element of envy there! For myself, I found

her pleasant and helpful, for which, as a new girl at the school, I was immensely grateful.' To Lorna, Margaret displayed the rather brisk, mothering sort of kindness which, in later life, she always showed to those who worked closely with her: 'one bitterly cold winter's morning I had to cycle to Grantham, with no breakfast, to have a nerve removed at the dentist's. Staggering out of the surgery, some time later, I ran straight into Margaret, who was shopping. She took one look at my ashen face, and steered me to Catlin's Café for a restorative hot drink. She will not remember her kind deed, but I have never forgotten it.'[19] What marked Margaret out, though, was her sense of purpose. As Shirley Ellis put it, 'She always stood out because teenage girls don't know where they're going. She did.'

And this purposefulness was accompanied by a fondness for simple moral precepts that never left her. It was a custom for schoolgirls in the 1930s to keep autograph books. These were not so much, as in future generations, to obtain the signatures of famous people as to collect the signatures of friends and the little improving remarks or quotations which they might want to inscribe. On 23 March 1937, the eleven-year-old Margaret Roberts wrote in Madeline Edwards's autograph book:

> Tis easy enough to be pleasant,
> When life goes by with a song.
> But the one worth while
> Is the one that can smile
> When everything goes dead wrong.

Rita Hind (later Wright), another schoolfriend, kept the inscription of fifteen-year-old Margaret Roberts on 22 June 1941 (the day, as it happens, when the world received the news of Hitler's invasion of Russia): 'A little thing is a little thing, but faithfulness in little things, is a great thing.' Shirley Ellis's autograph book did not survive, but she remembered what Margaret wrote in it in 1939: 'Smile a while and when you smile another smiles and then there's miles and miles of smiles.'

Precepts, once learnt, had also to be proclaimed. Margaret's Methodist upbringing and her father's example made it natural for someone of her interests to want to speak in public, unusual though this was for a woman at that time. It was many years, however, before she started to make speeches of her own. Her first public performances were recitations, and she favoured such poetry – well-known passages of Longfellow, Tennyson, Whitman or Kipling – as made its moral meaning plain and expressed it with grandeur and force. It was partly for these exercises that she began the first of several stints of elocution lessons which were to punctuate her career. According to Connie Pitchford, a KGGS contemporary, Margaret

suffered from 'a slight lisp and had trouble pronouncing her Rs'. In 1936, she and Connie had elocution lessons together.[20] From these, not from any later, political attempt to improve her social standing, springs the cut-glass voice for which Margaret was later to be criticized. In those days, all elocution teachers tried to enforce a very precise, carefully enunciated version of received pronunciation, and for Margaret, who was already competing in declamation competitions, it would not have been possible to win without eliminating all traces (which seem anyway to have been slight) of a Lincolnshire accent. Later, her carefully modulated tones used to irritate many of her contemporaries at Somerville, Oxford, who considered them 'artificial'.[21] So in a sense they were, but the purpose of the artifice was more purity of diction than climbing up the greasy political or social pole. Margaret herself understood that artificiality was frowned upon: her lessons had taught her the importance of avoiding exaggeration and melodrama: 'you were taught not to over-express. To over-express is to undermine your meaning because it becomes artificial.'[22]

The lessons produced results. In 1937, Margaret won the silver medal at the Grantham eisteddfod for her recitation of John Drinkwater's 'Moonlit Apples' and Walter De La Mare's 'The Travellers'. In 1939, Shirley Ellis remembers sharing a prize with her for declaiming Tennyson's 'Ulysses'. And Margaret, though by no means a literary girl, was someone easily stirred to passion by the high sentiments and noble expressions of poetry. 'I loved language and rhythm,' she recalled,[23] and she appreciated poets, such as John Masefield or Henry Newbolt, who indulged this love. 'Kipling was our hero, with the breadth of his writing,' she said,[24] and throughout her life she always had some quotation from him – 'A truth that's told with bad intent / Beats all the lies you can invent,' for example – readily retrievable from her memory (although this quotation is misattributed by her – the lines are by William Blake). One may speculate that Kipling, as well as the Methodist missionaries, excited the idea of India in her imagination. She loved what were then the 'obvious' anthologies of English poetry, such as Palgrave's *Golden Treasury* and Quiller-Couch's edition of the *Oxford Book of English Verse*. To her first serious boyfriend, she gave a copy of Palgrave. To the man whom, before Denis, she most nearly married, she sent the complete works of Shakespeare. Neither choice shows any originality of literary taste, but her reverence and affection for great writing were genuine. She extended these feelings, above all, to the Authorized Version of the Bible, singling out Isaiah, the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles: 'There is no greater English literature.'[25] Her choice of Acts is slightly unusual, and worth noting – it is the most important book in the Scriptures about the propagation of a message to the world. And to the end of her life she retained the words of scores of the classic English hymns

in her mind. At Denis's funeral in July 2003, when her anguish and mental confusion were such that she was not sure whether it was her husband's or her father's coffin in front of her, she was seen to sing all the hymns, word-perfect, without looking at the service sheet.*

This is how Lorna Smith, arriving as a shy new girl in September 1941, remembers the Lower Sixth at KGGS:

> Our combined sixth Forms shared a form-room, furnished with a desk and two long tables, at which we sat facing each other. The more senior girls usually sat opposite me, so I was able to contemplate the stars in my new firmament.
>
> There was Margaret Goodrich ('Margie'), clever, kind and attractive, well turned-out, and with her bright burnished red hair tied in a neat bow. She was inclined to be Miss Gillies' 'pet', but it did not spoil her.
>
> Her younger sister, Joan Goodrich ('Joanie') might be at the table, too. She was also clever, but very quiet and hardly ever spoke. She had a very pale complexion, and her hair was black, and sleek as a starling.
>
> Then there was Madeline Edwards, with her long Titian mane, proud of her Welsh origins, strong of character, a natural leader, and immensely gifted. She excelled in almost everything, especially in the arts and music.
>
> . . . and sometimes Margaret Roberts was there, too, when she was not 'swotting' in the chemistry lab, where she could usually be found.
>
> Not as striking, perhaps, as the girls already described, and with rather 'mousey' hair (like mine!), she nevertheless had even features, a clear complexion, intelligent grey-blue eyes, a very good figure and legs, and a sharp intellect. She radiated quiet confidence.

Lorna shared history revision with Margaret, which included a weekly session on 'Current Events'.

> After one of these classes . . . we were lolling about in our form-room, gossiping, and thinking about our futures. Margaret said she was going to be a scientist, but she was also interested, like her father, in politics, and would perhaps try for Parliament one day. 'Imagine – an MP!' I said, admiringly. 'Perhaps you could even be Prime Minister!' She waved away the idea, but she was looking both dreamy and purposeful. Since then I have heard her disclaim all such ambitions, but that is a clear memory.†

* The present author witnessed this.

† Margaret Goodrich has said, and Mrs Thatcher has confirmed in slightly different form (see Patricia Murray, *Margaret Thatcher*, W. H. Allen, 1980, p. 38), that her first moment of realization that she wanted to be an MP was at Margaret Goodrich's twenty-first birthday party

Discussion of politics, though, was a rarity at KGGS. There was plenty of talk, of course, about the progress of the war, but this concerned Britain's military fortunes, not the conflict's political rights and wrongs. Reflecting the parents of the girls, the school's prevailing allegiance was vaguely Conservative, but those girls who enjoyed debate were more likely to centre on religious questions than political ones. 'I think our faith mattered more,' said Rita Hind.[26]* The girls were very idealistic, she said: it was 'a very moral period', with no girls known to have boyfriends while at school. 'There were more important things to do than boys,' Margaret remembered.[27] It was a time of aspiration, and of a love of education. 'We didn't see the emptiness that would follow the war,' said Rita Hind. It was this high-minded atmosphere which Margaret drank in, and cherished: 'I'm quite sure she wanted to keep alive the spirit of the Thirties or revive it.'[28] No one remembered Margaret debating political issues at this time, though all remembered her interest in the subject. Indeed, there is scarcely a single instance, in all her surviving correspondence from the 1940s, of Margaret expressing a political view on any subject. Her political involvement is clear, but all her mentions of it refer to organization, meetings, speeches and so on, not to the substance of policy or ideas.

In the context of what she calls the school's 'strong religious bias, led by our high-principled Head' (Miss Gillies), Lorna Smith remembered many schoolgirl discussions about faith, not least a surreal conversation with Margaret on an afternoon walk from school into Grantham just before Christmas in 1942. 'She remarked that, really, she didn't think she could believe in angels. "Oh, why?" I asked, wondering what Ald. Roberts would think. "Well," she replied, "I have worked it out scientifically that in order to fly, an angel would need a six-foot-long breastbone to bear the weight of its wings." ' Lorna added, perhaps superfluously, '. . . Margaret could be very earnest at times.'[29]

There was something else that Margaret worked out scientifically, with alarming results. In the spring of 1943, the post-exam celebrations resulted in ink being spilt on the 'precious parquet floor of our form-room'.[30] For Lorna Smith, this was a second offence.

on 22 December 1944, when she assented to the proposition put to her by another girl that she wanted a political career. In fact, as Lorna Smith's story indicates, the idea was floating considerably earlier.

* Almost all the former KGGS girls interviewed for this book continued to maintain an active religious life, all of them Christian except for Madeline Hellaby (née Edwards), who converted from Unitarianism to the Bah'ai faith.

Knowing that soap-and-water was useless, what was to be done? Surely, this time we would be expelled. Then someone thought of our star scientist – Margaret Roberts would know what would remove the now-spreading black stain. Her remedy was that it should be sprinkled with bleaching-powder and then have hydrochloric acid poured on (stolen from the lab.). I scrubbed away furiously, and sure enough, the boards began to recover. But the next moment I was almost overcome by the fumes and had to rush out-of-doors, quite blue in the face – no one knew that the lethal mixture would give off chlorine gas. Our violent coughing and splutterings alerted the staff, who were too genuinely concerned about us to be angry at the mess. Indeed, the next day, there was surprisingly little retribution; I suspect that Margaret had quietly been to Miss Gillies and owned up to her near-fatal advice. (My lungs have not been the same since.)

As well as being religious, the school was competitive, at least in its higher academic echelons, and no one more so than Margaret. Rita Hind remembered that she, Margaret and Madeline Edwards used to vie for the top places, and that, in doing so, Margaret displayed more determination than she did natural talent: 'Most things with Maggie were learnt or contrived.'[31]* Even the good-natured Lorna Smith found Margaret's pride in her academic attainments rather tiresome: 'I recall [in July 1942] being slightly "miffed" when Margaret told me afterwards, and rather boastfully, that our form-mistress had said that all our geography results were extremely disappointing – except hers.'[32] Her faults, in the eyes of her contemporaries, concerned her tendency to come top, to be right and to rub it in. And it is noticeable that the ones who most resented her tended to be those who were themselves stars in the school firmament. Both Madeline Edwards and Margaret Goodrich recalled her irritating tendency to ask the first, well-informed question of any visiting speaker, even when she was a little girl in the fourth form ('We'd look at one another and say, "She's at it again,"' said Madeline Edwards); and Margaret Goodrich remembers, at her own twenty-first birthday party in December 1944, a friend turning on Margaret Roberts and saying, 'If you don't stop bossing us, I shall stamp on your foot.'[33] The less competitive girls, such as Lorna, Jean and Shirley, found Margaret less oppressive.

Once in the sixth form, Margaret became a prefect, and she seems to

* Mrs Wright is unique in referring to Margaret as 'Maggie' in her interview. There is no evidence that anyone, apart from President Reagan, who knew her ever called her this at any stage of her life, though it became the name preferred by tabloid headline writers. When asked about her names, Lady Thatcher replied, 'I don't like them, especially the Hilda: it has an ugly hard sound. But I would rather be Hilda than "Maggie"' (interview with Lady Thatcher).

have taken to her duties with the energy, dedication and slight exasperation at the weaknesses of others which were to mark her later career. In December 1941, she writes to Muriel about the preparations for a charity Fun Fair at the school. The decision was made to run the thing in forms, with each form getting up two competitions. 'I happen to have form IV Lower A who are rather young,' writes Margaret, and there was:

> a lot of extra work as posters had to be made to draw people's attention to the fact that they simply MUST go to room seven . . . Well, you know I am no artist so I got two of my form to promise to do some posters for Thursday morning. On Thursday they both came to me and said they were sorry but . . . On Thursday evening I had to sit down and do them myself . . . The youngsters are very enthusiastic but not very ready to do a lot.

Her competition raised 30 shillings and her stall £10 – 'an excellent result'.[34]*

Margaret was not considered an intellectual genius, but she was right at the top of the class, and consistently got good reports and good results. As early as Christmas 1936 she is recorded as having 'worked steadily and well throughout the term. She has definite ability, and her cheeriness makes her a very pleasant member of her form. Her behaviour is excellent.'[35] Even after promotion to the A Stream, Margaret continued to come top every year except one, in which she came second, and reports commended her for virtues like 'care and thoroughness'. Words like 'very satisfactory', 'thoughtful and helpful' and 'keenly interested' abound. Her 'power of sustained interest' was noted. When Margaret applied to Oxford, Miss Gillies, who, as we shall see, had a scratchy relationship with her pupil, nevertheless noted, in her reference, that 'she is a very logical thinker' and 'has a very clear mind'.[36] Miss Gillies's final report had a touch of coolness in its praise: 'Margaret is ambitious and deserves to do well. She has shown herself capable of a very thorough mastery of facts and is, I consider, now ready for the experience of wider scholarship which a University education can offer.'

Margaret accepted and admired the ethos of KGGS. Although, as education secretary from 1970 to 1974, she found herself landed with the task of permitting the closure of grammar schools if local authorities demanded it, and thus closed more than anyone in her position before or since, the process made her miserable. She loved grammar schools, which she regarded as the ladder of opportunity for able children from unprivileged

* Margaret Thatcher only rarely dated her handwritten letters exactly. They most commonly say just the day – for example, 'Tuesday' or 'Sunday evening' – or nothing at all.

families. When she visited KGGS in 1986 to open the Roberts Hall in memory of her father, who had been, for almost forty years, first a governor and then chairman of the Governors, she declared: 'I would not have been in No. 10 but for this school.'[37] And, after an earlier visit, as leader of the Opposition in 1977, she wrote, in her letter of thanks to the then headmistress, 'For me, the school's motto has always been particularly true.'[38] The motto is *Veras hinc ducere voces* – 'To lead true voices from here' (a quotation from Horace's *Ars Poetica*) – and it is fair to say that, despite all the evasions that politics requires, Margaret Thatcher was always exceptionally concerned to tell the truth as she saw it. When she accepted a peerage, she took her title from her school, not from her town, becoming Baroness Thatcher of Kesteven. Replying to a letter of congratulation from Shirley Ellis, she said: 'I am glad our KGGS friends like the title.'[39]

It is probably the case, however, that Margaret's relationship with her school, as with Grantham itself, was slightly more ambiguous than she would have allowed. Local feeling that she could have done more to use her fame to promote the school's interests may perhaps be discounted – she did keep well in touch with the school and she did, after all, have other things to do – but what is more significant is the conflict Margaret encountered as a pupil when she decided to try for Oxford to read chemistry, a subject in which she was particularly strong, and whose teacher, Miss Kay, she greatly respected.

It related to the character of the headmistress. When Margaret first arrived at KGGS, the headmistress was Miss Gladys Williams, who had held her position from the founding of the school in 1910. Margaret loved Miss Williams: she was always much influenced in her feelings about women (and, indeed, about men) by their manners, appearance and demeanour, and Miss Williams impressed her for these reasons.* Her 'quiet authority . . . dominated everything', she records in her memoirs. 'I greatly admired the special outfits Miss Williams used to wear on important days . . . when she appeared in beautiful silk, softly tailored, looking supremely elegant.' With this elegance, though, she combined another virtue high in Margaret's pantheon: 'she was very practical. The advice to us was never to buy a low-quality silk when the same amount of money would purchase a very good-quality cotton . . . The rule was always to go for

* Most of the young Margaret's harshest comments are reserved for those who make nothing of their appearance and exhibit sourness or slatternliness. In a letter to Muriel written in December 1941, she describes the school's hockey-team visit to a match in Melton: 'Their gym mistress was an awful old irritable thing. She had a spotty complexion, lank, greasy hair – eton-cropped, wore glasses and dowdy clothes. She found fault with everything possible and actually coached her own side while refereeing.'

quality within your own income.'[40] Despite proving to be the most successful career woman in the whole of British history, Mrs Thatcher liked the display of lady-like qualities and traditionally female accomplishments. She notes approvingly that Miss Williams made all girls 'however academic' take domestic science for four years,[41] and she records without complaint, though she herself studied the subject, that Miss Williams had in her day discouraged maths in the sixth form, because it was considered so difficult for the girls.[42] Jean Farmer had similar impressions of Miss Williams as 'a tiny person, beautifully dressed, looks could quell, not a hair out of place'.[43] So did Rita Hind, who found her 'elegant, stately and white-haired . . . her expectations were high. She was compassionate but distant.'[44]

In 1939, Miss Williams retired. Her successor, Miss Dorothy Gillies, was very different. More of a scholar than Miss Williams, she also had much more of a temper. 'She was a fiery Scot,' said Rita Hind,[45] and she once threw her shoe at someone. Madeline Edwards remembers her hurling books and shouting at the girls, 'You're all suet puddings.' Even the official school history implies some abrasions, saying that Miss Gillies was 'misunderstood' and comparing her with Goldsmith's village schoolmaster: '"If severe in aught, the love he bore to learning was at fault. Yet he was kind . . ."'[46] It should be remembered, as a huge extenuation of Miss Gillies's conduct that, unlike Miss Williams, she had to deal with the difficulties of a school in wartime. These included the facts that Camden School for Girls was evacuated to the KGGS premises for five terms until late 1941, forcing all the KGGS classes to take place in the morning only, and that the right staff were scarce. Worse, there was always the prospect of bombing. Grantham suffered twenty-one raids between September 1940 and October 1942, and in that final and most severe attack thirty-two people were killed. No one at the school was hurt in raids, but the tennis courts were all dug up to build air-raid shelters, and the burden of disruption and of responsibility that war put upon the headmistress was heavy indeed.

Perhaps because Miss Gillies was not Miss Williams, she and Margaret did not get on. Margaret considered her ungracious. Miss Gillies thought that Margaret needed taking down a peg. Their main disagreement concerned Margaret's application for Oxford. By the time of School Certificate, Margaret expected to go to university, though she recognized that she might not be able to afford to do so without a scholarship. With her customary care, she began to make plans, choosing science as her likely university subject because 'Science was the way of the future.'[47] She declared to Muriel that she would drop maths because 'I couldn't get on with Grumpy Grin [Miss Grindley, the maths teacher]: her explanations were as clear as mud.'

Again, she consulted Mr Marks, and followed his suggestion of switching to geography. She buckled down also to biology ('I never dreamt there was so much inside a worm before. One of the toughest jobs is to find the ovary . . .') and announced, 'I have decided to take Latin to help with Biology, and also because you must have it for entrance to most universities.'[48]

It is not true, then, as some biographers have asserted, that Miss Gillies, who was herself a classicist, forbade Margaret to learn Latin at the school. Her studies continued to go well and in 1942, before she had taken Higher Certificate (the equivalent of the modern A Level), she was offered places at Nottingham University, the nearest university to Grantham, and Bedford College, London. But the idea of Oxford grew in the minds of Margaret and her father, and was resisted by Miss Gillies along with the extra Latin teaching required, allegedly provoking Margaret to say, 'You're thwarting my ambition.'[49] According to Muriel, Margaret told Miss Gillies that she wanted to go to Oxford and Miss Gillies said: '"I'm afraid you can't. You haven't got Latin." She said, "I'll get it," and so she went to the Latin master of the boys' school* and she got her Latin [meaning her Latin School Certificate] in a year and she got in.'[50] Margaret never forgot what she considered to have been Miss Gillies's obstruction, though she does record that the head lent her Latin textbooks, including one written by her father.[51] In later years, she paid fulsome tribute to Miss Williams and none to Miss Gillies. Most KGGS old girls of that era remember the occasion in 1960 when Margaret, returning for the school's speech day as a newly elected MP and the guest of honour, actually corrected Miss Gillies on the Latin she had used in her introduction. Lorna Smith wrote, 'The audience was overcome with embarrassment; it was well known that the Head had taught Margaret every Latin word she knew!'[52] This was far from the case, but Margaret's rudeness is still remarkable.

Part of the problem that worried Miss Gillies was haste. Margaret eventually took her Oxford entrance when she was only seventeen, hoping to go up the following autumn, almost exactly on her eighteenth birthday in 1943. This hurry was not solely the result of Margaret's drive and ambition: there was a special wartime reason for it. All girls not already in further education by the time they were eighteen were liable for call-up to the services, and so most of them, anxious to get on with their education, made sure they got in early. Women did not take part in combat, and, it seems, there was no stigma of draft-dodging against girls in this situation.[53]

* It has also been suggested that Margaret was given Latin lessons by Fr Leo Arendzen, the Robertses' neighbour and the local Roman Catholic parish priest. (Letter from Canon A. P. Dolan.)

Indeed, the Grantham dentist's daughter Mary Wallace was proud of the precedent she established by persuading Oxford to take her in the Hilary (summer) term of 1943 solely so that she could avoid call-up.[54] The Grantham grocer's daughter, however, was a little more uneasy. 'I felt a little bit guilty,' she recalled, 'but that's the way my birthday came up.'[55] If, as Miss Gillies had suggested, Margaret had waited for another year, she would probably have been forced to serve.

This is very nearly what happened. Part of the problem about the Latin was the need to mug it up so fast, and there were other weaknesses, too, which Margaret needed to remedy. Although her science was strong, her wider education was considered less assured, and it was for this reason that her father went to Canon Goodrich* and got him to coach her for the Oxford general paper. When she did sit the scholarship for Somerville College, Oxford, she narrowly failed to achieve it. Instead, she was offered an ordinary place for the autumn of 1944, which involved returning to KGGS for an extra year to avoid the call-up that would follow her eighteenth birthday on 13 October 1943. This she did, but still facing the probability that her arrival at Oxford would be further delayed by the call-up, or that her degree would be shortened to two years so that she could do National Service afterwards.

The Michaelmas term at KGGS began that year in August because of the need for a longer break in October to help with the wartime potato harvest. For the first time in its history, the school had two head girls – Madeline Edwards and Margaret Roberts, polar opposites in interests and style, but each having a forceful personality. It is alleged by some of Margaret's contemporaries that she was given the post through the influence of her father as chairman of the Governors, but this is anachronistic: Alfred Roberts did not become chairman until after the war. Madeline and Margaret were the only obvious candidates. Indeed, they were the only two remaining girls who had taken their Higher Certificates. It is not clear why both were offered the post: perhaps it was considered invidious to appoint one and exclude the other.

In any event, Margaret's first taste of supreme authority did not last long. Three weeks into the school term, a girl who had a Somerville place dropped out and the college offered an immediate place to Margaret. She accepted, and vaulted suddenly into another world.

* See Chapter 1