KESGRAVE, SUFFOLK: HOLY FAMILY & ST MICHAEL CHURCH
THE ST THOMAS MORE PICTURE

This ink and watercolour picture by Margaret Rope is on the east wall of the Galilee. It was created after Thomas had been beatified, but before he had been canonised.

In the centre of the picture is the figure of Sir Thomas More, Lord Chancellor of England, a wise and witty scholar, lawyer and author, friend and advisor to King Henry VIII. He is dressed in fine robes and is at the peak of his career in public office. The detail of the upper part of his image seems to be based on Holbein's portrait of 1527, painted two years before Thomas was made Chancellor. He is wearing the gold 'collar of esses' with Tudor rose pendant, which was presented by the king to a few chosen men as a reward for exceptional service. We can tell that Thomas is Chancellor in Margaret Rope's depiction from the tasselled purse embroidered with the royal arms which is hanging from his right wrist. This purse held the silver moulds used to make the Great Seal of England, which was affixed to important documents issued by the king, and the Chancellor was its Keeper. In his left hand he is holding a book, a symbol of his scholarship, and in his right he is holding a martyr's palm, a sign of the fate which awaits him.

Thomas is framed by climbing roses full of animals and birds, a reference to the menagerie he keeps in his garden. His friend Erasmus wrote to an admirer of Thomas "There is hardly a species of bird that he does not keep in his house, and rare animals such as monkeys, foxes, ferrets, weasels and the like". Also within the rose frame are two coats of arms: those of Thomas himself on the left, and those of the University of Oxford on the right. Thomas's arms contain moorcocks (red grouse), a pun on his surname, and unicorns, and these are repeated in some of the roundels surrounding him. There are also two roundels each containing a black man's head, his family's crest. This was at the time regarded as another pun on Thomas's surname: More = Moor = (according to the Oxford English Dictionary) originally a native or inhabitant of Mauretania (N Africa), widely supposed to be black so often formerly used to mean a black person.

The Oxford University arms are a reference to the two years he had spent there as a youth learning Latin and Greek. Margaret Rope clearly thought that a martyr's time at university was a significant stage in his formation which should be included in his

story: she also inserted university or college arms beside some of the English martyrs depicted in her windows. Heraldry was one of the ‘artistic crafts’ which was taught in art schools in her time.

The river scene below Thomas shows the Thames, which is a major east - west highway in Tudor London. The royal palaces and nobles' and senior clerics' mansions front the river, and travel between them is usually by boat. In the centre we see Chancellor Sir Thomas More's great barge, propelled by eight watermen.

Next look at the twelve vignettes which run along each side of the picture. Starting at top left and going anticlockwise round to top right they tell Thomas’s story from high office to martyrdom.

The top vignette on the left shows Thomas happy in the bosom of his family: his 3 daughters Margaret, Elizabeth and Cicely, his son John, his stepdaughter Alice, his adopted daughter another Margaret and his second wife Alice. He has his arm round his eldest and favourite daughter Margaret, with whom he's sharing a book. There's a lot of reading going on, and wife Alice is playing a viola da braccio, a very modern instrument at the time (it is a little too early for it to be a violin). Thomas loves his family, and reading and music.

In the next vignette Thomas is assisting a priest at the celebration of Mass (he hears Mass every morning). Two men have been sent by King Henry VIII to summon Thomas to the King but Thomas will not go until the Mass is ended, telling them that he is paying his court to a greater and a better Lord and must first perform that duty. At this stage in his relationship with Henry he can get away with saying this!

Next Thomas is on board a ship flying English flags, approaching Calais. He is undertaking a diplomatic mission to the continent. His reputation is enhanced by a series of these missions, beginning in 1515.

Below this King Henry VIII is very fond of Thomas More and sometimes turns up uninvited at Thomas's home in Chelsea (can you imagine what consternation that must cause in Thomas's kitchen?). This scene shows them walking in Thomas's garden after dinner during one such visit, Henry with his arm around Thomas's shoulder (note the squirrel and the monkey, part of Thomas’s menagerie!). But Thomas is aware of Henry's true character, and has confided to his son-in-law

William Roper (husband of his daughter Margaret) that he is not proud of having Henry's special favour because he knows that if by executing him Henry might win the war with France then Henry would do it.

Next it is 1529, and Thomas More is at the height of his power: King Henry has made him Chancellor of England, having removed Cardinal Wolsey from that office for failing to obtain an annulment of Henry's marriage to Catherine of Aragon. Thomas is carrying the purse containing the Great Seal of England and is accompanied, as he would be when on official business, by two men, one carrying the ceremonial mace (symbol of royal authority) and the other a Gospel book (used for administering oaths).

In the lowest vignette on the left Henry's interference with and power over the English Church has increased until, in May 1532, Thomas More realises that if he continues as Chancellor he will either have to act against his conscience or have to incur the King's displeasure, so on the afternoon of 16th May in the garden of York Place he resigns by giving up the Great Seal to Henry in the presence of the Duke of Norfolk. York Place had been Cardinal Wolsey's residence but was seized by the King at Wolsey's downfall and converted to a royal palace (soon to be known as Whitehall Palace) for Henry and wife-to-be Anne Boleyn (they will be married there secretly the following year). Note the pillars topped by falcons: the Falcon of the Plantagenets is one of the heraldic 'King's Beasts', and a white falcon is Anne's heraldic badge. The flags displaying thin crescent moons are also a reference to Anne: new moon equals new wife. A play was performed for the first time before the Tudor court at Christmas 1532, The Play of the Weather, referring allegorically to the creation of a new moon because the old moon could hold no water but by St Anne the weather would soon amend. By including the crescent moons the artist has indicated the ultimate reason for Thomas’s resignation.

Now to the bottom right. On 13th April 1534 Thomas More is summoned to appear before the Commissioners at Lambeth Palace to take the oath recognising Anne Boleyn as King Henry's lawful wife and their children as legitimate heirs to the throne. He asks to see the oath, studies it and then refuses to take it because it contains a repudiation of papal supremacy. There are 4 Commissioners: Thomas Audley the Lord Chancellor, who is seated behind Thomas More and so can't be seen,

Thomas Cranmer the Archbishop of Canterbury in the purple robe, William Benson the Abbot of Westminster in his black Benedictine habit and Thomas Cromwell the Secretary of State. There's a table on which there's a quill pen and a bottle of ink ready for Thomas's signature. Thomas More's refusal to take the oath amounts to an act of treason: he is kept in the custody of the Abbot of Westminster for 4 days while the King consults with his Council on what to do with him, and then on 17th April he is sent to the Tower.

Above this Thomas's daughter Margaret visits him in his prison cell and pleads with him to take the oath as many of learning and reputation have, but he tells her that he will follow not them but his conscience. He has grown a beard.

Next Thomas is at his trial in Westminster Hall on 1st July 1535. He has been weakened by more than a year in prison, and has been allowed to sit in the dock. Facing him is a panel of 9 judges headed by Sir Thomas Audley, who took over as Lord Chancellor when Thomas resigned. In this scene the artist has encapsulated several key moments in a single picture. The man standing holding a long scroll towards the left of the gallery behind the judges is the Attorney General Christopher Hales. He is reading aloud the indictment against Thomas, which is so long that Thomas says that he can scarcely remember a third of it. Later in the trial the Solicitor General (the Attorney General's deputy) Richard Rich gives false testimony incriminating Thomas - Richard Rich is the man standing towards the right of the gallery dressed similarly to Christopher Hales. The jury of twelve men seated in the gallery find Thomas guilty of High Treason, and Thomas now feels free to speak his mind - to say that he has found nothing after seven years of studying the writings of the Doctors of the Church to support King Henry's claim to be head of the Church in England. The Lord Chancellor asks him if he considers himself wiser than all the bishops and nobles who have accepted Henry as head of the Church, and Thomas replies *For one bishop of your opinion I have a hundred saints of mine, and for one parliament of yours I have all the General Councils* [of the Church] *for 1000 years*. Thomas is condemned to death.

Above this we see Thomas at Tower Wharf on the way back to his prison cell after his conviction. He is surrounded by guards armed with halberds, their uniforms bearing the 'HR' monogram (Henricus Rex = King Henry). The leading guard is carrying the

executioner's axe, its edge towards Thomas. Thomas's daughter Margaret has been waiting at the Wharf for him, knowing that he must pass that way, and on seeing him rushes forward and embraces and kisses him for the last time.

Next it is the 5th of July 1535, 4 days after his trial, and Thomas is in his prison cell writing a last letter to his daughter Margaret. In it he expresses a hope that his execution will be on the following day, *St Thomas's Even and the Utas of St Peter*. St Thomas's Even is the eve of the feast of the translation of the remains of his namesake St Thomas Becket (who also died for opposing the king) from his original tomb in Canterbury Cathedral to a new shrine in the then recently built Trinity Chapel on 7th July 1220 in the 50th year after his death. The Utas of St Peter is the eighth day (now referred to as the Octave) after the Feast of St Peter on 29th June which was itself celebrated as a feast.

In this picture the artist seems to have made an uncharacteristic error of detail. She shows Thomas writing with a quill pen, but all his writing materials had been confiscated before his trial and the letter was written with a charred stick on a scrap of paper he had managed to acquire.

And now we are on Tower Hill: it is about 9 o'clock on the morning of Tuesday the 6th of July 1535, and Thomas More is climbing the ladder to the scaffold, where his executioner awaits. The ladder is unsteady and Thomas is weak, but he has not lost his famous sense of humour: he says to the Lieutenant of the Tower, Sir Edmund Walsingham, *I pray thee see me safe up, and for my coming down let me shift for myself*, and Sir Edmund gives him a helping hand. This sombre scene is a marked contrast to the one opposite showing Thomas surrounded by his loving family.

Around and below the main image of Thomas is a quotation from an earlier letter which he wrote during his imprisonment in the Tower to his daughter Margaret explaining how he might be unjustly put to death for doing right by following his conscience: IT IS A CASE IN WHICH A MAN MAY LOSE HIS HEAD & YET HAVE NONE HARM BUT INSTEAD OF HARM INESTIMABLE GOOD AT THE HAND OF GOD.

The last scene in Thomas's story is at the top of the picture. A kneeling Thomas is being welcomed into heaven by Christ and Our Lady. The rainbow (see Revelation 4:3) is a symbol of God's mercy. Thomas seems very small - I think that Margaret

Rope is reminding us that although he was a great man - lawyer, philosopher, scholar, writer, statesman - "unless you change and become like children you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:3). The six-winged angels around the group are seraphim (see Isaiah 6:1-3).

To the left, accompanied by 2 angels, are a group of beati, or 'blesseds' The group is headed by Cardinal John Fisher. He's wearing his red cardinal's hat and carrying in his left hand the New Testament which he took to the scaffold and in his right hand his crosier and martyr's palm. The 3 men in white are 3 of the 6 Carthusian monks who were martyred while Thomas More was in prison. They all carry martyrs' palms and one has a noose around his neck. The figure in red and white between 2 of the Carthusians is John Haile, a priest, dressed in his priestly vestments. The man in grey is Richard Reynold, a Brigittine monk. These were all the Catholics martyred by Henry VIII before Thomas More, and were all beati at the time this picture was made, though some are now Saints. Note that in the main image Thomas More wears a beati-type haloe – he (and John Fisher) were not canonised until 1935, after this picture was made.

To the right, also accompanied by 2 angels, are a group of saints, which the artist has distinguished from the beati by a difference in their haloes. The group is headed by St Peter: he has his fishing net over his right shoulder, and in his right hand are his keys and his martyr's palm. Behind St Peter is St Thomas Becket. He's wearing his bishop's vestments and holding his episcopal cross in his left hand. In his right hand is a sword, the instrument of his martyrdom, and his martyr's palm. His inclusion is very appropriate - he and Thomas More shared the same name and they were both close friends of kings named Henry. Each fell out with his king over matters of religion and each paid for this with his life.

The man behind Thomas Becket is a tonsured monk in Benedictine black, and behind him, with his right hand on the monk's shoulder, is a pope in white wearing an early form of papal tiara. I think that the monk is St Bendict himself and that the pope is St Gregory the Great, who was a Benedictine and so followed the Rule which Benedict devised. He wrote St Benedict's biography, and instigated the first mission from Rome to Britain to convert the pagan Anglo-Saxons: Thomas More mentions him several times in his works. Neither Benedict nor Gregory are holding palms as neither was martyred, but they *are* saints.

The two behind and on either side of Gregory are Roman soldiers and each is carrying a martyr's palm. The one on the left is wearing an officer's red cloak and the one on the right has a cross on his breastplate. I believe they represent the commander (St Maurice, in the red cloak) and men of the Theban Legion. When Rome conquered a country a fighting force was enlisted from the citizenry, trained as soldiers and sent wherever needed in the empire. The Theban Legion was formed of men from Thebes in Egypt, who were all Christians (hence the red cross on the soldier's breastplate). They were posted to present-day Switzerland in about 286 AD and ordered by the emperor to kill local Christians. They refused to obey the order and were all put to death for their disobedience. Why would Margaret Rope chose to depict such obscure saints here? There's actually a very good reason: a parallel between them and Thomas More. Before they were massacred they sent a message to the emperor stating that they were his soldiers but God's servants, and that they owed military service to the emperor but just living to God. When Thomas More was on the scaffold he said to the crowd that he was the King's good servant but God's first.

And finally … at the very top and bottom of the picture are two quotations from the poem ‘To the English Martyrs’ by Francis Thompson (1859-1907). I think that Margaret Rope must have been very familiar with this poem, so familiar, in fact, that she wrote out the quotations from memory, because one of them contains two errors!

Roger Hall