PROLOGUE

It seemed like a lost place. The more local people he asked about it, the less they appeared to know.

It was May 1987. Road touring then still relied upon directions from strangers, and paper maps that bent begrudgingly into concertina folds. What he did know was that the village lay just a few miles from Grantham. The previous afternoon he and his wife had arrived in that Lincolnshire town. Once known as the birthplace of Sir Isaac Newton, it was now more recognised for spawning Margaret Thatcher, who by then had been Prime Minister for so long, she seemed a permanent national fixture.

The following morning, leaving his wife to spend the day sightseeing in Grantham, he set off in their hire car, travelling north along the A1. Here the motorway follows the route of the original Great North Road, along which mail coaches once travelled from London to Edinburgh. It took him across Gonerby Moor, where Oliver Cromwell first defeated the Royalist forces, and where the flat landscape of Lincolnshire fully opens out.

It was only a short while before he spotted what he'd been told to look out for. It was just as described. A lonely garage, next to an easy-to-miss side road. There was a sign: 'Marston 1½'.

The name of the byway, Tollbar Road, alluded to its past as the site of a Georgian turnpike gate. Here a toll was once imposed for those wishing to proceed north or south. Behind the garage, though much

altered, the original toll house still survived.

He turned the car into the byway, and the roar of the A1 and the modern world quickly receded. Tall lush hedgerows flanked the roadside, intermittently hiding the view and altering the light to a soft viridescence. A few minutes on, and their green curtain suddenly vanished, revealing like a magician's cloak a smattering of substantial red-brick Victorian cottages. A few of their gables bore crests with dates from the 1860s, and the initials 'JHT'. These he guessed stood for a previous squire, Sir John Henry Thorold. It was probably the last time the village had been truly prosperous, before the flood of grain from America had brought agricultural depression and the slow collapse of the old order. "Marston – a place seldom patronised," a foxhunting account of the 1870s had observed. It could well have been the village motto.

At a fork in the road a public house appeared, the Thorold Arms. Here he halted. In the near distance, a church steeple speared above the trees. He knew that if he continued on the main road, it would take him on to the neighbouring village of Hougham: the two villages were so close they'd been combined into one parish, Hougham-cum-Marston. He turned the car into the side lane. Barely a hundred yards on lay his goal, marked by a pair of stone entrance piers with ball finials. Beyond them, in a deep pastoral hush, stood a low rambling stone manor. This was Marston Hall, held by the Thorold family since the fourteenth century.

If the village had disappointed, the sight of the Hall compensated. Like a painting on a cake tin, it was almost too picturesque, and not quite real, as if a Hollywood art director had been asked to conjure up a vision of Olde England. To the left there was a low stone wall, behind which gardens slumbered in florescent splendour. On the right, stretching behind the manor, lay an idyllic view across a spring-green field with a narrow winding stream, to distant hills.

The Hall was home to the Reverend Henry Croyland Thorold.* Unlike the rest of the family, he pronounced his surname with noble

* Rev. Henry Croyland Thorold (1921–2000). High Tory Anglican, naval chaplain, schoolmaster, architectural and topographical author; son of the Rev. Dr. Ernest Hayford Thorold, who was chaplain to Kings George V, Edward VIII and George VI, and a cousin of the 14th Thorold baronet.

idiosyncrasy as 'thorough'. He was sixty-six years old, but looked older. Graced with, as a diarist put it, "a profile like George III's and a stomach like George IV's," he presented "an amazing spectacle, long flaxen hair falling over temples…walking not on the soles of his shoes but the sides." Then there was the voice: "resounding, melodic and perfectly modulated – once heard…never forgotten."

A newspaper profile would describe him as "a splendid, indeed unrivalled example of that now-vanished country type, the bachelor antiquarian squire, imbued with a deep love and knowledge of architecture, ecclesiology, heraldry and the classics." He knew "Lincolnshire backwards and all the families that ever were, they being to a man his relations." Like something out of a Victorian novel, reputation had it that he was the squarson – that is, the squire who was also the parson. If there was anywhere such anachronisms could linger on, Hougham-cum-Marston was certainly such a place.

Opening village fetes with a lordly flourish, as Henry did, it was easy to assume this was so. However, the last true squire of the parish had been his cousin, the 13th Thorold baronet,* who'd sold up most of the estate shortly after the Second World War. Long before then, Marston Hall had become a mere dower house and estate office for the baronets, who in the mid-eighteenth century had moved to grander quarters at Syston several miles off. Marston Hall only belonged to Henry because his father had purchased it in the great sell-off.

Once, at a fete opening, a stranger had the temerity to question Henry about the latest Anglican controversies. "Don't you ask me about the Church, my man," he had boomed. "I may be in holy orders, but I have nothing, absolutely nothing, to do with the Church." This was despite the fact, that in addition to an elaborate floral buttonhole, Henry was then sporting a dog collar.

Henry did occasionally preach in remote churches. As *The Times* put it, he had a "declamatory style of preaching, often involving long pauses which kept the congregation on the edge of their pews". Depending on one's point of view, reserves of patience, and tone of

* A baronetcy is a British hereditary knighthood that also bestows the prefix 'Sir'. A baronet ranks above a knight, but below a baron and other gradings of the aristocracy, and unlike the latter, is legally a commoner (albeit, of the gentry), rather than a member of the peerage.

rump, this sermonising was either reverently dignified or exhaustingly camp.

However, as Henry made plain to another enquirer: "I don't *like* duties." The truth was, he much preferred *stones* to parishioners, or indeed, prelates. As a friend wrote: "He believed you could learn far more about Christianity by pottering around old churches and abbeys than by heeding what contemporary clerics had to say." Henry was a doughty campaigner for their preservation, and writing in longhand in his armchair, diligently produced several definitive books on ecclesiastical buildings and their ruins, another volume on Lincolnshire houses, and was co-author of five of the renowned Shell county guidebooks* – counties being as distinct to him as foreign countries. His co-authors and friends included John Piper, John Betjeman, Jack Yates, Peter Burton, and John Stevens-Guille.†

In his earlier life, Henry had served as a chaplain and school housemaster, including at Lancing, from which he'd been dismissed, due to a spat with another chaplain, subsequently Dean of Ripon, over liturgical revision. "The latter in his liberalism demonstrated everything that Henry abominated in Anglican clergymen." (The ordination of women would come as "a terrible blow" to him.)‡ Change was one of Henry's pet hates. Nonetheless, the school had presented him with an avenue of Lombardy poplars. His acreage was graced with hedges and herbaceous borders, plus a rose garden, vegetable garden, a rolling lawn shaded by an ancient elm, and the essential 'Gothick' gazebo. These were tended by a full-time gardener-

* Now keenly sought collectors' items, they were published by the Shell oil company between 1934 and 1987.

† John Egerton Christmas Piper (1903–1992) painter, printmaker and designer; Sir John Betjeman (1906–1984), Poet Laureate, writer, and broadcaster; John ('Jack') Theodore Yates (1905-1971), a wealthy bachelor aesthete and bon viveur, who owned a bookshop at Louth for pleasure; Peter Burton (1927–2014), schoolmaster and author, including of: *Six Inches of Bath Water: 100 Years of Scarborough College* (1998). Not to be confused with gay journalism pioneer Peter William Burton (1945–2011), publisher, editor and author of *Parallel Lives* (1985), *Amongst the Aliens* (1995), etc; John De Carteret Stevens-Guille (1928–2008), a bachelor banker who lived latterly at Yatton Court, Beaford, Devon, a Victorian rectory noted for its gardens, and where he used to hold charity organ recitals. According to one account: "He kept himself to himself, and was quite secretive. As he grew older he fell out with most of the family and his friends." [Chris Wrigley, *A.J.P. Taylor: Radical Historian of Europe*, I.B. Tauris, London 2006, pp40, 290-291; *Country Life*, Volume 201, 2007, p133; Diane Fortenberry (ed.) S*ouvenirs and New Ideas: Travel and Collecting in Egypt and the Near East,* Oxbow Books, Oxford 2013, p139.]

‡ A married friend would uncompromisingly write: "He correctly foresaw that it would mean the end of the civilised, humorous and intelligent Church of England he had loved." [Michael Hodges, 'Last of the Antiquarian Country Parsons', *Catholic Herald*, 1 May 2021.]

cum-cook who lived in the former stables.

Henry was also the self-appointed family historian. Amongst his celebrated relations was a long-deceased nephew, Arthur Charles Campbell Thorold. It was with the hope that Henry might shed light upon the mystery of Arthur's life in Lincolnshire that his visitor, John Henry Day, had now come, all the way from Australia. Arthur had migrated to that distant land, where he'd become a notable figure, and Day, a headmaster, intended to make him the subject of his PhD thesis.

Thirty years afterwards, Day's memories of the occasion had faded to a series of overlapping impressions. His footsteps crunching on the gravel. The great stone crest above the door of the manor. Henry's English upper class dishevelled appearance, which suggested long acquaintance with stodge and port.

Inside the house it was at least ten to fifteen degrees colder than the air outside, the damp cold of centuries. Those who braved overnighting at Marston Hall believed it held strong claim to be the coldest house in Europe; a condition to which Henry was impervious. Fine portraits of ancestors, including some by Reynolds and Lely, lined the walls. There was even a Poussin. Above the fireplace, carved in relief in darkened oak, the Thorold coat-of-arms staked its claim.

Compared to the palatial country houses of Henry's friends Myles Hildyard* and Sir Giles Isham,† Marston Hall was small beer.

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* Myles Thoroton Hildyard (1914–2005), soldier squire, historian, and preservationist of Flintham Hall, Nottinghamshire. Such was his popularity and sterling character, he used to bring his male partners to regimental dances without scandal. Being heir to a thumping great estate may have helped. [Myles Hildyard, *It Is Bliss Here: Letters Home 1939–1945*, Bloomsbury, London 2005, p1.]

† Sir Gyles Isham (1903–76), 12th baronet, of Lamport Hall, Northamptonshire. A romantically handsome golden youth of 1920s Oxford – "He was, in every inch, the glass of fashion and the mould of form." He became an actor, including opposite Greta Garbo; his celebrated Hamlet providing Cecil Beaton with "the most beautiful back view I'd ever seen". He then served in the Eighth Army, and for MI5 and MI6. In later life, as a "sconey dumpling, all jowl and smile," he was a scholar squire, hospital governor and National Portrait Gallery trustee. A bachelor, his last alliance was with the younger Trevor Anthony Humphries, "his agent, whom he worshipped in the discreetest, Edwardian fashion." [Robert Speaight, *The Property Basket: recollections of a divided life*, Collins, London 1970, p69; Sir Roy Strong, *Splendours and Miseries: The Roy Strong Diaries, 1967-87*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London 1977, p38; Stephen Dorril, *MI6: Inside the Covert World of Her Majesty's Secret Intelligence Service*, Fourth Estate Limited, London 2000, p544; Will of Sir Gyles Isham; Adrian Woodhouse, *Angus McBean: Face-maker*, Alma Books, London 2006, pp55, 185, and information from same; James Lees-Milne,

However, with the help of another friend, classical architect Francis Johnson,* elaborations had been undertaken, including the insertion of an extravagant 17th-century plaster ceiling rescued from another Thorold house.

It all spoke of feudal privilege, and money so old it was mildewed. The heavily embossed wallpaper in the drawing room was draped with cobwebs, and in places damp had broken through in brown stains. Visitors noted there appeared to be no television or radio in the house: in fact, Henry did not even take a newspaper. Here time was kept at bay. It was wholly in keeping that Henry dedicated his guidebook for ruined abbeys to a series of abbesses, Dames Eugenia, Christina, and Catherine Thorold of Pontoise, and Sister Catherine Thorold of Ghent, the most recent of whom had last drawn breath in 1699.

Henry beckoned his guest to the staircase: "Arthur Thorold would have walked up these very stairs!" he declaimed. John Day endeavoured to look impressed. His host next suggested that they repair to the Thorold Arms, to which Day readily agreed. He could do with a whisky and soda, and it would enable him to meet some of the villagers, and perhaps tap the more elderly amongst them for memories of Arthur.

In what seemed like a seigneurial gesture, Henry insisted they take his ancient silver-grey Bentley, despite the public house being a short walk away. When they eventually entered the portal of the Arms, Day was nonplussed by the reception: Henry was greeted by the staff "as if God himself had arrived." There was another surprise: apart from the staff, they were the only persons there.

A single dining table had been laid out with silver for lunch – or luncheon, as Henry phrased it, beckoning him to a chair. It looked

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Through Wood And Dale: diaries 1975-1978, John Murray, London 2001, p79.]

* Francis Frederick Johnson (1911–1995), neoclassical architect. He lived with his partner Edward Ingram, a touchy schoolmaster and local historian, at Reighton Hall, North Yorkshire, where they were looked after by Edward's sister, whose singing and indifferent food were their daily sufferance. Clients of Francis included Armatrude, Lady Waechter de Grimston, "a somewhat Gothic figure who radiated an aura of fantasy and saw herself as the last of the ancient East Riding family of Grimston of Grimston Garth," and who was always improving her various residences: "The best music," she once pronounced, "is the sound of workmen's trowels." [John Martin Robinson, David Neave, *Francis Johnson Architect: A Classical Statement*, Oblong Creative Ltd, Leeds 2001, *passim*.]

like a set piece. It *was* a set piece. Wherever the villagers were, they weren't here. The thought crossed Day's mind that they'd been banished, and he was being carefully quarantined.

However, when the food arrived, it was excellent traditional English country fare. Day now took the opportunity to broach the subject of his enquiries. Two generations previously, Arthur Thorold's father had been the rector of Hougham-cum-Marston.

"We are not the oldest family in the district, or in England," replied Henry, "but we have been about for a long time." Arthur had been "very much a member of the family – a family used to living in the public eye; a family steeped in the history of the area."

Like the son of gentry he was, his name printed in *Debrett*, Arthur had received the finest of educations, including going up to Oxford in 1892. Yet all had not gone smoothly. According to the Day's research, it had taken Arthur seven years to achieve a simple Bachelor of Arts degree. In a letter, Henry had written that Arthur might have achieved honours, but took a pass degree because he had "spent most of his undergraduate life acting and enjoying the social life… entirely in keeping with his delightful character!"

Now when Day again pressed the topic, a cloud had passed over Henry's face. He admitted that, within the family, Arthur was used "as a cautionary tale…a sorry story of what happens to a talented young man who dissipates his time and energy in the pursuit of pleasure."

To help ferret out information about Arthur, Day had enlisted a local historian. In the archives of the Diocese of Lincoln she'd struck paydirt. It took the form of several letters in the Bishop's correspondence. These revealed that in the summer of 1902, a crisis of some kind had struck Arthur's family. From that time onwards, his father began taking extended leaves of absence from the parish. In 1905, he petitioned the Bishop for permission to move from his benefice, the letter pleading:

> on account of certain great family troubles which have happened to the Petitioner and which are well known to your Lordship and on account of which the wife of the said Petitioner cannot at

present live in the Petitioner's parish.

The ink of the copperplate script had faded to sepia. Yet the anguish behind the words was as clear as when they'd been written.

There was also an earlier letter. Penned by a visiting clergyman to the Bishop, it contained a sentence with underlinings that would have stopped any reader in their tracks:

> Since I came to Grantham this morning I learnt that the 'bride' I married the other day was the sister of the boy with whom Mr. Thorold's son committed so grievous a Sin.

Although eighty-five years had passed since the letter was first read, Henry's manner suggested little progression, and Day didn't feel he could broach that particular correspondence with him. However, he did delicately raise the matter of Arthur's emigration to Australia. The research had uncovered the fact he was assisted during this time by an Anglican charitable organisation, The Church Army. Why would someone like Arthur, a gentleman from a family of substance, need their help?

Henry skated around this with polite condescension. Three decades later, the visitor couldn't recall the evasive reply. Perhaps it was something about the Thorolds being intimately connected with the Church, and that its blessings, particularly in those far off days, reached across all life.

If John Day felt he'd stepped into a novel, it would have been the ideal moment for its author to have Henry muse that, in England, there were all sorts of things that seemed to make no sense – to the casual visitor. However, they had their own logic. Of which time had proved the worth. Perchance the mystery in Arthur Thorold's life was testament to this anomaly? Such a reflection, if voiced, would surely form a perfect prelude to the improbable narrative now to be told.

Possibly Henry had then deftly changed the subject by asking: "How was the lamb? Perhaps a drop more of the excellent wine?" He was certainly a generous host, and charming conversationalist, with a fund of stories for those of whom he approved. Just as in the pulpit, he laid a sonorous balm over the room.

Lunch concluded, Henry had taken his guest on a short village tour in the Bentley, waving airily to a few passing villagers like the lord of his domain. The first stop was All Saints church at Hougham; a typical parish church with its ancient arches and darkened oak pews. "Here Arthur would have sat every Sabbath," Henry reverently intoned. For the final tour item, the Bentley was paused in front of the Georgian rectory, the size of which startled Day. Henry wasn't boasting when he spoke of Arthur being of the gentry. This was no vicar's cottage. It looked positively manorial.

With a gracious farewell wave, Henry sent the inquiring John Day back to Grantham. Job done. "There is no need for you to go any further than the house," Henry had written to him, referring to Marston Hall. Day now realised this had been no casual instruction. Henry was clearly hiding something. But what? Could it be connected with the family crisis the Bishop's letters had revealed?

It was mid-afternoon by the time Day met up with his wife in their hotel in Grantham. "I've just had the strangest experience," he told her. "The meeting with Henry…it felt completely stage-managed!" This forgotten parish in the middle of nowhere, this Hougham-cum-Marston, suddenly seemed a place of secrets.

The following morning, Day had another appointment that he hoped would prove more rewarding. This was at Grantham Library to view historical copies it held, going back to 1854, of the local newspaper, *The Grantham Journal*. The original Victorian masthead had proclaimed it as *The Grantham Journal of Useful, Instructive and Entertaining Knowledge and Monthly Advertiser*. As it also reported events in Hougham-cum-Marston, he hoped its bold promise would prove true.

However, after several long hours of carefully turning the brittle pages, Day would admit defeat. Apart from coming across a few scattered reports of Arthur being best man at his brother's wedding, and assisting his father raising money for the Church Fund, the record appeared silent. If something significant had occurred in this branch of the Thorold family, the local newspaper had studiously avoided mentioning it.

He was stymied. Yet when he returned to Australia, the more his

conviction grew that there was mystery at the heart of Arthur Thorold's life he had not been able to crack.

Back in England, the Reverend Henry would continue to preach, and motor the shires in his Bentley, seeking ancient churches, country houses, and ruins to admire. However, by this time he was drinking far too much, and suffering from diabetes. One evening at Marston Hall as he dozed on the sofa, a log rolled from the fireplace, severely scalding one of his feet. Henry would expire at the turn of the millennium, at the age of seventy-eight. The funeral homily was given by Henry's equally idiosyncratic brother, Father John Thorold, an Anglican monk. In a cloud of incense he'd memorably begun: "Henry was a very greedy little boy."

It's likely Henry went to his grave at peace with the knowledge that, as his family's historical custodian, the confidences he held, and one in particular, would be buried with him. By then it had been hidden for almost a century. This was despite the fact it was far more than just the petty secret of a proud provincial family.

It was a national secret.

It would be another thirty years until John Day learnt the truth, and how breathtakingly close he'd come to uncovering it. What he had chanced upon were the echoes of a great convulsive drama.

At Grantham Library he'd stared in vain at the yellowed pages of *The Grantham Journal*. Turning to the year Arthur's family troubles began, from the month of August he read:

> In the face of cold north-easterly winds, and almost incessant rain, the decorations at Grantham have made but tardy progress…Only fine weather is needed to witness a general blossoming of bunting such as never before has been seen in Grantham.

That summer of 1902 had been no ordinary one. It was a Coronation year.