

## Dame Margery Astry

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Many of London's wealthy widows, such as Thomasine Percyvale or Lady Joan Bradbury, contributed generously to the building of schools and other charitable causes, so ensuring lasting recognition.<sup>1</sup> Margery Astry was not one of these women. The legacy of her success went primarily to her family rather than her community, as it must have done for numerous aldermanic and merchant widows whose lives and characters are more obscure. Born Margery Hill, she was brought up just outside Hitchin, Hertfordshire, in relative comfort. Her family were grocers and, while not the wealthiest in society, would have enjoyed financial security. She married first, William Edward, son of the mayor and alderman of the same name and a grocer of no particular distinction with whom she had one son, Thomas. Widowed young and with a legacy of property and wealth from this marriage she must have found it relatively straight forward to make a second marriage that promised greater prosperity and social standing. Her next husband was the grocer and alderman Robert Revell, who died before he was able to take his civic career any further, but left Margery with a generous legacy and another small son, John. Her final marriage was to a man whose achievements and ambitions matched her own. Ralph Astry, fishmonger, was already an alderman by the time of his marriage to Margery and during their short time together was knighted and became mayor of London. When he died Margery again received substantial wealth and life interest in a large portfolio of property. This was the height of her achievements and the fulfilment of her ambitions. Now Dame Margery, she was a wealthy woman and one of the most prominent widows in London, but her twenty-nine years of widowhood would not prove to be peaceful. Her son, John Revell died before reaching his thirtieth birthday and she also outlived many of her friends. She found herself involved in numerous debt and property cases in her role as executor to Sir Ralph Astry and was embroiled in a long running and bitter legal battle with her ex-daughter-in-law Joan Pynson. Margery was, however, strong, determined and ambitious and more than capable of dealing with what life threw at her.

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Caroline Barron and Anne Sutton for their help with, and comments on, earlier drafts of this article. A.F. Sutton, 'Lady Joan Bradbury d. 1530', and M. Davies, 'Dame Thomasine Percyvale, 'The Maid of Weck' d. 1512', in *Medieval London Widows 1300-1500*, ed. by C.M. Barron and A.F. Sutton, London 1994, pp. 185-238.

### **Origins and Natal Family: The Hills of Hitchin**

Margery's father was a John Hill, grocer, of whom very little is known.<sup>2</sup> His home and Margery's birthplace is likely to have been Hillend, the Hertfordshire home of the Hill family.<sup>3</sup> Situated near Langley, five miles south of Hitchin, it overlooked the chapel of Minsden which Margery remembered in her will. She bequeathed 'unto our lady chapel of mynneston nygh hichyn in the countie of hertford where I was borne, a chalis with a patent of silver all gilt whiche is occupied in my chapell'.<sup>4</sup> The family included several grocers of London and was presumably prosperous and comfortable. Certainly, her family were in a position to provide the financial backing for her to marry well. This was vital in securing a daughter's future and many of London's great widows would have benefited from such financial assistance.<sup>5</sup> Margery's will also records the existence of a brother named Stephen, a grocer of London, who had died by 1523 leaving a widow and two sons, Robert and Thomas, both still young enough for Margery to leave money for their schooling. Stephen must have been either considerably younger than his sister Margery or fathered children late in life because by 1523, Margery's own children were grown and married themselves. This is essentially all that can be ascertained of Margery's immediate family but other relatives are plentiful and throughout her life Margery seems to have maintained close contact with her extended family. Of twenty-two family members remembered in Margery's will, ten can be identified as the married siblings of her 'cosyn Richard Hill', including her 'cosyn Lane and his wife', 'Nicolas Cosyn and his wife' and Agnes Gascoyne.<sup>6</sup> This suggests strong links with this side of the family although the precise relationship remains uncertain.

<sup>2</sup> *The Visitation of the County of Huntingdonshire*, ed. by Sir H. Ellis, Camden Society 1849, pp. 98-99. H.C. Andrews, 'The Hill and Astry Families of Langley and Hitchin', *East Herts Archaeological Society Transactions*, vol. 12 (1947), pp. 32-39. R.E. Chester Waters, *Genealogical Memoirs of the Families of Chester and of Astry*, London 1881. W.P. Hills, 'Richard Hill of Hillend and Balliol MS. 354', *Notes and Queries*, vol. 177 (1939), pp. 452-56.

<sup>3</sup> Andrews, p. 38. The site is now occupied by Langley End, dating from c.1900.

<sup>4</sup> The National Archive (hereafter TNA), Prerogative Court of Canterbury, PROB 11/21, ff. 198-99v.

<sup>5</sup> Despite the legend of her rise from poverty, Thomasine Percyvale's family was well connected and her brother became mayor of Launceston in 1512, Davies, p. 187.

<sup>6</sup> John Lane, the husband of Margery's cousin Elizabeth, is also a witness to her will.

Richard Hill left his mark on history by the survival of his common place book, now in the library of Balliol College, Oxford.<sup>7</sup> It contains a varied collection of poems, songs and ballads as well useful information such as advice on the breaking of horses, medicinal recipes and commercial rules and references. The manuscript also summarises some of the main events in the life of the owner and details the godparents of his children. Richard states that he was 'borne on hillend / in langley in the parishe of huchy[n] in the shire of hartfford' and it was here that his first child John was born in 1518. By 1520 he had moved to London and his second child Thomas was born at Freshe wharf in the parish of St Botolph. By 1522 he had settled in the London parish of St Andrew Undershaft, where his last four children were born. Among the godparents of his offspring occur some familiar names. John Lane and Nicholas Cosyn his brothers-in-law appear as godfathers and his sisters Margaret Preston, Elizabeth Lane and Eme Cosyn as godmothers. Elze Astry, the wife of Margery's son Henry Astry, whom Richard refers to as cousin, also becomes a godmother as does her sister Mary.

Richard had been apprenticed to John Wyngar, grocer, alderman and mayor, and must have completed this by at least 1508 because in that year he was made free among the merchant adventurers of England, although it was not until 1511 that he was sworn at Grocers' Hall.<sup>8</sup> This means Richard must have been born around 1482 and if Margery lived to be around sixty she would have been born around 1463, making a difference of at least nineteen years in their ages.<sup>9</sup> The existence of a significant variation in ages is supported by the fact that Margery had her children in the 1480s and early 1490s while Richard Hill had his children, mostly in the 1520s.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> *Songs, Carols and other Miscellaneous Poems from the Balliol MS. 354 Richard Hill's Commonplace Book*, ed. by R. Dyboski, Early English Text Society, ES vol. 101, 1908; repr. 1937.

<sup>8</sup> *Songs, Carols etc.*, pp. xii-xv.

<sup>9</sup> If Richard completed a ten year apprenticeship by 1508 at the latest, he would have started in 1498. An average of age of sixteen for commencement of the indenture produces a birth date of c.1482.

The average life expectancy of a sample of 47 London merchants was 58 and there were contemporary complaints that old age began around fifty. Caxton was just past fifty when he wrote 'age crepeth on me dayly', S.L. Thrupp, *The Merchant Class of Medieval London*, Michigan 1948; repr. 1996, p. 195. Rosenthal's analysis of peers born in the 14th and 15th centuries show that most lived into their fifties but living to sixty or more was not uncommon, J.T. Rosenthal, *Old Age in Late Medieval England*, Philadelphia 1996, pp. 123-4.

<sup>10</sup> Margery's first son Thomas Edward was still underage when her second husband made his will in 1490 and he must have been born between approximately 1480 and the death of William Edward in 1487. Margery would have been about 18 in 1481 and he is

The other Hill family with possible connections to Margery is the family of Sir Thomas Hill, grocer, alderman and mayor, but the relationship does not appear to have been close. In her will Margery mentions a William 'Hilles', priest, although she does not specify a relationship, this was probably the William 'Hille' termed cousin in the will of Sir Thomas Hill and he was one of the brethren of the house of St Thomas of Acre. By 1500, when Sir Thomas's widow Dame Elizabeth made her will, he had become the master of St Thomas of Acre.<sup>11</sup> There is also a Robert Hill named in the will of Ralph Astry in 1494 as his apprentice who could possibly be the son of Sir Thomas.<sup>12</sup> When Elizabeth Hill died in 1501 there was an inquisition in which Robert Hill aged twenty-three and more was named as her heir.<sup>13</sup> This would make him fifteen in 1494, the age when he is most likely to be apprenticed. Dame Margery Astry and Dame Elizabeth Hill also appear together in the *Great Chronicle* of London as donors of £10 each to the building of the kitchens at Guildhall.<sup>14</sup> The likely author of the chronicle, Fabian, was a draper who became a sheriff for

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unlikely to have been born before that. Fleming estimates the average age at marriage to be between seventeen and twenty-four, P. Fleming, *Family and Household in Medieval England*, Basingstoke 2001, p. 22. Thrupp highlights forty-one cases where the wife's age at marriage is known, producing a median age of seventeen, Thrupp, p. 196. Margery's last son Henry Astry has to have been born between 1492 and 1494. The will of Robert Revell was proved in March 1491 and Ralph Astry died on the 18 November 1494. This makes it highly unlikely that Andrews is correct in his suggestion that John Hill, Margery's father, may have been a brother to Richard Hill, Andrews, p. 33. It is far more likely that Richard Hill's father Thomas was of the same generation as Margery's father John, maybe a brother and Richard and his siblings would literally have been Margery's first cousins. This seems realistic as Richard was similar in age to Margery's younger brother Stephen and they had their children around the same time.

<sup>11</sup> Sir Thomas Hill, TNA, Prerogative Court of Canterbury, PROB 11/7, ff. 131v-33. Dame Elizabeth Hill, TNA, Prerogative Court of Canterbury, PROB 11/12, f. 186.

<sup>12</sup> The Robert Hill, son of Stephen Hill and the Robert Hill, son of Richard Hill are both far too young. Three of Sir Thomas's four sons can be identified as grocers. In 1488, Dame Elizabeth Hill appears before the mayor's court and enters into a bond of £1,885 12s 4d for payment of patrimony to the younger children of Sir Thomas. Among her supporters are William, Richard and John Hill, grocers. John Hill was the son of Sir Thomas's brother John, and an ex-apprentice of the mayor. William and Richard were Sir Thomas's eldest two sons. *Calendar of Letter Books of the City of London: Letter Book L*, ed. by R.R. Sharpe, London 1912, p. 249. Edward Hill appears in the records of the court of chancery for refusing to repay money lent to him and is identified as a grocer, TNA, C1/186/98. Robert, however, remains uncertain and could have become a fishmonger.

<sup>13</sup> *Calendar of Inquisitions Post Mortem Henry VII*, 3 vols, London 1898, vol. 1, p. 299.

<sup>14</sup> *The Great Chronicle of London*, ed. by A.H. Thomas and I.D. Thornley; repr. Gloucester 1983, p. 320.

London in 1493 and an alderman for Farringdon Without in 1494. This ward had previously been held by Margery's second husband Robert Revell and between 1493 and 1494 her third husband Ralph Astry was mayor. Fabian certainly knew Ralph and Margery and probably knew Dame Elizabeth Hill. The fact that only these two are named, among the 'sundry widows' who donated to the kitchen project, suggests that they were linked in Fabian's mind. When we consider that they also shared a common surname, some sort of relationship seems likely. All this underlines the fact that Margery was born into a prominent Hertfordshire land owning family which would have been well known both in Hitchin and in London. Their money came from trade and various branches of the family were all closely associated with the Grocers' Company.

### **The Wife of William Edward**

Around 1480 Margery's parents must have begun to consider the question of a husband for their teenage daughter, ultimately choosing a man her father or cousins may well have known through their membership of the Grocers' Company. This linking of families through trade connections was not uncommon. All of Thomasine Percyvale's husbands were tailors and Davies suggests she met her first husband Henry Galle through a friend of her brother named Richard Nordon, also a tailor.<sup>15</sup> Margery's first husband was William Edward, son of William Edward, grocer, alderman and mayor in 1471. William Edward the elder was a prominent stapler and contributed significantly to the grocers' support for the Yorkists.<sup>16</sup> His son would have moved in similar circles but was less significant and has previously been confused with his far more famous father.<sup>17</sup> Unfortunately, there is no

<sup>15</sup> Davies, p. 189.

<sup>16</sup> In 1460, the grocers advanced £200 to York's son the earl of March and the list of leading contributors included the elder William Edward. In 1461 he made a personal loan to the earl of March of £100, P. Nightingale, *A Medieval Mercantile Community: The Grocers' Company and the Politics and Trade of London 1000-1485*, New Haven and London 1995, pp. 514-15.

<sup>17</sup> A.B. Beaven, *The Aldermen of the City of London*, 2 vols, London 1908-13, vol. 2 (1913) p. 165. Thrupp, pp. 338. Beaven and Thrupp state that Margery was married to the mayor himself but it is clear that a generation has been lost in this analysis. On the 10 June 1482, before the mayor's court, patrimony was agreed for Edmund, son of William Edward, late alderman, *Letter Book L*, p. 192. Margery's first husband stated in his will that he had a brother called Edmund and this only makes sense if his father was the alderman. He also named his mother Isabel. Isabel Edwards, in her own will, called herself Dame which suggests she was the wife of the mayor rather than his mother, TNA, Prerogative Court of Canterbury, PROB 11/8, ff. 287-87v. While Margery's husband was buried in St Peter

information on which to base an estimation of his age except his date of death, but the fact he died thirty-six years before Margery does suggest he was either considerably her senior or died young. He makes no reference in his will to any previous marriage or any children but he did have one son, Thomas, with Margery. William Edward made his will on the 1 August 1487 and died later that year.<sup>18</sup> He stipulated that he was to be buried in the chapel of Our Lady and St George on the south side of the choir of the church of St Peter Cornhill and Margery confirmed that her first husband was indeed buried there, when she desired to join him. He left money for his unpaid tithes to this church, and the parson of the same church acted as his overseer. It seems that this was where he and Margery were living at his death, but he also made provision for unpaid tithes at ‘the parishe churche of our lady called Abchurche biside candelwike strete of London where I was som tyme a parishen’. This may have been where he lived as a bachelor. Her husband’s will does not suggest Margery had a large household, it was short, concise and only mentioned two servants, one male and one female. The male servant John Rikes, who received a bequest of forty shillings, was also a witness to his master’s will which may indicate that he died suddenly or unexpectedly. William Edward is known to have owned lands and tenements in London and in the Isle of Thanet, Kent. All of these lands together with the residue of his goods, after a few minor bequests, he left to his wife Margery, who was made his sole executor. William made no specific provision for his son and did not mention the fate of these lands after Margery’s death. He presumably trusted her to ensure that his son’s inheritance was passed on. This is the first evidence we come across that Margery was considered intelligent and capable by those who knew her well. As we will see, all of her husbands saw fit to make her one of their executors. If the approximate date of birth suggested above is applied, then Margery may have been only twenty-four when she found herself widowed for the first time with a young child and with the responsibility of her late husband’s estate. Even with the property she had been left she must have been nervous of her future and her ability to support herself into her old age if she didn’t remarry. She did, however,

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Cornhill, Stow records that William Edward, alderman and mayor, was buried in the church of the Austin Friars while his wife, Dame Isabel, was buried in the church of the Crossed Friars, *A Survey of London by John Stow*, ed. by C.L. Kingsford, 2 vols, Oxford 1908, vol. 1, p. 179. That William Edward, mayor, was buried here is confirmed by the will of Sir Thomas Cook who refers to his own burial place being opposite that of William. *The Politics of Fifteenth Century England: John Vale’s Book*, ed. by M. L. Kekewich and others, Stroud 1995, p. 95.

<sup>18</sup> TNA, Prerogative Court of Canterbury, PROB 11/8, ff. 85-85v.

have friends and relatives around her to offer support. The extended family that she gained with her first marriage included two brothers-in-law: Edmund, a priest, and Philip, a grocer, and a mother-in-law, Isabel, who lived until 1490. There was possibly also a sister, since her mother-in-law Isabel Edward mentioned in her will a debt of £100 owned to her by her son-in-law, Sir Gilbert Debenham. Margery also had the support of the man William Edward had assigned to be the overseer of his will, John Breton, parson of St Peter Cornhill, a man who remained her friend until his death.

### **The Wife of Robert Revell**

Within a year or two of her first widowhood, Margery married a Robert Revell. Born in Byfield in Northamptonshire, he had previously been married to an Alice from 'Stanstede in the counte of hertford' with whom he had one son Thomas.<sup>19</sup> He went on to have another son, John, with Margery. He had been apprenticed to Symkyn Smith, grocer, and had been made free of the Grocers' Company in 1458.<sup>20</sup> If they were married in 1489, Margery would have been approximately twenty-six while her new husband would have been around fifty-seven. The business interests of Margery's first two husbands may have overlapped as there is evidence that the Revells, like the Edwards, were involved in trade with Calais.<sup>21</sup> For example, when Robert Revell died, one of his executors was a John Broke, grocer, alderman and prominent exporter to Calais even during the recession of the 1460s.<sup>22</sup> It is also certain that Thomas Revell, Robert's son by his first wife, became a 'merchant of the staple of Calais'.<sup>23</sup> Robert Revell would probably have been part of Margery's circle of friends and associates during her first marriage.

<sup>19</sup> TNA, Prerogative Court of Canterbury, PROB 11/16, ff. 346v-48v.

<sup>20</sup> Thrupp, p. 363. If he commenced a ten year apprenticeship in 1448, around the age of sixteen he would have been born c.1432.

<sup>21</sup> There is no indication that Margery ever ran William Edward's business but the businesslike winding up of his interests and obligations would have been expected of her both as widow and executor. Robert Revell may have hoped that he could in some way benefit from the clients of his wife's ex-husband. This may parallel the experience of Thomas Barnaby, whose will makes it clear that when he married Thomasine Percyvale, he took over the business of her first husband that she had administered since his death, Davies, p. 192.

<sup>22</sup> Nightingale, p. 529.

<sup>23</sup> TNA, Prerogative Court of Canterbury, PROB 11/11, ff. 103-103v.

Margery, with her second husband, moved to the parish of St Mary at Hill where her household would have included a baby son, John Revell and her first son Thomas Edward. Her stepson, Thomas Revell, would already have started his apprenticeship.<sup>24</sup> Robert had two apprentices in the household who were members of his family, a William Revell and a Robert Revell, who was the son of his brother William, but he also had several other apprentices and servants. In 1490 Robert became a sheriff and alderman for Farringdon Without, but his time in office and Margery's residency in St Mary at Hill was to be short-lived as he died on the 23 February 1491.<sup>25</sup> He and Margery cannot have been married for more than three years and a few months. He was buried in the chapel of St Stephen within the parish church of St Mary at Hill, to which he left two hundred marks for rebuilding work in his will. He clearly had affection for this church and it continued to be the favoured church of the Revells for several generations. Between 1514 and 1515 the church accounts recorded the burial of a Mawde Ryvell and the ringing of the great bell for six hours for Master Ryvell. In either 1501 or 1502 the church received two shillings for the burial of a child of one Robert Revell and another was buried a year later.<sup>26</sup> The parish accounts also suggest that Margery's late husband had a large and significant tomb. Record was made of payment for the building of the wall over his place of burial and four pence was paid for hooks of iron to support the cross over his tomb.<sup>27</sup>

Robert divided his goods and chattels into three parts, one for his widow, one for his sons and one for charitable bequests, as was the custom of London. While Thomas was old enough to take control of this inheritance, Margery, with the support of certain sureties, would have been responsible for John's inheritance until he came of age.<sup>28</sup> Once again Margery was made an executor of her husband's will, this time along with

<sup>24</sup> Thomas Revell was made free in the Grocers' Company in 1491, Thrupp, p. 363. A ten year apprenticeship commenced at the age of sixteen would place his birth around 1465 and he could therefore have been as little as two years younger than his new stepmother. He died in 1497.

<sup>25</sup> Stow, vol. 2, p. 178.

<sup>26</sup> These may be the children of the Robert Revell who was apprentice and nephew of Margery's second husband, *The Medieval Records of a London City Church, St Mary at Hill, AD 1420-1559*, ed. by H. Littlehales, 2 vols, The Early English Text Society, OS 125 and 128, 1904-05, vol. 1 (1904) pp. 291, 361, 245, 249.

<sup>27</sup> Littlehales, pp. 187, 198, 215.

<sup>28</sup> On the 14 March 1497, after the death of Ralph Astry, Dame Margery Astry, Henry Colet, knight and alderman, William Copynger and Nicholas Mattok, fishmongers appeared before the mayor's court and entered into a bond of £573 10s 4d for the payment of patrimony to John Revell when he came of age, *Letter Book L*, p. 321.

his son, Thomas Revell, and John Broke. At the age of around thirty-one she was a widow again, responsible for administering her late husband's estate for a second time and with two orphan sons to care for.

### **The Wife of Sir Ralph Astry**

Margery's third husband was Ralph Astry, a fishmonger from Hitchin and the second son of Henry Astry and his wife Ide.<sup>29</sup> He had been apprenticed to Sir William Hampton, fishmonger, and was later his partner and an executor of his will.<sup>30</sup> His first wife had been a Margaret Ostriche, daughter of Thomas Ostriche, haberdasher, with whom he had three sons, William, Ralph and Thomas.<sup>31</sup> As well as trading in fish, Ralph, like many other merchants, also exported cloth. In 1481, he was exporting cloth alongside another Hitchin fishmonger and family friend, Nicholas Mattok. On the 22 February he sent four fardels or bundles with twelve cloths on four horses of Thomas Bishopp going to Plymouth. Similar amounts were sent out in May and July and in August a larger shipment of over twenty-eight cloths.<sup>32</sup> With a successful business behind him, Ralph embarked upon a career in city government. He was sheriff in 1485, alderman for Aldgate ward between 1485 and his death in 1494 and, shortly after his second marriage, became mayor in 1493. He was knighted in January 1494 and so, through Ralph, Margery was lady mayoress and became Dame or Lady Astry. Initially they lived in the parish of St Martin Vintry and later St James Garlickhithe. Their household would have included Margery's two boys, a new baby son, Henry, and Ralph's son, Thomas, who was still underage in 1501, as well as at least four male servants and three female servants. Ralph also had a clerk William Hayle, and the apprentice named Robert Hill.

<sup>29</sup> On the 12 September 1486 he received a grant of arms 'Barry wavy of six Argent and Azure, on a chief Gules three bezants' with a crescent to indicate a second son, Andrews, p. 34. There is less information available on which to estimate Ralph's age. He began a civic career, with the position of sheriff, five years before Robert Revell and lived only three years after his death. This suggests that they were of a similar generation and approximately the same age; certainly considerably older than Margery.

<sup>30</sup> He would include Sir William and his wife in an obit which he founded in St Andrew's, Hitchin.

<sup>31</sup> Andrews, p. 34. Andrews and Chester Waters both perpetuate the error in Camden's Visitation of Huntingdonshire. Here Sir Ralph Astry's first wife is called Margery and his second Margaret but Sir Ralph's own will makes it clear Margery was his second wife.

<sup>32</sup> *The Overseas Trade of London: Exchequer Customs Accounts 1480-81*, ed. by H.S. Cobb, London Record Society, vol. 27, 1990, pp. 98, 99, 125, 139, 141, 158.

The Christmas of 1493-94 that Ralph enjoyed as mayor was marked by a royal feast described in detail in the *Great Chronicle* by Fabian who, as a new alderman, would himself have been present. On the twelfth day of Christmas the king held a dinner at Whitehall for the mayor and all the aldermen. After the meal, the mayor, Ralph Astry, was brought to the king's chamber where he was knighted. They then went to view the sports and entertainments in Westminster Hall where the king and queen joined them with the ladies of the court and the ambassadors of France and Spain. At the end of the evening, the mayor and his company took two barges back to the city, arriving home by break of day. Here Fabian departs from the formal grandeur of the royal celebrations and inserts a personal anecdote. Ralph, arriving home, found Margery had either been woken by their drunken arrival or had waited up for her husband and Fabian reports that 'the mayer kyst hys wyffe as a dowble lady'.<sup>33</sup> Such a private insight in a chronicle is unusual and suggests that Ralph had a certain genuine affection for his new wife; they cannot have been married for long. Margery's reaction is unrecorded and her feelings for her husband harder to assess, but Ralph's knighthood must have been an exciting achievement for both of them.

Ralph Astry died on the 18 November 1494 and requested burial in St Martin Vintry. Stow states that he shared his tomb with both his first wife Margaret and his second wife Margery. This contradicts Margery's later specific request that she be buried with William Edward, but it highlights that fact that the dead may not always have been buried where they requested. Ralph, like Robert Revell, had an interest in church building and paid to roof the church of St Martin Vintry with timber and lead and to glaze the windows.<sup>34</sup> In his will he left £60 for vestments for the same church and £40 for vestments for the parish church of St Andrew in Hitchin. The chapel of Minsden, which Margery was to also recall in her will, also received five marks.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>33</sup> *The Great Chronicle of London*, p. 251.

<sup>34</sup> Stow, vol 1, p. 248.

<sup>35</sup> TNA, Prerogative Court of Canterbury, PROB 11/10 ff. 147-49. This chapel seems to have had a change in dedication. While Ralph Astry referred to it as the chapel of St Nicholas in 1494, Margery called it a 'lady chapel' in 1523. In 1650 the commissioners appointed to enquire into the state of ecclesiastical benefices reported that it had fallen into decay but the parochial registers of Hitchin, to which the chapel was affiliated, recorded that baptisms and marriages were regularly performed there up to 1626. In the last year of the reign of Edward VI the goods of the chapel included a chalice of silver, a cross of copper and gilt and a vestment of white damask and tawny velvet, *The Victoria History of the*

By the end of his life, Ralph owned a substantial amount of property in London, Hertfordshire, Kent, Middlesex and Surrey. William Astry, Ralph's eldest son, received lands and tenements in and around Hitchin in Hertfordshire, which were presumably family lands, but most of his other lands seem to have been purchased during his lifetime. Ralph's acquisition of property in Kent before his marriage to Margery suggests he was an ambitious man who may have desired to join the gentry. These lands were to be Margery's in her widowhood and were then entailed upon his sons. First, Margery received the 'grete tenement' in St James Garlickhithe where Ralph and Margery lived and she would continue to dwell as a widow. She also owned in London various tenements in St Martin Vintry sometimes known as the 'Three Tonnes'; lands and tenements in the parish of St Mary 'Matselon' without Aldgate, two adjacent tenements in St Lawrence Jewry, a tenement called 'the Galy' in St Botolph Billingsgate as well as two tenements in St Leonard, Eastchepe and two tenements in Trinity Lane and Hogyn Lane in the parish of Trinity the Little. Interestingly Ralph also notes that during her widowhood Margery would have access to his brewery called the 'Suyte' adjoining the tenements in St Leonard's. In Surrey she owned property around Malden, Kingston and Talworth, but most of her identifiable landholding was in Kent.

This property, outlined in Ralph's will and defined in greater detail in the inquisition carried out after his death included two houses. Gore-court comprised fifty acres of land, twelve acres of meadow, twenty acres of pasture and twenty acres of wood.<sup>36</sup> It was located just south of the village of Otham in Kent and although a house of the same name still exists on this site, it is not a house Margery would recognise. The building is mostly rendered white with sash or early nineteenth-century, pointed windows and, although one half-timbered gable end is still exposed, it is no earlier than 1577. Beneath the house, however, the thirteenth century cellar remains.<sup>37</sup> While it is not known for certain if Margery visited or lived in

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*County of Hertfordshire*, ed. by W. Page, 4 vols, London 1902-23, vol. 3 (1912), p. 18. J.E. Cussans, *The History of Hertfordshire*, 3 vols, London 1870-81, vol. 2 (1874-78), p. 51.

<sup>36</sup> *Calendar of Inquisitions Post Mortem, Henry VII*, vol. 1, p. 453.

<sup>37</sup> Hasted records that the property was owned by the same owners until it came to the possession of Sir Henry Isley in the reign of Henry VIII who alienated it to Thomas Astry, E. Hasted, *The History and Topographical Survey of the County of Kent*, 12 vols, Canterbury 1797-1801; repr. Wakefield 1972, vol. 5, p. 516. This does not correspond with the fact that this property was owned by Ralph Astry by 1493 when it was assigned as Margery's dower. Chester Waters concludes that it was purchased by Ralph from Sir Henry Isley, Chester Waters, p. 54. For architectural details of the house see J. Newman, *West Kent and the Weald*, London 1969; repr. 2000, p. 449.

this house it was used in her widowhood as a country retreat for the family. In 1517 John Revell, her son, ‘went in to a village callyd ottom in the countee of kent there to take his recreacon for a weke or two’.<sup>38</sup> He must have stayed at Gore-court since this is the only house known to have been owned by Margery in this village. Margery was also dowered with the manor of Brishing.<sup>39</sup> This manor house, in the parish of Langley, was built between 1380 and 1400 by Thomas de Bressinges and was purchased by Ralph Astry early in the reign of Edward IV. The house still stands today and is known as Brishing Court.<sup>40</sup> Margery also received various other unnamed lands and tenements around Otham, Maidstone, Langley, Bearsted and Thornham in Kent and others in the parish of Alhalowen in the hundred of Hoo, Kent.<sup>41</sup>

### **The Widow**

Margery did not marry for a fourth time. Even if she was past the point when she could have borne children, her fortune could have attracted a man who had heirs from a previous marriage, but she apparently no longer desired or needed a husband. Used to having husbands who were preoccupied with civic affairs she would have been competent in supervising their business concerns in their absence, yet she does not appear to have continued as a business woman in her later years. This is in contrast to other widows, including Thomasine Percyvale, whose will mentions three apprentices of her own, whom she was presumably training to be tailors.<sup>42</sup> Margery had no financial need to work and therefore presumably chose not to do so. Nor is there any indication that she adopted an austere or religious lifestyle. She continued to associate with friends and presumably maintained a similar lifestyle to that she had enjoyed previously.

For the last twenty-nine years of her life, Margery continued to live in the large house in the parish of St James Garlickhithe where she had lived with Ralph Astry and, from her will, a few details of this house emerge. She referred to her ‘chambers and compting houses’ and particularly the

<sup>38</sup> TNA, C1/553/61-62.

<sup>39</sup> *Calendar of Inquisitions Post Mortem, Henry VII*, vol. 1, p. 453.

<sup>40</sup> Parish boundaries have changed and the house is now in the parish of Boughton Monchelsea, Hasted, pp. 350-51. Chester Waters, p. 54. E.R. Swain, ‘Divided and Galleried Hall Houses’, *Medieval Archaeology*, vol. 12 (1968), pp. 134-35.

<sup>41</sup> *Calendar of Inquisitions Post Mortem, Henry VII*, vol. 1, p. 453.

<sup>42</sup> Davies, p. 196.

counting house over the hall door.<sup>43</sup> She also referred to her own chapel and the chalice and paten in use there. The notary, Alexander Roughley who worked and lived with Margery, had his own chamber with a feather bed and bolster which she bequeathed to him. Margery's house would appear to have been a type of house described as a larger medium sized dwelling which generally comprised three to six rooms in ground plan, possibly with an alley way running the length of the property, or a yard with buildings along one side, and often with shops on the street frontage.<sup>44</sup> The presence of a domestic chapel in particular, indicates that this was a large and expensive house, but chapels were generally simply furnished even in the wealthiest of houses. In the house of Thomas Kytson, in Milk Street in 1527, for example, the chapel contained an old painted hanging, two sarsenet curtains, a table of Our Lord, a cross of timber, a linen altar cloth, a pair of latten candlesticks, six short forms and a chest.<sup>45</sup> Margery also had access to her own chaplain. The will of Ralph Astry provided that the priest employed to pray for his soul should also 'wayte uppon the same Dame Margerye my wife at hir pleusure'. A comparable house might be the *Crowne*, Aldgate, owned after 1363 by William Cosyn: after several changes of ownership, in 1569 this was leased to Richard Irme, woodmonger, and the inventory included a hall, great chamber and two parlours as well as two other chambers and a kitchen. Its great parlour in particular was noted for its wainscoting and was furnished with settles. In the late fifteenth century, a fishmonger, John Bedham, made his home at *Lumbardes Place*, Botolph Lane, which may have been another house of similar standing to Margery's. On his death, John Bedham bequeathed the property to St Mary at Hill which received an annual rent of £13 6s 8d and between 1477 and 1479 extensively renovated the house employing two labourers and two tilers for eighteen days. In an inventory of 1485, *Lumbardes Place* included a parlour, buttery, summer parlour, kitchen larder house, house next the gate, garden and well, a chief chamber and ten other chambers all with beds.<sup>46</sup> During the later medieval period, ground floor halls were often divided to form an upper floor or a gallery and first floor halls became the norm. It would appear that the counting house in Margery's home was either on the floor above the hall or on such a gallery. It may have been something like the arrangement at number sixteen Cornhill, owned in the late fifteenth century by the family of John Stokker. Here the counting house was part of a

<sup>43</sup> A 'compting house' or counting house was a office or room for storing valuables.

<sup>44</sup> J. Schofield, *Medieval London Houses*, New Haven and London 1994, pp. 51-52.

<sup>45</sup> Schofield, p. 69. Sarsenet was a fine silk material.

<sup>46</sup> Schofield, pp. 157, 164.

gallery at first floor level leading from the house to a separate kitchen.<sup>47</sup> It is certain that the house at St James Garlickhithe was big enough for John Revell and his wife Joan to live there, with his mother Margery, in the early sixteenth century and from there he conducted his business.<sup>48</sup>

### The Family Feud

Throughout her widowhood, much of Margery's time and thoughts would have been directed towards a series of court cases with Joan Pynson, the widow of her son, John Revell.<sup>49</sup> The issues were financial and the accusations levelled at Margery depict her as a grasping and heartless woman. Whether true or not, this was certainly not the sort of thing that anyone would want aired in public and must have been distressing. The story begins with the death of Robert Revell. In his will he left a third of the residue of his goods to his children, Thomas Revell and John Revell. Margery was appointed executor and presented to the Prerogative Court of Canterbury an inventory of his goods totalling £3,506 plus £555 of debts.<sup>50</sup> In 1497 Margery appeared before the mayor's court and affirmed John Revell's portion to be £573 10s 4d and some time after 1512 he came of age and took control of his inheritance.<sup>51</sup> Then around 1516 he married Joan Rastell and they both came to live with Margery in her house in St James Garlickhithe.<sup>52</sup> This marriage was very short lived. In September 1517, on a visit to Otham in Kent, John Revell unexpectedly succumbed to 'the grete sekene of the pestylence and there dyd'.<sup>53</sup> While Joan was in Kent

<sup>47</sup> Schofield, pp. 66, 74.

<sup>48</sup> TNA C1/553/61-62.

<sup>49</sup> Joan was the daughter of John Rastell, the printer, and the niece of Sir Thomas More. After the death of John Revell she remarried first Richard Pynson, son of the printer, and then John Heywood, A.W. Reed, *Early Tudor Drama: Medwall, the Rastells, Heywood and the More Circle*, London 1926, pp. 1-7, 20, 45, 68-69. H.R. Plomer, *Wynkyn de Worde and His Contemporaries from the death of Caxton to 1535: A Chapter in English Printing*, London 1925; repr. 1974, pp. 148-49.

<sup>50</sup> These figures and all details of this feud come from Joan's 1521 chancery case, TNA C1/553/61-62.

<sup>51</sup> This is in March, only a few months before John's brother, Thomas Revell, died. His will was proved on 3 June, TNA, Prerogative Court of Canterbury, PROB 11/11, f. 103.

<sup>52</sup> John Rastell is believed to have been born around 1475 and to have been married by 1504. He must actually have been married several years previously as Joan must have been born around 1500 for her to be old enough to marry John Revell before his death in 1517, Reed, pp. 1-2.

<sup>53</sup> TNA C1/553/61-62. The sweating sickness reoccurred in London and Oxford in the summer of 1517 and was hardly over when plague broke out in London in September.

arranging for the funeral of her husband she sent word of the death to Margery. When she received the news she went into John's room and broke open his chest containing money, plate, jewels, bills and books of reckoning of debts, worth over one thousand marks and refused to return them to Joan. In this Margery was said to be advised by Nicholas Mattok, Henry Wynkot, Thomas Edward and Henry Astry. This was not to be the end of the affair. When Joan returned from the funeral, Margery threw her out and would not allow her to access any of her late husband's possessions.<sup>54</sup> Margery then delivered John's account books to John Lane and returned various records of debt to the debtors, including one debt of a hundred marks that Thomas Astry owed to his step-brother. This she, of course, had no authority to do because Joan had been granted the administration of her late husband's estate.

Joan remarried Richard Pynson, and the couple began their case against Margery to recover what was due to Joan as John Revell's widow, but this was only the first of a series of wrangles. Each party composed new accusations against the other and started new cases. Some time before 1521, 'Richard Hyll, factour to Laurence Hill', brought a case against Joan for a debt of £75 8d.<sup>55</sup> Joan did not deny the debt but pointed out that in order to recover the money, Margery had taken the goods assigned as surety, had them valued at only £75 8d, but sold them for their full value, which was a hundred marks more, and retained the hundred marks. The court agreed with this and awarded Joan the sum of £75 8d, but by 1521 she was still trying to recover the hundred marks.<sup>56</sup> Unfortunately Richard Pynson died before the main case over Joan's dower and the breaking of

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Although John was in Kent it is likely that he could have died from either of these diseases, C. Creighton, *A History of Epidemics in Britain*, Cambridge 1891, pp. 246, 290.

<sup>54</sup> Joan's replication makes it clear that Margery did not deny these actions but attempted to justify them by claiming that she had already received news of John's death and believed that on his death bed he said he had a will in the said chest. Joan refers to a previous judgement in King's Bench which declared Margery's version untrue and that she did not return anything to the chest.

<sup>55</sup> Most likely Margery's cousin, Richard Hill, but Laurence Hill cannot be identified.

<sup>56</sup> The account of this case again comes from Joan's replication, but the view has generally been taken that Joan, with the advice of a lawyer, in the shape of her father, and facing Margery, who had all the resources necessary to hire the best legal representation, would not quote the judgements of previous court cases if she were not recounting them faithfully. This could and would be checked. Joan's father, John, was a chancery lawyer, and under Wolsey would have had the authority to check and sign bills of complaint to ensure they were genuine. John was not particularly active in this role and generally only signed his own bills but he did sign Joan's bill against Margery, so he clearly supported his daughter, Reed, p. 20.

John Revell's chest was completed and Joan was forced to start the case again in her own name in 1521.

Joan's final offensive in this battle took the form of a particularly bitter accusation which reveals a deep antagonism between the two women. She claimed that when Margery was acting as executor for Robert Revell she 'craftely and untruely' declared John Revell's portion of the estate to be far less than it really was in order to 'desceyve the seyd John Revell her own naturall son'. However, this claim seems implausible, even on Joan's own figures; it tells us more about the depth of ill feeling that can develop when two strong minded and determined women vent the pain, which they feel at the loss of a son and husband, on each other.<sup>57</sup> On Margery's side, the antagonism is clear in her will. She releases poor debtors from their debts to her, all except 'John Rastell and Jone his daughter and late wife of John Revell my sonne and administratrice of his goods while he lyved'. She also makes it clear that nobody was to do to her what she allegedly did to her son. She states that her executors should not 'unlock oppen or breke any dores of Chambers, Counters, Compting Houses or chiste within my said dwelling place, except my said overseer be present and prevy therunto'. It is hardly surprising that Margery would feel resentment towards Joan who had only recently joined the family. Her son John only came of age a few years before his marriage and cannot have been married for much more than a year. Suddenly this young woman, almost a stranger, had a significant claim on the estate that Margery had been building up and protecting for years. Of course, Margery benefited from both of her later marriages, in a very similar way to Joan, and this may be the key to understanding her reaction, and the bitterness between the two women. Margery would not be unusual in reacting with aversion to somebody who demonstrates similar imperfections to herself or reminds her of incidents in her own past. Although she had done nothing wrong, Margery may have been made to feel slightly uncomfortable with the fact that she had acquired Revell and Astry wealth after such short marriages and did not like to be reminded of this. She may also have experienced resentment from the Revells or Astrys.<sup>58</sup> Margery probably did not regret the turn of events but that does

<sup>57</sup> If Robert Revell's estate including goods, cash and debts amounted to £4,061, the third for his children would have been £1,354 and John Revell's share, £677. Margery's bond for patrimony was only £573 10s 4d but this was in 1497, six years after Robert Revell's death. The estate may have declined in value and it may not have been possible to collect all the debts. Thomas Revell, John's brother, had died but this did not entitle John or Joan to his portion since he died leaving a wife and three daughters.

<sup>58</sup> Hanawalt has found that complaints from families who stood to lose control of dower to financially independent widows were relatively common, B.A. Hanawalt, 'Remarriage as

not mean she ever desired to enjoy their wealth as a widow rather than a wife. Such feelings are more likely to have existed if she felt genuine affection for Robert and Ralph and was not solely a gold-digger. Two similar characters, in an emotionally charged situation, inevitably become allies or enemies; in this case the latter. Joan became the focus for the frustration Margery felt at the simultaneous loss of her son, a portion of her family's wealth and her peace of mind.

### Circle of Friends

Throughout her life and particularly during her first two marriages, Margery seems to have maintained a stable and constant group of friends and associates. Evidence of affection is scarce but we can assume at least familiarity with people who appear in her life more than once. A number of these friends can be traced back to the circle she would have moved in during her marriage to William Edward. Thomasine Percyvale similarly had ample opportunity, during the course of her first marriage, to establish connections within the Tailors' Company, and it can have been no different for Margery.<sup>59</sup> Both women became part of a circle which would remain with them throughout their lives. Margery's long term friends among the grocers included John Broke, grocer and alderman who was executor to Robert Revell and a John Benyngton, grocer, left £6 13s 4d by Ralph Astry, both Calais merchants.<sup>60</sup> John Warde, grocer, alderman and executor to Ralph Astry, joined the livery between 1461 and 1462. An exporter of cloth, he was involved in the infiltration by Londoners of Southampton's Mediterranean trade. In 1466, along with three other grocers, he was granted a licence to export 400 broadcloths from Southampton to the Mediterranean every year for ten years.<sup>61</sup> He appears as one of Ralph's feoffees for Gore-Court and Brishing Court and was clearly a close friend of Margery as he left her, in his will, an ounce of fine gold for a ring.<sup>62</sup> Like her he came from Hertfordshire and was a man of means. His will included bequests to create some sort of new ornament in St Paul's Cathedral, a new window in the chancel at St Martin Otewich, new bay windows in Grocers' Hall and a new roof for the church at Hinxworth, Hertfordshire.<sup>63</sup>

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an option for Urban and Rural Widows in Late Medieval England', in *Wife and Widow in Medieval England*, ed. by S. Sheridan Walker, Michigan 1993; repr. 1996, p. 157.

<sup>59</sup> Davies, p. 191.

<sup>60</sup> Nightingale, p. 529.

<sup>61</sup> Nightingale, p. 532.

<sup>62</sup> *Calendar of Inquisitions Post Mortem, Henry VII*, vol. 1, p. 453.

<sup>63</sup> TNA, Prerogative Court of Canterbury, PROB 11/12, ff. 80v-82v.

John Breton, parson of St Peter, Cornhill, also entered Margery's life during her first marriage. As a parishioner of this church she would have known him well and if he wasn't already a good friend by the time of her husband's death, he became one over the following months. As overseer to William Edward, he would have seen her through what could only have been a difficult period, as she took on the responsibility of executorship for the first time. He was someone who stayed with her throughout her life and who she presumably introduced to each of her husbands. John appears again as witness to Robert Revell and overseer to Ralph Astry and he also oversaw the will of Richard Hill, son of the alderman Sir Thomas Hill.<sup>64</sup> He was only unable to perform a similar role for Margery herself because he died in 1500.<sup>65</sup>

Shortly after the death of her first husband, Margery appeared before the mayor's court on the 29 January 1489 and entered into a bond of £110 for payment of patrimony to Thomas Edward, her son, when he came of age. Among her supporters were Philip Edward, grocer, and Richard Hill, tailor.<sup>66</sup> This is clearly not the same Richard Hill, discussed above, who was a grocer and probably too young in 1488 to be a surety to anybody, but is likely to be some sort of relative. He was also known to Margery's third husband Ralph Astry who left him £30, and he witnessed Ralph's will. While it is possible that Ralph met him through a business connection, it seems far more likely that Margery introduced him to her husband and that he was a friend to both of them. This Richard Hill was admitted to the livery of the Tailors' Company on the 26 May 1486. He was warden from 1490 to 1491 and from 1493 to 1494 and was possibly master some time between 1504 and 1509.<sup>67</sup>

Ralph Astry also had a close connection with Nicholas Mattok, originally from Hitchin, fishmonger and chamberlain of London. Ralph provided in his will that in default of all heirs the main family lands in Hertfordshire were to go to Nicholas's son, suggesting they may have been related. Nicholas Mattok and John Warde were Margery's fellow executors when she performed this role for the last time, which made him one of the most important figures in her widowhood. He was at her side in many of the court battles that occurred in the wake of Ralph's demise and she may even have known him from her childhood in Hitchin. Nicholas Mattok died in 1521 and was buried in the church of St Andrew's in Hitchin beside

<sup>64</sup> TNA, Prerogative Court of Canterbury, PROB 11/12, ff. 114-15.

<sup>65</sup> Commissary Court of London, Guildhall Library, MS 9171/8, f. 222r-22v.

<sup>66</sup> *Letter Book L*, p. 268.

<sup>67</sup> *The Merchant Taylor's Company of London: Court Minutes 1486-1493*, ed. by M. Davies, Stamford 2000, p. 292.

his first wife Elizabeth. To his second and surviving wife, Agnes, he left tenure of a room called the garret in the mansion in Hitchin where he lived and he funded an obit for the souls of Ralph Astry and his wives, Margaret and Margery, despite the fact Margery was still alive.<sup>68</sup> During his life time Nicholas constructed a lasting monument to his wealth and success in the form of the elaborate south porch of the church in Hitchin.<sup>69</sup>

Sir Richard Broke, Margery's overseer, must also have been an important friend to her in her latter years. The fourth son of Thomas Broke of Leighton, Cheshire, he came to London to study the law and held a number of offices. Between 1502 and 1510 he was the under-sheriff of London, later becoming the recorder and in 1512 and 1515 he served as a member of parliament. His will, dated the 6 May 1529, described him as a knight and chief baron of the Exchequer of Henry VIII, a position he held from 1526 to his death, and revealed that he received, on the death of Charles, Earl of Worcester, various household goods such as chairs and carpets.<sup>70</sup> By his death he owned land in five counties but the income he derived from them may not have been large.<sup>71</sup>

Female friends for Margery are harder to find, partly as a result of the type of records which are available. The only female relationships specifically mentioned are those in her will and these are all relatives. They are, however, left cloth for black gowns which often indicates a close friendship, and Margery does describe this group as her friends, confirming that this was more than just a family obligation. She would also have known the wives of male friends such as John Warde and Nicholas Mattok. Richard Brooke, Margery's overseer, was an associate of Lady Joan Bradbury, and one of her fellow executors of the will of Thomas Bradbury.<sup>72</sup> Both Joan and Margery seem to have lived among the rich and powerful guild members and on the boundaries between trade and gentility.<sup>73</sup>

<sup>68</sup> TNA, Prerogative Court of Canterbury, PROB 11/20, f. 123.

<sup>69</sup> R.L. Hine, *The History of Hitchin*, 2 vols, London 1927-29, vol. 1 (1927), p. 90.

<sup>70</sup> The mention of carpets in plural suggests he lived in some comfort and Richard also notes that his dwelling house in London, which included a garden, was 'gyven and graunted' to him by the earl of Northumberland for a term of certain years, 'without any thing yelding therfor'. This suggests he was allowed to live there rent free and that he had some sort of association with this family, TNA, Prerogative Court of Canterbury, PROB 11/23, ff. 23-25.

<sup>71</sup> S.T. Bindoff, *The House of Commons 1509-1558*, 3 vols, London 1982, vol. 1, pp. 503-04.

<sup>72</sup> Sutton, p. 221.

<sup>73</sup> Sutton, p. 234.

Many of Margery's friends would not only have known her but also each other. Many familiar names, for example, appear together in Ralph's arrangements for his wife's dower.<sup>74</sup> Her social group was stable and closely bonded and running through it were links to home. Richard Hill, grocer, and his siblings, the Lanes and the Cosyns, Nicholas Mattok, John Warde and Ralph Astry all have connections to Hitchin or the surrounding area. Margery also seems to have forged bonds between Ralph Astry and her own kin. As well as taking on her relative, Robert Hill, as an apprentice, he had a female servant named, Agnes Hill. William Cosyn, the elder, and his son, almost certainly related to Margery's cousin, Nicholas Cosyn, were also remembered by Ralph with bequests of £5 each. The bonds which she forged between the different areas of her life can also be seen in the person of John Edward, priest. Although not positively identified, it seems likely that he was in some way related to the family of William Edward, but he was also close enough to Ralph Astry for the latter to fund an obit in the church of St Andrew in Hitchin for the souls of his mother, father and John Edward. It is likely that it was Margery who brought them together. She was not one of those widows who developed what Rosenthal has termed 'social amnesia'; and left behind family and friends from previous marriages.<sup>75</sup> This intermediary role for wives was not, however, unusual. Lady Joan Bradbury and Thomasine Percyvale are other examples of women who linked their various families together. Joan's mother was a left life interest in a London tenement by Joan's first husband and her brothers received black gowns in the will of her second husband. Thomas Barnaby chose Thomasine's brother, Richard, as his overseer.<sup>76</sup>

So, Margery began her widowhood surrounded by familiar faces. John Breton, of St Peter Cornhill, and Richard Hill, tailor, were both witnesses to Ralph Astry's will. She also had around her John Warde and John and Richard Broke as well as her sons and extended family. Unfortunately, the presence of this reassuring circle was not to last. John Breton died in 1500 followed by John Warde in 1501, John Broke in 1511, her son John Revell

<sup>74</sup> On his marriage to Margery, Ralph instructed that the manors of Brishing and Gorecourt, along with a few other small pieces of land were to be demised to her for the term of her life, which was done on 29 September 1493. The remainder of the property was reserved to John Wyngar, ex-master of Richard Hill, grocer, and Margery's cousin, Richard Hill, tailor, John Benyngton, Philip Edward and Nicholas Mattok. *Calendar of Inquisitions Post Mortem, Henry VII*, vol. 1, p. 453.

<sup>75</sup> J.T. Rosenthal, 'Fifteenth Century Widows and Widowhood: Bereavement, Reintegration and Life Choices', in *Wife and Widow in Medieval England*, ed. by S. Sheridan Walker, p. 40.

<sup>76</sup> Davies, p. 192. Sutton, pp. 212, 219.

in 1517 and Nicholas Mattok in 1521. Margery was in the unfortunate position of having outlived most of her contemporaries. She may have found some comfort in the presence of her notary Alexander Roughley and although he was an employee, they seem to have been close. Margery left him his bed and bolster, a black gown and eight marks for writing her will and for his true and faithful service to her. She also left her best set of vestments to the chapel in the parish of Prescott in Lancashire where he was born, and he witnessed her will. As well as the battle with Joan Pynson, Margery also pursued various cases in chancery relating to the estate of Ralph Astry, and Alexander would almost certainly have aided her in this. She was in dispute with Richard Hyberden and William Bradman over debts owed to Ralph and over ownership of the tenement known as ‘the Galy’ in Bishopsgate.<sup>77</sup> She and Nicholas Mattok were also involved in a dispute with Edmund Dudley over deeds relating to the manors of Fishwick and Eccleston in Lancashire, which had turned up in the effects of Ralph Astry, and also a similar case against Thomas Fiennes, Lord Dacre, over deeds to the manor of Holbeach.<sup>78</sup>

### **Margery’s Death: Charitable and other Bequests**

Margery died in 1523 and her will was proved on the 10 December. We cannot now be certain where she was finally buried since those she left behind, in particular her sole executor Henry Astry, may have felt they had legitimate reasons to disregard her wishes and bury her with her most recent husband. She was not one of the London widows whose wealth motivated them to spend their widowhood in acts of charity and who, by their bequests, became great benefactors. She did no more than was expected of her, but she did choose to direct her charitable legacies towards the relief of suffering she would have witnessed in her immediate locality. Several bequests, for example, went to parishes where she lived. Poor people in Vintry ward were to receive a load of coal every winter for ten years and, over the same period, twenty shillings was to be distributed every year among the poor of the parishes of St Peter Cornhill and St James Garlickhithe. She also left two of her six funeral torches to the

<sup>77</sup> William Bradman claimed that he had purchased the reversion of ‘the Galey’ from Agnes, the widow of Henry Revell but had been persuaded by Ralph to place the purchase in his name so William would not be liable for jury service. The result, he claimed, was that Margery held all the proof and deeds for this, in Ralph’s name, and would not return them or admit his ownership; in fact she claimed he owed her rent and demanded he vacate the premises, TNA, C1/205/43-36, C1/208/62, C1/184/61.

<sup>78</sup> TNA, C1/304/10, C1/132/57.

brotherhood of our Lady and St James in St James Garlickhithe, indicating that she was a member of this fraternity in her widowhood. Of all the parishes in which she lived, only St Mary at Hill was neglected, probably because she only lived there for a short time, while she spent many years in St Peter Cornhill and St James Garlickhithe. Beyond London, ten marks went to repair the roads within twenty miles of London, by the advice of Robert Barbour, hermit of Jesus Chapel, Islington. All of Margery's husbands may well have travelled regularly outside London on business and she herself would have experienced the journey between Hitchin and London at least once. She may also have travelled on occasion to their country properties in Kent. This bequest may have been motivated by these journeys. She also remembered the companies with which she was associated. Both the Fishmongers and the Grocers received a silver cup, but many of her other bequests were to religious benefactors. The works of St Peter Cornhill received £3 6s 8d and the five orders of friars, ten shillings each. The brotherhood of the Pappey was left 6s 8d and the brotherhood of the Sixty Priests, 13s 4d. Finally, St Peter Cornhill gained 'a paxe of silver and gilt garnished with perles and other stones and also set and garnished with Synkfoyles' and a missal and Charterhouse was given a silver cup to pray for her soul. The range of benefactors that Margery chose reflects the popular choices of the day. Even with a rise in the foundation of almshouses, immediate distribution of money or necessities such as food or fuel was still common. Although there was greater distinction made between the poor who needed help through no fault of their own and those who could work but did not, many still gave help, as Margery did, simply to 'the poor'. The London Charterhouse was growing in popularity as a beneficiary and the friars continued to maintain a high level of support.<sup>79</sup>

The largest single monetary legacy in Margery's will was the £70 spent on ten years of prayers for the souls of herself, her husbands and John Revell. Even in this, she complies with what was common in her lifetime. Far from declining, the establishment of some sort of anniversary service and long term prayers was growing in popularity up to the Reformation.<sup>80</sup> Margery also spent an additional £6 13s 4d on a further ten year obit, and 13s 4d to ensure her priest said mass at the altar of *scala celi* in the Crossed Friars every Friday. Her funeral must have been far from simple as she left £48 to pay for it and her sepulchre was to cost £3 6s 8d. Interestingly, she

<sup>79</sup> A third of the wills examined by Thomson contained bequests to the orders of friars, J.A.F. Thomson, 'Piety and Charity in Late Medieval London', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, vol. 16 (1965), pp. 183, 189-90.

<sup>80</sup> Thomson, pp. 178-95.

also made provision for a brass for John Revell in Otham. She may simply have been ensuring that his grave was well marked and remembered, but guilt over her treatment of him and his widow cannot be ruled out. Certainly the brass was an after-thought as it appeared in a memorandum added six weeks after the main will was written.<sup>81</sup>

Margery's financial priorities clearly lay with her family rather than charity, but it is possible to pick out one charitable interest, namely education. Her young nephews, Robert and Thomas, received £4 for their education, and she left a generous £50 to students of divinity at Cambridge and £10 to a student of grammar who intended to become a priest. There is no indication of where this interest may have come from. Unlike Lady Joan Bradbury, whose brother-in-law Richard demonstrated in his will the family interest in educating their offspring, or Dame Thomasine Percyvale, who followed the example of her husband in founding her school, none of the wills of Margery's family indicate any such concern or include books, and none of her husbands made significant educational bequests.<sup>82</sup> Clearly a motivated and ambitious woman herself, she may have felt that a university education was the most beneficial start in life for young men but in this she would have been quite unusual, for it has been found that before the Reformation only 3.5% of wills contained bequests for education.<sup>83</sup> Given Margery's interest in prayers for her soul, however, and her focus on scholars of divinity and those intending to become priests, she may have had another motive. Ordained or not, these students would be expected to pray for their benefactor and if they did join the church, their prayers would be even more effective. This should not detract too much, however, from the fact that a £50 bequest was a generous sum. Almost all charitable bequests in this period, whether to friars, lepers or prisoners would ultimately have resulted in some sort of prayers for the donor. This does not mean that all benefactors were thinking only of their own soul.

After all these bequests, Margery divided the rest of her estate between her sons Thomas Edward and Henry Astry. Much of the Astry property would have reverted to the heirs of Thomas Astry under the terms of his father's will, but an indication of the wealth that she was free to bequeath in her own right can be gained from the plate that she described. Some has been noted above but Thomas Edward also received a 'litell salt with a cover of silver and gilt garnished with perles ... a grete standing cupp with a

<sup>81</sup> This was to be an accurate likeness of him and include his arms and various passages of scripture and her executors were to expend 13s 4d or more as necessary as well as the 10s paid to the church.

<sup>82</sup> Sutton, pp. 210-12. Davies, pp. 202-206.

<sup>83</sup> Thomson, p. 186.

cover of silver parcell gilt and on the knopp of the said cover a squyrell' and 'ix spones of silver with woodruffe on the endes, gilt'.

### **Conclusion: Life Choices and Ambitions**

At the heart of Margery's story is her climb to the heights of society and prosperity. William Edward was a professional man, able to provide well for his family but was far from being prominent or memorable. Robert Revell was a sheriff and an alderman with substantial wealth and on the way to greater things, but Ralph Astry was the summit of Margery's ambitions. He was wealthy, with considerable amounts of property, and a knight and alderman as well. Margery's success was partly coincidence as both her later husbands died after only a few years of marriage, enabling her, ultimately, to enjoy a widowhood of twenty-nine years. Her choice of men, however, and the decisions to remarry at all were entirely her own and would not have been made without a view to her future prosperity and status. Wealthy widows did not have to remain single for long if they did not wish to do so. Their property made them an attractive prospect but it also meant they had the power to refuse suitors they either did not like or who did not offer the lifestyle they desired. None of Margery's husbands stipulated that she was to lose her life interest in her dower if she remarried and therefore, along with many other widows in this position, she would have controlled the marriage market.<sup>84</sup> So, what factors affected her acceptance or refusal of a marriage proposal? First, many of the men she already knew would have been from the Grocers' Company and guilds favoured keeping widows and their wealth within the trade. They, of course, could not enforce this but she may have experienced a rush of offers from familiar men of the grocers' guild.<sup>85</sup> As a young woman, widowed for the first time, this sense of familiarity almost certainly influenced her choice of second husband but she was also cool headed enough to assess his wealth and potential. This is not to imply that she was entirely mercenary in her choice, rather that it would have been foolish to choose a man with fewer resources than her last husband, particularly with a young child to bring up. She had to think of the future of her son and the opportunities that might come with a wealthy step-father, and she had to be certain of her own future. Prosperity and familiarity were also vital to Margery's choice of third husband. This time she rejected the Grocers' Company for a man from her home town. Yet

<sup>84</sup> A.L. Erickson, *Women and Property in Early Modern England*, London and New York 1993, pp. 196-7. Hanawalt, pp. 154-57.

<sup>85</sup> Hanawalt, p. 154.

Ralph Astry was still part of her social group because, even before their marriage, they had friends in common.<sup>86</sup> So it seems that Margery's strategy was to limit herself to men with prospects, who she may have already been familiar with, and to choose from them, someone for whom she felt some affection.

This still leaves us, however, with one of the most crucial elements of her character, ambition and a desire for social status. Margery came from an ambitious family that included prominent guild members and a mayor of London. It would be surprising if she had not inherited some of that ambition. A determination to scale the heights of civic office through her husband may therefore have influenced her later marriages. In this she would have felt an affinity with Lady Joan Bradbury who unable to become a mayor herself 'had to make one out of her second husband'.<sup>87</sup> Robert Revell almost certainly had ambition of his own but it is probably not a coincidence that he embarked on a career in city government shortly after his marriage to Margery. Unfortunately, her plans were thwarted when he died on her in 1491. In her last husband Margery found a man whose character matched her own; who was already an alderman and who ultimately climbed to the position she so desired. In Fabian's account of Ralph arriving home after receiving his knighthood we see not only his affection for his wife but also their joint ambition. It was more that wifely devotion that kept Margery from her bed and it is not surprising that she was unable to sleep on the night she finally attained her desired title and status. We can only imagine the frustration she must have felt at not being present. Evidence that Margery chose men with ambitious characters similar to her own, rather than manipulating the husband she happened to have, can also be found in the religious patronage of Robert and Ralph. Both built substantial tombs in their parish churches and contributed generously to the building of St Mary at Hill and St Martin Vintry. It has been argued convincingly that such patronage was partly motivated by a desire to dominate the view of parishioners with depictions of the family name and arms and as such was primarily carried out by the socially aspirant.<sup>88</sup> This would certainly seem to fit the characters of Robert and Ralph, and this unity of purpose must have led to a certain degree of affection between Margery and her husbands. Her ambitions, however, did not apparently extend beyond the horizons of London as she did not aim

<sup>86</sup> John Warde and John Breton, who Margery knew from her first marriage, were Ralph's feoffees for Gore-Court and Brishing Court before they were assigned as Margery's dower, *Calendar of Inquisitions Post Mortem, Henry VII*, vol. 1, p. 453.

<sup>87</sup> Sutton, pp. 210, 216.

<sup>88</sup> D.M. Hadley, *Death in Medieval England: An Archaeology*, Stroud 2001, pp. 153-64.

for a fourth marriage into the gentry or lesser aristocracy. Maybe she desired independence or maybe she genuinely missed Sir Ralph too much to contemplate another husband.

If Margery had died as the widow of William Edward she probably would have remained obscure. By the end of her life her name would have been widely known as one of London's great widows; she was prominent enough to feature in the *Great Chronicle* and her wealth must have exceeded many of her male relations. Such an achievement cannot have been coincidence. We should not dismiss her as a gold-digger, while we praise the modern business woman or company director, since such independent achievements were not attainable by the ambitious denizens of medieval London who happened to be born female. Margery achieved her success through her husbands because other avenues were limited, but these marriages and the rest of her life were not without affection. Her husbands' wills may not refer to her with any terms of endearment or appreciation, but the men she chose for herself, in particular Ralph Astry, were like-minded companions with whom she shared a sense of purpose. She also enjoyed the comfort of two grown sons and a close network of friends and family. As many widows must have done, however, she lived to see her friends die around her. Her final years brought bereavement with the loss of John Revell and bitter legal wrangling with his widow rather than peace, contentment and the enjoyment of what she had achieved.

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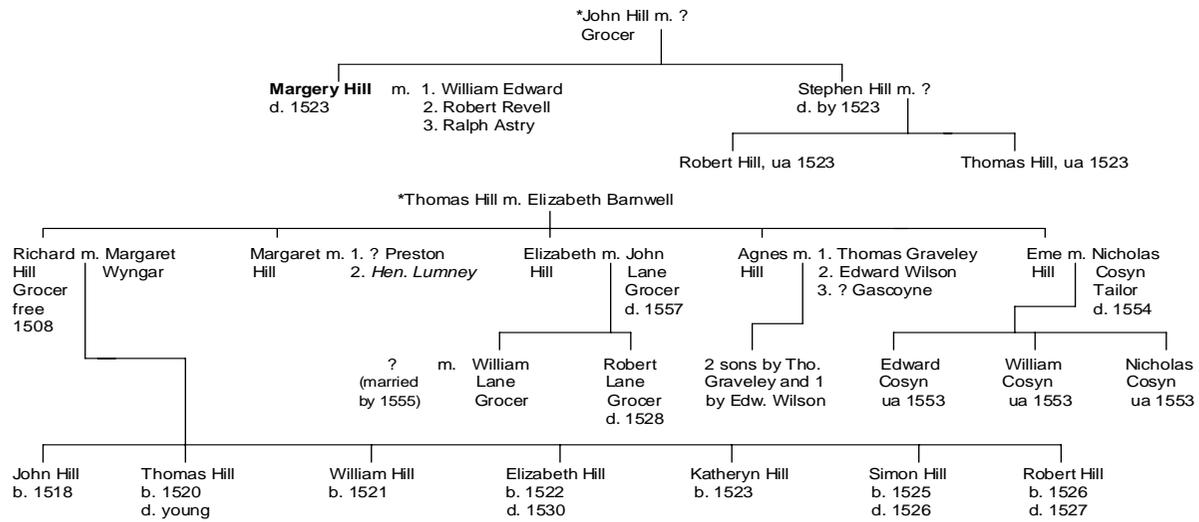
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*Italics* = uncertain information  
 \* Possibly brothers

**Fig. 1 The Hills of Hitchin**

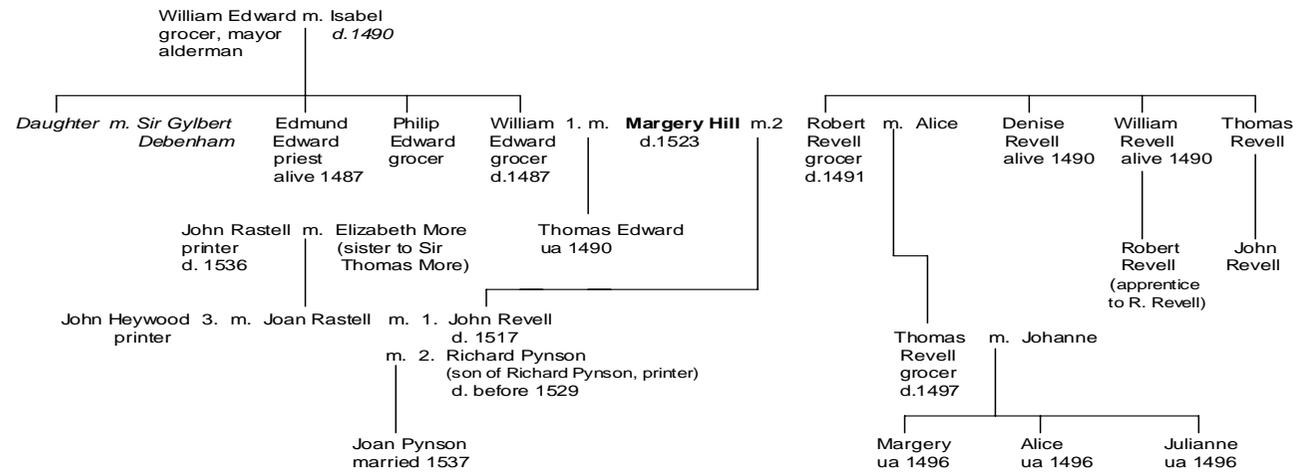
ua = under age





*Italics* = uncertain information  
 ua = under age

**Fig. 3 The Edwards and The Revells**



*Italics = uncertain information*

**Fig. 4 The Astry Family**

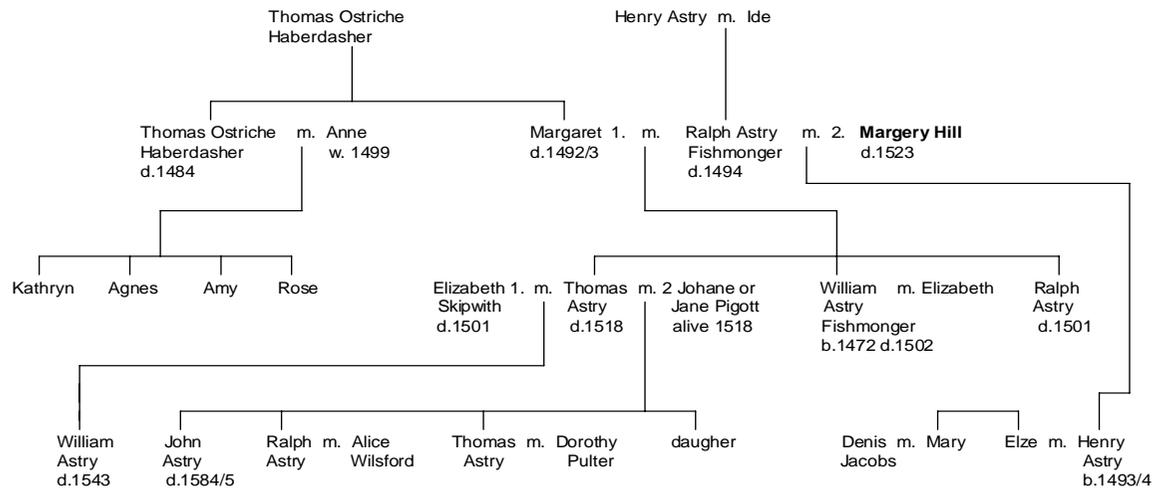




Fig. 5 Fig Gore Court, Otham, Kent  
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Fig. 6 Brishing Manor, now Brishing Court, Boughton, Monchelsea, Kent  
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