When Alfred Roberts, a Grantham grocer, and his wife, Beatrice, had their second and last child on 13 October 1925, they apparently hoped to have a son, rather than a sister for their four-year-old daughter, Muriel. Beatrice, indeed, may never have got over her disappointment, and seems to have failed to develop a warm, loving relationship with
the child, who was named Margaret Hilda. Alfred reacted differently, treating her exactly the same as if she were a boy, and the young Margaret grew up doing everything she could to meet her father’s expectations, always declaring that he was the role model for her life.

Alfred Roberts was a formidable figure. The son of a Northampton shoemaker, he left school at 13 to work in the tuck shop at Oundle, the boys’ public school, moving on to a series of jobs in grocery shops before becoming, at the age of 21, the manager of a grocery store in the Lincolnshire market town of Grantham. After six years, he had saved enough to take out a mortgage and buy his own shop, with living accommodation upstairs, on the outskirts of the town. Working immensely hard, he and Beatrice were soon able to expand by taking over two neighbouring shops, and opening a sub post office as well as a branch in another part of the town. By the time that Margaret was born the family was already prosperous, but the household was conducted in a highly parsimonious manner, with no labour-saving devices and all the girls’ clothes being made by Beatrice, a skilled dressmaker. The frugality of their lifestyle was attributed to Alfred’s strong religious principles. A Wesleyan Methodist local preacher, and strict Sabbatarian, his daughters attended church four times each Sunday, and were discouraged from participating in frivolous entertainments. Alfred also became a leading local government figure in Grantham, being elected to the town council in 1927, reaching the aldermanic bench in 1943, and serving as Mayor in 1945–46. Originally a Liberal, he was elected as an Independent, which in Grantham as in many other small towns at that time, effectively meant Conservative.

Margaret’s most thorough biographer so far, John Campbell, casts doubt on whether she was quite so devoted a daughter to Alderman Roberts as she later claimed, pointing out that, after she left Grantham for good at the age of 18, she only returned on very rare occasions to visit her parents. (Nor, according to the political scientist, Sir Bernard Crick, was the alderman quite such an estimable character as she makes out. In 1997, he recounted in Punch magazine (21 June 1997) how he had been told by elderly Grantham residents that he had a reputation for paying low wages and groping his female shop assistants.) Nevertheless, Campbell identified in her three qualities which she clearly owed to her father’s precepts and example. First, he argues, it was he ‘who instilled in her the habit of hard work, as something both virtuous in itself and the route to self-advancement’. Second, he gave her a powerful impulse towards public service – ‘her restless belief in her duty to put the world to rights was only a projection on a wider stage of