

The composer and the cleric: a mystery solved

Dr John Morton (c.1420–1500) is a key person of interest for The Missing Princes Project.¹ One of the project's important questions is to attempt to understand Morton's apparent connection with Flanders,² in particular whether he may have had a family member residing there. Flanders, as we know, is a location that figures largely in the story of the disappearance, and possible re-emergence, of the sons of King Edward IV, the so-called 'princes in the Tower'. As a result, project members Julie Stafford in America and Nathalie Nijman-Bliekendaal in the Netherlands investigated the conjectured connection between Robert Morton, the composer, in Flanders, and Robert Morton, (Dr Morton's nephew), who became the bishop of Worcester. Their report is on the following pages. It is very encouraging for the project to be able to solve this particular mystery, and our grateful thanks go to Julie and Nathalie.

In the mid-fifteenth century an English composer, named Robert Morton (born around 1430) was musically active at the Burgundian court as a chaplain and singer in the chapel choir.³ While there he composed several famous works and well-known songs.⁴ During that same period another Robert Morton lived in England who would later, in 1486, become bishop of Worcester and who died in 1497. This Robert Morton was a nephew of Cardinal John Morton.⁵

It is sometimes considered that the composer Morton and the later bishop Morton may have been one and the same person. There seem to be good reasons for identifying the composer with the later bishop Robert Morton.⁶ This idea is prompted by the fact that in the very years that the composer Robert Morton was active at the Burgundian court – from 1457 to 1476 – there is no documentation whatsoever concerning the Robert Morton in England. From 1458, the year when he graduated as a Master of Arts at the University of Oxford, there is a conspicuous silence until 1478 without any known facts about his life and career during this period.⁷

It is also considered an intriguing coincidence that John Morton, an intimate of King Edward IV at the time, stayed at the Burgundian court from December 1474 to January 1475 as an English envoy. His stay there exactly overlapped with the final months of Robert Morton's tenure at the chapel choir of the Burgundian duke.⁸ This, it is thought, could indicate close (family) ties between the two men, which is not such a difficult leap, given the fact that the English composer disappeared from the Burgundian records from 1476 onward and in 1478 'the other' Robert Morton re-emerges in England after a long silence. This is the same year that this Robert Morton succeeds his uncle John Morton as canon of Salisbury Cathedral and St Paul's Cathedral in London, followed in 1479 by his appointment as Master of the Rolls at the court of King Edward IV. After the failed Buckingham Rebellion of 1483, Robert and his uncle John Morton fled to Burgundian Flanders together, after which they undertook a pilgrimage to Rome in early 1485.

It has long been assumed that the musician had died in 1476, because he was no longer mentioned in the payment rolls of the Burgundian duke and his position as chaplain had been taken over by someone else in that year. However, it turns out that the composer Morton did not die around 1476. Evidence from the Vatican archives shows that he was alive as late as 1479, since he resigned from the Dutch parish of Goutswaard-Koorndijk on 13 March 1479.⁹ In other literature we also find confirmation that the composer was alive for a considerable time after 1476 in the Burgundian Netherlands. In his book on the history of the diocese of 's-Hertogenbosch (1873), Schutjens notes that on 5 September 1472 one Robert Morton, 'who was chaplain of the Duke of Brabant', became a canon of Saint John (in 's-Hertogenbosch) until his death on 16 September 1483.¹⁰

Recently, the Dutch archivist and historian Lucas van

Dijck, who performed in-depth research in the archives of the Illustre Lieve Vrouwe Broederschap (Illustrious Brotherhood of Our Blessed Lady) in 's-Hertogenbosch, discovered that the composer was a member of this famous brotherhood.¹¹ Van Dijck's research in the accounts of the Brotherhood provided a lot of new information on the life of the composer Robert Morton.¹² He found out that Robert Morton, then mentioned as 'Roberto', moved to 's-Hertogenbosch at the end of 1459, where he first came into service of the Brotherhood as a singer. He received a 'welcome amount', a 'farewell amount' and a salary that was higher than his fellow singers. After June 1460 this 'Roberto' can no longer be traced in the accounts of the Brotherhood until 1482, where it is noted that Robert Morton has a seat at the fifth Brotherhood meal, shortly before 6 May or the feast day of Johannes ante portam Latinam.

Van Dijck writes: 'From 1481–1482 it is clear that Morton was a canon, but whether he became a member of the Brotherhood is not entirely certain. Probably it is, because otherwise he did not have to pay for the participation in the fifth Brotherhood meal. In the accounts of the Brotherhood he is called Lord, which means that he was a priest.'

The canon of Saint John and former chaplain and composer, Robert Morton, died in 's-Hertogenbosch on 16 September 1483. He is buried in St John's Cathedral in front of the chapel of the Brotherhood.¹³ He is registered on 16 September 1483 in the Obituarium of Saint John, a book where dead members of the parish were commemorated (see image 1). It says:

Dominus Robberti Morton canonici huius ecclesie Joannes capellanus fratris - 1 libri redemptor

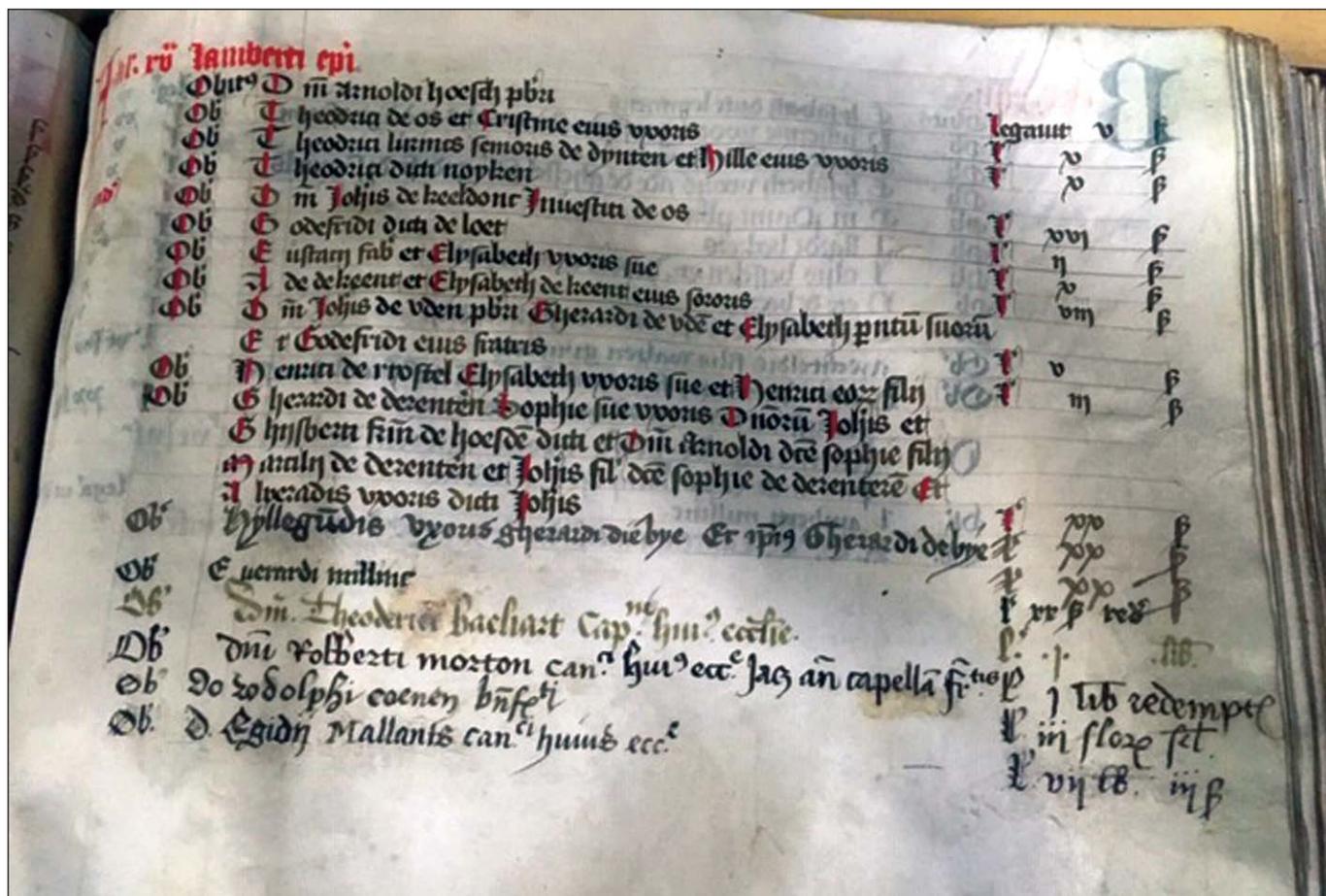
Translated in English: Sir (or Master) Robert Morton canon of this church [lies] in front of the Chapel of the Brotherhood. Free and released of debt.

Thanks to these new discoveries, we can now say with certainty that Robert Morton, the English composer at the Burgundian court, and Robert Morton, the later bishop of Worcester – although they shared the same name and lived their prominent lives in the same era – were two different persons.

Nathalie Nijman-Bliekendaal

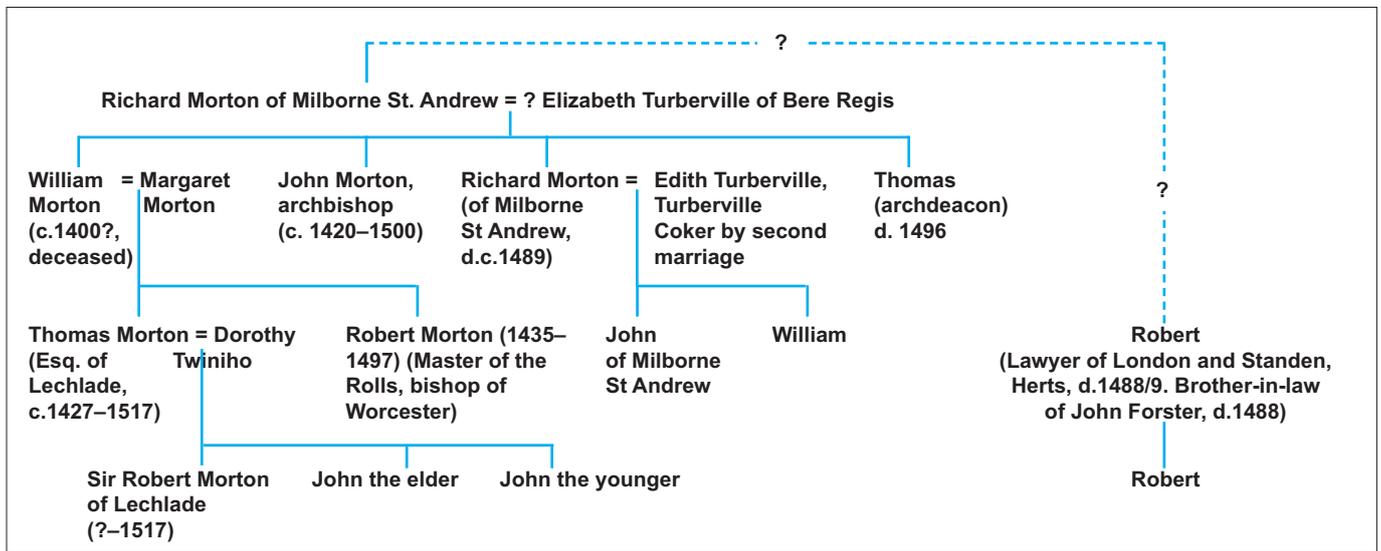
Acknowledgements

My special thanks go to Julie Stafford for her preparatory literature study and research on Robert Morton the composer. Her research made it easy to find evidence of Morton's life after 1476 and his death in 1483. For alerting us to van Dijck's research on Robert Morton's death, our thanks to Dr David Fallows. I am also grateful for the help I received from Laurens Ruzius (City Archive of 's-Hertogenbosch) and Leo Peters (Archivist of Saint John in 's-Hertogenbosch).



1. Obituary of St John with the registration of the death of 'robberti morton', third line from the bottom. Published with the kind permission of the City Archives of 's-Hertogenbosch (Afdeling Erfgoed Gemeente)
2. Page from a choirbook of the Illustre Lieve Vrouwe Broederschap with Gregorian Chants and Mass songs (c. 1500), Archive of the Illustre Lieve Vrouwe Broederschap in 's-Hertogenbosch (inv.nr 1232, 149) Brabants Historisch Informatie Centrum. Image in public domain





3. Dr John Morton’s family tree, adapted from *Ricardian Bulletin*, June 2018, p. 53. Includes a new line of cousins related to John Forster (Dr Morton’s co-conspirator on 13 June 1483)

Notes

- Betty I. Knott, ‘The will of John Morton, archbishop of Canterbury, c.1420–1500’, *Ricardian Bulletin* June 2018, pp 47–54.
- Following John Morton’s attainder and escape from the Tower of London in 1461, he joined the Lancastrian court in exile on the Continent. In 1469 he studied theology in Flanders at the University of Louvain. Following the defeat of ‘Buckingham’s Rebellion’ by Richard III in October 1483, Morton escaped across the Fens to Flanders. It is interesting to note that Morton did not head to Brittany (and Henry Tudor) at this time. Morton was in Rome by the end of January 1485. For John Morton, see: Christopher Harper-Bill, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (ODNB)*.
- Robert Morton, the composer, was employed by two Burgundian dukes: Philip the Good (1396–1467) and his son and successor Charles the Bold (1433–77). In 1468 Charles married Margaret of York, sister of Edward IV.
- Robert Morton, the composer, is perhaps best known for two of the most successful compositions of the period: *Le Souvenir de Vous Me Tue* and *N’Aray Je Jamais Mieux Que J’Ay*. He is also attributed with the earliest known setting of the tune *L’Homme Armé*. For Robert Morton, the composer, see: David Fallows, *ODNB* (24 September 2004). Also: Choral Wiki at: www0.cpd.org/wiki/index.php/Robert_Morton.
- Harper-Bill, *ODNB* (23 September 2004).
- Fallows, *ODNB*.
- Ibid.*
- Ibid.*
- P. M. Grijpink en C. P. M. Holtkamp, *Register op de parochieën, altaren, vicarieën en de bedienaars, zoals die voorkomen in de middeleeuwse rekeningen van den officiaal des aartsdiakens van den Utrechtsen Dom, VII, Zuydhollandia, Voorne en Putten* (1937), p. 108.
- L. H. C. Schutjes, *Geschiedenis van het Bisdom ‘s-Hertogenbosch*, deel 4 (1873), p. 245.
- The *Illustre Lieve Vrouwe Broederschap* was founded in 1318 and from then located in ‘s-Hertogenbosch, the domicile of the confraternity. Besides the veneration of Mary, the confraternity took care of the poor. The

brotherhood initially consisted of ‘sworn brothers’, who were all clergy. However, many outside members from all over Western Europe soon joined. Gatherings for meals and music in the *Zwanenbroedershuis* (Swanbrothers’ House) became increasingly important. As a result the *Broederschap* became a rich and leading organisation that still exists. A number of famous people were members of this confraternity, such as the painter Jheronimus Bosch (c. 1450–1516), and William, prince of Orange (1533–84). King Willem-Alexander of The Netherlands is also member. He bears the honorary title of ‘Royal Swanbrother’. See: www.zwanenbroedershuis.nl and www.sint-jan.nl.

- L. G. C. M. van Dijck, *Van vroomheid naar vriendschap’, Biografie van de Illustre Lieve Vrouwe Broederschap te ‘s-Hertogenbosch: 1318–2012* (2012), pp 560, 561.
- Obituarium van Sint Jan*, p. 273. City Archives of ‘s-Hertogenbosch (Afdeling Erfgoed Gemeente), since 2019 transferred to ‘the Brabants Historisch Informatie Centrum. See image 1.

4. Choir singers at the Burgundian Court, fifteenth century. Image in public domain.

