

CHANCELLOR GEORGE NEWSOM QC 1909-1992

The death of George Newsom on 14 February, a piquant Feast Day which would have amused him, very much marks the end of an era. Like Walter Wigglesworth and Garth Moore before him, he was truly learned in the ecclesiastical law and an acknowledged authority on the subject. We are indeed fortunate that he committed much of this learning and his practical wisdom built up over nearly 35 years as a diocesan chancellor to us in his highly regarded book, *Faculty Jurisdiction of the Church of England*, first published in 1988. As Archbishop Runcie commented in his Foreword: 'This book is an attempt, and in my opinion a most successful attempt, to make knowledge of the system and how it works readily available to those concerned or interested. It will, no doubt, become required reading and a ready source of reference for archdeacons and churchwardens as well as chancellors, bishops and archbishops'. He had nearly completed the preparation of the forthcoming second edition which, through the good offices of his son George, will shortly become available to all who study and practise ecclesiastical law. With the considerable changes in the law brought about by the Care of Churches and Ecclesiastical Jurisdiction Measure 1990, in the preparation of which Chancellor Newsom was heavily involved, this new edition will appear at an opportune time.

But lest it be thought by those who did not know him well that his legal interests and expertise were channelled solely into this one specialised field, it should be recorded that he obtained a 'First' in Jurisprudence at Oxford and was for many years a successful and highly esteemed member of the Chancery Bar, taking silk in 1956. He was the author of a well known book on the law relating to limitation, and co-author with C. H. S. Preston of the authoritative and standard text book on restrictive covenants, known generally as *Preston and Newsom*.

He also sat for ten years as deputy chairman of Quarter Sessions and later as a Recorder of the Crown Court, not far from his home in Wiltshire.

His other great affection in the law was for Lincoln's Inn of which he was for many years a Bencher, serving as Treasurer in 1980.

George had other interests too, a brief excursion into politics in the Liberal cause, a prodigious knowledge of wine – he had recently made a final progress through the vineyards of Burgundy – and gardening with his wife Margaret at his home at Bishop's Cannings.

But it is of course as a distinguished Chancellor of St. Albans, London, and Bath and Wells that most of those who read this Journal will remember him. He was responsible for many judgments which have profoundly affected the development of the law relating to the care of churches in the last thirty years.

As Deputy Dean of the Arches he laid down guidelines in *St. Gregory's Tredington* regarding the sale of church plate and other treasures and so helped prevent parishes from disposing of allegedly unwanted items of great antiquity without good cause. This proper attitude to conservation was matched by a willingness, where appropriate, to interpret ecclesiastical law in a way which made it applicable to the needs of the Church in the second half of the twentieth century. For example, his judgment in *St. Mary's Luton* enabled parishes to build extensions to their churches in disused burial grounds to provide hall accommodation which was much needed if the Church was to fulfil its mission. Further examples of his willingness to interpret the law liberally are to be found in cases

such as *Re Consecrated Land in Camomile Street* where he permitted part of certain funds accruing to a parish pursuant to a faculty to be diverted for the benefit of other parishes, and *St. Mary's Paddington* concerning the disposal of unwanted curtilage, to name but two.

Some of his judgments concerned not only interesting and difficult points of law but controversial and unusual subject matter, such as a proposed monument at *St. Luke's Chelsea* to those who suffered in the Katyn massacre, the Henry Moore altar in *St. Stephen's Walbrook*, and a tank for baptism by immersion in *St. Barnabas, West Kensington*. Many of his judgements have been noted in this Journal including a substantial extract from that concerning the coffee bar at *St. Mary-le-Bow*.

Newsom may have given the appearance of being a bit of a stickler as regards court procedure and the due observance of formalities, but his heart went out to those in the parishes with whom he had to deal and there is no doubt that he did all he could to help them forward the mission of the Church in the changing years through which he lived. He was, incidentally, as many will know, a firm supporter of the ordination of women.

To those of us who met him regularly as members of the Ecclesiastical Judges Association, as diocesan registrars and as fellow members of the Faculty Rule Committee, he was a charming, delightful and friendly companion, ready to be forward looking whilst keeping his feet firmly planted in the faith and order of the Church of England he so much loved.

He was a man of considerable wit and humour and always ready to lend a generous and attentive ear to those who wished to draw on his vast store of experience and practical wisdom in the field of ecclesiastical law.

He would have greatly merited the degree of doctor of civil law which the Archbishop of Canterbury has announced he intended to confer upon him and which he was only prevented from receiving by his untimely death.

He will be greatly missed.

M.B.G.