

# Death of Ian George Gill, CVO (1938-2017)

## Former Dover Town Clerk

Martyn Webster

The death on 15th December 2017 at the age of 79 was announced early this year (2018) of Ian Gill CVO, Dover's last Town Clerk under the old order whose office terminated in 1974 on the implementation of the Local Government Act 1972 and the abolition of the old Dover Borough Council. His town clerkship concluded the centuries old civic office that had been defined for Dover in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by three generations of the Knocker family. News of his passing was disseminated locally in Dover by an item in the Dover Mercury of 24th January 2018. His role between 1969 and 1974 had been responsibility for Dover's affairs, its Solicitor and Coroner, then Honorary Town Clerk to the Dover Charter Trustees until 1996, and as Registrar and Seneschal of the Cinque Ports between 1979 and 2005 all of which work was appreciable, and at times challenging, in the testing circumstances he had to take on at the outset. He was once described as the "impresario of Dover's greatest show".

Ian Gill, a solicitor by profession, first came to Dover in 1967, then aged 29, when appointed deputy town clerk to the formidable Town Clerk of the time, James A. Johnson (James A), who had held sway in office altogether for 21 years previously. It must have been no mean tutelage. On Mr Johnson's retirement in 1969 Ian Gill succeeded as Town Clerk, remaining in



office for the next five years and as such was one of the youngest town clerks in the country. In early 1979, although having left Dover by this time, he was called upon to take office as Registrar and Seneschal of the Cinque Ports upon the abrupt resignation from that age old title of James A. Johnson who, since 1949, had dominated its proceedings; Dover's town clerks traditionally holding

both posts. Ian Gill was thrown in at the deep end. For, at the time, preparations were in full swing for the Queen Mother's installation in the summer of 1979 as Lord Warden but had been put into dire jeopardy by Mr Johnson's sudden departure, caused by a more than prima donna spat of personalities between him and certain members of Dover District Council. It was all over the summary removal of Mr Johnson's nameplate as Cinque Ports Registrar and Seneschal from what was then the town clerk's office at New Bridge House. At the same time Mr Johnson had, it might now be said, almost rather spitefully at such a crucial moment, retrieved to his home in Bournemouth the Silver Oar from the Dover District Council offices, an item of Cinque Ports regalia, which he had purchased some years earlier and given on loan in 1968 after the theft of the original and other civic pieces from their safe at the old museum in Ladywell in 1966. The Silver Oar is the centuries old symbol of the Lord Warden's jurisdiction in Admiralty matters.

It therefore fell to Ian Gill and the Cinque Ports Federation to take over at the very shortest possible notice both the preparations, without the previous experience that Mr Johnson had had at his command, and the commission of a new silver oar required by the installation ceremonials. The new oar was hurriedly and skilfully made by Professor Gerald Benney, the Queen Mother's silversmith. This oar is in use to this day and paraded yearly at Speaker's Day (this year in Hastings on 29th September). The original is still lost and the fate of the retrieved replacement loan item unknown. In the event, at the time however, despite these trials and tribulations, the installation ceremony "Dover's greatest show" went ahead as planned on 1st August 1979 according to the ceremonial precedent set by Edward Knocker in 1861. It was all ably carried out with aplomb and distinction at the hands of Mr Gill, assisted by staff of Thanet District Council to which he was then Chief Executive, and the Cinque Ports Federation, almost as though nothing untoward had happened in the run-up.

Ian George Gill had been born on 20th February 1938 in Dumfries, Scotland, the son of a civil servant. It is believed that his background was not entirely Scottish however. A graduate of Durham University, he began his legal career as a trainee with Peterborough Council where, after qualifying, he became assistant solicitor to that council. He then moved on as senior assistant solicitor with Lincoln council where he was their senior assistant solicitor. He moved to Dover in 1967 from where in 1974, after local government reorganisation, he became chief executive of Thanet District Council. He still retained strong Dover associations however as honorary town clerk to the Dover Charter Trustees before the establishment of the current Dover Town Council in 1996

whereby the office of town clerk was reinstated. Apart from the installation of the Queen Mother as Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports and attending upon her thereafter in his full capacity as Registrar and Seneschal, he also presided over the installation ceremonials of her current successor, the Lord Boyce, at Dover in 2005.

He retired from office the following year. In recognition of his service to the Cinque Ports he was appointed first as a Lieutenant of the Royal Victorian Order and then promoted to a Commander of the Order. The photograph accompanying this obituary depicts Ian Gill (on the left) taken at a retirement dinner held in his honour, on 13th January 2006. It shows him being presented by the Lord Warden with a scroll signed by all the mayors and officers of the Cinque Ports. His term of office had been between 1st February 1979 and 21st October 2005.

Ian Gill had been in failing health for a decade, latterly at a nursing home in Beltinge, near Herne Bay. A widower, whose wife Gloria died in 2007, he leaves three children, the youngest of whom is Dovorian by birth. His funeral on 22nd January 2018 at St Andrew's church Broadstairs was attended by a number of his former colleagues from the Cinque Ports, including the current Lord Warden, the Speaker and Ian Russell, his successor and former joint solicitor colleague, the present Registrar and Seneschal. Ian Gill was buried in Margate cemetery. He had done good service for Dover in his various eminent capacities.

*I am indebted to Mr Ian Russell for his kind help to me in contributing to this obituary. Other detail has been culled from contemporary editions of the Dover Express, Dover Mercury and the public record.*