

# Dover's Town Clerks in the Aftermath of the Knockers (part 2)

## James A. Johnson (1908 – 1997): Town Clerk (1945 -1968)

— Martyn Webster —

After Samuel Loxton (1935-1944), next in the very distinguished long line of persons and families to hold the role of Town Clerk of Dover over the centuries there came an unexpected all-dominating personality who, it could well be said, stood out way above all others before him in an almost indescribable range of ways. Was Dover really ready for him at the time and realize what it was letting itself in for? Did Dover benefit by and from him in the long run? Was he a good choice? These are the questions we may well ask in hindsight, given his record. It is difficult to fairly balance the qualities of the man in a biographical account, such was the impact, not always benign, that this one controversial figure had on Dover's history in the twenty three years of his reign, autonomously and unchallenged, throughout the 1950s and 1960s.

He arrived on the scene in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War which had ravaged and weakened Dover so desperately, to the point that the very heart and soul of it had been knocked for six, both physically and in almost every other way. The damage was, in many cases, unrecoverable. Many of Dover's ancient buildings were lost during this era. The new Town Clerk often made himself unpopular, but he did not seem to care. Some found him dictatorial; he was loved by some and unloved, even feared, by many more yet,



James A. Johnson (1908-1997)

one way or the other, made a real name for himself locally, to his own eventual downfall. Although undoubtedly able and capable to a high degree, one of the unkinder epithets applied to him was that he was a Yorkshire tyke. It was as though he ran Dover single-handedly. This extraordinary man was James Alexander Johnson, who came to be known as "James A" or just "Jimmy".

James Alexander Johnson was born on 13th May 1908 at 67 Tivoli Place, Horton, Bradford, West Yorkshire, younger son and third child of George Ernest Johnson, police sergeant, later inspector, West Yorkshire Police, and his wife Emma, formerly Baker.

The family was unusual. His older brother, George Victor Johnson (1903-1974), was a clergyman who settled before the war in Albany, Western Australia, where he lived out his life. His sister Florrie(1906-2001), known pretentiously in social circles as Cecile, was bachelor James A's constant female companion, housekeeper and "reine chatelaine en charge" of their home at 28 Waterloo Mansions on Dover seafront.

On his first appointment in 1944, the *Dover Express* of 15th September in that year reported thus:

"...Mr Johnson who was educated at Grange High School, Bradford and Leeds University, and who was articted to the Town Clerk of Bradford and partly with a private firm in

London. He was admitted a solicitor in 1932, gaining First Class Honours and being third in order of merit in England and Wales. He was a Clifford's Inn prizeman and a Bradford and Wakefield prizeman. His first Local Government appointment followed, being Junior Assistant Solicitor at Bradford for a year. From 1933-1934 he was Assistant and Prosecuting Solicitor at South Shields, and for a year afterwards Deputy Town Clerk. For two years he was Deputy Town Clerk at Poole (Dorset) but returned to South Shields in 1937 where the salary was substantially increased. While at Poole, Mr Johnson has had considerable experience in many phases of Local Government work which are applicable to Dover."

In his twenty three years of office as Town Clerk and Borough Coroner at Dover, James A, courted controversy at almost every turn and proved to be of a litigious nature at any opportunity. Those who appeared before his coroner courts, and indeed reported upon them, were never in doubt what kind of experience they would be letting themselves in for and at what cost. It was as though he delighted in what seemed to be his overbearing, bullying stance. His fingers appeared to be almost in every pie and he a shadow looming behind all local government doings, in particular the immediate redevelopment of war-torn Dover. It has been said that his role in this determined largely what the town is today or, more to the point, what it is not. Others, rather than I, must be the best judges of this.

Was it therefore with tongue in cheek that the following account was written in the *Dover Express* on his retirement in 1969? :  
 "The Town Council was unanimous at its December 1968 meeting in deciding to admit the Town Clerk Mr James A Johnson, who is due to retire shortly, as an Honorary Freeman of the Borough. The town's appreciation of his services will be inscribed

on vellum and presented in a suitable casket during a ceremony later this year at which Mr Johnson will be admitted a Freeman. Alderman George Aslett said it gave him great pleasure to propose that Mr Johnson be admitted a Freeman and that the Corporation should put on record its appreciation of his eminent services as Town Clerk and in many other capacities. The proposal was seconded by the Mayor Councillor Harold Carr and supported by Alderman John Bushell, who referred to the efforts which he had made after the last war to put Dover back on its feet and of the part played by the Town Clerk in ensuring that Dover became the beautiful community it was today."

And so it was that in March 1969 the Freedom of the Borough of Dover was bestowed upon James A, before he and his sister Florrie (Cecile) retired in blurred glory to the bosky chimes of Bournemouth, where they were to see out the rest of their lives.

But Dover had not seen the last of him, for between 1969 and 1979 he carried on in his role as Registrar and Coroner of the Cinque Ports Federation, with a plaque announcing the fact at the door of New Bridge House, his former office of so many years, remaining there intact for another ten years as if to impose his continued presence on all in the town. He was, after all, one of the last Barons of the Cinque Ports, having first been appointed by the then Lord Warden Sir Winston Churchill, over whose installation in 1949 he had himself presided.

In this role he also presided over the installation in 1966 of Sir Winston's successor, former Australian Prime Minister Sir Robert Menzies, an appointment that might seem somewhat coincidental to the fact that James A had connexions to Australia, with his own clergyman brother resident there with their father who died there in 1952. A photo in the *Dover Express*

of 1st July 1966 shows a Menzies/Johnson quartet together outside 28 Waterloo Mansions, posing almost literally, the obvious question who was holding court to whom? James A and sister Cecile became firm friends with the Menzies calling upon them, and the reverse, when on their visits Down Under, in particular during a cruise on board the liner *Canberra* at Melbourne later in 1979, for which there is remarkable letter evidence in the archive.

He also had the ear of the Queen Mother herself, whose installation as Lord Warden in 1979 was very nearly scuppered by his own supreme vanity over a spat with Dover Corporation and certain councillors within it, over his name plate having been purposely removed from outside his former Town Clerk's offices at New Bridge House during the installation preliminaries. It seemed that there were those who had had quite enough of his local involvement, even after ten years' absence. The whole situation bore the petty, farcical hallmarks of a Gilbert & Sullivan opera. This was made all the more spiteful by the fact that, at that crucial time, he, James A, reclaimed the Cinque Ports' Silver Oar, a ceremonial piece of the Federation's regalia, which he had had made at his own expense in 1969 after the theft of the original from the Maison Dieu and, cunningly, only loaned to the Federation for its official usage.

The archives of Winchelsea Corporation, held at the Keep, the East Sussex Record Office in Brighton, hold unique, priceless minutes and verbatim notes, not available anywhere else, taken at the time of his resignation as Registrar of the Cinque Ports. They reveal a wave of compliments and recognitions of his service, yet tainted at the very same sessions by his vituperative response, and his perception of acts of vengeance made in Dover to his presence there for the Queen Mother's installation as

Lord Warden. No author in his wildest imagination could have invented such an imbroglio. In the event, luckily, all was supremely retrieved by the adroit work of Ian George Gill, James A's successor as Dover Town Clerk and Cinque Ports Registrar.

On his retirement in 1968 as Dover's last but one Town Clerk under the old order the *Dover Express* wrote very perceptively of him:

"Tall and stocky, he dressed inconspicuously, nearly always in a black or blue suit. Work was his hobby, along with travel. He often worked a 12-14 hour day, before taking a packed briefcase home for more study at his nearby flat."

"His final months in office (were) marred by a planning row at River which became known locally as the Cowper Road Gate Case."

This notorious case taken up by a local resident over an issue of right of way led to a County Court judgment which found that James A, who had by then retired any way, had been guilty of a serious abuse of the power which he had by virtue of his office. Such was the inglorious end to James A's rule over Dover.

As well as his Cinque Ports Baronial status until 1979, James A maintained links with Dover through his business interests in the White Cliffs Hotel. His name also lives on through the Dubris Trust, a scholarship he set up under his will to financially help boys and girls in Dover town schools leaving for university.

Terry Sutton, journalist with the *Dover Express* for 45 years before retiring as deputy editor and well known to us all, said recently, "The majority of those who disliked his attitude kept quiet about it. (He

told me once he had a writ in his pocket to serve on me. It was a joke). Few people in Dover, especially councillors, had the guts to stand up against Jimmy. But when they did, he respected them. One of the bequests he left to Dover was the centre in Maison Dieu Gardens, now Age Concern, a venture led by Jimmy and one-time mayor John Husk."

Terry also reported in 1969, "Those who knew Mr Johnson well remembered him as a very strong character. But he was also a man who, quietly, could be very kind and helpful."

James Alexander Johnson died on 23rd October 1997 aged 89 years at a nursing home in Canford Cliffs, Poole, Dorset. His will included, to his great credit, a number of very generous, kind bequests to a wide range of friends, but principally to his surviving sister, Florrie, otherwise Cecile, who survived him by four years. That same will

stated in clause 2: "I wish my body to be cremated privately with no flowers or mourning and no preceding service at any church nor any memorial service and my ashes to be scattered in Upper Wharfedale, Yorkshire."

What became of the second of the three Cinque Ports' Silver Oars is anyone's guess.

As to James A's successor as the last of Dover's Town Clerks, Ian George Gill,(1968-1974) my biographical account for him has already appeared in his obituary, published in *The Dover Society Newsletter* no.93 (November 2018), following his death in late 2017.

Thus, then, concludes my series on Dover's incredible Town Clerks 1860 - 1974. They are all truly unique both to our ancient town, port and Cinque Port of Dover and our country as a whole.

# River Dour Partnership

Deborah Gasking

The Dour was lucky this year in terms of benefitting from a wet winter, although water consumption went up in Dover, which is not ideal. The extremely wet month before summer prevented the lower stretches drying up or being reduced to a small stream. The river is flowing remarkably well for this time of year so, hopefully, this winter we will get the right kind of rain again (preferably at night)!

Kingfishers have successfully bred on the Dour and will be establishing their territories soon, so look out for a flash of blue along the whole length. Of course the tree colours are changing and the Dour will see more egrets and herons looking for an easy feed too. October is the last month

we are allowed to go in the Dour (unless with a permit) as the trout will start spawning November/December time.

Weekly tasks this year, have been done by smaller-sized groups of 3-5 volunteers to respect the Covid 19 guidelines. We have removed 64 bags of rubbish since August. Some of this rubbish has been in the river for well over a decade, which shows that, although we don't do a huge stretch at one time, we are getting just as much, if not more done. So a really massive achievement for those who care for our beloved river.

Well done to us volunteers!

# Return of the Unknown Warrior Centenary

Derek Leach

Every year in November, as Chairman of The Dover Society, I lay a wreath by a brass plaque in the former Marine Station, now Cruise Terminal 1. The plaque was the initiative of The Dover Society and was unveiled on 17 May 1997 by the then Chief of the Defence Staff, General Sir Charles Guthrie.

It marks the return home on 10 November 1920 of the remains of an unknown British soldier killed during the First World War. This November will be the centenary of that event and it was hoped to commemorate it in a special way, but that will not now be possible due to Covid-19.

The origins can be traced back to a Mobile Ambulance Unit formed in 1914 manned by civilian volunteers and led by Fabian Ware. Very soon, in addition to recovering the wounded from the front, they began recording the locations where those killed had been buried in haste. With rapidly increasing numbers, this soon became a full-time job and Fabian Ware was given the task of coordinating the work for the whole Western Front. He was given the honorary army rank of Major.

What was to happen to these bodies and remains? There was a demand from the rich for the bodies of loved ones to be returned to Britain, but Ware was adamant that everybody should receive equal treatment. If the poor could not afford the cost of repatriation, then all the bodies should remain near where they fell, in specially created cemeteries. Unidentified remains would be buried with the inscription 'An Unknown Soldier'. The missing with no known grave would be remembered on memorials in the

cemeteries and through special memorials like the Menin Gate, which bear 55,000 names of those missing around Ypres.

Whilst relatives, whose loved ones had been identified could, if they could afford it, visit the cemeteries abroad and grieve by a known grave, how were the relatives of those thousands with no known grave to have some sort of closure? The answer was to break that hard-and-fast rule of no-repatriation to bring back one unknown set of remains.

So it was that on 7 November 1920 the remains of one unknown Tommy from four different battlefields, Aisne, Arras, Somme and Ypres, were exhumed and taken to a temporary chapel, where they were wrapped in Union flags. There, a blindfolded senior British officer touched one of the bodies. That body, inside a plain coffin, was taken to Boulogne with sacks of soil dug from the spot where the soldier had died, so that the French earth that he had defended would cover the Warrior in Westminster Abbey.



*Inside Rail Van used for the Unknown Warrior,  
Capt Charles Fryatt and Nurse Edith Cavell*