

# James A. Johnson – A Note

Clyde Binfield

Mr Johnson, Town Clerk from 1945 to 1968 (Newsletter, No. 99, pp. 9-12), will have resonated with many older readers. It has prompted me to add some brush strokes in the hope of softening a few of Mr Webster's shades. I am conscious that my recollections have been distorted by time and by the fact that I was a boy taking care to listen unobserved to my grandparents' conversations about current municipal affairs; one learns so much when one is a fly on the wall.

My grandfather, Arthur T. Goodfellow (1879-1965), who first entered Dover Town Council in November 1930, was Mayor from November 1945 to May 1949. The first year of his mayoralty coincided, therefore, with the first full year of James A. Johnson's town clerkship. The two men developed a partnership of mutual respect and, I think, liking. My grandparents certainly admired the Town Clerk's ability and they were certainly aware of his foibles, which they probably attributed to his northern upbringing – Bradford, Leeds, and South Shields were as far then as they are now from Dover and the Cinque Ports, and his two years in Poole were neither here nor there. They were also aware of, and perhaps amused by, the dislike which he inspired in some Councillors. It was in these years, however, when James A. Johnson (always "James A." to my grandparents) was in his prime, that there was forged the spirit which resulted, for example, in the acquisition of Kearsney Abbey (regarded as the height of extravagance by many on the Council) and in the ambitious competition which issued in *The Gateway*. Thereafter the post-war mood of reconstruction faltered

and then dwindled away. Or so it might seem.

Perhaps this was the last decade when it really was something to be Dover's first and representative citizen (and in my grandfather's case, Dover's first Labour Mayor, a fact of which my grandparents were fiercely proud) and when it was something else again to be Dover's Town Clerk. Here was no mere Walmington-on-Sea.

To this I would add a more personal memory. As a boy I was addicted to civic events, among them the annual mayor-making. Who could resist that ritual combination of Council Chamber, red-robed Aldermen, black-robed Councillors, mace, mayoral chain, and speechifying? The speeches varied in quality. Some Council members spoke well. I think of Aldermen and Councillors Fish, Williams, John Bushell, Constable, and Eckhoff. I rank my grandfather with them. Their voices carried and their sentences joined up. Others were an embarrassment. I think of Aldermen Norman and Snelgrove, though the latter was so manifestly good-hearted. The dominant figure, however, holding the ritual together, making sense of it, was James A., with his crisp, dry, lawyer's drawl (or is the drawl a figment of my imagination?). It was certainly an accentless voice, with not a trace of Yorkshire.

Perhaps he had noticed that I was riveted, because he intimated to my grandfather – it must have been in 1956 or 1957 – that if ever I thought of Law as a career he would take me on as an articulated pupil and forgo the payment of a premium. It was a

notably generous offer and quite uncalled for, since beyond occasionally shaking hands and saying "How d'you do" I had never spoken to him, but it testifies to the generosity of the man who was to endow the Dubris Trust and whom Terry Sutton was to recall in 1969 as one who "quietly, could be very kind and helpful".

And yes, I had thought of Law as a possible career but James A. Johnson's offer was not taken up because in December 1957 I was awarded a scholarship to Emmanuel College, Cambridge. Any thought of Law turned rapidly into History and Law and even more rapidly into History on its own, which is where it has remained. I did, however, become a member of the college's flourishing Law Society and I have never ceased to be grateful that this

Town Clerk made that offer, and with such tact. It was a tremendous boost to a teenager's confidence.

A postscript might be in order: 1969 was when James A. Johnson received Dover's Honorary Freedom. Nearly eleven years earlier, on 15 May 1958, my grandfather had also been admitted as an Honorary Freeman of the Borough of Dover. I still have the oak casket which was presented to him. It contains the vellum record of the Council's resolution to convey that honour. It was proposed by the Mayor, Alderman Williams, a Conservative, and seconded by Councillor Eckhoff, who had been my grandfather's Deputy Mayor. And it was signed by James A. Johnson. Those two Freedoms testify to an honourable post-war partnership in civic responsibility.

## **Dover Society AGM Invitation**



The Dover Society are pleased to announce that they are streaming their Annual General Meeting on-line via Zoom on Monday 26th April 2021 at 7.00 p.m.

This will be a free event as usual and will be available for our Members to join. That said, the Event will be recorded and after the meeting will be available for ALL members of The Dover Society on their Web Site at:

<http://thedoversociety.co.uk>

To attend the Meeting we ask that you request a 'ticket' by email from Jeremy Cope at [jeremycop@willersley.plus.com](mailto:jeremycop@willersley.plus.com) by Friday 23rd April and you will be forwarded a link to The Dover Society Zoom AGM.

(It is recommended that you download the free Zoom App from their Web Site – just search for Zoom!)

The meeting will cover the last two years. See the Meeting Notice and Agenda on page 24 of this newsletter.