

OBITUARY

Sir Gavyn Arthur

Waltzing judge with a sense of duty and a passion for chocolate cake who became lord mayor of London and godfather to ten

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Sir Gavyn Arthur with the Queen in 2003

Asked to identify the toughest aspect of his role as lord mayor, Sir Gavyn Arthur claimed that it was hosting the annual Mansion House fancy dress party for 600 children. “There is no more demanding audience — and that includes the Court of Appeal.”

It was an amusing answer given that his job also involved having to smile for photographs as he shook hands with presidents Putin of Russia and Assad of Syria.

In reality, Arthur was a strong supporter of children’s charities, selecting Save the Children UK as the main beneficiary of his Lord Mayor’s Appeal. He was also an attentive godfather to his small army of godchildren, 10 of them altogether. He travelled a great deal and would always send them postcards, which amounted to hundreds over the years.

When he was sworn in as the 675th lord mayor of London in November 2002, the occasion was marked with a banquet and he made sure that his godchildren had pride of place — indeed he sat with them at a large round table in the middle of the Egyptian Hall at Mansion House.

In his speech that day the lord chancellor noted: “My lord mayor, this weekend you take over the governance of the City of London, one of the few places in the empire your family have not governed before.”

He was alluding to the reputation that the Arthur family enjoyed for having been “the backbone of colonial administration, with a habit of naming ports after themselves around the world”. In the first half of the 19th century, it should be explained, Arthur’s great-great-grandfather, Sir George Arthur, served as governor of Bombay, as well as lieutenant governor of Upper Canada and what is now Tasmania. During his time in Australia, he founded the notorious convict settlement of Port Arthur. Other members of the Arthur family fought and died at Lucknow, avenged General Gordon at the Battle of Omdurman in 1898, and ordered the start of the Zulu War. Sir Gavyn’s favourite hymn was I Vow to Thee My Country, which, perhaps not surprisingly, was written by a cousin of his, the diplomat Sir Cecil Spring-Rice.

He would always kneel at the foot of his bed at night to say his prayers

Arthur inherited from these illustrious forebears a profound sense of public duty. He was the first holder of the office of lord mayor to be a working barrister, and in assuming this demanding and unpaid role he walked away from a thriving family law practice.

“After so many years at the Bar, I needed a break,” he explained, “and there is such a thing as public service. There are more things in life than simply getting the cheque at the end of the week.”

The only surviving child of Major Leonard Arthur and his wife Raina, Gavyn Farr Arthur, was born in the KwaZulu-Natal district of South Africa in 1951. His father, known as Midge, worked for the Colonial Service and served at one stage as chairman of the Natal Provincial Assembly.

Arthur was educated at Harrow. On leaving the school he read jurisprudence at Christ Church, Oxford. There he made two lifelong friendships, with Alexander “Johnny” Dixon and Bernard Lever. All three would go on to join Middle Temple on the same day in 1975 and all ended up on the circuit bench. When they arrived at Oxford they compared notes about what they had done in their gap years: Dixon had worked as a navy on the A38; Lever had worked the night shift at a Kellogg’s factory; the eccentric Arthur had packed his tails and white tie and headed for Vienna, where he stayed as a paying guest in the house of Countess Esterházy. While there he learnt to waltz and developed a passion for Sachertorte, Viennese chocolate cake.

After a spell as a criminal lawyer, he switched to family law, focusing on financial matters and post-divorce arrangements in particular.

In 1991, he began a 16-year spell as an alderman for the Ward of Cripplegate. It suited his personality and he appreciated the opportunity it gave him to talk to, and spend time with, people who had lived lives much less privileged than his own. In 1998, he became sheriff of the City, a role that required him to live at the Old Bailey and open court proceedings each morning.



With President Assad in 2002

During his year as lord mayor, Arthur lobbied for the abolition of stamp duty on share dealings, which he saw as a disincentive to equity trading. While his predecessors tended to avoid the issue of corporate governance, Arthur was more than happy to air his views on the subject. Having already served as a recorder since 2002, he was appointed a circuit judge in 2007. The following year, he became a deputy high court judge in the family division.

A fine raconteur with a lively turn of phrase and a “full frontal” delivery, Arthur was much in demand as an after-dinner speaker. In 2014, to mark the centenary of the outbreak of the First World War, he gave a number of lectures on the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand.

He lived at the Barbican, remained a bachelor and enjoyed entertaining his wide circle of friends at his club, Brooks’s on St James’s.

He had a reputation for being a bit of a card. When he was lord mayor he once sat anonymously as a recorder in Derby and served all the judges their tea and coffee. At one point, as he was doing his waitery rounds, he delighted in hearing one of the judges say to another: “We have the lord mayor of the City of London sitting with us, and I have to take him to dinner with the lord-lieutenant.”

Though he had a commanding presence — he towered over Putin — Arthur also had a boyish face which seemed to suit his character and his penchant for what his friend Sir Bernard Lever characterised as “gallivanting and making mischief”. He was one of the few people Lever knew who managed to live out his youthful fantasy “to one day parade around London in a gold coach in fancy dress waving at his adoring public”. That said, “he was the only person of my generation I knew who knelt at the foot of his bed at night to say his prayers”.

Not only was Arthur in possession of a lofty intellect, he was also a fastidious man, a high-maintenance houseguest and, when it came to grammar, punctuation and etiquette, a notorious pedant.

Lever had two best men at his wedding, Arthur and Dixon. In his speech Arthur said, “Bernard says and thinks that he has two best men but you can’t have two best of anything. So I want to make it clear to you all that I am the best man, Johnny the better man.”

One of Arthur’s hobby horses was the iniquities of London’s transport system, something which as mayor he was powerless to tackle. He would, nevertheless, “shout about them as loudly as I could”, arguing that transport problems were damaging the capital’s reputation as a business hub and Europe’s leading financial centre. “I take the Tube every day of my working life and I’m delayed every day,” he told *The Times* in a tone of evident frustration. “It’s a simple journey that has become a monster.”

He was perhaps more effective in his legal career, as a campaigner for family justice. A note attached to some flowers delivered to court at Luton after his

death read: "HHJ Sir Gavyn Arthur, rest in peace. Thank you for giving me my children back. A dad."

Sir Gavyn Arthur, judge and lord mayor of London, was born on September 13, 1951. He died of an aortic aneurysm on May 16, 2016, aged 64