

1979 to 2004 - by SIR ALEXANDER GRAHAM, GBE

I was elected unopposed as Alderman of the Ward in 1979, succeeding Peter Theobald who sadly had to retire from ill health. I had been elected a Common Councilman for the Ward of Cheap in 1978 and stood for Queenhithe with the encouragement of several Aldermen including Sir Christopher Leaver and Sir Hugh Wontner. I was the first member of the Mercers Livery Company to become an Alderman for over two hundred years and the first Mercer to become Alderman of Queenhithe for over three hundred years. Almost the first thing that happened following my election was that the ward church St Nicholas Cole Abbey was declared redundant by the Church of England and the lease was taken up by the Free Church of Scotland (the Wee Frees). An inaugural service was held attended by former Rectors including one who had become a bishop. The service took me back to my childhood in Scotland where in the Free Church you stand up to pray and sit down to sing with out an organ. Like the Jewish faith they have a Presenter (Cantor) who starts the singing. On occasions when my mother was away from our village in Scotland I stayed with the Headmaster of the village school and went to similar services with very long sermons. The Free Church turned out to be very nice and the Minister of the time the Rev'd John Nicholls was my Chaplain when I was both Sheriff and Lord Mayor. At this time Queenhithe was the centre of the world fur trade with 83% of the world's fur being traded through the ward, sadly this has all disappeared. It was also the centre of the tea trade with the auctions being held in Sir John Lyon House. The Ward always thought that the hymn 'the Church is one foundation' with its final line 'one church, one faith, one lord' reflected Queenhithe with its, one church, one pub, one livery hall!

In the last twenty five years the ward has been largely rebuilt with even post war buildings being pulled down and rebuilt. A very encouraging development has been the increase in the number of residents through the conversion of warehouses and the building of new blocks of flats. As a result the ward is now one of the four residential wards of the City and will be preserved as such in the future. One result of this is that all the wards in the City have had their boundaries, which remained largely unaltered for hundreds of years, redrawn in order that the resident votes in those four ward are not swamped by the new business vote which gives companies and corporations etc votes according to the number of staff employed. As a result of this exercise Queenhithe lost St Nicholas Cole Abbey, now abandoned by the Presbyterians, and gained St Benets, the Welsh Church. We also gained the whole of the City of London School, but we had to fight to save the Painter-Stainers' Hall within the Ward, on balance I believe we gained. Ensuring that these changes were brought about to the benefit of the Ward was almost the last action I took before my retirement as Alderman. In addition the north end of the Millennium Bridge is situation in the ward so we have a constant stream of pedestrians walking through the ward towards either St Paul's Cathedral or the Tate Modern. The ward really does have a very interesting selection of buildings and is a hive of activity. Although we have lost some office blocks to reduce the size of the business vote in relations to the residential vote, I am glad to say that we have retained the International Headquarters of the Salvation Army. I doubt that the rebuilding has finished and something may well happen to Queens Quay House.

At the start of my time as Alderman of the Ward we had four Common Councilmen and at the end we had only two. These reductions were forced on the City by the Government of the day. Partly because of the fact that the City had the largest council of any borough, caused by the City's responsibilities which extend far beyond the City boundaries and the need to staff the many committees required to run the Corporation, something the government, I think, did not really understand.

I have been asked to say something of my year as Lord Mayor, 1990-91. It is difficult to convey adequately the excitement of being elected Lord Mayor, an enormous privilege to be able to serve the City and the country in such a capacity. Having had a very enjoyable year as Sheriff in 1986-87 I had some idea of the pressures and pace of the Mayoralty but even so it does take one by surprise. The preparations alone are very exacting as one has to plan the Show, the Banquet and the overseas trips which these days are a very important part of the job. One impression that will stay with me is the wonderful help one received from so many organisations, The Corporation of London. The Mansion House staff, the Ward Club, my Livery Company and many others, one is aware of a raft of goodwill. I was lucky with my two Sheriffs, Alderman Christopher Walford, who subsequently became Lord Mayor and John Taylor, both of whom have remained firm friends. The show is a magical day as the coach rumbles through the huge crowds who greet the new Lord Mayor with enthusiasm. My banquet on the following Monday was memorable as it was really Mrs (now Lady) Thatcher's last major public speech as Prime Minister. She was under enormous pressure to stand down in that capacity and she made a fighting speech on a cricket theme, where she was going to hit the opposition for six, unfortunately to no avail, a few days later Geoffrey Howe put in the boot in the Commons and she was on her way out.

Probably the most significant event of the year was the first Gulf War which started in January 1991 and was over very quickly. The government was very reluctant to celebrate the victory and said it was not prepared to have a victory parade. I pointed out that the City had been celebrating such occasions since the Battle of Crecy, when French prisoners were paraded through the City in chains, although we would not go that far today and if the government didn't want to we would arrange one. Eventually it was agreed that there would be a celebratory march with the Queen taking the salute at the Mansion House, involving representatives of all the units involved. I decided that rather than have the whole Royal Family which would have been a crowd we would invite the Queen, Prince Philip, The Prince and Princess of Wales, the Prime Minister and Mrs Thatcher, who had been in power at the declaration of war. We had invited all the bereaved families to watch the parade and the Royal Family each spoke to a number of them so that everyone had the chance to meet one of the royals. The parade was followed by a buffet lunch at the Guildhall for everyone involved attended by the Prince and Princess of Wales.

The overseas trips, as I have said, are a very important part of the job. I visited eleven countries on four major trips. The most important were Mexico, backing up a British Invisibles seminar and visit which resulted in 100 top business men visiting the City to find out about our financial services. To Chile where I took part in their celebration for the 450th anniversary of the City of Santiago, also helping to establish relations with the new democratically elected government following the Pinochet regime. To this end I had entertained President Ailwyn, a descendant of the City of London's first Mayor Henry FitzAilwyn, to a banquet in the Mansion House at the beginning of my year. Finally on this trip I went to Argentina with whom we had just re-opened diplomatic relations following the Falklands war and the British government wanted a senior non political figure to go and meet President Menem. Other trips included Europe and the Far East. In India an eye-opening visit to a slum in Mumbai, contrasted with the launch in the grand Victoria Memorial building in Calcutta of an appeal for the restoration of the famous paintings there. I was caught out not realising I was expected to speak. In desperation I looked around for inspiration and there at the top of the building was a mosaic of the Lord Mayor of London greeting Queen Victoria at the Temple Bar on the occasion of her Jubilee. It was a lifeline that gave me the theme to speak of the continuity of the relations between our two countries and that the pictures were a legacy from the days of the Empire. It is also important that the City keeps in touch with the domestic scene and to this end I visited 13 towns and cities in the UK.

Throughout the year the daily programme ranges from some 80 plus livery dinners, visits to major City institutions, opening railway stations and new buildings to an incredible variety of other occasions, too many to mention here but certainly a lunch and dinner every day. I found that many of the small events more fulfilling than the large ones possible because they were more intimate and one had more time to get to know people.

It would be impossible, in my view, to have a fully satisfying and productive year without the help of a Lady Mayoress. Carolyn proved to be an inspiration with her ability to get on with people in all walks of life, from the poorest of Indians to the great and good of the various countries we visited and of course with the staff of the Mansion House.

To have had the privilege of serving as Alderman of Queenhithe and Lord Mayor is something not given to many and I can say that it was the most satisfying, if most hectic year of my life. When I look back I realise how many fond memories I have of so many occasions. The City has preserved its integrity and customs for many centuries and adapted when necessary without losing the continuity which is part of its strength, long may it continue.