

The Rt. Hon. Baroness Heather Carol Hallett DBE PC, Mrs Wilkinson
(Jurisprudence, 1968)

Profile by Veronica Lowe (Modern History, 1969)



Following her retirement in October 2019 as Vice-President of the Court of Appeal Criminal Division, the Rt. Hon. Lady Justice Hallett DBE was created Baroness Hallett of Rye in the County of East Sussex in the Prime Minister's Resignation Honours List. She sits as a cross-bencher in the House of Lords.

Born on 16 December 1949 and educated at Brockenhurst Grammar School, Baroness Hallett read Jurisprudence at St Hugh's. She later expressed gratitude to St Hugh's for "taking a chance on her" despite the discouragement of her school. Her choice of Law and then ultimately Criminal Law as a career was inspired by reading the legal biographies and case-books collected by her police officer father. She has also commented that her close-knit and supportive family inspired her to believe that she could do anything she set her mind to do, and "they were nearly right".

Perhaps Baroness Hallett was referring there in her retirement speech to the fact that she did not become Lord Chief Justice as had widely been anticipated, but in every other way, her career has been one of outstanding success. That is not simply in her attainment of high judicial office but in serving as a role model for women seeking a career in Law, and in championing the widest-possible diversity among practising lawyers and in judicial appointments.

Her career has indeed been a roll-call of offices in which she was the first female occupant. At the start however, she was called to the Bar (Inner Temple) in 1972. According to an interview given in 1998 when she became the first female Chairman of the Bar Council, her choice of the Bar for a career was somewhat influenced by dismal teenage work experience in a solicitors' office "stuffing envelopes" in the Probate Department. Indeed, her early practice provided the more interesting fare of defending alleged armed robbers and serial killers.

Baroness Hallett had met her husband Nigel Wilkinson QC at Oxford when they sat next to each other at a law lecture. She obviously made an impression on him as he recounted on her retirement that she had been long-haired and wearing hot pants but the subject of the lecture completely eluded him. Significantly, it was he who encouraged her to apply to take Silk in 1989. She was amongst the youngest in that intake of QCs, and one of only 6 women. She was appointed a Crown Court Recorder in 1989, and was elected a Bencher of Inner Temple in 1993, becoming its Treasurer (leader of the executive council of Benchers) in 2011. In 1995 she became a deputy High Court Judge. She was elected as the first female Leader of the South Eastern Circuit between 1995 and 1997. It was the largest of the 6

Circuits of the Bar whose function was to make representations to the government on issues affecting barristers, and to promote professional training and mentoring. Social organisation was on the agenda too. She was also Director of Public Affairs for the Bar Council.

In 1997 as Heather Hallett QC she became deputy Chairman of the Bar Council succeeding as Chairman in 1998. On being described in the manner of the times as a working mother of 2, and a grammar school girl made good, she questioned with her blend of humorous acuity whether a male Chairman would have been described as such.

Her year as the first female Chairman of the Bar was rendered difficult not by any overt sexism towards a popular female QC with a strong background in criminal law but by troubled times for the Bar itself. There were relentless media attacks on so-called “fat cat” lawyers; strained relations with the Law Society (the solicitors’ professional body also experiencing a period of turbulence); and proposed swingeing cuts to the Legal Aid budget which would affect not only the livelihood of many junior members of the Bar but access to justice itself. A diplomatic if effective line had to be pursued as it was the incumbent Lord Chancellor who had first referred to “fat cats” and promoted the Legal Aid cuts.

It was a golden opportunity for the Bar that their Chairman was able to present a genuinely different image to that in the popular imagination of either a benign but crumpled “Rumpole of The Bailey” or a well-tailored leech whose standard of living was paid for by the Legal Aid budget. Indeed, Heather Hallett QC challenged the editor of a national newspaper pontificating about “fat cat” lawyers to examine the accounts of a publicly-funded lawyer – her own.

As Chairman, she emphasised that careers at the Bar were for people from all social backgrounds including non-traditional ones like her own, and that having family responsibilities not only should be acknowledged as an integral part of a professional career but helped to keep one’s feet on the ground. In engaging with the government on more transparent fee arrangements and on Legal Aid, and seeking a rapprochement with the Law Society, she was widely credited with healing rifts as well as giving the Bar as a whole a more relevant image.

In July 1999 Heather Hallett QC became a Dame Commander of the British Empire, and a full-time judge in the Queen’s Bench Division of the High Court. St Hugh’s made her an Honorary Fellow in October 1999 in recognition of her distinguished career so far, including becoming the College’s first High Court judge. She became a Presiding Judge of the Western Circuit, responsible for supervising the work of the local judiciary, and was acclaimed for putting a stop to a bizarre plan to hive off Winchester from the Western Circuit to join Norwich and Ipswich in the South Eastern Circuit.

The turn of the millennium marked further career achievements. After spending 6 years in the High Court covering both civil and criminal jurisdiction, although often sitting on the most difficult and high-profile criminal cases, Dame Heather as she then was, was appointed to the Court of Appeal in 2005. She was the fifth woman to be appointed to sit in the Court of Appeal.

As was noted by the Lord Chief Justice on her retirement, not only was she responsible for many of the major decisions in the Court of Appeal Criminal Division but took on roles designed to improve the functioning of the judiciary. These included being an inaugural Commissioner of the Judicial Appointments Commission in 2006 and its Vice Chairman from 2007 to 2010; from 2010 a member of the Judicial Executive Board responsible for supporting the leadership functions of the Lord Chief Justice, in particular as Lead Diversity Judge; Chairman of the Judicial College from 2010 to 2014, responsible for judicial training; and from 2013 Chair of the Judicial Diversity Committee.

Whilst it sounds as if Lady Justice Hallett's time was fully taken up with these crucial administrative and management roles, she was also appointed as Vice-President of the Queen's Bench Division in October 2011 for a 4 year term, and Vice-President of the Court of Appeal Criminal Division in November 2013.

However, perhaps the first glimpse the general public had of Lady Justice Hallett (other than across a courtroom) was in the Press reports of when she received a special appointment as Inner West London Coroner for the inquests of the 52 victims of the "7/7" 2005 London bombings. The harrowing hearings took place over 5 months in 2009, and she expressed herself as humbled by the courage and dignity of the bereaved, survivors and the emergency services.

The final inquest reports were completed in May 2011 on time despite the tight schedule, and the Coroner was credited with being tough and decisive in making evidence-based criticisms of the Security and Emergency Services, with sensible recommendations for improvements. On the other hand, she showed great sensitivity in handling the hearings, in having the names of the victims read out at the closing session, and confining the upsetting detail of their individual deaths to written records. A Coroner was not then legally able to ascribe criminal liability but could make a later report of recommendations to prevent future risk. Having obtained the Lord Chancellor's permission to publish such recommendations at the same time as the inquest findings, Lady Justice Hallett as Coroner was able to name the 4 suicide bombers as the murderers.

A second glimpse behind the red-robed façade was being nominated in February 2013 as the eighth most powerful woman in England by "Women's Hour" in its Power List. The Rt. Hon. Lady Justice Hallett came after Baroness Hale of Richmond at no. 4 but before Lady Justice Arden.

On a more serious note, she was appointed by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland in March 2014 to conduct the independent review of the administrative scheme by which "letters of assurance" of non-prosecution had been provided as part of the peace process to those known as the "on the runs" (OTRs), suspected of serious terrorist crimes during the Troubles. As with the "7/7" inquests, Lady Justice Hallett was praised for the sensitivity and aplomb with which she undertook this difficult task. Her conclusion was that the scheme had been lawful but had systemic failures in its operation.

In April 2019 she was appointed as the Chair of the Security Vetting Appeals Panel, and in August 2019, to conduct individual fatality investigations at the request of the Ministry of Defence for example, an investigation into Iraqi civilian deaths during the Iraq war.

Baroness Hallett will preside as Coroner over the inquest into the death in July 2018 of Dawn Sturgess, a victim of the Salisbury Novichok poisoning aimed at assassinating former Russian spy Sergei Skripal. Ms Sturgess's family successfully challenged by judicial review the previous coroner's intention to limit the scope of the inquest. Owing to the national public interest in the Salisbury poisonings, and the clear risk which had been posed to innocent residents of the Salisbury area, Baroness Hallett has promised "a fair, fearless and thorough investigation" which would address public fears and suspicions about the circumstances of Ms Sturgess's death including who brought the Novichok to the UK and who directed the poisoners.

The high profile and sombre nature of Baroness Hallett's recent judicial roles should not overshadow her commitment throughout her professional life to encouraging gender balance and social mobility at the Bar with practical schemes to foster talent, delivering measurable results. The issue of promoting diversity has been the thread through all of Baroness Hallett's executive roles in the judiciary.

On International Women's Day 2021 she described the discrimination which female lawyers experienced during the 1970s and 80s, whether an assumption that a woman would put having a family first, or indeed that family law must be what a woman wanted and was fitted to do. She frankly explained that she did not complain because you were instantly marked as a troublemaker, so she decided to play a serious role in Bar politics in order to achieve change.

Huge strides had been made in raising awareness of discrimination and unconscious bias, and in providing mentoring and advice networks. The importance of diversity and inclusion was to ensure that parties to a case could see that lawyers and judges came from similar backgrounds to them and indeed looked a bit more like them. That effort started in outreach to schools and communities, and also in tackling the lazy stereotypes of judges still offered in some parts of the media over 20 years after she was tackling them herself as the first female Chairman of the Bar Council.

Baroness Hallett continues to defy any stereotype.