

## A BIOGRAPHY OF HAROLD JOHN RAMSBOTHAM

### During his residence in Lyme Regis

Derek Perrey, 2010

Introduction by Graham Davies



Hillman & Bond was a firm of solicitors in Broad Street, Lyme Regis from the late 1890s to 1946. The Lyme Regis Museum Research team has been given the opportunity to read many of their copy letter books covering this period. Harold John Ramsbotham was the firm's sole solicitor for over 30 years, and because of his professional work and municipal duties he would have been an important member of the community. Yet, little seems to have been written about him. It was therefore a good opportunity for me to ask Derek Perrey, a member of the team and retired solicitor, to write a short biography of H J Ramsbotham, based on our studies of the copy letters together with further researches carried out by Derek and myself.

**HAROLD JOHN RAMSBOTHAM** was Town Clerk of Lyme Regis from 1912 until late 1934 and Clerk to the Magistrates from 1916 until 1945 and sole principal of the firm of Hillman & Bond from 1912 until 1946. He was born in September 1883 in Godalming or Guildford, Surrey and died in the same area in 1956 aged 73. His father was Francis S. Ramsbotham, a Yorkshireman from Huddersfield who died in 1920 and was survived by his widow, Harold's mother, Isabella H, born in 1859 in London Middlesex, died in 1937. The Children of the marriage were chronologically, Mary I, born 1878 and died 1962, Edward F S, born 1882 and died 1974, then Harold and lastly Hilda, born in 1889 and died in 1954. Francis was a Church of England clergyman and a schoolmaster with his own boarding school in Hindhead Road, Godalming. The 1901 census reveals that all the family lived there at the time with 37 boarding pupils and 9 servants, one of whom was male. It may be assumed that Harold was educated at the school and by his father, as he was later to declare that he had spent the first 26 years of his life in the Guildford area. Harold was not very sporty because he declared later that singles tennis was for the under 25s, which may mean that he was a tennis player until he left Godalming.

There is no direct evidence as to when Harold qualified as a solicitor, but when he applied for the post of Borough Clerk at Lyme Regis, a letter of reference referred to him having 5 years' experience. This would mean that he qualified at the age of 23, which would mean taking his articles at 18 having completed his schooling. The same letter refers to his "degree" but this is probably a reference to his professional degree as a solicitor rather than a university degree. It is very doubtful that in those days he would have been permitted sufficient time off to have travelled up to London to take a degree course over 3 years. A sample of his letter heading for his practice shows him as a solicitor and commissioner

for oaths, but does not mention any university degree. In the circumstances very strong negative evidence that he had not taken one which, in those times, was usual for solicitors as it would have normally have taken 8 years to become a solicitor. If his statement that he spent his first 26 years in Godalming is to be taken literally, then his articles would have been served in or around Guildford. It is, of course, possible for him to have commuted to London, but unlikely as the vicar would not only have had to have fed and housed him and paid for his articles but also for his train fares and food in London. In 1911 Harold was living in a two roomed apartment at 20 Gayton Road, Hampstead, and had qualified as a solicitor and occupied the position of a solicitor's managing clerk. There is no trace of his ever having been married.

In 1911 he acquired the practice of Hillman and Bond in Lyme Regis at No 10 Broad Street and lived "over the shop" for some time. Details of the transaction are not available, but the reason for Mr. (Major) Bond selling was that he was in very poor health and died not long after the sale. Mr. Bond was also the Borough Clerk. The practice was a small general provincial practice with no magistrates Courts work and very little High Court or County Court litigation, other than debt collection. The principal source of income was conveyancing and probate work. A Mr. Long was the clerk and was taken over with the practice, where he stayed until Harold's retirement. He lived in Dorset House next door to the practice which was owned by Harold. Mr. Long was plainly an important element of the practice and provided continuity. Harold also owned No 8 Cobb Road in the 1920's and his housekeeper Miss Annie Clark lived there for some years. From 1927, or maybe earlier, they lived at Sunnyfield Cottage, Hays Lane.

Early in 1916 Harold acquired the practice in Lyme Regis of Mr. J.W. Johnstone who was then Clerk to the Justices with Harold as his assistant. Part of the terms of sale was that the price payable would be increased if the public offices held by Mr. Johnstone were gained by Harold. Mr. Johnstone's departure for East Africa somewhat hastened the completion of the transaction.

Conscription into the armed services was introduced in the first quarter of 1916 from which Harold was exempted as being Town Clerk. Harold was appointed to the post of Clerk to the Magistrates on June 14<sup>th</sup> 1916.

Harold held a number of public positions, not all of which would have had any remuneration attached; among them were the secretary to the Lyme RNLI for 12 years culminating in February 1925 when he was presented with an address on vellum in appreciation: clerk to the board for exemption of service, secretary and trustee of the Burrigge Charity for the poor, Clerk to the OAP sub-committee, (which determined the amount payable to the elderly in need), Clerk to the Harbour Trustees and the Borough representative to Southampton University. (He attended only once and resigned in 1932.)

When Harold resigned as Town Clerk he is reported as attributing it to wishing to concentrate more on his solicitor's practice, but that he had no intention of resigning from any other post held by him. "Mr. H J Ramsbotham stepped down after 22 years as Town Clerk, to be replaced by Mr. Fiennes Trotman (31), who was a partner with his father in the firm of Kitson & Trotman, solicitors, Beaminster. The firm had an office in Lyme Regis." There was never any evidence of a burning desire to build up the practice. He never took on a partner and it would in any case probably have been necessary to open an office in another town as the population of Lyme Regis was not large enough for a sizeable practice.

The income of the practice was boosted by acting in the role of estate agent and manager, collecting rents, paying dues including tithes and rent charges, arranging for repairs, keeping clients apprised of properties coming up for sale that might interest them and suggesting mortgages for which they might become sources of finance. Another form of income was derived from being an insurance agent. This included arranging insurances on properties and their contents but also on farm stock and hay ricks

The practice was located at 10 Broad Street until the premises were divided and the practice remained to occupy the part then to be known as 10A Broad Street. Going through the front door into a hall, the waiting room was to the left, with the solicitor's room to the rear, lit by a skylight. A staircase to the left led to the first floor; Iris's office to the left & Mr. Long's to the right. Roper & Roper, Bridport, took over the

practice from H J Ramsbotham. (Memories of Iris Warren who worked at the solicitors from 1945 until she retired in 1981.) Also remembered by Iris Warren was Harold's physical appearance:" Iris describes him as being about 5ft 10in, well-built and on the stout side. He wore rimless glasses and was going bald. He wore dark suits to work, either grey or navy. He had a stick and walked to work from Sunnyfield Cottage, Haye Lane to work. As he passed No 34 Silver Street, where Iris lived with her parents, she often heard him saying good morning to people, and she thought, "That's my boss going to work". She thinks he wore a cloth cap on his head. He was strict, a bit of a blusterer, but nice to work for, and was probably shy and reserved. He lived at Sunnyfield Cottage, Haye Lane, and Miss Annie Clarke was his long time housekeeper." *(In those times people were not always able to dress exactly as they wished. There was a shortage of almost everything and clothing was CC41 economy style and on coupons to limit the quantity one could buy)*

Judging his character from his correspondence is probably not reliable but professionally he was very concerned to be in the right and failed to exercise tact or diplomacy when it might have paid to do so when faced with an alternative point of view. It should be said that he was usually in the right. He seemed to have a particular antipathy towards tax collectors. Bearing in mind that with only 5 years' experience at the level of managing clerk, he had become associated with and advisor to important people in the community, it is hardly surprising that he was defensive of his professional standing and it is noticeable that the correspondence never shows aggression to fellow solicitors when in dispute with them. Clients who suggested that he was in any way incorrect were tongue-lashed and told to go elsewhere or grovel. In later years he mellowed (more secure?) and frequently strove to achieve compromise between parties at loggerheads.

His own entrepreneurial activities included advancing money on security including for Court proceedings, and buying and selling property. He invested in equities and Government securities and advised his mother in this respect.

Harold John Ramsbotham retired in 1946 and left Lyme Regis.