

Peter Gorton Baker (1973 - 1983)



1970s
C-Type print
46 x 36cm

Peter Baker was born in 1920 and was educated at Victoria College. His family's business was an old Jersey company, Frederick Baker and Sons, who owned a department store and some shops in the Town centre. This was partially the reason he left Jersey, in 1936, to undertake a business studies programme for students at Harrods. In an interview for the radio in the early 1980s Mr Baker said that before the outbreak of war, because of his love of the sea, he had been planning to join the Royal Naval reserves. However he and his friends joined the Territorial Army in London “almost by accident” as they hadn't expected war to break out. Nevertheless he went in to the Army as a Private and came out with the rank of Major.

A Museum in France exhibits the uniform and boots of Mr Baker because, as a leader of a pathfinder unit, he was the first soldier from the Allied forces to set foot in the occupied territory. Returning to Jersey after the Liberation he said the Island was a strange contrast to what he had known before.

However he joined the family business, becoming joint Managing Director and Chairman, before the company was sold.

Mr Baker was President of the Jersey Chamber of Commerce between 1966 and 1968. His first attempt to enter Island political life was in 1968 when he narrowly lost the Constable election to Keith Baal by 107 votes. However after this defeat he continued to serve on the St Helier Welfare Board and began working on the Maison de Ville and Westmount Day Nursery projects. In 1973, after the death of Mr Baal, Mr Baker put his name forward again for Constable because of the enthusiasm of his fellow Welfare Board members.

This election saw two men successfully put their name forward for Constable, the other candidate was Senator Don Filleul, although to begin with six different candidates were expected to stand. Mr Baker won the election and was sworn in on September 20, his time was marked by a certain dignity and pride that he put into the role, which he successfully continued for three full terms.

Whilst he was in office Mr Baker supported the plans for the pedestrianisation of the Town centre. After a successful trial period the main streets were paved over in stages between 1976 and 1979. Features like the King Street apple crusher, installed in April 1978, were designed to give the shopping precinct a nicer atmosphere for its users. Mr Baker later commented on the success of this scheme, saying how the loss of the roads could not have been possible without the completion of the Fort Regent Tunnel. However despite these improvements, in 1979, the Constable stated that St Helier was “a traffic slum”. He was a strong supporter of the idea of a second tunnel underneath the Fort and was keen to stop the building of a block of flats on Pier Road, which would sit directly above the proposed route, however his efforts ultimately failed.

In early 1978 the Town streets were being smartened up for a visit by the Queen. In March a new cross at Charring Cross was unveiled by Mr Baker. The work was designed to commemorate the Queen’s Silver Jubilee in 1977, depicting several important images to the Parish and the Island, it was the only feature to be added to the Town since the Cenotaph in 1923.

The cross was then officially dedicated on the Queen’s visit to Jersey in May (see photo).

Mr Baker’s approach to the Constablenesship was highly influenced by the fact he was from a business background but he was still a strong supporter of the honorary system. He admitted that the role was nothing like he had expected when he took it on, he told the JEP;

“People often ask me now if I am enjoying being Constable. I suppose in a way I must be enjoying it, but my answer is that the job is so demanding that you can’t say until you have finished. The pleasure will come when you have finished and you can look back and feel that you have done a good job. While you are actually doing the job it can be a bit lonely”.

In 1979 a deputation met at the Town Hall to persuade Mr Baker to stand for a third term. The Constable was wary of spending too long in the post, he said that standing again would be a “privilege”, but he was more than aware of the need for “new blood” in such an important position. His proposer, Leslie Sinel, said of him; *“During his term of office Mr Baker has shown initiative, dignity, and a sense of public responsibility. He has definitely raised the prestige of the parish to a new level”.* It was a widely held view that his was *“a parochial career which has been so brilliantly undertaken”.* Mr Baker was re-elected un-opposed for a third and final time when, at the end of his term, he would be the longest serving Constable since Harry Grant.

In 1982 Mr Baker placed the roll of honour for the Second World War in the sarcophagus on top of the Cenotaph before it was sealed. He was also greatly involved in orchestrating the Town’s twinning with Avranches in 1983. In July 1983, after he had retired as Constable, Mr Baker opened the new Welfare Offices in Seale Street as he had been involved in the purchase and reconstruction of the building.

Mr Baker decided to step down after nearly ten years as Constable, as he was wary of longlived reigns and felt that it was better to step down while he was still doing a fine job, rather than to be pushed out when he had long ceased to do good for the Parish.

His last public duty as Constable was on Feb 1, 1983, where he planted a tree in the Parade Gardens.

Nevertheless Mr Baker had no plans to remove himself from the wider public scene and was sworn in as a Jurat on March 28 when, the Island's Bailiff, Sir Frank Ereaut described him as a "very fine ambassador" who displayed dignity, vigour and compassion in his role as father of the Parish of St Helier.

After his death in 1989, the Very Rev. Canon Tom Goss wrote a public letter to the paper, praising Mr Baker and his "amiable authority". He declared that Mr Baker was;

"a natural leader who had the priceless gift of inspiring those around him with his own enthusiasm and efficiency. People felt they were working with him rather than just for him, and found it a pleasure and a privilege. No wonder he was so universally popular" (27/9/89)

The new Constable, Mr Fred Clarke, said that his predecessor "was always interested in traffic and parking problems, trying to balance the need of the trader delivering, the commuter working, the shopper bringing commerce to the town, and the residents of the town". Mr Baker was definitely one of the most popular Constables of recent times and he was one that was deeply mourned by the whole community.



Fred P.W. Clarke
1980's
C-Type print
47 x 37cm