

Originals

With more than three decades of helping to administer justice in Great Yarmouth, Violet Bell was proud to be the town's longest-serving magistrate before her retirement. Reporter **GERALDINE SCOTT** finds out more about why she got involved as a magistrate and about her lifelong passion for the borough

Violet Bell has always been a Gorleston girl. Even when she was evacuated during the Second World War it wasn't long before she

was back, returning to her hometown before the war finished.

"I just love Gorleston, I couldn't imagine living anywhere else," she said. And it's this passion for the town and the surrounding area which has kept her involved in community life for so long.

Mrs Bell, who grew up in Nelson Road, may not have relished her school years – she described them as "bearable" – but education became important to her in other ways when she sat on the board of governors of many schools in Gorleston, including her former secondary school, Alderman Leach, where she was deputy chairman when it closed in 1982.

"School was different back in the war to what it is now," said Mrs Bell, 81, "Being brought up in wartime was completely different.

"But I found being on the governors very interesting, especially in the schools with younger children.

"I remember being very upset that I had to stay at school for an extra year when the school leaving age changed to 15 in 1944, I wanted to get out there and earn money."

When Mrs Bell did leave school in 1945, she started working at Johnson's sewing factory, making shirts and other items of clothing.

"I enjoyed the camaraderie with the girls there," she said. "It was great fun."

It was while out with the girls, dancing at the Floral Hall [now the Ocean Room], that Mrs Bell met her husband, Gordon. "It was the place to go," she said. "I think most people met their husbands there." They married in 1954 and a year later Mrs Bell was pregnant with son Norman, born in 1956.

Mrs Bell spent some years at home caring for Norman, while Mr Bell worked at a local scrapyard before becoming self-employed.

He also volunteered for the Gorleston lifeboat service. "People couldn't do what he did now, he



■ Violet Bell outside Great Yarmouth Magistrates' courthouse.
Picture: JAMES BASS

Violet reflects on 36 years on the bench

could do everything," said Mrs Bell.

Mr Bell died in 1996, but not before he saw his wife flourish in her role as a magistrate. "He was supportive, but cautious," she said. "He didn't want me to overwhelm myself."

Mrs Bell was approached to be a magistrate in 1968, and to this day doesn't know who put her name forward, as the advisory board which selects new magistrates was private at that time. Nowadays, you are able to see who sits on the board.

"I told the gentleman that I knew nothing about the law, but he said it was more important to be sensible and have local knowledge.

“It's an honour to become a magistrate, it's a duty, you're helping people, and you're representing the Queen

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"Being a magistrate is awesome, but humbling.

"You have to remember that you are dealing with people and their problems, and although you never make a decision alone, there is a lot

riding on that decision."

Mr Bell saw lots of cases in her 36 years on the bench. "I was on every committee going," she added. Some cases were memorable for sad reasons, some joyful, while some would make her laugh.

"But it's an honour to become a magistrate," she said. "It's a duty, you're helping people, and you're representing the Queen."

Mrs Bell retired in 2004, and is proud to hold the title of the longest-serving Great Yarmouth magistrate – not least because after she was sworn in there was a change to classify all future magistrates as Norfolk magistrates.

Now, she is a member of the Gorleston on Sea Heritage group, which has put on countless exhibitions, published multiple books and unearthed hundreds of historic gems, as well as unveiling its first blue plaque last month.

"The people in the group all love Gorleston as much as me, it's snow-balled and we have so much fun."

Mrs Bell now keeps her hand in with many community projects, but likes nothing more than spending her time with her grandchildren, Nikki, Russell, Charlie and Rosa, and her two great-grandchildren, Maria and Sophie. "We have the most wonderful time," she said.