

# ST HELENA'S FIRST GOVERNMENT REPRESENTATIVE IN UK TAKEN BY DEATH

by Trevor W. Hearl

H. W. "Bert" Howe, who helped St Helena weather two of its stormiest crises in the 1970s, died on 7 April 2000 at St Wilfrid's Hospice, Chichester, West Sussex, where he was being tended with loving care, suffering from cancer. He was 86.

On St Helena he will be remembered for skilfully restructuring Solomon's after its dramatic takeover by the St Helena Government in 1974, and then guiding its recovery through the next 12 difficult years. Less well known was his crucial involvement in the choice of the "old" RMS as St Helena's own ship in 1977 after the withdrawal of the Union Castle service threatened to leave the island stranded. Few were better qualified to meet the challenge of such emergencies, following a career which had elements of a boy's adventure tale.

The eldest child of a North London schoolmaster - a brother and sister survive him - he had a youthful urge to "see the world". On leaving school, with hopes of a Foreign Office posting having fallen through, he joined Millar's Timber Trading Company in the city, where he began as office boy and in true storybook style, rose through the ranks to become senior Director. This was no pin-striped desk job, however, as Millar's traded lumber on a world-wide scale, and the mid-1930s found him based in the Philippines for some years, from which he barely escaped with his life when the Japanese invaded in 1941. He joined the Royal Air Force (RAF), got his "wings" in Canada, and on returning to Britain, was put on hazardous "met flight" operations reporting weather conditions over enemy territory. After the war, he was soon globe-trotting again for his firm, covering business in Australia, Africa, North and South America, and the Middle East where a favourable assignment was providing sleepers for the Hejaz Railway, famed by the Great War exploits of Lawrence of Arabia. Business was booming in 1972 when, out of the blue, his firm became the victim of a takeover by a Slater Walker syndicate and he had the pain of seeing his asset-stripped, which perforce meant early retirement. Thus, as a youthful 60-year-old, he was ready for a challenge in 1974 when the Foreign and Commonwealth office wanted a Chief Executive to mastermind the rehabilitation of Solomon's of St Helena. This was a new territory, but by experience and personality, he was ideal for the job. The situation from any point of view - commercial or political - could not have been more difficult. For six years the firm had been through turbulent times, modernizing under Tony Thornton's South Atlantic Trading and Investment Company, with its associated fishing enterprise FRASHI, and now, deeply in debt, it had been nationalized by a Government takeover, fomenting a political furore deeply dividing the close-knit Island community.

Public meetings and a petition to the Foreign Secretary for a Referendum - which was refused - created more heat than light, portrayed in the British press as the islanders' struggle against a colonial government dominated by a few white settlers. The turmoil was revived a year later when, to scotch the local Labour Party contesting the next elections, Mr Thornton was "excluded" from the Island following Councillors' allegations to the Foreign Secretary that he was a Communist working for Russia interested against the peace and well-being of St Helena.

This was the volatile background against which Mr Howe began rebuilding the business on which the Island depended for vital supplies and services. While it remained at the centre of a political storm, this required more than commercial knowhow to succeed; it needed tact and the trust of islanders to win the hearts and minds of employees. He spent the first two years putting the firm on its feet and training a local management team, and the next 10 visiting the Island several months each year, seeking to expand its operations. Off the Island he was always on the lookout for new merchandising opportunities, while coaxing the first back to a public limited liability company. This was finally achieved on February 14, 1984 when it was registered in London as "Solomon & Co. (St Helena) plc", which he hoped would encourage islanders to invest in their own company and share in its fortune, though in this he was disappointed.

The St Helena Government, meanwhile, used his services as its representative in Britain, finding employment opportunities for Saints and serving the Island's interests generally. Thus, when an authoritative opinion was wanted on a suitable vessel to meet the Island's demands for a multi-purpose ship to supply its needs and develop its economy, particularly tourism, the responsibility fell on Mr Howe. In August 1977, Andrew Bell found the Northland Prince at Vancouver and there he was sent to vet the choice. "He brought a lifetime's experience of shipping to the task", said Mr Bell. "Everyone had confidence in his judgment". It was to be amply vindicated by the services of the "old" RMS for St Helena and in the Falklands War.

Mr Howe retired finally in 1986, having earlier moved down to Bosham, near Chichester, for the sailing he loved. A sociable man who had a wide circle of friends in many countries, he had always been an active sportsman, and in his youth a keen Scout and chorister, reflecting values and principles which guided him throughout life. In 1945 he married Eileen (Howitt), who accompanied him on many of his journeys including visits to St Helena, by whom, with their two sons, he is now survived.

**South Atlantic Chronicle, July 2000, Vol. XXIV, No. 3, pp. 17-18.**

© A.H. Schulenburg. Reproduced with permission.