

OBITUARY

Sir Robert Finch

Leading property lawyer who ruthlessly negotiated multimillion-pound contracts and later became lord mayor of London

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Robert Finch at the lord mayor's office. He was one of the City's most effective ambassadors, visiting more than 30 countries

Sir Robert Finch, a former lord mayor of London, was for years the foremost property lawyer in the capital who negotiated multimillion-pound contracts for international companies seeking a headquarters in London. He was respected and feared in equal measure, and his formidable negotiating skills made him the go-to lawyer at a time when dozens of international companies were seeking to establish themselves in the City.

During the boom years in the 1980s and 1990s, he played a significant role in consolidating London's reputation as a global centre of finance and commerce — and then represented the capital as its lord mayor, marketing the City around the world. During his year in office, he visited more than 30 countries, proving to be one of the most effective ambassadors to have held office in Mansion House. For almost three decades Finch was a key figure in the property department of Linklaters, one of the leading London law firms. His astute grasp of the property

market, his skill in hard bargaining and his doggedness in getting the deal his clients wanted, made him the lawyer of choice, reportedly earning his company some of the highest fees in the City. Every investor wanted him on their side; few relished finding him leading the opposition.

His greatest skill, however, was to pull off a deal with good manners and a smile. Charmingly persuasive and persistent, he was an iron fist in a velvet glove. His courteous demeanour was disarming and effective. As one of his partners described it, "A lease negotiation with Robert at the helm was one of the hottest tickets in the City for aspiring lawyers at Linklaters chosen to act as his bag carrier or 'gofer'. It guaranteed high drama, plenty of posturing, a bit of bullying and disdain for those who focused on the mundane (ie, usually anything legal), a rollercoaster ride, but, at the end of the day, invariably delivering what the client set out to achieve — and more."

His expertise was increasingly in demand not only in the property world. He sat on numerous City Corporation committees, including eight years on the powerful planning committee, the body that determines how and where London's new offices are built. He was a governor of the College of Law and chairman of the Royal Brompton & Harefield NHS hospital trust, a cause to which he devoted much time and where he was able to save the children's heart surgery unit from closure.

He helped to consolidate London's reputation as a global centre of finance

After serving as director of the property group Liberty International, he became chairman of its board for three years. He was also master of two London livery companies, the Solicitors and the Innholders; a trustee of St Paul's Cathedral Endowment Fund; and an honorary member of the London Symphony Orchestra (LSO), for whom he raised a significant sum of money during his time as lord mayor. He was, in short, a City man par excellence.

Robert Gerard Finch was born in the hill station of Ootacamund ("Ooty") in southern India in 1944, the son of an officer in the Bombay Sappers and Miners. His father was an engineer, hill climber, serious mountaineer and skier, his mother a talented painter and gardener. He inherited an interest in all their pursuits, as well as sailing.

Sent back for education in England with his elder brother at the age of eight, he attended Felsted school, where it was said he enjoyed rugby more than work. On leaving, he was apprenticed to his uncle as an articled clerk in a solicitor's firm in Cannon Street. There had been generations of Finches who were barristers or solicitors in Lancashire, where his family had roots. "We were all paid £5 a week with a little extra for lunch," he later recalled. "Great ingenuity was needed to find our lunch venues, either in Southwark or in the labyrinth of lanes around Cannon Street. Thus began my City career."

He qualified as a solicitor at the College of Law and joined Linklaters in 1969, becoming a partner in the firm's real estate practice in 1974. The job included national and international transactions for City institutions and Finch travelled extensively — to America, Japan and the Middle East in particular. These were heady days for property lawyers: multinational companies flocked to London in the 1980s, and Finch had plenty of practice negotiating large headquarter deals.

He was made head of Linklaters property department in 1997, and spearheaded the firm's expansion.



Finch in 2003 on the day he was admitted at Guildhall

One of the projects he worked on led to his parallel career in the government of the City. While negotiating the development of the site of Royal Mint near the Tower after the Mint moved to Wales, he found himself across the table from Michael Cassidy, then the formidable chairman of the City's planning committee. Cassidy suggested that he should stand as an alderman in Coleman Street to succeed Lady Donaldson. The election, unusually, was contested, but Finch won, and in 1992 became a member of the Corporation of London — the body that runs the City. He was elected a sheriff in 1999 and then lord mayor in 2003, the 676th to hold office.

Finch threw himself into the job as an active lord mayor. His parade, the traditional November carnival through the City's streets, drew record crowds of 500,000 people and included 6,000 participants, 2,000 military personnel and more than 70 floats. Nowadays the job involves not only ceremony but a taxing round of travels to market the City's expertise overseas. Finch visited 33 countries, including China and the eight east European countries in the final stages of negotiating accession to the European Union.

At Mansion House, the lord mayor's official residence, Finch, wearing the traditional tights and buckled shoes, cut an imposing figure as he hosted several state occasions, including visits by the presidents of Finland, Poland and Latvia. One event that captured his heart and public attention was the return to the City of London of Temple Bar in 2004. This ancient arch once stood in Fleet Street, marking the boundary of the City, but was regarded as a traffic obstacle and had been removed to a remote field in Hertfordshire. Finch ensured that it was reinstated, restored and refurbished, to a new location in Paternoster Square, next to St Paul's Cathedral, and unveiled "Wren's great gateway alongside Wren's cathedral masterpiece".

In his civic career, Finch was loyally supported by his wife, Patricia, who travelled on many of his official visits and took her duties seriously. They had met when, as a student in a Bayswater mews house, he had rescued her after she had forgotten her keys to the house next door. They had two daughters, Alexandra and Isabel. Alexandra now works at the Royal Academy of Arts and Isabel lives in Australia. His wife and children all survive him.

After leaving the Mansion House, Finch returned to Linklaters, but retired in 2005 and joined the underwriters, Liberty International. Until March this year, he was also chairman of the Property Industry Alliance, which represents eight property bodies.

As a schoolboy, he enjoyed rugby far more than work

He continued to sit on the court of aldermen, but in 2008, after a change to the voting system, he was challenged for the seat by a lawyer who accused him of overspending on the campaign by not declaring the use of Liberty's company car and chauffeur. In the court case, the judge ruled that ignorance of the law could constitute by virtue of inadvertence a defence in electoral law — a point that had existed in Scots law and in Northern Ireland law but not in English law. Finch was gratified to find that he had himself made law.

He lent his expertise to a number of charities and was especially keen on the arts and education. Much of the money raised by his lord mayor's charity appeal was given to the LSO's music education centre. Although he was not himself a musician, Finch loved listening to music, and was rewarded by being made an honorary member of the LSO in 2004.

As honorary colonel of the Inns of Court and City Yeomanry, he was a great supporter of their band and used to accompany the regiment to Normandy each year to commemorate the D-Day landings. On one occasion, he was asked by the bandmaster, as they formed up in the fields behind the beaches, to conduct the band in a march. He knew the music, but his arm movements bore little resemblance to the piece in question.

He was knighted in 2004 after his year in office as lord mayor. He was a passionate and public-spirited man, but also insisted that there should be time for fun and family. As well as gardening and sailing at his retirement home in Bosham, near Chichester, he enjoyed skiing. Yet, as friends recalled, he approached the sport in a similar fashion to conducting his negotiations, with, as he said himself, a very aggressive attitude to demolishing moguls rather than skiing around them".

He fell ill while in Bosham just before Easter. A fund has been established in his memory at the Royal Brompton Hospital.

Sir Robert Finch, lawyer and former lord mayor of London, was born on August 20, 1944. He died of pneumonia on March 31, 2016, aged 71