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OBITUARY

Sheila Cameron CBE KC (1934–2025)

Morag Ellis KC

Dean of the Arches and Auditor

Sheila Morag Clark Cameron CBE KC was born on 22 March 1934. She would go on to build a remarkable and distinctive career as a barrister and judge in the male-dominated worlds of the Law and the Church. But Sheila wore her distinction lightly and is fondly remembered by many for her kindness and sense of fun, as well as for her professional achievements. She died on 2 July 2025, a few days after her beloved husband, Gerry Ryan KC.

Having graduated in Jurisprudence from St Hugh's College Oxford, Sheila was admitted to the Middle Temple in January 1954, one of 26 women and 258 men. She was called to the Bar in 1957, winning a prestigious Harmsworth Scholarship.

After completing a largely criminal pupillage, Sheila was offered a tenancy, on the basis that she was being given the opportunity to 'have a go' but that her clerk would not actively promote her. She therefore made work for herself by volunteering at the Russell Square Mary Ward Legal Advice Centre.[1] Soon, the Advice Centre solicitor started to send her work in her own right and she developed an extensive matrimonial practice.

In 1960, Sheila married fellow barrister Gerry Ryan. In the midst of all the professional commitments, she gave birth to their two sons in 1965 and 1967.

Sheila took silk in 1983 and was appointed a recorder in 1985, serving in this capacity until 1999. During this time she developed a specialised and outstanding secular practice. Major infrastructure projects were promoted by way of bills in Parliament and Sheila became one of the leaders of the Parliamentary Bar. Her knowledge of the arcane law relating to commons and village greens was unrivalled and she was involved in many of the leading cases. Sheila's talents as an administrative lawyer were recognised and she became the first woman Boundary Commissioner for England, as well as a member of the Council on Tribunals from 1986 to 1990. In 1988, she was elected as a Bencher of the Middle Temple.

[1] Mary Ward Legal Advice Centres specialise in giving free advice on housing, welfare benefits and debt issues; see https://www.marywardlegal.org.uk/ (accessed 15 September 2025). Mary Ward was born in Yorkshire in the 16th century. She founded an order of nuns devoted to establishing free schools for the poor, teaching outside the walls of the convent, rather than leading an enclosed life, which was unusual at the time, as was independence from episcopal control, which she also achieved. She died in 1645 during the siege of York. She was declared Venerable by Pope Benedict XVI in 2009.

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Sheila's ecclesiastical career began by chance, when she inherited a brief in the St Albans Consistory Court from another member of chambers. She won the case and made her mark. Soon afterwards, in 1969, she became Chancellor of the Diocese of Chelmsford, the first woman ecclesiastical judge. When the appointment was announced, the *Daily Express* front page headline ran: 'Church appoints woman to position of authority!'.

From 1992 to 2001, she was also Chancellor of the Diocese of London. During her tenure, Sheila gave the important judgment in *St Helen's, Bishopsgate*, setting out principles for the application of the faculty jurisdiction to listed church buildings which were to stand for over 20 years.[2] Granting a faculty for the reordering of St Mary-le-Bow, she also foreshadowed the general approach which the Church of England has now taken to shared use, saying:

> The primary purpose of any church is use for the purpose of worship ... Where there is additional space ... it is understandable and responsible for a minister with his/her churchwardens and PCC to contemplate permitting an outside body or bodies to use that space on commercial terms ...[3]

In 1983, Sheila became the first woman Vicar-General of the Province of Canterbury and was therefore a member of General Synod when the very close[4] vote on women's ordination to the priesthood was taken. Breaking with convention, whereby the *ex officio* judicial members do not generally vote, she spoke and voted in favour of the motion. She subsequently appeared in *R v Ecclesiastical Committee of the Houses of Parliament, ex parte The Church Society*,[5] successfully defending the lawfulness of the draft Priests (Ordination of Women) Measure against a claim for judicial review.

Discussion of the ordination of women to the priesthood inevitably raised the question of their consecration as bishops. Sheila had been appointed to chair the Archbishops' Group on Women and the Episcopate.[6] Their Report was published in 1990.[7] She described this role as one of the most difficult of her entire career, as it proved impossible for the members of the Group to reach consensus. Eventually, however, Sheila's work helped to pave the way for passage of the Bishops and Priests (Consecration and Ordination of Women) Measure 2014.

Sheila had been appointed Dean of the Arches and Auditor in 2000, yet another 'first' for a woman. In this capacity, she gave what remains the leading judgment on exhumation, *Re Blagdon Cemetery*.[8] With characteristic humility and intellectual curiosity, she followed the example of her predecessor, Sir John Owen, in studying

[2] *St Helen's, Bishopsgate*, 26 November 1993 (unrep), noted in (1993) Ecc LJ 256.

[3] *Re St Mary-le-Bow* (2001) 1 WLR 1507, at 1511D—E. See further the 23rd Report by the Ecclesiastical Committee on the Pastoral (Amendment) Measure (HL Paper 132; HC 930) and the Pastoral (Amendment) Measure 2006, re-enacted in the Mission and Pastoral Measure 2011.

[4] House of Laity (in which Sheila sat) 169–182; House of Clergy 176–174; House of Bishops 39–13.

[5] *R v Ecclesiastical Committee of the Houses of Parliament, ex parte The Church Society* (1994) Admin LR 670.

[6] Renamed in July 1986 'The Archbishops' Group on the Episcopate'. Their remit became 'To consider the nature and function of the episcopate in the Church, including a particular examination of the theological issues bearing upon the ordination of women to the episcopate': see the Chairman's Preface to the Report, viii.

[7] *The Report of the Archbishops' Group on the Episcopate* (Church House Publishing, 1990).

[8] *Re Blagdon Cemetery* [2002] Fam 299, [2004] 4 AER 1380.

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for the Cardiff University LLM in Canon Law, graduating in 2008 with a dissertation on *The Parliament of the Church: Making a Measure*.

Appointment as Dean automatically brought with it Mastership of the Faculty Office of the Archbishop of Canterbury.[9] Here, Sheila's principal work was to oversee the granting of special marriage licences, Lambeth degrees and the regulation of notaries in England, Wales and parts of the Commonwealth. She arrived at a key moment, as the Government was reviewing the provision and regulation of legal services. Sir David Clementi's initial consultation paper described regulation by the Court of Faculties as 'somewhat anachronistic'.[10] Exercising her particular combination of charm and determination, Sheila went to work. Together with the Registrar of the Faculty Office and representatives of the Notaries' Societies, she succeeded in persuading Clementi and the Government to modify their proposals and ensured recognition and the continued role of the Faculty Office under the Legal Services Act 2007.

Sheila retired from secular practice in 2001 and as Dean in 2009. Her service to the Church, and her learning, was recognised by the award of the degree of Doctor of Civil Laws by Archbishop George Carey in 2002. In 2004, there was further recognition when she was appointed a CBE for services to the Church of England. A founder member of the Ecclesiastical Law Society, her service to the Society was recognised in 2010 by her appointment as its President.

In retirement, Sheila did not rest on her considerable laurels but threw herself into local church life. She was churchwarden of St Mary the Virgin, Bepton in Chichester Diocese. In July 2025, the Bishop of Chichester made her a member of the Order of St Richard 'for her long and distinguished service to the Church of England and her local parish. She has been described as the glue who holds the parish together'.

Sheila's was a life well lived, rich in years, service and achievements. She was a much loved member of her chambers, Francis Taylor Building, of which her husband Gerry was head for many years. Although she did not see her career in these terms, the example she set of intellect, hard work, dignity, common sense and kindness has helped to lay the foundations for contemporary women barristers, especially those working in her fields of secular and ecclesiastical law. As well as her Chambers 'family', Sheila leaves two sons, Andy and Nick, and six grandchildren, and she and Gerry will be much missed. May they rest in peace and rise in glory.

Acknowledgements. This obituary draws on a lecture, *Women in the Law, Sheila Cameron CBE KC*, given by the author to mark the 100th anniversary of the call of the first woman to the Bar as part of Francis Taylor Building's *Boydell Lecture* series. That lecture was informed by an interview with Sheila about her career and the personal recollections of her colleagues, including Philip Petchey (Chancellor of Southwark who had been Sheila's pupil) and FTB clerk, Andrew Briton.

[9] Pursuant to the Public Worship Regulation Act 1874, s 7. See now Ecclesiastical and Courts and Jurisdiction Measure 2018, s 23(2).

[10] *Review of the Regulatory Framework for Legal Services in England and Wales, Sir David Clementi, Final Report* (December 2004).

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