

**Monday 11 January 2021**  
**Swearing-in Ceremony - The Master of the Rolls**

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We have just received the oaths of Sir Geoffrey Vos on his appointment as Master of the Rolls. Once more it has been necessary to adapt the way in which these ceremonies are performed to take account of the current Covid 19 pandemic. In more normal times I would be accompanied on the bench by the heads of each division of the High Court, the President of the Supreme Court and the Lord Chancellor. But today Sir Geoffrey and I cut lonely, socially distanced figures in this vast courtroom with almost all others attending remotely. Similarly, it is not possible for the court to be packed with fellow judges, members of the legal profession, other colleagues and friends. Save for you Miss Tolaney and David Greene, the President of the Law Society, from whom we shall hear shortly, all are joining us using our online platform. Nonetheless, I welcome the very large number of participants who have joined us this afternoon. It is a particular disappointment for Sir Geoffrey, a disappointment I share, that it is not possible for members of his family to be with us in court this afternoon. May I welcome the online attendance of Sir Geoffrey's wife Vivien, their daughter Lottie Mabey and her husband Richard, together with his brother Peter Vos, sister-in-law Sioned and Aunt, Carol Allen.

The Master of the Rolls is today the President of the Civil Division of the Court of Appeal and Head of Civil Justice. At least since the court reforms in the late 19th century, the Master of the Rolls, outranking the Law Lords and still the members of the Supreme Court, save its President, has been in pole position in the Court of Appeal to develop, adapt and interpret the

law. That is why so many of the most distinguished lawyers and greatest judges of the last century and a half have occupied the office.

Like so many offices in the United Kingdom, and particularly those within the judiciary, it is of ancient lineages. Its origin is found in the history of Chancery and the need for important records to be kept. The holder of the office was known by different titles in the 12th and 13th centuries but the office was first mentioned in statute in 1495 in an act of Henry the Seventh. It exempted the Master of the Rolls from forfeiture of his office if he failed personally to accompany the King when the King went to war. It appears that in those early days the French misunderstood the nature of the office. Sir Robert Megarry quotes one gallic source as translating the title as “maitre de petit pains”. Over time, the Master of the Rolls ceased merely to be the custodian of records and began discharging judicial functions in support of the Lord Chancellor. There appears to have been some uncertainty, indeed dispute, about whether the Master of the Rolls, when sitting judicially, was exercising an original power vested in his office as opposed to being the Lord Chancellor’s deputy. It was not until 1729 that the matter was settled by statute. It provided that all orders made by the Master of the Rolls should be valid without more. However, there was a right of appeal to the Lord Chancellor.

I know that we have the Lord Chancellor with us today virtually. I trust that he will not take it amiss if I suggest that a return to the position of 1729 would be a retrograde step and would be best left out of any review of this role.

It was not, however, until 1833 that the Master of the Rolls sat continuously to hear cases, in addition to those which had been addressed to the Lord Chancellor. His court of first instance lasted until 1881.

The origins of the office are still reflected in the Master of the Rolls' involvement in the public records office. He is chairman of the Advisory Council on the National Archives and the historic manuscripts forum.

One of the first things that will happen to Sir Geoffrey on assuming the office of Master of the Rolls is to be provided with a list of all his statutory functions, many of which may surprise him. If he has not yet picked it up, I must let him know that both he and I are Commissioners for the Reduction of the National Debt, an office to which I gave no real heed until the events of recent times. Should the Chancellor of the Exchequer arrive at the Royal Courts of Justice seeking contributions from the Commissioners, I shall ensure that he is directed to the office of the Master of the Rolls.

How then did Sir Geoffrey find himself in this position?

He was born and brought up in London and educated at University College School before securing a place at Gonville and Caius College Cambridge to read law. He was called to the bar by Lincoln's Inn in 1977 and then practised in Chancery and commercial work from 3 Stone Buildings. He took silk in 1993 and was head of his chambers between 1998 and 2009. He had a stellar practice but also found time to devote himself to the interests of the bar. He was Secretary of the Chancery Bar Association from 1994 to 1997, Vice Chairman from 1997 to 1999 and then Chairman from 1999 to 2001. He was Chairman of the professional

standards committee of the Bar Council in 2004 and 2005. Sir Geoffrey then became Vice Chairman of the Bar Council in 2006 and was its Chairman in 2007.

It was as Chairman of the bar that I first met Sir Geoffrey. He won't necessarily remember the encounter. He visited Snaresbrook Crown Court where I happened to be sitting as a Recorder. He joined the judges for lunch and spoke to us of the pressing difficulties of the publicly funded bar. Not much seems to change. But I have to confess being a little distracted because only shortly before his visit it had been revealed that someone responsible for the preparation of food for the judges at Snaresbrook had been adulterating some of the offerings in a particularly unpleasant way. I was therefore paying very close attention to what I was eating. But one thing did become apparent from that visit, namely that in Sir Geoffrey Vos we were dealing with someone possessed of inexhaustible energy.

And so it has proved. His clerk from chambers, Gary Bateman, recalls that he has never known anyone work so hard or with such dedication. He had cause to question a timesheet sent to him by Geoffrey Vos as incredible which recorded three hours work on Christmas morning. Gary assumed that there must be a typo and checked with his principal. Sir Geoffrey had been in the Far East leading up to Christmas and stayed over the holidays. His response? They don't have Christmas in Hong Kong you know.

Sir Geoffrey showed early interest in a judicial career. He was a deputy High Court Judge from 1999 until 2009. From 2005 he was also a judge of the Court of Appeal of Jersey and Guernsey and then of the Cayman

Islands. In 2009 he was appointed to the Chancery Division of the High Court. He was not detained there for long, because he was promoted to the Court of Appeal in October 2013. He succeeded Sir Terence Etherton as Chancellor of the High Court three years later. These various jobs are very demanding in themselves. His judicial output has been prodigious. But Sir Geoffrey has done much else, only a little of which there is time to mention. He was President of the European Network of Councils for the Judiciary in 2015 and 2016. He has been deeply involved in international judicial relations the world over for many years. He has also been a trustee of the Slynn Foundation since 2009. He is a member of the UK's LawTech Delivery Panel. He was responsible for the publication of the legal statement on the status of crypto assets and smart contracts in November 2019. He has been at the forefront of promoting London as the premier international dispute resolution centre and in encouraging the use of technology in the administration of justice and resolution of disputes.

Sir Geoffrey Vos is truly an example of the individual in mind in the aphorism: if you want something done ask the busiest person you know.

Astonishingly, since 2018 until now he has also been editor-in-chief of the White Book. That may well mean that of the hundreds of people who are joining us this afternoon, he is the only person who has read it from cover to cover, both volumes, and also dipped into the more obscure parts available only online.

I would mention one other particular commitment. Sir Geoffrey has been committed to the Social Mobility Foundation and for many years he was chairman of its trustees.

But remarkably, he is also a man with a hinterland. He is devoted to his family. He shares pictures of the toys he gives to his youngest grandchild, but we all know who really plays with them. He is a farmer. He and Vivien farm in Herefordshire but in this I have the strongest of suspicions that he is the assistant who executes the instructions off the boss, Lady Vos.

I am looking forward enormously to working with Sir Geoffrey as Master of the Rolls. The circumstances of the last nine months and the reality that we shall be living with the disruption wrought by Covid-19 for the foreseeable future will call for energy, vision and determination to continue to secure the delivery of civil justice in England and Wales. All of these qualities he has in spades.

On behalf of all those who have joined us this afternoon, especially those online, may I offer my heartfelt congratulations to Sir Geoffrey on his appointment as Master of the Rolls and wish him well as he embarks upon the next stage of his remarkable legal and judicial career.