

Sir Thomas Dunne, dashing and self-deprecating Lord-Lieutenant of Herefordshire

When he was made the 1,001st Knight of the Garter he took as his crest 'a wolf rampant holding between the forepaws a bottle'

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Sir Thomas Dunne: dispatched his ceremonial duties with panache Credit: Willie Burlington

Sir Thomas Dunne, who has died aged 91, could reasonably be said to have embodied the county of Herefordshire.

The heir to an estate near Leominster that had been in his family since 1678, Dunne was for three decades the Queen's representative in the county, serving as its Lord-Lieutenant from 1977 to 2008 (and as Lord-Lieutenant of Worcester from 1977 to 2001). It was an astonishingly long tenure, which he crowned by chairing the Lord-

Lieutenants' Association, effectively making him the senior Lord-Lieutenant in the kingdom.

He was also president of the Friends of Hereford Cathedral, the Hereford Historic Churches Trust and the Herefordshire Nature Trust, steward of the Hereford and Ludlow racecourses, and trustee of a dauntingly long list of local museums, choral societies, cricket clubs and scout associations.

The secret to his unfailing energy, he explained, was that he positively enjoyed the rows and dramas in all the organisations he was asked to lead, since he was born and bred in fox-hunting country, where rows and dramas were both ferocious and frequent.

Although Dunne looked every inch the dashing young Lord-Lieutenant – even chosen by Miles Jebb as the cover star for his history *The Lord-Lieutenants and their Deputies* – and he dispatched his ceremonial duties with the panache to be expected of a former captain in *The Blues*, he was not at all pompous.

His greatest delight was in telling stories against himself, and he was thrilled when, on his first engagement as Lord-Lieutenant, he clanked into a town hall in his full regalia, only to be firmly turned away by the lady serving tea, who told him: “I’m sorry, love, but the band are having their tea downstairs.”

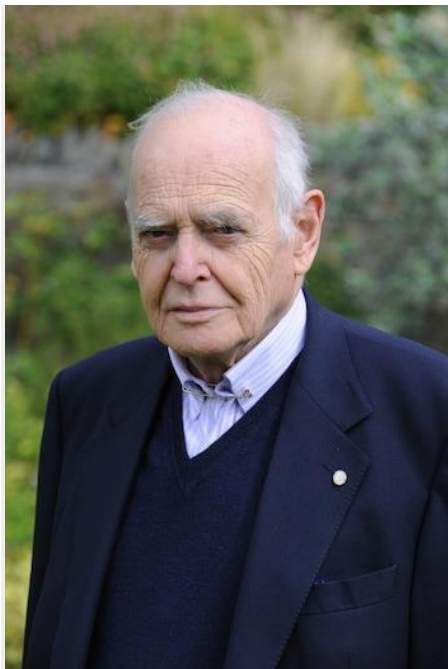
Dunne was equally tickled to learn that the “Gatley” of his ancestral home, Gatley Park, meant “goat hollow”, and in the early days of email, while his fellow landowners were concocting rather more stately email addresses, he made his own email “goathollow”.

Dunne’s genius was in getting along with, and getting some fun out of, everyone he encountered. His local history talks dwelt on the more eccentric, off-beam denizens of his county. He was held in no less esteem by his local garage proprietor and by his butcher than by the late Queen, who grew very fond of him.

When in 2008 he was made the 1,001st Knight of the Garter – Prince William being the 1,000th – he took as his crest “a wolf rampant holding between the forepaws a bottle”. (The bottle was understood to be whisky.)

That year, when he stepped down as Lord-Lieutenant of Herefordshire, 2,000 people turned up to Hereford Cathedral to attend his farewell service – more than could fit inside the nave, and a substantial portion of the entire Herefordshire population, which was around 180,000.

On his death, the flags of council buildings across Herefordshire were lowered for a week to half-mast.



Dunne: unfailing energy Credit: Alamy

The eldest of three, Thomas Raymond Dunne was born on October 24 1933 to Captain Philip Dunne, later an MP, and his wife Margaret, née Walker, a whisky heiress; Thomas’s younger brother Martin would become Lord-Lieutenant of Warwickshire (1997-2010), and his sister Philippa would marry the 2nd Earl Jellicoe.

Their father was something of a Boy’s Own hero: a noted figure in the hunting world and on the Turf, celebrated for his bravery and gaiety,

he had been awarded the MC at Salerno Bay in September 1943, and earlier fought in North Africa with the No 8 (Guards) Commando.

The family home was Gatley Park, a romantic, early-17th-century brick house set in hilly parkland that had been sold to the Dunnes, then landowners in the Welsh Borders, by the widow of the Royalist MP Sir Sampson Eure. The family, formerly “Dwn”, were descended from the Welsh princes.

Young Thomas, however, spent his early years at his mother’s home of Chadshunt in Warwickshire, where he hunted passionately; the unwritten rule was that the children would have to ride to any meet within eight miles. Later he would be joint master of the Radnor & West Herefordshire Foxhounds.

After Ludgrove, Eton and Sandhurst, he was commissioned in 1951 into the Royal Horse Guards, serving in Germany and Cyprus.

In 1957 he married Henrietta Crawley, a niece of the television commentator and MP Aidan Crawley; the actress Anna Massey was a bridesmaid at their wedding at St James’s, Piccadilly, which was attended by Princess Alexandra.

Over their 67-year marriage, the beautiful Henrietta was the linchpin of all that he did, whether making Christmas stockings for his officers in The Blues or handling the intricate seating plans at the annual consultation for Lord-Lieutenants at Windsor Castle.

In 1959 Dunne left the Army to look after the 1,500-acre estate at Gatley, but retained a strong affiliation with the Forces, serving later as president of the West Midlands Territorial and Army Volunteer Reserve Association and national vice-president of the Royal British Legion, and as an honorary colonel in the Mercia Regiment, the Worcester & Sherwood Foresters and the King’s Shropshire Light Infantry.

In 1981 he accompanied the then Prince of Wales to the SAS base outside Hereford, where they were invited into the regiment's famous Stun Chamber. Noise and smoke grenades were thrown in to the darkened room, but the commanding officer deemed the explosives insufficiently impressive, and ordered more to be added. When the pair emerged suitably shaken but roaring with laughter, Dunne's hair was standing on end.

In 1972 he sought the Conservative nomination for the soon-to-be vacant seat of Leominster, but was not encouraged when, during one of his campaign speeches, he noticed one of his best friends sound asleep in the front row. He lost out to Peter Temple-Morris, who would hold the seat for the Conservatives until 1997.

Among many other endeavours, Sir Thomas Dunne was president of the 3 Counties Agricultural Society, joint-president of the Mid Wales & Herefordshire Magistrates Association, West Midland regional director of Central Television, vice-president of the Friends of Abbey Dore, governor of Bishops Bluecoat School and Lucton School, and a church warden.

Evelyn Waugh described Dunne's father Philip as “chivalrous, with a sense of private honour uncommon nowadays”; the same was true of Thomas Dunne, who never raised his voice, always put people at their ease and was a fount of sound advice, particularly to the young.

In 1995 he was appointed a Knight Commander of the Royal Victorian Order.

He is survived by his wife Henrietta, by their daughter, Milly Soames, a Deputy Lieutenant of Buckinghamshire, and by their two sons, Philip Dunne, former MP for Ludlow (2005-24), and Nicky Dunne, chairman of Heywood Hill bookshop; another daughter, Letty, predeceased him. **Sir Thomas Dunne, born October 24 1933, died January 6 2025**