

Court stalwart to step down

By Iain Ramage

APPROACHING 82, Donald Mackenzie is surely Scotland's most "senior" court officer.

But he is still very much in demand, having been offered a transfer to Tain when imminent, controversial reforms signal the end for Dornoch Sheriff Court.

Donald has, however, opted to retire after more than six decades of public service.

The former police inspector was brought up in Sutherland and attended school at Golspie.

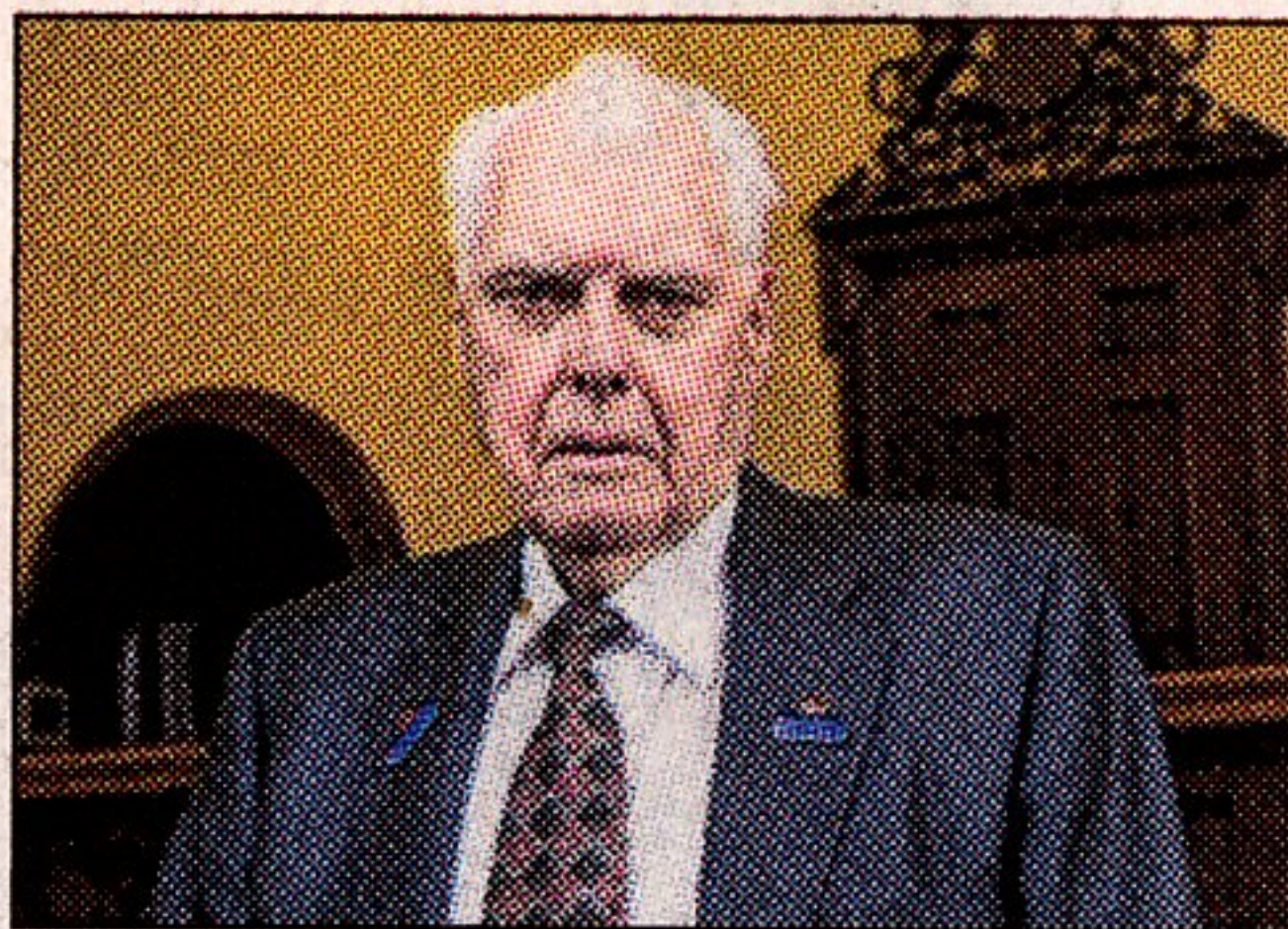
After national service with the Household Cavalry (Lifeguards) at Windsor, he joined the police and his 30-year police career took him from Invergordon to Stornoway, Gairloch, Dingwall, Inverness, and Kingussie.

In 1984, shortly after retiring, he was asked to stand in "temporarily" to cover for a sick court officer in Dornoch - and he is still doing the job.

"It keeps me in touch with what's going on in the crime world," he says.

Among memorable major cases he recalls from his police career was playing a "background role" in the successful capture of two killers who had struck at Epping Forest in Essex and fled to the Highlands, camping out in hills above Ullapool.

His current duties entail checking in the accused and witnesses into court and assisting the sheriff



Donald Mackenzie

and fiscal in preparation for trials.

"I've enjoyed the job. It's kept me in touch with what's going on," he said. "But I'll be finished in a couple of months. I was told that I could go to Tain, but I'm not going. I feel that I've done enough - I've passed my sell-by date."

What has fundamentally changed during his years of crime-busting? Donald quickly highlights a single issue.

"When I joined the police we heard little of drugs," he says. "Now, the problem is rife all over the country and a lot of problems arise from it."

Donald, who has four children and five grandchildren, also finds time to help his wife Jean run their nearby guest house. He relishes having more time for gardening, fishing and bee-keeping.

Donald recalls a time when the bees got him into a spot of bother with colleagues at the court house after the insects swarmed outside the building. He has since reduced the number of the hives he keeps from six to two.

Will Donald miss the buzz of court life?

"Possibly, yes possibly," he said. "It'll be sad. I know all the local solicitors and the sheriffs. I'll be sorry to leave them."

Principal Procurator Fiscal depute Alasdair MacDonald, who heads up the Scottish Fatalities Investigation Unit North, worked with Donald.

He said: "The closure of Dornoch Sheriff Court may be the loss of an institution but Donald Mackenzie's departure is the end of an era."

He has seen many sheriffs, clerks and fiscals come and go over the years and I would like to thank him for all his help during my time prosecuting at Dornoch.

"The court officer is not just the man who shouts court but is, many people may not realise, a vital link between the hard pressed prosecutor and the court and the bewildered and anxious witnesses waiting outside."

Mr MacDonald added: "Donald had a very helpful well of local knowledge regarding who was who in cases and that was of tremendous assistance."

"He took everything in his stride, from west of Scotland gangsters and complicated frauds and fatal accident enquiries to piles of documents and records."

"But he enjoyed nothing better than a good old-fashioned poaching trial with lots of firearms, deer carcasses, nets and fish."

A spokesman for the Scottish Court Service said: "Donald has been a loyal and committed member of staff over the past 30 years."