Jonathan Hirst, QC

Chaiman of the Bar Council known for his sang-froid and for being no fan of pop music, despite representing the Beatles

Jonathan Hirst was not a man to dwell on a setback. The former chairman of the Bar enjoyed a distinguished career, but would inevitably lose the odd case. At such times his natural optimism prevailed. “We gave them a bloody good fright,” he would say. “What’s more, we avoided indemnity costs.”

For Hirst, the glass was always half-full. If the principal witness was found to be an invertebrate liar and indemnity costs went against his client, Hirst still found a positive spin, telling colleagues: “The judge’s decision was quite right. He was a bloody crook and he was lucky to avoid being referred to the DPP.”

Doubtless, Hirst’s legal genes contributed to his sang-froid. His father, Sir David Hirst, was a leading defamation and commercial barrister who became a Lord Justice of Appeal. His great-grandfather established a firm of solicitors in Norwich; his great-great uncle was a Liberal MP and Master of the Rolls during the First World War. Steeped in the law as he was, Hirst would emulate his father in becoming a popular figure at the Bar — and in acting for the Beatles. While Hirst Sr acted for Paul McCartney to dissolve the Beatles, and later for all of the Beatle’s claim against their manager, Allen Klein, Jonathan was proud to follow in his footsteps and act for the Australian media against EMI in the 1990s that he also once again echoed his father’s habits in preferring any cases heard on a Friday to wrap up by 2.30pm so that he could be on the afternoon train to Norfolk.

He was ever willing to serve the legal profession more widely too. As well as being chairman of the Bar Council he was chairman of the Law Reform Committee, treasurer of Inner Temple and joint head of Brick Court Chambers.

Although latterly he developed an extensive arbitration practice — chairing many tribunals and ranked in tier one for arbitration by the Legal 500 — Hirst was an advocate’s advocate. “The Bar is going to compete, and compete vigorously,” he declared, upon becoming chairman of the Bar. He staunchly rejected calls for the fusion of barristers’ and solicitors’ professions, argued for the modernisation of the Bar and helped to pioneer the BarDirect scheme, enabling clients to circumvent solicitors and gain direct access to counsel.

Hirst’s regular holiday destinations abroad were Venice, where he and Fiona honeymooned in 1974, and Barbados. Anthony Trollope was a favourite author; he also enjoyed historical biographies, detective stories and the music of Mozart, Bach and Handel.

The Beatles were not the only pop musicians for whom he acted. Hirst helped Sting in his claim against Coutts Bank for paying out money without authority after his accountant was found to have stolen money from his personal account. Yet he remained, in many ways, his father’s son. Fiercely capable yet courteous; apparently old-fashioned, but with his finger on the pulse; and resolutely and determinedly to the end, not one for the largely uncerebral delights of pop music.

Jonathan Hirst, QC, barrister, was born on July 2, 1953. He died from cancer on July 10, 2017, aged 64.

Jonathan Hirst had strong legal genes

father served in the same role in 1978-79. Once, when Jonathan appeared before Mr Justice Jacob and began his submissions saying “I have three points”, the judge interrupted him to observe: “Your father always used to say that. And he would always forget what the third point was.” It is possible that the story of Hirst’s ensuing performance is apocryphal; it is also possible, given his innate ebullience and good humour, that Hirst knew exactly what he was doing. He went on to make his first and second points, before saying: “And now for my third point. Er...”

For all that he had an infectious laugh and booming voice, Hirst was also a fine lawyer who married sound common sense with legal acumen. He was called to the Bar in 1975 and, after joining 1, Brick Court (now Brick Court Chambers), did not hang about. Having gravitated to commercial work, he became known for his incisive grasp of the issues and quick turnaround of papers. Before long, as well as rapidly building his own practice, he was working as a junior with two greats of the Bar: the late Robert Alexander, QC, and Sir Sydney Kentridge, QC. With Alexander, Hirst acted in the well-known case brought by the Australian media tycoon and entrepreneur Kerry Packer against the Test and County Cricket Board in 1977. With Kentridge, he acted in the Makédomic scuttling case in the early 1980s. Hirst went on to practice for 41 years, 26 of which were as a QC. In one of his more notable cases he acted for Coopers & Lybrand, the auditor of many of Robert Maxwell’s companies, after the media mogul’s death.

Jonathan William Hirst was born in 1953 at St George’s Hospital, Hyde Park Corner, London, and brought up near Hampton Court before, at the age of eight, going to board at a preparatory school on the Wiltshire-Dorset border. The eldest of five siblings, he went to Eton where he enjoyed tennis and — despite the teasing of his brothers and sisters, who noted that an unusually large animal he was disinclined to — become a keen swimmer.

From Eton, Hirst went to Trinity College, Cambridge to read law. It was

while there that he met his wife, Fiona Tyser, a medical secretary at Addenbrooke’s Hospital, while out beagling one Saturday afternoon in his first year. They married in 1974 and had two children. The first, Thomas, died at birth; the second, Charles, is soon to take up a role with mbp, a London-based communications firm. Fiona and Charles survive him, as does his mother, Pamela.

The Hirsts settled in Fulham, south-west London, but also loved Norfolk, where they bought a house on the edge of the market town of Aylsham. There he would spend most winter Saturdays shooting pheasant and partridge.

So enamoured of country life was Hirst that he converted an outhouse into an office so that he could spend the Bar vacations in Norfolk. It is rumoured

Hirst acted for the Beatles in their dispute against EMI in the 1990s