

Margaret Duggan
has spent more
hours following
General Synod's
debates than
anyone else. She
looks back over
its 25 years

Giants in those days

one has had the same gift for getting members of Synod falling off their seats with laughter as soon as he spoke. One remembers, too, the glamorous Jenny Boyd-Carpenter sitting in Synod in one of her long dresses, almost a ball gown, laced at the bodice like Snow White's, working at some piece of ecclesiastical embroidery (on one occasion a full cope) to while away the debating hours. And there was always the notable Dr Margaret Hewitt, the only woman to wear a hat in Synod: hats that got steadily hatterier and hatterier as the years went on.

Many of the great names in Synod at that time were radicals, with Michael Ramsey the most truly radical of the lot. We had a great sense of wanting to get on with reforms; and the passing of Canon B.15a, which allows all Trinitarian Christians of good standing in their own churches to receive communion at Anglican altars, seemed a real triumph. But a great blow, and a personal blow to Dr Ramsey, was the failure of the Anglican-Methodist unity scheme, which was the first hint of the Anglo-Catholic/Evangelical alliance that was to grow in strength in subsequent Synods.

The press gallery was very sparse in those days, with Basil Gingell who doubled up as religious affairs and naval correspondent for *The Times*; the faithful Baden Hickman from *The Guardian*; Cecil Northcott, noted for the eccentricity of his reporting, in *The Daily Telegraph*; and Douglas Brown from the BBC. Occasionally there was a hard-bitten old journalist in a dirty raincoat from the Press Association, who snored loudly.

By the time we reached the last session of that first five years, we had set in motion the process that would dominate much of the Church's life for the next two decades. We had voted that there were "no fundamental

Times that week, I confessed that I had actually been converted in the course of the Synod debate.

Right up to the moment it started, I said, my intention had been to abstain. My instincts (prejudices) were all against women priests, and I had not been swayed by the arguments of women's lib or the heart-tugging cases of personal vocation that had so often been voiced. But on 3 July 1975 the debate was lifted on to a theological plane that made sense to

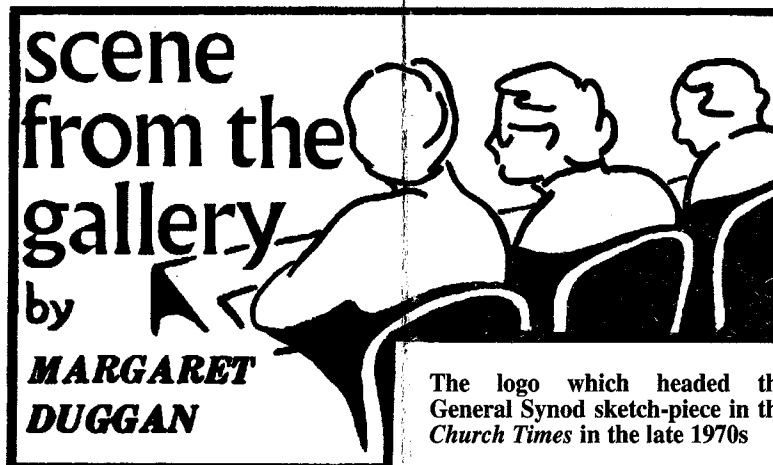
reporting with Susan Young, the new news editor, and we were later joined by Betty Saunders. Since then we have always followed the same pattern. If a text is provided for the opening speech (which one always hopes for), one of us checks it against delivery while the other writes it up. (I always aim to have completed the writing up of an opening speech by the time the speaker has delivered it.)

Then, in turn, we take down two or three speeches in our individual

pattern to hold summer sessions of the Synod at York University. I remember that the first year or two, the only fax machine made available to us was in the university chemistry department to which Susan Young and I would prowl at about one o'clock in the morning to coax it into action.

By the late 1970s, public and media interest in the General Synod was growing. One major factor was the appointment of the late Gerald Priestland as the BBC religious-affairs correspondent: a huge lovely man, a distinguished former foreign correspondent. He brought a new seriousness and credibility to church affairs in the media, and in 1977 introduced a nightly report on Synod during its sessions. Unfortunately it did not survive.

At the same time the General Synod's own press-information office was growing steadily more professional under John Miles and his team, and the quality newspapers were beginning to appoint more specialists



The logo which headed the General Synod sketch-piece in the *Church Times* in the late 1970s

me; and I began to realise that all the arguments for women priests were coming from those members whom I most respected both as Christians and as intellectuals, while the arguments against the women were (as I wrote at the time) "so sterile, so encapsulated in the past, so unfree and afraid of the unknown".

The second Synod was different in character. For one thing, Dr Ramsey had retired and been replaced by Dr Coggan; and the Synod itself had become a more conservative body. By the time Dr Coggan retired, he had to warn it that elements in it were getting so untight and bitter they were

mixtures of short- and long-hand, and write them up as our colleague takes the next couple of speeches. (Our national media colleagues have long been tapping away at lap-top computers.) In those early days we sent the copy back to the *Church Times* office by a relay of messengers. These days the fax machine has taken over, and seems even more relentless than the messengers in its hunger for copy.

It soon became the established

IT MUST BE some sort of record to have attended every session of the General Synod for a quarter of a century without missing a single day. Amazingly, it represents over nine months of my life, yet I still have enough of a perverted taste to look forward to it. Like the Church of England in general, the Synod has often been exasperating, sometimes painful, and has certainly had its tedious hours (all those long afternoons of registrars' fees and standing-orders revision); but it has also on frequent occasions shown itself to be an admirable body of informed Christians, intelligently discussing the world and their faith.

I was a member of the General Synod for its first five years, after it was inaugurated in 1970, though even then I spent part of my time in the press gallery. I don't think it is just the distance of time which now makes that first Synod seem so much more colourful than the greyer body it has since become. We felt we were pioneers, and that it was exciting to be taking the government of the Church into the Church's own hands in such a significant way. And there were giants in those days: Archbishop Michael Ramsey, Professor Geoffrey Lampe, Professor Norman Anderson, the Revd Hugh Bishop, and "the two great Dames": Betty Ridley and Christian Howard.

Other characters also lent colour. Christopher Wansey may have had