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Amorous judge is cleared of £500,000 theft

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A FORMER judge who lavished expensive gifts on a woman half his age with the help of £500,000 allegedly taken from his company had the case against him thrown out yesterday.

Largesse: Kenneth Bagnall, QC

Kenneth Bagnall, QC, was accused of stealing more than half the publishing firm's bank balance and using some to give the woman a six-figure cash gift, a Rolex watch and diamond ring.

The former deputy circuit court judge, 72, who never denied his largesse, left Blackfriars Crown Court, central London, vindicated after the judge decided to stay the proceedings.

Most of the cash Bagnall took was owed to him for his part in the sale of the New Law Publishing company, of which he was a founder and major shareholder, to a Dutch concern in 1997. The rest was made up of salary arrears, Judge Brian Pryor, QC, was told.

After legal argument, Judge Pryor concluded: "I am in a position to say that there should be a stay placed on these proceedings." He will give his reasons today.

Outside court, Bagnall, of Wentworth, Surrey, said: "I have been living with this each and every day since May 1998. Facing a case like this was even worse, as I had a career at the Bar, but I am just glad that the right decision has been made."

Bagnall, who was called to the Bar in 1950 and served as a judge from 1975 to 1983, denied 14 charges, which alleged that he stole £560,000 from the company between October 1997 and April 1998.

Timothy Barnes, QC, defending, said: "From the outset he was saying his shareholding entitled him to a share of the pot. It is not the case that the New Law fund had been ransacked." His client had told police: "It was my company, it was my money. I do not see how you can steal from yourself."

The court was told that Bagnall used half of the firm's bank balance of £1 million after New Law's sale to the Dutch company Croner. The sale was prompted by New Law's increasing debts.

Mr Barnes said Bagnall used the slice of the account to which he was entitled and left the other shareholders the proportion that was theirs. A large proportion of Bagnall's cash went to a friend, Diane Howell, as a £200,000 gift, a £6,750 Rolex watch and £50,000 diamond ring. The gifts to Ms Howell, who is in her early 30s, were part of a failed attempt at a personal relationship.

Non-executive directors, including Sir Brian Goswell, feared that Bagnall had taken too much from the account in a "criminal" act and reported him to police, Mr Barnes said. The defence team sought to stay the proceedings on the basis of an abuse of process, prompting the hearing that started yesterday.

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