

Without Sir Peter Gregson, Mrs Thatcher would probably never have won her titanic confrontation with the miners. As her trusted aide in the Cabinet office and the man deputed to formulate the government's tactics in any looming showdown with Arthur Scargill's National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), Gregson was the senior civil servant who made sure that the government could withstand any prolonged strike.

He ensured that power stations had enough coal to continue working. He warned her of the political dangers of using the army to move coal. He made contingency plans to avoid damage to the nation's food stocks and industrial output. Above all, he was the calm voice of deliberation and forethought, ensuring that if it came to a fight, the prime minister would win.

He knew well what would happen if proper preparations were not made. He had worked closely with Edward Heath, and had seen how an earlier confrontation with the miners had rapidly led to power cuts, the three-day week, widespread economic unrest and a collapse of public confidence — culminating in electoral defeat and the end of Heath's career.

After more than 20 years in senior civil service posts, Gregson arrived in the Cabinet office in 1981 as deputy secretary. He quickly won the confidence of Thatcher. She admired his thoroughness, his mastery of detail, his low-key manner and his skill in ensuring that she had all the right papers, at the right time, to make decisions. He demonstrated his bureaucratic skill in annual public spending rounds, when he was secretary of the Ministerial Group on Public Expenditure (known as the "Star Chamber") and was responsible for settling arguments about spending in various departments that could not be agreed with individual ministers or the chief secretary to the Treasury.

In 1982, he was brought in to chair an official group dealing with the coal industry. From the start, he knew — as did Thatcher — that this was where the government's determination to curb the power of the unions would be tested to destruction. Over-capacity was placing a heavy burden on the economy in high energy prices and public subsidy. The NUM leadership was increasingly militant and determined to resist downsizing of the industry. The government did not want to provoke a strike. However, Thatcher refused to back away from a clash.

When the strike came, in the spring of 1984, she was ready — thanks largely to the work done over the previous years by Gregson and the official group. For the next 12 months, as violent confrontations between striking miners and the police broke out, the bitterness grew and the ideological stakes mounted, Gregson was by Thatcher's side, advising, planning, consulting.

In the run-up, he had been clear on what could be won and where concessions should be made. Just before the strike began, the dockers had walked out. He briefed Thatcher on the dangers. "The political and economic stakes are much higher for the government in the coal dispute than in the docks dispute," he wrote in a memo. "Priority should therefore be: end the dock strike as quickly as possible, so that the coal dispute can be played as long as possible." She listened to him, played the miners for the next 12 months and finally forced

unconditional surrender on Scargill.

Gregson worked closely with three prime ministers — Wilson, Heath and Thatcher — and for 11 years held top posts in the civil service as permanent secretary of the Department of Energy and then the Department of Trade and Industry.

Peter Lewis Gregson was born in 1936 in the Yorkshire village of Howard, to Lillian and Walter, who taught in the school. From 1945 his family lived in Nottingham and, in 1947, he won a scholarship to Nottingham High School, where he had a distinguished academic record that took him on to Balliol College, Oxford, with an open scholarship in classics. He graduated with a first in both classical moderations in 1957 and Greats (philosophy and ancient history) in 1959.

An academic career beckoned, but his tutor advised him only to do this if there was no alternative. That year he was selected for the administrative class — the high flyers — of the civil service, but he had first to do his national service. As a second lieutenant in the Royal Army Educational Corps, he was attached to the Sherwood Foresters. He claimed that he learnt more about leadership and management from his army experience than in his early years in the civil service.

He joined the Board of Trade in 1961 and was immediately set to work on preparing the negotiating briefs for Britain's first, and unsuccessful, attempt to join the Common Market. In 1963 he became private secretary to the minister of state for overseas development, and spent the next 18 months organising and taking part in ministerial visits to 16 countries in the Far East, North and South America, East Africa and Eastern Europe — an arduous task at a time when long-distance travel was still tiring and complicated. The lesson he learnt was the importance of detailed planning, resilience and stamina.

The next job, in 1966, was to assist in assessing candidates for entry into the higher grades of the home civil service and the diplomatic service. The discipline here was how to evaluate personal strengths and weaknesses with objectivity. This was followed, a year later, by a stint in the executive development programme of the newly established London Business School. He was the only civil servant on the course, and he became convinced of the need for officials dealing with industrial and commercial issues to work alongside business people.

In 1968 he was moved again — this time to become one of the prime minister's private secretaries with responsibility for parliamentary matters. The main task was to draft answers for prime minister's questions. Wilson particularly enjoyed putting down a hostile questioner with a devastating statistic. Gregson, who supplied the material, later said the most stressful time of his career was sitting in the officials' box during PMQs, listening to the uproar and hoping that what he had given the prime minister would keep him out of trouble.

Few people could match Gregson for the wealth and range of experience he accumulated. He had responsibility for Northern Ireland, and took part in the conference telephone call in 1969 that led to the deployment of British troops in the province. He worked as private secretary to Heath after he became prime minister. He returned to the Board of Trade in 1972 and, after Labour's election victory in 1974, he was obliged to make a seamless switch when asked to develop radical new policies for Tony Benn, including the creation of a National Enterprise Board to take over the UK's 25 largest companies. It was not a direction he favoured — and this was the only time in his career when personal concerns about the implications of his work kept him awake at night.

Gregson seemed the perfect fit for the consummate civil servant, with a wry, dry sense of humour that he deployed sparingly. Government service was his life. He never married, and lived in Beckenham with his mother, devotedly nursing her through ill-health in her later years. He lived alone after her death. He was, his friends recall, a very private person, but had a strong altruistic streak and sense of patriotic idealism. His interests included opera, and he had a circle of friends from Oxford days — two of whom went on to become Nobel laureates.

In 1977, he returned to the Department of Trade as under secretary responsible for trade with the Middle East and Africa — and so he then began travelling extensively again. Two years later, he was appointed head of the Marine Division, later the Maritime Coastguard Agency. There was a lot of concern at the time about oil pollution from tanker accidents. On Gregson's first day in office, the tanker *Tarpenbeck* collided with another vessel off Selsey Bill and turned over. His staff, with a nautical background, feared he might be a Jonah who would bring back luck. Luckily, the incident was successfully handled, and there were no more tanker accidents during his tour of duty.

His brief was then widened to take in civil aviation. He was enjoying the challenges of airports policy and preparing British Airways for private ownership when, in the summer of 1981, he was invited to move to the Cabinet Office. He declined at first because he felt the disruption would not be fair on his staff. He agreed only after a personal appeal from the Cabinet secretary who indicated that this was a move that the prime minister herself had requested.

After the end of the miners' strike, he was appointed permanent secretary at the energy department and then permanent secretary of the much larger trade and industry department, which, later, in 1992, absorbed responsibility for energy. In seven years, he served four secretaries of state: Nicholas Ridley, Peter Lilley, Michael Heseltine and Ian Lang — all with different ideas of the role of government.

On his retirement, in June 1996, Heseltine, by now deputy prime minister, wrote to him, referring to the "tremendous loyalty and dedication with which he had served so many ministers". He added: "For myself, I could not have asked for a better permanent secretary to work with during my time at the DTI." Sir Michael Scholar, who succeeded Gregson in 1996, said he left the

department in perfect condition — “everything was in apple-pie order”.

Retirement brought appointments to the board of Scottish Power, a directorship of the Woolwich and deputy chairmanship of the Board of Companions of the Chartered Management Institute from 1996 to 2002. He was active in voluntary work in Beckenham.

Throughout his life he had been a keen gardener — a hobby to which he could finally devote far more time during retirement.