

When is it time to hang up your boots?

From being yelled at by older solicitors to doing the yelling, **Richard Barr** reminisces on decades in the legal industry



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If it had been a reunion of surviving presidents of the USA, we might have had to fight off the media when we all gathered, but the get-together of 4 grey haired male solicitors is not yet a newsworthy event. Maybe, when solicitors are as rare as Bigfoot, the situation will be different.

Thus – anonymously – the four of us took our seats in our old office (which had since been turned into a restaurant) and ordered lunch. For the greater part of my working life and theirs, I was at a firm whose title hovered around the name of its founder – John Dawbarn who died in the 1950s when he fell out of a train – apparently in need of a pee. The firm was called variously Dawbarn & Barr, then Dawbarn Barr & Knowles, Dawbarns, Dawbarns Pearson and is currently Fraser Dawbarns.

What was significant was that the other three were: the past senior partner, the current senior partner and the next senior

partner. At one stage I was on the same trajectory, but, like John Dawbarn's train accident, that is another story.

I have written about them all over the years in these pages. Collectively, we have accumulated something like 130 solicitor years and we all go back to the 1970s when (with the warm glow of hindsight) life was easy and funny and time recording had not been invented.

Capriciousness over intelligence

We were all connected in a benignly incestuous way. We started our careers at a time when merit was judged more by capriciousness than by academic brilliance – which was just as well because two of us did not even have degrees, therefore these days any job application from us would have been binned nanoseconds after it had been opened. Employment was offered in the same style in which I was approved as a suitable candidate to become a solicitor: I attended a panel of three solicitors who were then at least as old as we are now. I was asked just one question: "Is your father the cricketer?" My response, "yes", was only slightly a white lie. I knew of no other Barr who was a cricketer and my father had indeed occasionally played cricket. I never knew whether he was the cricketer, but in any event my answer satisfied the panel and I was approved to train as a solicitor.

In rather the same vein John (to whom I have referred in the past as the bearded partner – even though he is now clean shaven) mainly got his job because he was at the time dating Suzanne who was the daughter of our family's friendly optician. He will take over as senior partner at the end of the year.

William, the cross partner, had been articled with me in London and was my best man at my first wedding. He rang me one day and said that he was not happy in his present job. A few weeks later he joined the firm and built up a formidable litigation practice. He retired last year as the senior partner but still keeps his hand in as the coroner for parts of Cambridgeshire.



"These days any job application from us would have been binned nanoseconds after it had been opened"

And the current senior partner, Colin (the vegetarian partner) joined the firm because he crashed his car and dented his then girlfriend. He came to us to be sued. His insurers paid up

enough to enable them to put down a deposit on their first house. In passing he had mentioned that he was studying law at university. He joined the firm, carrot in hand and full of left-wing ideals. Sometime later he became an enthusiastic capitalist.

Pensioners' day out

We had not met together for several years and must have looked, if any onlookers were interested, like pensioners on a day out. Worse than that; we were probably not noticed at all. William had once remarked that once you are over 60 you become invisible to the next generation down – so presumably all they saw was an empty table with the cutlery lifting itself and depositing food into nowhere.

Our conversation spanned decades, from first beginnings when we were shouted at by elderly solicitors, to the times when we did the shouting. We discussed Lord Chancellors we had hated; none more so than the present one; and of course we exchanged gossip – the more salacious because many of those we gossiped about were now dead and could not retaliate.

When we finished, we bade our fond farewells, resolved to do it again and invisibly departed. Nobody saw us come and nobody saw us go. And that perhaps is a metaphor for all solicitors who get near to their sell by date. Time for us to wear purple perhaps? **SJ**

