

Stand and stare

At his local law society's AGM, Richard Barr remembers the days when solicitors could have a leisurely lunch and time recording was a far-off prospect



They were all sitting on the warm grass under a surprisingly warm bank holiday sun. From time to time one of them passed a comment which was acknowledged by another in a nonchalant way. I did not get their meaning, but it was probably something along the lines of "Nice bit of grass this," or "How is the cud chewing going Erin?"

In one of those eccentric moments that spouses have from time to time, my wife acquired some sheep a few years ago. It seemed faintly logical. There was land for them to graze on. They would be delicious to eat. Their fleeces could be turned into worsted and we would be rich.

But it did not quite work out that way. They all acquired names, and small personalities. It is one thing to buy a shrink wrapped leg of New Zealand lamb from Sainsbury's. It is altogether different to contemplate leg of Erin or Meredith.

So the sheep are destined to live to a ripe old age in complete luxury, sure in the certain knowledge that they will never pay a visit to an abattoir. The only indignity they will have to endure is to be shorn once a year.

Their fleeces, far from making us money, are gradually filling the house. The plan, one day, is to sell them but people who buy fleeces do not pay much (about £5 per fleece I am told. Cost of shearing a sheep £4. Profit £1.) It is one of those long term plans for which totalitarian countries and the EU are renowned. I am looking forward to contemplating our own wool mountain in due course. It is already a wool hillock.

But it was not about sheep that I wanted to write.

Our local law society recently had its AGM. So great was the enthusiasm of the local professionals that we could not even achieve a forum until several additional

solicitors had been press-ganged into attending.

It has not always been like that. Local law societies, even in Norfolk, were once a force to be reckoned with. A letter from the secretary was perhaps not quite as scary as a communication from the SRA (as it then wasn't) but it came close. Now presumably the response would be "Whatever..."

"Local law societies, even in Norfolk, were once a force to be reckoned with"

At the same AGM, after we had dragged several young solicitors kicking and screaming to the meeting to make us quorate, an old solicitor lamented the passing of lunches.

Yes the office lunch. If you are under 40 you probably do not know about such things, but once upon a time solicitors used to go out for lunch – taking a full hour, and sometimes slightly more. Furthermore, they would even go out together and, for a brief moment in the day, they would abandon their animosity and would be, if not exactly pleasant to one another, at least civil enough to buy the occasional drink.

In my formative years, our office was next to Antonio's wine bar in King's Lynn and there we would gather several times a week not, as one would now, for a low calorie, no carb, wholemeal wafer washed down with water that had been purified through fissures in rocks during the Precambrian era, consumed while crouched in front of the computer. Instead it would be a thick pizza laced with mozzarella, piled high with the most dangerous ingredients known to coronary arteries, and washed down with

not one, but several, glasses of excellent dry house white.

It was during those sessions that we would in short shrift solve the problems of the world in general, and the Law Society and the lord chancellor's department in particular.

We would then repair to our offices for an afternoon nap. We would not even have to invent a time category for the activity because time recording had not become widespread – and had certainly not reached Norfolk. Yet we got our work done, made more money in real terms than we do now, and were probably a lot happier.

We cannot turn back time, but most practitioners outside the thriving commercial sweat shops need support, cheering up and a drink of something that has not come straight out of a spring.

To that end, I commend the most meaningful resolution passed at our AGM: an end-of-week get together on the last Friday of every month at the newly named pub in Norwich called The Lawyer.

And I also commend to you (at only £1 a session) the chance to lean over our gate and look at our sheep for –

"What is this life if, full of care,
We have no time to stand and stare.
No time to stand beneath the boughs
And stare as long as sheep or cows."
W H Davies

In that way you will be able to cleanse your minds, and our sheep will at long last turn in a modest income.



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