

# Rat race for a lawyer's territory



No animals were harmed in the writing of this article, explains **Richard Barr**



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**"D**ear Sirs, we write to acknowledge receipt of your letter of 21 February," I said into my dictating machine. Scratch scratch, rustle rustle. "However, we take exception to the unhelpful tone of your letter." More scratching, a faint sound of gnawing. "We have endeavoured to be proportionate in our response to your unreasonable proposals." Gnawing right above my head and growing louder. "In our turn, we feel sure that any judge WILL YOU SHUT UP!" Startled scuttling in the ceiling space.

I have before described the pleasures of working from home. Those pleasures merge with the pain of living in an elderly house in the middle of Norfolk, surrounded on all sides by fields and woodland which are occupied by horses, sheep,

foxes, hundreds of song birds – and rats.

There are many nooks and crannies in the house where uninvited rodents can live in the relative warmth of our central heating (usually set so that it just about prevents our cups of tea from freezing if they are not consumed within five minutes). For a rat, however, it is luxury compared to living under a damp branch or down a wet hole.

It was already a bad week. The roof to the bay window in our bedroom had started to leak. Throughout the night there was the sound of the constant drip-drip of water into a bucket. For a while it would stop, then, as I was drifting off, there would be a spatter of drips that had me wide awake until it stopped before... you can guess the rest.

So, when the gnawing started the following morning, just as I was dealing with a difficult letter from the other side, (why oh why can we not be a little more inquisitorial and less adversarial in this country?), my temper was already frayed and it became unremittingly more so as the morning wore on.

A rat had crept into the space above the ceiling of what passes for my office (a repository for every piece of paper in the house that no one can find a home for, along with baskets full of laundry waiting for action –

the washing machine is next door – and more baskets of clean laundry waiting to be put away).

Nothing could silence it. Shouting did no more than startle my secretary when she came to type my dictated outburst the following day. Banging on the ceiling with a broom handle was no more effective.



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I began to develop a nervous tick. I started to speak in a falsetto voice. Many of my clients asked if I was ill – only to be told in no uncertain terms that I was fine. I started to go off my food. I stopped shaving, and still the rat gnawed on.

Our local hardware shop sold me three very large rat traps with springs so strong that they almost required a crowbar to set them. I planned a ratty menu of

all the things that if I were a rat (which I am not; I am a lawyer, but there are some jokes that fail to make the distinction), I would enjoy: peanut butter, cheese, lightly fried bacon, organic porridge. I provided the rat with a choice on its traps. Then I went to bed (to endure more torture from the leaking roof) and waited.

The following day, the rat had indeed shown its preferences. It had finished the bacon, gnawed round the edges of the peanut butter and shunned the cheese but had not sprung any of the traps. The day after was the same. Bait gone, traps still set. The only casualty was the end of my finger when I accidentally let off the trap while checking the bait.

The gnawing diminished, no doubt because the rat was now well fed, but my apoplexy remained at the high end of the Richter scale.

Eventually, for no other reason than I had it in my hand, I discharged a whole can of Lynx deodorant into the ceiling void. There followed a little ratty coughing. Then silence.

And that is how it has remained. Now, as I lie awake at night listening to the rain dripping into the bucket, I reflect that I have got one over on the rats – and that potentially we have the sweetest smelling rats in Norfolk. **SJ**