

Parking problems on Carey Street

The return of a long-lost memory card gets **Richard Barr** thinking about how firms can best protect their confidential data



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I was standing on an unsteady stool wielding a large hammer and a small picture hook when my telephone chirped. Dilemma. Do I continue to try to hang the picture – on the basis that it is more likely than not that the call is from a nice lady who will cheerfully invite me to write off all of my debts under new government legislation – or do I take the call?

The displayed number was unfamiliar. I took a chance and dropped the hammer. It narrowly missed my toe.

'Is that Richard Barr?' asked the authoritative voice – definitely the voice of someone who was to tell (not sell) me something.

'Yes,' I replied, ever so tentatively.

'It's' (and here he identified himself as the last president of the Law Society-but-three). 'Have you lost anything?'

When the last president of the Law Society-but-three rings you in the evening and asks you if you

have lost something, it induces the kind of buttock-nipping panic that is normally reserved for that moment when the defendants cheerfully inform you that your client's claim is statute barred or a judge pronounces at trial that your pleadings are irredeemably defective. This was partly because I could not think of a single thing that I had lost, and certainly nothing that should be of concern to the last president of the Law Society-but-three.

There is a room inside the Law Society where members of the council can go, leave their baggage, log onto computers, and make telephone calls. This is where the mystery began, but first a brief history lesson.

In 1956, a mere 60 years ago, IBM launched its 305 RAMAC, the first computer with a hard drive. At the time it was hailed as a dream come true – a computer that could handle accounts, store them, and print documents. It weighed half a ton, cost \$3,200 (equivalent to £23,170 now) per month to lease, and took up a whole room. And the size of the hard drive? It was five megabytes – about 3,000 times smaller than the capacity of my current mobile phone.

The storage capacity of microchips is truly remarkable now. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* is no longer printed, but when it was, it consisted of 32 volumes and weighed 129 pounds. It ran to about 50 million words but the full set now takes just 4.5 gigabytes – or far less than the memory card on most digital

cameras. So why am I telling you?

Well, it was like this. Towards the end of 2014 I was sitting in the council members' room working on my laptop when there was a ping and the little micro SD memory card vanished from its slot. It is about the size of a trimmed-clean fingernail. For the next hour I searched high and low for it, but it had just disappeared into thin air.

It had nothing special on it, certainly nothing that would compromise national security, make me liable to a hefty fine from the Information Commissioner, or prevent me from becoming president of the USA, but it had cost me a lot of money. I thought about it from time to time but eventually overcame the bereavement and moved on with my life... until the last president of the Law Society-but-three made his call.

He had, he said, recently been working (on the opposite side of the room to where my loss occurred), and when he finished he scooped everything into his briefcase and left. Sometime later, he put the card into his computer. He then found, among other things, some copies of my draft articles for *Solicitors Journal*.

What the SD card was doing with itself for the intervening two years may never be known. It could have been tagged by the CIA and followed by a team of highly trained sleuths as it meandered hither and thither in search of its home. Or it could have been planted in the computers of presidential

candidates (of the American kind – please leave out our humble last president of the Law Society-but-three).

These days it is not just the loss of a fingernail full of data that gives concern; more it is the rampant hi-tech fraud that is perpetuated on all parts of the population, including the legal profession. No matter how good the security, it seems there is someone somewhere who will defraud you.

I have a solution. All I need is a very large lorry. That card can store up to 64 gigabytes (13,000 times more than the RAMAC computer). Translated into paper, that would fill 640 bankers' boxes of documents – and a pretty large lorry. Let us all end our romance with the microchip and invest in lorries to carry around every piece of data we have ever created. It may cause a few logistical problems, especially as huge lorry parks will be required for the larger firms, but think of the relief: no more cyber-attacks.

When I next pay a visit to the Law Society I shall therefore leave my SD card at home and instead park my lorry in Carey Street, with the reasonable confidence that it is unlikely to vanish into thin air – unless the last president of the Law Society-but-three has taken my parking space with his three-year-old presidential lorry and I have to leave it somewhere dodgy like the Strand or the Royal Courts of Justice's judges' car – or lorry – park. **SJ**

