

Who knows where the time goes

From miscarriages of justice to goats on boats, **Richard Barr** takes a look back at his 22 years as our yokel solicitor in residence



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Just a little over 22 years ago, the then editor of *Solicitors Journal* Marie Staunton dropped me a line to suggest that I might write the occasional piece for *SJ*. Delighted to be asked to write something, I accepted with enthusiasm. The *Journal* then was almost unrecognisable from its present format – printed in black and white with the only colour being a splash of blue on the front cover. Over the years – through at least three changes of editor (and containing more than 400 articles from me) it has evolved to its bright new appearance.

Those 22 years have seen big changes not only in my life (divorce and remarriage, and five changes of firm) but also in the lives of those who chose the law in the vague expectation that it would be a worthwhile and remunerative career.

Back in the early 1990s, legal aid was under stress but it was

still alive and well. One of my early articles described a visit from the inspectors when we applied for a personal injury franchise (personal injury, like most other causes, has long since been removed from the scope of legal aid).

Small firms were surviving and – in most cases – thriving. The same cannot be said of 2013. More firms than ever are going to the wall, and many more are merging, or just giving up.

On reflection

So what did I put into those 400 articles? The short answer is all legal (and sometimes non-legal) life. In the early years I wrote a lot about holidays (mud baths in Turkey, firing rockets in Florida, jumping off a mountain strapped to a man with a beard), about Christmas (complaining bitterly that the in-laws were visiting and that the smooth flow of work was being interrupted), and about animals (a mouse with a parachute, a



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cow in a swimming pool, a cat that came back from the dead, and a goat on a boat).

Fruit and vegetables also provided inspiration. I featured turnips, carrots and even bananas.

I reflected (in a slightly distorted mirror) the changes in the profession – our uncertain steps to introduce computers into our lives and other advances in technology (I had started one partner off with a box labelled “computer” and gradually persuaded him that these machines did not bite). Mobile phones were present but far from universal. In one article I complained that seven people were speaking on their mobiles in a train carriage. Nowadays it would be astonishing if only seven people were on the phone at any one time.

My articles spanned the time when Martin Mears (from Norfolk) was president of the Law Society. He had been referred to variously as a backwoodsman and a Norfolk yokel. As I have lived in Norfolk all my life I felt it was my duty to respond. I wrote a number of articles (the first of which featured a cartoon taking up the whole of the cover) extolling the virtues of yokel law.

Well illustrated

Not everything I wrote was light hearted. I occasionally wrote about injustices, not only to

clients but also to solicitors themselves. I returned to one case again and again – the horrendous miscarriage of justice that was meted out to solicitor Sally Clarke who was wrongly accused and subsequently convicted of murdering her two sons. The prosecution had failed to make available crucial medical evidence which eventually (at the second attempt) resulted in her conviction being overturned. By then it was too late. She had been destroyed by her ordeal and died a few years later. John Batt wrote *Stolen Innocence* describing the full horror of the case. It is still available, and mandatory reading for anyone who is concerned that our system of justice can sometimes go very very wrong.

For the past 20 years every piece has been illustrated by cartoonist David Haldane. Some would say that the cartoons are far superior to the articles.

I don't promise still to be contributing to *Solicitors Journal* in another 22 years' time but in the meantime I wish well to the new look *SJ* and all who sail in her. **SJ**

Footnote: if you are interested in reading a pdf document containing a selection of some of the articles I have mentioned, email me at Richard.barr@paston.co.uk