

One last last word

Richard Barr looks back on a 40-year love affair with a legal journal dedicated to the interests of solicitors



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The book *84 Charing Cross Road* was a charming, poignant work published in the 1970s consisting entirely of an exchange of letters, spanning 20 years, passing between the author Helene Hanff and a bookshop in Charing Cross Road. It was described as a love affair between the author and a bookshop. The book was so successful that it was adapted as a film and a stage play.

My love affair with a journal dedicated to the interests of solicitors will attract no such accolades, even though it has lasted for more than 40 years – especially as it is shortly to be brought abruptly to an end.

It began quietly enough nearly 50 years ago when I was a reluctant article clerk in the country firm in which my late father was the senior partner (having reached that heady status in the small town office in Wisbech when his own senior partner fell out of a train while, apparently, looking for the loo).

In the days before CPD was invented we met at 8am every Friday to catch up on our cases and review developments in the law. Our source? *Solicitors Journal*. Then it was a far cry from its present lively format. It was a little severe, keeping its print strictly in well-defined columns with nothing more than a brief heading to tell us what each article was about. Yet it contained useful material for busy practitioners. It had already scored a century – its first issue was in 1857 – and had become well established as the supporter of the solicitors profession. It had no ties and prided

itself on its independence, as well as the range of topics it covered.

Fancying myself as a writer, I sent in an article in 1979 describing our firm's first word processor, a machine that was barely more sophisticated than a manual typewriter and cost about 20 times as much. To my delight it was accepted. There then did not follow a flood of my articles. Instead there had to be a real flood to inspire me to write again – three years later – when the River Ouse overflowed its banks and inundated the branch office which at the time I was running.

Over the next few years I wrote a few pieces for other journals but something I had written caught the eye of the then editor, Marie Staunton, who invited me to write regularly for *Solicitors Journal*. In the ensuing 439 articles I covered diverse topics from ghosts to goats, wobble dancing to white vans, frogs to fire engines, parachuting to paralegals, carrots to parrots, and even occasionally a little law.

Over the years I traced in these pages an exciting, if not exactly successful, career as I became involved in cases the likes of which would have been far better confined within the pages of a John Grisham novel – until I made what was probably my last move, working from home connected by an electronic umbilical cord to a virtual firm. The emphasis moved away from office life towards the struggle of practising law in competition with sheep, cats, ducks, bees, and the crumbling thatched house that we occupy.

Over the same timespan *Solicitors*

Journal became colourful, attractive, and tightly focused on the needs and interests of ordinary solicitors, without ever dumbing down. It embraced modern technology with enthusiasm, including a fully searchable website, digital copies of the magazine available online, and, just last month, its own app. The pithy editorials written by editor-in-chief Jean-Yves Gilg and deputy editor John van der Luit-Drummond always gave pause for thought.

I say 'gave' because, as you will have read elsewhere in these pages, *Solicitors Journal* is to be no more. Its publishers, on two weeks' notice, have decided to bury it – for ever.

When I received the news, it engendered the same emotions as I have on hearing of the death of a dear friend: I felt gutted. This journal has been a living organ, existing for 160 years, dedicated to the promotion and support of solicitors. It is the longest-running legal journal in the world. I have shared 40 or more of those years and have developed a great fondness for it. Yes, you could say it is a love affair. I for one will miss it – terribly.

If there is any bright spot coming out of this, the editor-in-chief and I have been working for some months on a little book of a selection of my articles, covering some of the topics I have mentioned here. Ironically, a week before the death knell was announced, the book went off to the typesetters and it is ready for printing. So *Solicitors Journal* might live on for just a little bit longer. *The Savage Poodle* – for this is what it is to be called – should be published later this month. **SJ**

