

LAW ON THE AIR

Richard Barr on the radio



I I hear' said former Radio Norfolk broadcaster Neil Walker, 'that you know a thing or two about the Consumer Credit Act'. He had rung me several times before I returned his call. Radio Norfolk was in its infancy in 1984 (it was not even broadcasting for a whole day) and I was frantically busy at my day job. Eventually he persuaded me to talk on air. That was well over a quarter of a century ago. At the time I was working in King's Lynn.

To reach the studio I had to climb narrow and creaking stairs in one of the oldest buildings in the town's Tuesday Market Place. There amid the low beams and yellowing wallpaper was Radio Norfolk's King's Lynn studio. Despite the antiquity of the building, there was a console bristling with switches, sliders and dials and I was connected up by the station's resident reporter who fitted me with my headphones, made me sit in front of a microphone that looked like a lollipop and asked me to say what I had had for breakfast.

Even in those days the whole set up would not have looked out of place in the cockpit of a modern jumbo jet - which is not inappropriate because the programme was called 'The Norfolk Airline'. That was one of the gentle puns in which the BBC specialised.

It was a nerve-racking experience. It was my first live broadcast. I was alone in the studio but in Norwich were two presenters (Neil Walker and David Clayton) and another solicitor (Peter Nicholls). I felt distinctly outnumbered. I listened through the chunky headphones to the record that was being played. As the music died away, a disembodied voice came down the line:

'So, Richard Barr, what's all this about the Consumer Credit Act?' I began to launch into a legal explanation.

'Stop right there!' I think it was David. 'Say that again and this time in English. No long words. No Latin.'

I took a deep breath and began again. 'When you pay for something by credit card you get extra protection from the law and this would help you if what you buy is defective or the seller has done a runner'.

'That sounds more like it'. I told the story of a client who had gone into one of those shops that are here today, gone tomorrow and back again on Thursday. He had bought a television set with his credit card, but when he got it home and plugged it in, there was no picture to be seen - just a lot of smoke coming from the back.

He stormed back to the shop, but by then its proprietor was gone, so he wandered unhappily into our offices. I pointed him to the law and he received a full refund from his credit card company. So pleased was he that he tipped off Radio Norfolk - and incidentally launched my legal broadcasting career. I don't think I even sent him a bill for that advice.

After I had told the story of the defective television I prepared to leave.

'Why don't you stay on till the end of the programme?' came one of the voices from Norwich. So I sat with my headphones on looking out over the comings and goings of the Tuesday Market Place. Callers came on the line with their legal problems. I was asked for my penny worth and I muttered some words of comfort. A little later on David came down the line when a record was being played and said 'You're a real natural, would you like to come on the next programme as well?'

And so I did - again and again and again. More than twenty-five years later I am still going back to Radio Norfolk to do legal broadcasts.

Although it could be done down the line from King's Lynn to Norwich it worked much better when you are all in the studio together. You can catch each other's eye, get an idea of when you are talking for too long and plan the next section of the programme while a record is being played.

From then onwards, I would usually join David, Neil and Peter in the studio to deliver a weekly dose of law on the air.

During that time I came to know all three pretty well. We developed ways of keeping the listeners on tenterhooks. We usually set a quiz at the beginning of our section of the programme but did not give the answers until the end, so everybody had to wait and hear us out to find out the answers to the questions. Sometimes we awarded exciting prizes like a Radio Norfolk eraser or a T-shirt to those who won.

During our broadcasts we heard all human life. We found that the first listener's question would often set the tone for the broadcast, so one day it might be wall to wall wills, and the next week it could be those horrible neighbour disputes which are often as bitterly fought as the worst divorces.

Then there was an imperious lady who rang to complain that her neighbour was gardening in the nude, and asked what could be done. 'You can't be serious' said David. 'I can and I am' she responded scarily. After that we solemnly pronounced on the legal possibilities - breach of the peace, indecent exposure, behaviour likely to frighten the horses. In truth, unless her neighbour was in a public place we concluded that there was not a lot that could be done - and we refrained from suggesting self-help with garden shears.

The Norfolk Airline was a runaway (fly away?) success and received a Sony radio award. The result was that David and Neil moved over to BBC Radio 4 and became national broadcasters, but the legal programmes continued. And I'll tell you more next month. ■

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FLYING HIGH ON THE RADIO

Richard Barr on the radio



In May I described the beginnings of my legal broadcasting career with BBC Radio Norfolk which continues to this day - if it can be a career when no money changes hands.

The programme on which I started, the Norfolk Airline, was so successful that the presenters, David Clayton and Neil Walker, were hired to make programmes for BBC Radio 4. Before they left they brought out a book of the programme which shows David and Neil apparently trying to start the engine of a bi-plane.

Judging from the photograph on the cover of the book they were trying to rotate the propeller backwards which means that they would never have got off the ground or, if they did, they would have flown the plane in reverse. Inside the book is a rather solemn photograph of Peter Nicholls and me looking like - solicitors (see picture inset).

Like a bad penny I kept coming back for more legal broadcasts. Other solicitors joined in from time to time including Barbara MacBrayne and Rebecca Carriage. I even had a long partnership with William Armstrong who is now the Norfolk coroner.

Throughout that time I broadcast with almost every presenter Radio Norfolk has ever had. Each had a different style. Sometimes we would tackle serious issues. I remember once crossing swords with the insurance industry when I dared to say that low cost endowment mortgages were highly risky as they never guaranteed to pay off your mortgage at the end.

They were outraged and I responded simply saying that if they were as good as we were told, then they should guarantee that the mortgage would be repaid at the end. Alas I was right, and many people who had low cost endowment mortgages found that they had a shortfall at the end of their mortgages.

Then there would be light hearted discussions

about the law, mingled with talk about almost everything under the sun. Sometimes the listeners would catch the lawyers out - either because they knew more about a legal topic than we did, or we simply did not know the answer. That was always a cause of celebration from the presenters.

One day a friend rang in to the programme. She had decided to wind me up and came out with all manner of scurrilous suggestions about my behaviour. The problem was that during this particular broadcast I was in the King's Lynn studio and the presenters were in Norwich. There was no way I could signal that this was a wind up. Eventually the presenter realised that something was up and faded her out. But it did not end there. Several outraged listeners then called in to ask why the programme was protecting me and I

was not asked to answer the accusations.

Technical problems sometimes beset us. Tony Mallion (editor of Places&Faces® and long time Radio Norfolk broadcaster) was attempting a live programme from the King's Lynn Magistrates Court when the broadcast line failed just moments before we went on air. It turned out to be a blown fuse at the receiver across the river next to the transmitter - not that this helped.

The broadcast was saved by the fact that Tony and I had pre-recorded a section of us exploring the vaults of my old office on the quayside, giving enough time to move all the guests to the King's Lynn studio and continue from there as if nothing had happened!

On another occasion I threw my toys out of the pram because the link had been taken over for another broadcast. I stormed back to my office in high dudgeon. Not long afterwards a frantic presenter telephoned to beg me to return to the studio. I relented. Listening to the recording afterwards, no one would have been able to tell that there had been a major wobbly thrown by me. It was all seamless.

It was less seamless when I tried to log on from the new King's Lynn studio out on one of the industrial estates. I obtained the key from next door, let myself in and immediately the burglar alarm went off. All they could hear in Norwich was a cacophony - and I had to take part sitting in my car and using my mobile phone. ■



The legal experts - Peter Nicholls and Richard Barr

ANIMALS Dogs without pedigrees. Dogs that bite. Dogs that bark. You name it; we've had a query about it on the Airline. Anyone who owns or is in charge of an animal has a duty to take care that it does not cause injury or damage. You must have a licence to keep animals such as alligators or tigers. It is an offence punishable by imprisonment to be cruel to an animal.

ARREST, RIGHTS ON If you are ever unfortunate enough to be arrested do remember that you should be allowed to speak directly to your solicitor and to a member of your family. If you are in doubt about your legal position you have a right of silence (i.e. you need say nothing).

Next month how we were greatly assisted in our legal broadcasts by the arrival on the scene of Drunken Denise. She breezed into the studio one day exuding the strong aroma of too many gins and tonics.

Richard Barr

RICHARD BARR IS A SOLICITOR BASED IN NORTH NORFOLK WHO IS ALSO A WRITER AND BROADCASTER



Had Twitter been invented then, Drunken Denise would be now be tweeting for all she was worth.

Drunk in charge

Richard remembers a boozy radio assistant



In a sober suited solicitor-ish way I've reminisced over my long association with BBC Radio Norfolk as an on-air legal beagle. But there was a point when sobriety went out of the studio window.

We were greatly assisted in our legal broadcasts by the arrival on the scene of Drunken Denise. She breezed into the studio one day exuding the strong aroma of too many gins and tonics.

In truth she was a character I created for the quizzes we set for the listeners. Over the following years she became involved in every conceivable legal dispute, frequently involving a slight over indulgence in G&Ts. Her escapades entertained the listeners and she even had a small fan club.

Such was the devotion that we even got to the point of creating our own Drunken Denise law qualification, duly despatched to listeners who got all the questions correct. My son, Nicholas, was pressed into designing the certificate which meant, after several years, DD had a face (of sorts!)

But it didn't stop there. This was developed in my time working on mid mornings with Tony Mallion, then a broadcaster now editor of Places&Faces® who felt, as a special treat, that DD should make a once in a lifetime live appearance. This she did, suitably inebriated and, as I recall, wearing a fetching woolly hat.

Now it can be revealed that the talented actress who brought her to boozy life was none other than Look East's Carol Bundock! I hope she won't sue me for that breach of confidence after many years. If Drunken Denise were still around, I am sure she would be helping Carol apply for a super injunction.

Had Twitter been invented then, Drunken Denise would be now be tweeting for all she was worth. Eventually she faded away, but her legacy lives on, as do some of the questions. See how you get on. Cheers!

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You be the judge

1. Denise had been served with an order to appear in court as a witness. She fully intended to appear, but because she was celebrating St. Denise's day the night before, she clean forgot to go to court. She apologised profusely when she got to court, but she was still charged with contempt of court.

QUESTION: Was she guilty? (Incidentally In Denise's calendar, St. Denise is the only saint who has 364 saint's days in the year.)

2. You may not know it but Denise in her day was famous on the stage. The local repertory company advertised for a man to play one of the three ugly sisters in Cinderella. Drunken Denise applied for the role. She was certainly ugly, but the producer wanted a man to play the part. Denise took this as blatant sex discrimination and made the appropriate complaint.

QUESTION: Was her complaint upheld?

3. Denise was a dog lover. She loved dogs and she loved lots of dogs. At one stage she had 44 of them and she kept them all at home. Surprisingly they were not all St. Bernards employed by her to carry her booze. She did not keep or breed the dogs for commercial purposes. The local authority decided that it was a 'material change of use' for her to have so many dogs, and that she should therefore have applied for planning permission.

QUESTION: Did Denise need planning permission?

Answers

YES 3 ON 2 YES 1

