



50 YEARS IN THE LAW HOW IT ALL BEGAN

Lionel Fynn



I wish I could tell you I always wanted a career in the law. After unsuccessfully pursuing various alternatives I eventually attended an interview with EVW Marshall-Harvey, a successful court advocate who made a name for himself in the Rattenbury murder case (refer to Terence Rattigan's Cause Célèbre). In preparation I read Dickens' aptly titled "Bleak House", his office being a gloomy dark room which had one light suspended from the ceiling on a frayed rope. Poised just above the desk it lit up its contents and little else.

I could dimly make out huge piles of brown paper bundles stocked on top of cupboards and shelves and covered in dust. In one corner an elderly gas fire wheezed and coughed with all its elements missing bar one. This confirmed all my worst suspicions about the law and I could not wait to get out into the sunshine. That would most definitely have been the end of the law for me but for a second interview with another local celebrity solicitor Philip Evans.

A charming young secretary named Deidre came in and brought tea for both of us. She also brought in what looked like a floppy vinyl record and placed it on what was the latest office recording machine called an "Emidicta", (Google it!) I was now very impressed. "I will take the remainder of my school holidays and let you know at the end of that", I said confidently. "Be here on Monday or forget all about it. Goodbye", said Philip Evans as I was shown the door.

do you mean by this?", said Mr Evans as he played out my most unimpressive version of, "Worried Man Blues." "I'm worried now but I won't be worried long!". "You won't be here long if you ever do anything like that again!", I was told, "You have over-recorded a vital commercial agreement. I have sacked people for less than that and you haven't been here a week yet!"

I need to make sense of everything by stepping back in time and looking at legal life in 1958. What of the hours of work? It was 9:00 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Monday to Friday and 9:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. on Saturdays. One in four Saturdays off and 2 weeks holiday a year. The most obvious difference to the 21st Century was in the way responsibilities were handled. Nowadays go to the office entrance at 5:00 p.m. sharp and you will see a bevy of secretaries determinedly making for the exit. In the late 1950s no-one, not even the office junior, was expected to leave the office until given tasks were completed. So if something had to go out that day and catch the post (and the post collections were much more frequent and later than they are now) then that is what happened. The secretary stayed to type whatever it was and the junior stayed to stick the stamps on, and post it. And what of the partners? They arrived soon after 9:00 a.m. (almost never beforehand) and left promptly at 5:00 p.m. And did not come in on Saturdays! And the senior partners of major firms such as Cyril Clarke, Harry Ellis, Marshall Harvey, Lewis Manning and occasionally Philip Evans, met downtown for coffee at 11:00 a.m. each week day when they were free to do so. Conveyancing was a major fee producer with fees fixed by law as minimum per cent charges on the value of the transaction. Around 4% and more if my memory is correct. No undercutting or competition in price or advertising was allowed. No wonder partner Colin McInerney



And so it was that I turned up at Philip Evans & Co, 16 Christchurch Road, Bournemouth on a Monday in August 1958. Philip Evans waived the then usual premium that everyone paid to enable article clerks to be employed and said if I made myself useful I might get £5 per week after 18 months. Apparently this meant doing anything thrown my way and doing it successfully. On my first day I was shown to a huge complicated looking telephone switchboard with numerous plugs and leads, just like the one illustrated here. I was told that the telephonist was ill and so I was the telephonist! There was no instruction book and no tutor and very soon everyone was shouting at each other on the single line that I had managed to connect. I can still hear the babble of numerous complaining voices today! After I got the hang of it I took an interest in the Emidicta. Recordings were made on the 12 inch floppy disc which the secretary then transcribed. So early on that first week I waited for everyone to go, found a disc, and recorded my personal version of the current Top Ten. Unfortunately I could find no way of erasing it. I assumed the maestro would dictate over it and be none the wiser. Next day, however, he demanded from his secretary the typescript of a commercial agreement he had dictated the day before. "I haven't got it", said the secretary, "I think you better hear this:"



Secretary with old dictation equipment, typewriter, and extension telephone system - probably around 1960

told me how lucky I was to be joining a busy successful firm as I would be able to retire at 40 years old! Philip Evans also told me how lucky I was to be a lawyer because "as a matter of honour no-one ever challenges or fails to pay a legal bill, so you will never have bad debts!" Pause and think how everything has changed! Fee earners now work anytime anywhere and pick up and answer their emails on Bondi Beach if that is where they are on holidays. And as for bad debts. Run the business like an accountant or face bankruptcy!

How much has changed for the better? ■

"Lionel!" I heard my name booming down the corridor: "What

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