

Our golden anniversary

by Ian McCombie, President, Leeds Law Society



"F

iftieth issue? Are you sure?"

But 'tis true, I was assured, it having been five years ago that as editor of the Leeds Law Society bulletin I sat with Lucy, the chief executive of our publisher, Barker Brooks, and agreed with her plan to take the publication to a wider audience, to pack it with professional news items and features that would interest readers, and to attract advertisers who would be delighted to be associated with our product. Fifty issues on we are still evolving, still trying to get the balance right, and still changing what we do to keep it fresh, relevant and readable.

I thought it would be an interesting exercise to remind us all of what was written in the President's column in the first issue, by my distinguished predecessor, Tony Sugare. So here it is:

Anthony Sugaré, past president (June 2001)

By the time this article is published Jeremy Shulman will have been installed as the new President of the Society, with Richard Stockdale as his Deputy.

I wish them both a successful year in office and I am confident that the society is in very capable hands. They know that at any time if I can assist, I will be only too happy to oblige.

When I took over as President last May, I said it was a great honour and I hope that you, the members, feel that I have discharged my duties in a manner which befits the society's good name. If I have, then it is only due to the wholehearted support of the Committee and you, the members.

I leave the society in what I believe is a very strong position. The membership has held up, committee meetings and sub-committee groups are well attended, we have held more seminars than ever before – nearly all of which have been well attended, and the society's finances remain very healthy. There will be a further announcement with regard to these finances later in the year.

I have thoroughly enjoyed my year in office with many highlights and very few lows. A good deal of my time has been taken up in supporting the action taken by those who practise criminal law – helping those who have struggled, to try and achieve the best terms possible in the contract negotiations with the Legal Services Commission. I believe that the united stance taken by practitioners in Leeds did play its part in eventually achieving favourable terms in the final contract documents.

I am gratified to learn that the number of complaints received by our local office continues in a downward trend, but we cannot be complacent. The media is only too quick to besmirch the reputation of the profession and we all have to be vigilant to ensure that we do not leave ourselves open to criticism from our clients.

I believe that the National Law Society still has a powerful voice in looking after the affairs of its members – whilst that may not have always been the case in the past. The stability that the current Office Holders have brought to their positions, coupled with plenty of good Yorkshire common sense from Michael Napier seems to have held sway in the Council chamber when making important decisions – not least of all the Reform Proposals.

I sign off with only the daily grind of the Leeds Magistrates Court to look forward to, although the memories that I take with me from my year in office will be there for many years to come.

The issues are very familiar, though the emphasis shifts from year to year and from president to president, but like carrying the Olympic torch, presidents proudly but with some trepidation carry the office for the benefit of the members, balancing delicately the anxiety of having a disaster occur on their watch, with the eagerness to protect and progress the interests of the solicitors they serve, and have been doing so now for 201 years.

And so I was delighted to meet with and hear the thoughts of our president, Kevin

Martin, at both the annual dinner of the Sole Practitioners Group in Wetherby, and then at the AGM of the Yorkshire Union in Hull. Mr Martin is an impressive man with a thorough grasp of the issues facing the profession; a clear mind; an excellent communicator; and a compassionate advocate on our behalves. He identifies the independence of the profession and the rule of law as the two most important and central issues for our profession.

In one of my previous columns commenting on the White Paper, I urged you all to recognise the potential for governmental interference in our profession, and to consult the Law Society's views on the point. These are excellent starting points for the formulation of your own views, which you must then communicate to your colleagues and submit to the government. Kevin Martin fears that the 15-month delay by the Department of Constitutional Affairs in providing a response to the proposed new professional rules submitted to it by the Law Society is indicative of a desire by Government to have much greater control of our profession, not the light touch regulation which we were promised when the Legal Services Board was formed. We have a responsibility to ourselves, to our clients, and to the legal system to be vigilant and to well-informed.

HIPs are a case in point: it's crucial to plan how to deal with them, and you should be expressing your view while it is still possible to influence the process.

As my year draws to a close, I would like to thank those who have helped, guided, encouraged and supported me. My committee has been excellent, and I must particularly thank our secretary Marie Walsh, treasurer Andrew Turnbull and dinner secretary, Jackie Samuels. Finally, thanks to the Leeds Legal team, particularly our regional manager, Debbie Green. It has been a fascinating year of insight, challenges and excitement, and I wish Rosemary Edwards great success in her own year.