



37 years of Lester Aldridge – Interview with Corporate Partner Susan Cowan

At Lester Aldridge, we like to celebrate that some of our employees have been with the firm for a significant amount of time.

Over the last few months we have been running a series of interviews with people in different roles across the firm, and this month we are shining a light on our [Corporate and Commercial](#) Partner [Susan Cowan](#), who is celebrating over 30 years with LA.

When did you join the firm and in what role?

I joined Lester & Russell (one of the two firms that merged on 1 October 1988 to create Lester Aldridge) on 1 October 1984. I moved from the City firm, Slaughter and May, where I had done my articles, qualified in 1983 and stayed for one-year post qualification. My role at Lester & Russell was as a corporate/ commercial lawyer although that type of work was limited at that time. I became a partner in July 1985. When I joined the firm, Lester & Russell was a 12 partner high street firm with two branch offices. The main office, where I worked, was in Old Christchurch Road / Post Office Road, above what is now Lush, Office and Patisserie Valerie. The office was spread over three floors and was not an efficient space, with lots of rooms, corridors and ups and downs. Most partners had two secretaries (who often performed paralegal roles by today's standards). Secretaries had electric typewriters and there was a room containing two-word processors that the secretaries took it, in turn, to use as needed. There was a room at the top of the building that housed the only photocopier, a huge Xerox machine that printed onto shiny paper (ugh!). We did have our own telephones though! When I first arrived my phone was hung on the wall behind my desk, which I found rather odd. Lester & Russell had two small branch offices. The Westbourne office, above an Italian restaurant, was presided over by Colin Patrick and his secretary, Sheila Jones. The Parkstone office occupied two houses in Ashely Road and was presided over by Sandy Stronach-Hardy and Jeremy Allin.

At the time I joined Lester & Russell, Mooring Aldridge, the other half of what was to become Lester Aldridge, was a 12 partner firm with its main office in Westover Chambers, Bournemouth. It also had two branch offices, a sizable office in Christchurch and another office in Poole.

The idea for the merger of Lester & Russell with Mooring Aldridge came from the Mooring Aldridge partners, sometime in 1987 I think. The Lester & Russell partners thought about it but said "no, thank you". A few months later the idea was put forward again and this time met with a more favourable reception. The merger was agreed in principle in the early summer of 1988 and actually took place on 1 October 1988. Our new name was the imaginative "Lester Mooring Aldridge & Russell" (which the local competition was quick to adjust to: "More or Less").

How have things changed at Lester Aldridge over the past 30 years?

Initially, the merged firm had to continue with its existing premises, but we also took a short lease of purpose built office accommodation on the first floor of Vandale House in Post Office Road. People were brought together in their teams and some people had to move buildings. I moved into Vandale House, which was a huge improvement. The plan was for the Bournemouth office to be located in a single building in Bournemouth, but that took time to achieve. Russell House was a building plot at that time with planning permission. The developer was looking for a tenant to sign up for a lease of the building before starting the build. We committed ourselves to Russell House and watched it being built over the next 18 months.

The first year of the merger did not go particularly well, not helped by the name and the fact that we didn't have any clear strategy (or if we did, no one told me what it was)! The name changed about a year later, as did the entire structure of the firm and its management.

We moved into Russell House over the August bank holiday weekend of 1990. I think all of the Bournemouth office partners, plus a lot of the staff, were present over the weekend helping to get things straight ready for Monday morning.

Over the next 5 years (maybe less), all of the branch offices were closed, our strategy being to move away from being a "high street" practice to being a regional firm, eventually with offices in strategic locations. The Southampton office opened in 2000.

How has technology changed over the years and how has this impacted your role?

One big change that took place at the point of the merger in 1988 was to give each secretary (at first only in some teams) their own word processors. At that time we used a system called Wang, it dealt with our accounts function as well as word processing, but it did not run any other applications. Compared with today's personal computers, it was also very difficult to use and very temperamental!

So, at the time of the merger, we had an automated accounts system, a limited word processing capacity plus a photocopier and a fax machine in each office. That was as far as our technology extended.

Gradually all of the secretaries were given their own word processor keyboards and monitors. I recall that by the end of 1991 I had my own Wang word processor on my desk (it was a brute, but I got used to it!).

Sometime in 1992 (I think), the first batch of PCs were introduced in Russell House. They were being trialled by the Private Client team. They ran the Word Perfect word processing application and a few years later we switched to Word. The trial was a success and the PCs were introduced firm-wide. By December 1992 I had a PC on my desk. As technology has developed we have had to adapt and keep up with it, as far as we can and as far as budget allows.

What made you stay with Lester Aldridge for more than 30 years?

I've had no reason to leave. I have been part of an evolving business and I have evolved with it. I've been very fortunate in my partners who I've always found very supportive.

What does the future hold? How different do you think things will be in 30 years' time?

Looking back, the changes over the last 30 years have been vast, largely fuelled by developments in technology. Looking forward I see an even faster pace of change than in the last 30 years but I can't begin to imagine what life in a law firm will be like in 30 years.

Thank you, Susan.

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