Celebrating 39 Years at Lester Aldridge – Farewell to Susan Cowan

This week, we say a fond farewell to Susan Cowan, Partner in our Corporate & Commercial team, who retires after 39 years with the firm.

In 2021, we spoke to Susan about her career and time at Lester Aldridge, and we have updated her interview below to include her future plans.

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 an Italian restaurant. 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 used 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 on Ashley 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

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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 took effect 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 39 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. At that time, Russell House was a building plot with planning permission. The developer was looking for a tenant to sign up for a lease of the building before starting to 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, few knew what it was)! The name changed about a year later, as did the entire structure of the firm and its management, under the guidance of a law firm management consultant.

We moved into Russell House over the August bank holiday weekend in 1990. I think all 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 five years (maybe less), all 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 processor. At that time, we used a system called Wang, which 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 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 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!).

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Sometime in 1992, the first batch of PCs was introduced in Russell House. They were trialled first by the Private Client team. The PCs 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 to secretaries firmwide. By December 1992, I had a PC on my desk, but it was a few more years before PCs arrived on all fee-earner desks. As technology has developed, we have had to adapt and keep up with it as far as we can and as far as the budget allows. Cyber security is a major part of the firm's IT infrastructure these days.

Compliance is another area of huge change over the last 15-20 years. There was no thought of a compliance team in the 1990s although quality standards and accreditations were beginning to emerge. The world has changed and these days it is all about compliance, and rightly so.

What specific roles have you had in Lester Aldridge over the years?

There have been a few. In 1989, when the firm's new management structure was being put in place, I was asked to take on the temporary role of "Administration Partner", which I did until the role of Managing Partner was established. In 1992, I was asked to take on the role of Commercial Department Head, which I did until 1997.

My involvement with trainee recruitment began in 1988, before the merger, and has continued ever since. I have been the firm's Training Principal since that position was first created by the SRA. As Training Principal, I participate in the trainee selection process (which is managed by the HR team); I am the interface with the SRA regarding registration and signing off of training contracts and every 6 months, I deal with the allocation of trainee seats.

What made you stay with Lester Aldridge for 39 years?

I've had no reason to leave. I have been part of an evolving business, and I have evolved with it. I've never felt the need to move to another firm to progress my career. I have had supportive partners throughout my career, for which I am thankful and consider myself blessed. Loyalty is rewarded but must be earned.

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 a much faster pace of change, but I can't begin to imagine what life in a law firm will be like in 30 years. I foresee great change over the next ten years, let alone 30, largely driven by AI.

Susan's plans for her next chapter

Susan certainly has no plans to take life easy and already has a fully stacked calendar to keep her busy. She is in the throes of moving homes in readiness for her lifelong desire to own a Cocker Spaniel. Having pleaded for most of her childhood for such a pet, her parents finally conceded when Susan was 18, just as she herself was

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ready to move out to university, so this time, she plans to be able to spend a lot more of her time with her own furry friend.

Susan will continue her active involvement with her church, The Bournemouth Oratory / Sacred Heart on Richmond Hill and the exciting new developments that have taken place there over the past few years and continue to take place.

Susan will continue to support the Corporate Team on an “as and when needed” basis, so we will see her around Russell House from time to time.

We wish you the very best in your next chapter, Susan, and you will remain an inspiration to all those who have been blessed to have worked with you.

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