



International Women's Day 2024 – Interview with Liz Oaten

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The law has not always been considered the most diverse or inclusive profession. However, this is changing, and the people within the profession are driving that change. In celebration of International Women's Day, [Liz Oaten](#), [Clinical Negligence](#) Partner at Lester Aldridge, talks to [Helen Clement](#), Associate, about her career spanning four decades, her experience of the profession as a woman, and her views on the future.

Why choose the law as a profession?

I originally did a law degree to please my parents. At the time, my parents thought it would be a good transferrable degree. I did my articles with Bevan Hancock, a firm that specialised in healthcare. My training partner, Paul Barber, was brilliant, and I learnt a lot from him and two other influential female practitioners at the firm- Sue Humble and Jill Broadhead. My experience at BH/BA led me to specialise in clinical negligence claims; my PQ experience has been equally split representing defendants and now Claimants..

Your parents must have been incredibly proud of you when you qualified as a solicitor and became a partner.

Yes, they were very proud and supportive of my career. I recall they gave me a ballpoint pen when I qualified as a solicitor. When I became a partner, my dear late mum gifted me a meat slicer; I am not sure why! I still use it every Christmas. It is a running family joke!

What was your experience of being a trainee?

When I had my interview in 1985, there were very few women working in the law. As a young woman interviewing for articles, I remember being asked, "Can you spell?" to which I answered, "Yes." The (male) interviewer replied, "Well, that's good, as most women can't." During my training contract, I remember having a dictionary thrown at me when I had misspelled a word!

Following the interviews, I was fortunate to have two offers to do my articles in Bristol. I went with my instinct and joined Bevan Hancock.

Life as a trainee was very different from now. I recall being sent to collect the partners' dry cleaning and having to retrieve their cars from the garage. This meant navigating the narrow basement car park where many a car met its doom when being driven by articulated clerks! It was a different world for women in the legal profession back then.

Who were the inspirational women during your legal career?

My dear friend Sue Humble who was a couple of years ahead of me. She is my daughter's godmother. She was a fantastic role model; she would often take me out to interview witnesses, and I learned a lot from her tactically.

Another was Jill Broadhead, the first female partner at Bevan Hancock and a woman who frowned on trouser suits in the office. She had to find her own way in a very male-dominated profession, and it was good for me to watch how she navigated that. I witnessed firsthand the battles she had to fight to succeed.

Can you share any interesting stories from your legal career?

I once had to spend two weeks in Australia interviewing three doctors for childbirth injury claims. This was before the time of virtual meetings. I went to Melbourne and Sydney. I was assisted by local firms who provided me with background support. For a young solicitor that was an exciting experience.

Memorable but perhaps not so exciting was an occasion when, as a trainee, I had to go to a morgue with my training supervisor, who had failed to inform me that the morgue technician was likely to open a drawer and pull out a dead body. I had no warning and was more than a little shocked by the experience!

What advice would you give to female lawyers navigating the beginning of their legal career?

Always trust your instincts. If it doesn't feel right, then it probably isn't!

The tough times don't last. Make sure you have good support around you from your team and supervisor. They will be the ones to see you through the difficult times.

Your reputation is something to work on and guard.

What are your key practice tips for working as a lawyer today?

Be clear with the client from the start of the claim on what can and cannot be achieved from their claim. Keep them updated with developments and involve them with what is happening.

Stay calm. You are inevitably going to experience challenging clients during your career. When you do, remain calm, listen to them and respond to them in calm manner.

Know when you don't have a good case. Not all cases are going to succeed. Do not continue with a claim unnecessarily, if there is no claim at all even after your evidence has been tested and the defendant is to going to budge, discontinue the claim.

Equally, if you think you have a good claim even after the defendant denies liability, then stick at it, having thoroughly tested your evidence. I have had three cases recently, which I have continued to pursue because I knew I had a good case even when the defendants originally denied liability. These cases have resulted in admissions of liability from the defendants and are now working towards quantification and settlement.

Do you think it is easier or harder now for women to pursue a career in the law?

I don't think it is necessarily easier now. There are still the same pressures for women; balancing home life with work life.

However, there are now far more women in the profession compared to when I first started out.

I do think that it is harder now to get a training contract. It is very common these days to have to prove your value as a paralegal first. When I started out we didn't have the paralegal role in the profession. What we did have were fierce PAs that soon whipped us into shape!

How different was the legal professional when you first started out compared to now?

Firms tended to be a lot smaller, with fewer regional offices and smaller numbers overall in the partnership.

We didn't time record as we do now. That really only came about in the '90s.

We used faxes and telexes rather than emails. Fax machines were so expensive that not every office had one. I remember having to go to another office up the road to collect our messages! That simply would not happen now with GDPR issues to worry about!

International Women's Day 2024 has the theme "Inspire inclusion". The point is made that "*when we inspire others to understand and value women's inclusion, we forge a better world.*" How do you try to implement this in your day to day work?

I encourage the team to work together and help each other, to share knowledge and support each other. I ensure I am available to provide advice and support when required whilst at the same time ensuring personal growth and development. I do this regardless of gender, but I am always on hand for my female colleagues to support and offer any advice I can give.

Any final thoughts?

I thoroughly enjoy being a solicitor and whilst it can be a challenging job at times it can be extremely rewarding too. A final piece of advice I would share to women or indeed anyone starting in the legal career is to develop your professional reputation. The defendants I deal with regularly know that I do not pursue hopeless cases; build that strong reputation as a firm but fair opponent and guard your reputation carefully.

Biography – Liz Oaten

Liz attended Cardiff University reading law. She graduated with a 2.1 before returning to her home town of Bristol and studying for her Law Society Finals. Liz began her articles (training contract) with Bevan Hancock (now Bevan Britton) in Bristol, completing a one-year seat in NHS litigation acting for Defendant Health Authorities, a six-month seat in property and a six-month seat in company and commercial. Liz qualified as a solicitor in 1987, rising to Partner by 1995 and obtained her LLM Master in Legal Aspects of Medical Practice in 1996.

Liz is accredited to all three specialist clinical negligence panels, [AvMA](#), [APIL](#) and the [Law Society](#).

Liz joined Lester Aldridge in 2021.

Liz lives in Bristol with her husband. She has two grown-up children.