

ONE

ALBERT AND A LOAD OF BALLCOCKS

The day we opened Wilford Smith, my first client was Jack Heptonstall, a likeable rogue with a weakness for other people's property. He had never committed a house burglary or robbed an old person – as he put it, he avoided 'Joe Public' – but scrapyards and commercial properties were fair game for him. Jack also had a flair for driving whilst disqualified, and in all the years he'd been a driver, I don't think he was ever insured. He had nine children, and when I once asked him why so many, he told me that he'd never owned a television. All his children had inherited the huge grin that dominated his face – along with his faults. There are certain clients you can't help liking, and Jack and his family were among them.

Jack, who had come to ask me to represent him in the Rotherham Magistrates' Court the following day, had brought along his youngest son, about seven years old. Albert was a spotty little urchin with an appealing, almost angelic, face that belied his nature, as I found out when he picked up a bottle of ink from my desk and spilt it all over my papers. Jack clouted him about the ear, called him a 'twat', and told him to be quiet. Within seconds the lad was checking to see if my plastic telephone would split if propelled with great force against the desk. Another clout ensued, whereupon the little boy shouted, 'Gi' ower!

'Oh, it can speak,' I thought, as he began to pick his nose.

Throughout the visit, he stared at me with an unreadable

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smile. Jack's cup of tea arrived together with a glass of pop for the boy; Albert managed to knock over the tea, which crept along my file under the legal aid application I'd just filled in and into my top left-hand drawer, but significantly didn't waste a drop of pop. The boy was a disaster area. How I kept my temper I don't know, but I was placated to some extent by the continual clouts from his father.

As our meeting was about to finish, I was aghast to see the brat standing on a chair, trying to capture the koi carp in our fish tank. 'Put the bugger back, you little bastard!' shouted his father with annoyance clouting him again.

'Yes, put the bugger back, you little bastard,' I echoed, with even greater annoyance.

'Gi' ower,' said the boy. 'Gi' ower, will tha? That's child abuse!' Jack clouted him again, twice. 'No, *that's* child abuse,' he said.

I got up, took the fish's castle from him and put it back in the tank, at which point one of the fish bit me. My immediate reaction was to pull my arm out of the way, splashing the front of my immaculately ironed white shirt with water and streaks of green algae, which burrowed into the cotton. In a mere forty minutes, one small boy had almost destroyed my brand new office and image.

'Anyway, we'll get off now,' said Jack. 'Come on, son, say good-bye to Steve.'

'Tarra Steve,' said the boy, offering his hand. I shook it, and came into contact with something extremely sticky. The boy had donated me his used chewing gum.

He laughed, then turned to follow his father, who was blissfully unaware of what the little shit had done. 'Well, Albert,' I thought, 'I'll certainly remember you.'

I had worked in the law since 1965, coming to Rotherham in 1971. At night school I qualified as a Fellow of the Institute of Legal Executives, which I used as a springboard to qualify as a solicitor

of the Supreme Court in 1979, and became an assistant solicitor with a local firm. Two years later, I achieved my ambition of opening my own practice.

I joined forces with my friend and colleague Steven Wilford, who would deal with conveyancing, probate and non-contentious matters, and look after the money, while I dealt with the contentious court proceedings. We'd started work at the same firm and got on well, so kept in touch after I left. In 1973 my then employers were looking for someone about my age who worked in land law and conveyancing; I suggested Wilf, and was delighted when they took him on. He's a remarkable character, a gifted lawyer and excellent office manager, who also likes a drink (as do I and most of our friends!) We were a good match, I the extrovert and Wilford the stable one, and despite all the problems and doubts, the scheme was as exciting as anything I had ever been involved in.

By early January 1981 we had acquired the building; we rented the ground floor to a small print shop, and the upper floors were to be shared between Wilford Smith and Co., Solicitors of Rotherham, South Yorkshire, and our friend Michael Jarvis, an accountant, who needed a room because of overcrowding in his own offices. (I met Michael in 1971, when he was working on the books of my then employers, and we hit it off immediately. A ginger-haired, chubby man with an athletic frame – he even played table-tennis for his county – he's easy-going and well and truly 'one of the boys'; the nicest compliment I can pay him is that I've never heard anybody say a bad word about him. He's also an extremely able accountant, who never lets his socialising skills get in the way of his profession!) We would be the town's tenth firm of solicitors, and were due to open in May with a staff of one. The premises were dilapidated, with holes in the roof and a recalcitrant ballcock in the loo that liked to shoot out of the cistern and hit you on the side of the head while simultaneously showering you with water. But it would be our own!

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On my next free evening I took my family to see the premises, probably more of a thrill for me than for them. While my mother, wife and daughter explored, my father set about mending the ballcock. After much effort and some swearing, he sat back on the toilet seat flushed (sorry!) with success. ‘Shouldn’t be a problem now, son,’ he said, pulling the chain to demonstrate. The ballcock promptly hit him on the back of the head as water shot out of the bowl, soaking the seat of his pants. I rocked with laughter, and after a few seconds he joined in. He laughed so much that he began to cough, sweat running down his temples as he held his sides in an attempt to relieve himself of a stitch. For the rest of the evening, as we cleared up and discussed decor, I could hear him chuckling in the background, reliving the incident.

During the following weeks the whole family joined in: my wife Jennifer, father, mother, and six-year-old daughter Rebecca – who once accidentally kicked over a bucket of emulsion, causing my father even greater hilarity when Wilford slipped in it and gave his Levis a magnificent cream patch around his bottom. Their efforts were such that our two rooms were quickly cleaned and beautifully decorated. We got hold of some second-hand furniture from a dealer in Sheffield, and bought two brand-new desks, one for reception (the larger room, where Anne, our one member of staff, would answer the phone, attend to visitors and do her typing), and one for the office Wilford and I would share. Looking back, I suppose it was a bit of a hovel, but to us it was a dream come true.

About a week before we were due to open our brass plate arrived, bearing the names of the firm and the two partners, and I rushed to my parents’ house to show it to my father, who was delighted. The following day, my mate Graham Broom, joiner-cum-builder-cum-entrepreneur, affectionately nicknamed Bodger for his skills, came to fix it outside our office door. Having done so, he asked me to come out and check it. He had mounted it upside

down, and I pretended I hadn't noticed. We had a good laugh, he made the necessary adjustment, and the job was done. It looked immaculate.

I later picked up Jennifer and Rebecca and my parents, and drove the whole family to Rotherham to show them the nameplate. This was one of the most moving moments of my life. My father had always been in awe of the legal profession – the only time he ever went to see a solicitor he wore his best suit, smelling of mothballs – so the fact that his son had achieved his own office gave him immense pleasure. As he looked at my name on the brass plate he wiped away a tear, and to conceal his emotion, brought out a camera to record it. (I later found out he'd forgotten to put a film in it, so all the effort was for nothing).

A day or two later Jarvis moved in his VAT department, consisting of his friend Oscar, a genius at VAT who unfortunately suffered from dreadful flatulence, becoming quite famous in local circles for his ability to break wind almost on demand. He was also extremely keen on draught Guinness, which I am convinced aggravated his problem. He had a room of his own and a share of the toilet, which was at the top of the stairs.

Oscar was the most consistent person I knew in everything he did, not least his ablutions. He had his breakfast and a cigarette at the same time, bought the same paper from the same news-vendor and walked the same route to the same office, each and every day. The downside to this rigid regime was his dreadful problems each morning, not later than 9.45 am, when he took his first major visit to the lavatory. He always took the *Racing News* with him: a keen horse-racing enthusiast, Oscar liked to consider the day's form whilst he sat doing his duty. The area had to be avoided like the plague, and was.

In the last few days before we opened we were busy with the final arrangements. We had to register with the Law Society and legal aid board, as well as informing the local building societies

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and banks of our move, in the hope they might give us some work. Although both of us had been in Rotherham for about ten years and had built up some business relationships, and indeed a clientele on the litigation side, we now had to start bringing in business for Wilford Smith and Co.

As we got nearer the day, all the financial details were put into place. I'd borrowed £2,500 from my parents, and Wilford the same from his mother. Some of it had gone to buy office equipment, and on deposits for the two cars we'd bought. The rest was in the bank as a buffer against wages and day-to-day expenses. We were indeed working on a shoestring.

The grand opening was 13 May 1981, and in the days leading up to it we received a great deal of help from our friends in the business community. Wilford had taken a couple of weeks' holiday, but I was still working out my notice, though most lunchtimes were spent at the new office. One such lunchtime I went to deliver some stationery, and found that Oscar was paying his second visit of the day to the loo. We were aware that he was in there, because the toilet adjoined our office and the walls were thin.

As we finished our business, Oscar finished his. I could have sworn that I heard him cursing, but thought nothing of it. We were leaving our room as he too emerged, rubbing the side of his head.

'Good afternoon, Oscar, any winners today?'

'Oh hello, lads, not today,' he said distractedly, and disappeared into his office.

'Did you see the lump on the side of his head?' Wilford asked.

'Why don't we get a plumber in?' I asked earnestly, and we both burst out laughing. The ballcock had struck again.

I left my old job on Friday 8 May, after ten happy years with the firm, to become a self-employed solicitor in Rotherham. Over the weekend, I rang all my friends with the new number.

When the big day came, with no files, an empty diary, but a lot

of hope, I set off for work bright and early, calling at a local shop for milk – we had agreed that the first week would be my turn for the collection rota. (This was just one example of the decisions self-employed business partners have to make.) On my way I met one of the local prosecutors, Philip Chadwick, walking towards the court. Seeing the bottles in each hand, and knowing that I had left my old job, he shouted to me, ‘That’s a good idea until you get established, a little milk round.’ I laughed. Nothing was going to upset or offend me that day.

At the office, someone had stuck a balloon to our front door, bearing the words ‘Happy Birthday Margaret’. I couldn’t believe Sean Page had been up so early that morning! (Our friend the Honourable Sean Page, insurance broker and all-round good egg, is one of those characters who can brighten any dull occasion with his wit – or more accurately, lunacy.)

I opened up and went in, and soon Wilford appeared, carrying two bottles of Newcastle Brown Ale. I presumed they would be part of our lunch, but I was wrong: they were part of *his* lunch. Anne appeared a few minutes later, carrying a bottle of champagne. ‘What a lovely gesture,’ I said, only to be told that it was to be *her* lunch! We weren’t having that, and opened the bottle there and then.

At 9.00 am the phone started to ring, with calls from well-wishers. We even had some post: one letter confirming that we had been entered onto the legal aid panel, the rest greetings cards. Page’s bore the legend ‘A happy Easter to all of you’.

By 10.00 am the fuss had died down, and all the post been opened. Wilford and I sat across the desk from each other and suddenly faced the realisation that we had nothing to do. Wilford Smith was open for business, but had no business.

‘I know!’ said Wilford. ‘Pass me the screwdriver. There’s one job I can do; that damn ballcock.’

But before he could set about it, the phone rang again. It was a

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local estate agent, asking if we were interested in dealing with a house transaction for one of his clients. This was Wilford's department, and he enthusiastically took down the details of our very first job.

'I can see them right now if you want, I'm free at the moment,' he said, and within half an hour our first clients came through the door. I suppose we overdid it, for they not only got an interview with Wilford, but an interview with me and our secretary, plus copious amounts of coffee from a donated percolator that burnt your fingers every time you used it. They went away happily carrying our business cards, a list of our services, our emergency number and a potted history of the firm and its partners. Their transaction was completed in record time, and to our delight, only a few days later they brought in a relative who was also buying a house.

We spent the rest of the morning showing friends round the premises, then at lunchtime went to the Cross Keys and advertised ourselves to all and sundry for an hour and a quarter. By 2.15 pm we were back in the office, and found Jack Heptonstall waiting to see me. Wilford Smith and Co. was up and running.