



In the SPOTLIGHT

Move opens up new market

Despite marketing itself as a Kent law firm, moving into London was a 'natural step' for 230-year-old Whitehead Monckton, according to its managing director **STEPHEN BECK**



Things have changed dramatically at Whitehead Monckton in the five years Stephen Beck has been in its top job.

Since he became managing director, the 230-year-old firm has opened a larger office in Tenterden and its new office in Canterbury, adding to its historic headquarters in Maidstone.

Turnover and staff numbers have grown by 30% in the same period.

Its newest venture is its expansion into London for the first time, with the takeover of Docklands Solicitors in Canary Wharf announced last month.

"When this opportunity came along it seemed pretty natural because we have done a couple of big things in the last few years," said Mr Beck.

Docklands is a family and property law firm, which has the appeal of a range of "high-net worth" clients and astronomically high property values compared to Kent.

"The principal reason was it opens us up to a completely new market," said Mr Beck.

"They have an excellent client base, who typically work for the major banks and financial institutions.

"Hopefully, as we market our services to them, we can develop those contacts into broader ones as they recommend us to friends and colleagues. We are confident we can broaden the appeal of what Whitehead Monckton is."

Mr Beck joined Whitehead Monckton as a trainee in 1992, at the same time Jo Worby, his opposite number at rival firm Brachers, joined her practice.

He qualified in 1994 and was a litigator for his first five years.

Mr Beck trained to become a private client lawyer in 1999 and was made a

partner soon after.

He became managing partner in 2011, changing the title to managing director in April 2014 when the firm was incorporated.

"Most other firms have gone down the route of being limited liability partners (LLPs) and, from our perspective, making the firm a limited company seemed the better route.

"The corporation tax rates are half that of partnerships and the reduced income and corporation tax have released more money into the business.

"It has also freed our mind because the personal liability is not on our shoulders. We can operate in a more business-like way.

"We are run as a company where the board is accountable to our shareholders, like many of our clients. That is good corporate governance."

Whitehead Monckton has a long history of employing the Under Sheriff of Kent, who supports the High Sheriff. Its head of property Robert Coombe currently holds the position.

Has the firm suffered any impact from the Brexit vote?

"What matters is the day-to-day calls with clients and the fees billed at the end of the month. In the three months since the vote, we have not seen any negative impact. There was a moment in the week after the result where a number of commercial deals paused but when I look at all the teams and how we are performing, we are as busy as we were at the beginning of January. What we don't know is what will happen in the next three to six months. No one knows what's going on."

Are law firms recession proof?

"We struggled as much as any firm throughout the recession but there will always be a need for lawyers somewhere regardless of economic activity. The problem is the needs of clients change and if you have specialised then that is no good if no one wants that service. Property work and commercial deals are at the forefront of economic activity. If people are losing their jobs then no one moves house."

What makes a good lawyer?

"You have to be patient, good at listening and avoid speaking like a lawyer. You have to talk in English to clients. Private clients are not looking for lawyers to show they know the law. They want the service and to build a relationship with their lawyer. You have to talk about what you did at the weekend and your hobbies. We are all human and just trying to help solve people's problems in a compassionate and efficient way, which they understand."

How much does the history of Whitehead Monckton impact staff?

"It is nice to have that history because it makes us custodians of the firm who are handing it on to the next generation. I have a great affection for this firm and I want to see it grow for future partners. But we don't live in the past. Growth only happens if you look forward strategically. The history is there but we are not burdened by it."

Typical day

Stephen Beck gets up at about 7am to walk his dog, which his family is fostering for the Guide Dogs Association. He arrives at the office at about 8.15am and has various management meetings, client meetings and phone calls throughout the day. "I can't stand emails. I get hundreds of them." He usually gets home at about 6pm and picks up the dog from the training school on the way home. In his downtime he wants to get back to flying, as he has a private pilot licence which he wants to renew. He trained at Rochester Airport.

CV

Born: 26/7/1969
School: Midhurst Grammar School, West Sussex
Live: Bearsted, Maidstone
Family: Married to Ali with son Samuel, 16, and daughter Rachel, 15
First job: Waiter in a pub
First wage: £2 to £3 an hour
Salary now: Undisclosed
Car: Mitsubishi Outlander PHEV hybrid
Book: English Passengers by Matthew Kneale
Film: Goodfellas (below)
Music: "At the moment I'm listening to Imagine Dragons, who I went to see at the O2."
Gadget: iPhone
Last holiday: A flotilla sailing holiday around Greece
Charity: "I support Slide Away, which helps children in Maidstone and west Kent who have suffered a bereavement."



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