

FIRST WOMEN

STORIES OF WOMEN AT ASHURST

ashurst

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IN CELEBRATION OF THE CENTENARY OF
WOMEN BEING PERMITTED TO PRACTISE LAW
IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

FOREWORD



Any anniversary of one hundred years naturally prompts reflection about what happened “back then” and how things might have changed since. The events of 1919, when legislation was passed to allow women to practise law in this country, were fundamental to the profession and women’s rights. However, in many ways the stories told in this publication are as interesting for what they reveal about what happened before 1919, about the changes in the firm during the most recent fifty years and, perhaps most important of all, what is happening right now.

The story before 1919 goes right back to the remarkable family of William Ashurst, who founded the firm in 1822. Throughout much of the 19th century, he, his wife, their children and grandchildren were all deeply engaged with issues of social justice, including gender equality. Despite their vigorous efforts (and those of other prominent women and men), not much happened to liberalise attitudes towards women working in the law for a very long time. The position established by legislation and the courts before 1919 seems patently ridiculous now, but it must have been enormously frustrating and dispiriting for those affected at the time.

We can then move forward in time to 1964, when Linda Humphreys-Evans became the first female Ashurst trainee. That development itself seems to have taken a very long time after the change in the law – indeed, it is somewhat startling that it happened so relatively recently. It is intriguing that the legislation (and its interpretation by the courts) was not the only impediment to women practising law, with social expectations no doubt playing a part until the 1960s and 70s. Further progress was very much incremental for a number of years after that and the stories told by Linda Walker, Elizabeth Morris, Susan Roy and Jan Sanders are truly pioneering tales. All of them were at Ashurst when I arrived from New Zealand in 1993, but I don’t think I had any appreciation at the time of the significance of what they were doing. Indeed, I expect they had little time to spend thinking about their place as “first women” and how they were blazing a trail for women who came after them. I would like to take this opportunity to thank them for the difference they have made, by being role models, agents for change and by inspiring other women who could see what they were achieving.

I think we can safely say that the environment for women lawyers today is very different. I recognise there is still much to do to achieve genuine equality in the profession, but I believe we have made great progress. I also take tremendous encouragement from reading the stories of some of the women who have joined the profession and the firm more recently. Advances in technology, along with evolving social and workplace norms, continue to provide a fair wind for further change – and all of us benefit from many aspects of the flexibility they provide.

My optimism is also reinforced by observing the group of lawyers who have run this project. Their energy, enthusiasm and commitment leaves me in no doubt that we have a healthy new generation ready to tackle the next challenges to equality in the legal profession. I am confident that the Ashurst family from the 1800s would thoroughly approve of their approach! I would like to thank the First Women project team for their efforts in initiating and running this wonderful project. I very much hope you enjoy the fruits of their work.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'B. Tidswell', written in a cursive style.

Ben Tidswell
Chairman

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INTRODUCTION

“The plaintiff in this action, a spinster, in December 1912, filled up and sent to the Law Society a form of notice, issued by the Society, of her intention to present herself at their preliminary examination on February 5 and 6, 1913, with a view to becoming bound by articles of clerkship and ultimately being admitted as a solicitor. She enclosed the requisite fee. The Society returned the fee, and informed her that if she presented herself for examination she would not be admitted, giving the reason that she was a woman, and therefore could not be admitted as a solicitor...” *Bebb v Law Society* 1913

Gwyneth Bebb, the plaintiff, was the sixth woman to study law at Oxford University and received first class marks in her final examinations in 1911. When the Law Society refused Gwyneth’s application, she asked the English court for a declaration that she was, in fact, a “*person*” within the meaning of the Solicitors Act 1843, and therefore ought to be admitted. Her case was dismissed.

In reaching his decision in the Court of Appeal in 1913, Baron Cozens-Hardy, Master of the Rolls, felt constrained by the current state of the law which, he found, did disqualify women from the profession on the basis of sex, but noted that “in point of intelligence and education and competency, women... are at least equal to a great many, and, probably, far better than many, of the candidates who will come up for examination”. He invited Parliament to legislate on this issue and, shortly after the end of the First World War, the **Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act 1919** was passed.

A few of us heard about Gwyneth Bebb and the 1919 Act at an event in the summer of 2018. We realised that we knew very little about the history of women in law and decided to try to find out about the first female lawyers at Ashurst so that we could learn their names in time for the centenary.

We started to reach out to Ashurst alumni to ask for their stories. We soon discovered that we would not only learn the names of our first women, we would be able to meet them: the first woman lawyer at Ashurst, Linda Humphreys-Evans, joined in 1964 and she was happy to speak with us about her time at Ashurst.

We were surprised that it had taken so long for women to join the firm, particularly given the socially progressive views of William Ashurst (the founder of the firm) and his family in the nineteenth century. Our research on William and his family forms the first part of this book.

In the second part of this book, we share with you some of the stories of women at Ashurst in the last few decades. Along with our first female solicitor, we have spoken with our first three female partners, the first woman with the right to return after maternity leave, and the first woman on the Ashurst board, amongst many others. We thank each of these women for their contributions to the firm, as well as this project.

In the final section, we consider some of the themes arising from our research, as well as the future of women in law. We also share some of the advice we have heard along the way. As the next generation of lawyers enter the industry and continue to break boundaries, we are confident that the next 100 years will see greater equality, as men and women from all social backgrounds keep progressing through the industry, and leave the door open for those behind them.

First Women Project Team
London and Glasgow, 2019

PART ONE

WILLIAM ASHURST & FAMILY

THE MUSWELL HILL BRIGADE

BY CLARA YEO



Portrait of William Henry Ashurst.

“Equal to Paradise before the fall” – The Muswell Hill Brigade

It is Sunday afternoon. You step over the threshold of the house in Muswell Hill, North London, unsure what to expect except the unexpected. The gathering is already underway, male and female voices in lively debate drifting through to the doorway. As you head in, cigar smoke hangs low, but for once it is not an exclusively male activity – the lady with a cigar in hand must be one of the Ashurst daughters.

This was what a visitor to the Ashurst family home might have experienced and you may have met women’s rights activist Clementia Taylor, Italian revolutionary Giuseppe Mazzini, newspaper editor George Jacob Holyoake, utopian

socialist Robert Owen, political reformer William James Linton and American abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison.

Garrison had high praise for the Muswell Hill residence, writing that it was “a perfect gem of a place, quite equal to Paradise before the fall”. It was truly a radical and progressive home, where the strictures of Victorian society were suspended. Males and females could converse freely without fear of censure and independence was a virtue rather than a vice.

The patriarch

Within and alongside his law practice, founded in 1822, William Henry Ashurst acted against injustice and

oppression, whether in his anti-slavery endeavours or in his support of the Great Reform Bill, which enabled much-needed improvements in electoral representation. Less apparent but no less important was how the demonstration of his principles and beliefs was a signalling beacon, broadcasting to his family and an ever-expanding circle that reached the shores of Italy and the United States.

William has been described as “a force behind the scenes” and, perhaps other than reading between the lines of his associates’ writings, it is not possible to ascertain the breadth and depth of his influence. If not for the nexus of William and Muswell Hill, Garrison and Mazzini, two radicals engaged in differing but parallel causes of freedom, might not have met. Garrison went on to write the introduction to a collection of Mazzini’s autobiographical writings edited by William’s daughter Emilie, reflecting on his and Mazzini’s common ideals and friendship.



Giuseppe Mazzini.

The family

Though less is known about Elizabeth Ann Ashurst, William’s wife, we know that the Ashurst parents “brought their children up to the habit of independent thought and action”. All four daughters and one son became involved in activism. Caroline, Matilda, Emilie and William Jr chose life partners who complemented the family’s values.

In 1844, Caroline Ashurst and James Stansfeld married in a ceremony which encapsulated their view on marriage: they spoke only “the two sentences rendered necessary by the [Marriage] Act” and they exchanged rings to signify that marriage was a union of equals.

Another example of family influence was William Jr’s role for the last 17 years of his life. The penny post, now an object of Victorian nostalgia, may never have become a reality if not for William Sr. Voluntarily providing his legal services pro bono, he vigorously argued in favour of Rowland Hill’s proposal and raised funds to finance a study, comparing the old postal system with Hill’s ideas, that was presented to a parliamentary committee. Success came in 1840, ushering in a golden era where letters within the United Kingdom became more widely affordable for the masses. Mirroring his father’s interest in the postal system, William Jr left the family firm to become the Post Office’s solicitor, his role no doubt changed by the reform that his father had enabled.

The Muswell Hill Brigade

The Muswell Hill Brigade described themselves as “mutual-improvement essayists”, but one can only imagine the richness of thought that flowed in those weekly gatherings. Far from being in an ivory tower, the Brigade put their weight behind pressure groups for liberal causes.

Since many of their efforts involved legislative change or forming membership-based organisations, the legal expertise of various members of the Brigade undoubtedly came in useful, including that of William Shaen and James Stansfeld who had both trained at Ashurst’s firm.

Their causes included the People’s International League, the first British pressure group on foreign affairs, and the Society of the Friends of Italy. Members of these groups numbered 400 and 800 respectively, not bad for a band of “essayists”. Other than these public activities, which were met with sneering from establishment newspapers including *The Times*, the Brigade undertook undercover operations in support of Italian reunification, at great personal risk.

At times, sacrifices were made. James Stansfeld’s political rise was halted when he had to resign as a junior Lord of the Admiralty due to his involvement in the Italian cause. He was alleged to have allowed his house to be a letter drop for a man involved in an attempted assassination of Napoleon III.

In 1880, Stansfeld again chose principles over power when he turned down a Cabinet position as it was offered with the stipulation that he would not express his views on repealing the Contagious Disease Acts. This cause was embraced by the Brigade, including Caroline, Emilie, Stansfeld, William Jr and William Shaen, as part of their wider push for equality for women. Under the Acts, women who were suspected of being prostitutes could be detained without trial and without treatment. For 15 years, Emilie was editor of the weekly journal of the Ladies’ National Association for the Repeal of the Contagious Disease Acts. Not content with solely campaigning, Matilda and Emilie founded a home in Leicester for former prostitutes. The Brigade’s efforts came to fruition when the Acts were repealed in 1886, putting an end to legislation which inherently upheld double standards between men and women.

That which is unwritten

Despite the danger and controversy that they were often at risk of, the Brigade held fast to their progressive principles. They built for themselves a Victorian salon not merely in service of entertainment or polite conversation, but one which required absolute discretion and trust. It is little wonder then that many of the bonds they forged lasted for life.

The Ashursts lived in Muswell Hill for 18 years beginning in 1836, but the Brigade’s weekly meetings continued until the 1880s. That “perfect gem of a place” lived on in the hearts and minds of the Ashursts and their guests, but the world-changing words that were exchanged, and the charged atmosphere of Muswell Hill, have since faded like ephemeral wisps of cigar smoke.

VOTES FOR WOMEN

BY JOSIE OLIVER



Caroline Ashurst Biggs.

ES. Guinness.
1897.

A Modern Family: the Ashursts and votes for women

In 1889, Caroline Ashurst Biggs, William Henry Ashurst's grand-daughter, wrote an impassioned letter to her fellow Englishwomen. "If women respect themselves", she argued, "they will make the acquisition of suffrage the foundation stone of their political building". Caroline Ashurst Biggs was a prominent early feminist, deeply entwined in the nineteenth-century suffrage movement – and part of a third generation of a radical and progressive family. We all know that William Henry Ashurst was the founder of this firm, but our radical beginnings are at risk of dropping out of our collective memory. In a publication on the first women of Ashurst, it is only fitting that we start with the true 'firsts': William Ashurst himself, his children and grandchildren.

"Is the world so full of honour, honesty and charity that we can afford to dispense with so powerful a contingent?"

"It set me thinking": William Ashurst and female equality

William Ashurst had a deep-rooted ideal of female equality. In a biography of her father written after his death, Emilie remembered that his reason for why he had an interest in "that particular craze" was "characteristic and worthy of note":

When I was but a lad... I attended the trial of a girl under 16 for child murder. That girl had been first seduced and then forsaken by a man; she was tried and found guilty by twelve men; condemned to death by a man, and hung by a man. It set me thinking.

Such an experience was clearly of profound importance for William. Writing under the pseudonym of Edward Search in *The Liberator*, the American anti-slavery paper run by

the famous abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, he later asserted that the concern that women might transgress "the modesty of nature... is an ignorant and idle fear". Instead, "the cultivation of the kind affections" in society would be much more likely to occur "when women are allowed to take active part in the public advocacy, management and business arrangements". These sentiments were put into practice throughout his life. At the World Anti-Slavery Convention in London in 1840, the eight female delegates were denied their seats by the British sponsors. William passionately defended their right to participate, and sat with them in the gallery in protest when the decision was upheld. "It is peculiarly painful", he angrily wrote in *The Liberator* following the Convention, that the delegates were refused when the Convention represented itself as an assembly "to assert and maintain the rights of all". For William, emancipation of all went hand-in-hand: to support anti-slavery whilst ignoring female rights was not true equality.

A family of feminists

William's family shared his strong beliefs and, like him, vehemently expressed their ideals in both public and private. Emilie recalled that he encouraged his four daughters to have "independent thought and action" at a time "when the words 'women's rights' were rarely spoken" – or, when they were, "only provoked a sneer". Two of Emilie's sisters, Matilda and Eliza, had accompanied William to the 1840 Convention, inspiring their own feminist and anti-slavery beliefs whilst supporting their father's push for equality. Emilie herself was informally trained as a legal clerk in William's offices before being apprenticed to an artist. This apprenticeship was more than an entertaining pastime. Eliza noted that "it would be wrong to neglect so intellectual a means of independence, especially when the prejudices of society leave so few open for women"; indeed, Emilie used her skills as an artist as a means of income between her two marriages. Independence – financial, intellectual, social – was encouraged among the Ashurst daughters, and political engagement expected.

ARE MEN LAWYERS AFRAID OF WOMEN'S BRAINS?



You can have a woman doctor, but you can't have a woman lawyer: the Court of Appeal decided yesterday that their sex disqualifies them. Above are Miss Bebb (on left), who fought a test case, and Miss Ingram who was another aspiring lawyer. "The Law" is a law unto itself.

The Daily Sketch, 11 December 1913.

OUGHT WOMEN TO HAVE VOTES FOR MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT?

"All those who live in a country should take an interest in that country, love that country, and the vote gives that sense of interest, fosters that love."—
Mr. Gladstone, "Nineteenth Century," January, 1878.

I.—What is meant by Women's Suffrage?

That women, who as regards residence or property fulfil the conditions to which the Parliamentary franchise is granted to men, should, like them, be admitted to the franchise.

II.—What number of Women would be enfranchised?

In England and Wales between 700,000 and 800,000, or one woman to every seven men who now possess the franchise. According to the Return of Municipal Electors, recently made, more than 217,000 women possess, as householders, the Municipal franchise,—being the proportion of 16·8 per cent. of the municipal voters of the nation. The Return of Owners of Land in 1872, popularly called the New Domesday Book, gives the number of women landowners of one acre or upwards in England and Wales as 37,806 out of 269,547—a proportion of one in seven. In Ireland the proportion of women landowners is somewhat less, being one in eight. If we assume the proportion of women-householders to men-householders to be the same in non-municipal as in municipal towns, we arrive at the total of between 700,000 and 800,000, who being householders and rated for the relief of the Poor, are rightfully entitled to exercise the vote.

III.—Are Women capable of Voting?

They do already vote in many kinds of elections. From time immemorial they have possessed the same local and parochial franchises as men. They can vote in the election of Overseers of the Poor, Poor-law Guardians, Churchwardens, Overseers of Roads, Board of Health, and other local authorities. They may vote in Municipal elections. When the Municipal Corporation Act was amended in 1869, women were placed on the roll of voters. A letter of inquiry was addressed to the Town Clerk of every Municipal Borough after the first election under the new Act, and by the courtesy of these gentlemen it was ascertained that women had generally voted in equal, and in some cases in greater proportion to their numbers, than the male householders. In 1870 women were expressly included among the voters in the Elementary Education Act, and have, since that time, voted in every School Board Election. These last two votes are given by personal attendance at the Polls in precisely the same manner as at Parliamentary elections, and at no time have disturbances occurred,—though party feeling has sometimes run high—rendering it dangerous or difficult for women to give their votes. Moreover, in 1868, a doubt existed as to whether women-householders were not legally enfranchised under the Household Suffrage Act, and their names were allowed to remain on the register by many revising barristers. No difficulty was experienced by them in voting at that General Election, and the Ballot, by rendering elections still more quiet, has removed what might sometimes have been an obstacle in the way of women exercising the Suffrage. It was, however, determined in Nov., 1869, in the Court of Common Pleas, that women should be disqualified from voting, and that decision can only be reversed by the action of Parliament.

IV.—Do Women themselves desire it?

A large number of them do, and have taken pains during the last seventeen years to show that desire

"Ought Women to Have Votes for Members of Parliament?" written by Caroline Ashurst Biggs. Courtesy of Manchester Libraries, Information and Archives.

Private views, public views

With such a family background, it is then perhaps predictable that the Ashursts practised what they preached in prominent public settings. In 1847, for example, Matilda disseminated one of the earliest printed leaflets in favour of female suffrage, which had been sent to her by Anne Knight, another anti-slavery campaigner. The family was also willing to add their names to petitions. Petitioning was a traditional form of political activism, but it experienced dramatic growth across the mid-nineteenth century, reaching tens of thousands of appeals a year. These petitions provided women with a loud public voice on key social, economic and political concerns as well as opportunities to influence parliamentary thinking and public opinion. Emilie helped to organise the first mass petition in favour of votes for women in 1866, which was submitted to Parliament by John Stuart Mill, a radical MP elected on a platform which included female suffrage. The petition accumulated 1,521 signatures, including Emilie's sisters, Caroline and Matilda, and Matilda's eldest daughters, Caroline and Elizabeth Ashurst Biggs. Though the signatories could not have imagined that it would take a further 62 years for women to achieve equal voting rights to men, this was a highly significant step forward in recognising the possibility of female suffrage. It is unsurprising, therefore, to find the Ashurst women at the forefront of the campaign.

A family affair

Such family connections in political involvement were commonplace among the Ashurst clan, as internal discussions engendered outward political participation. William's son-in-law and former associate, James Stansfeld, became an MP in 1859. He spoke out in favour of the Woman's Disabilities (Removal) Bill in 1875, which would have obtained the parliamentary vote for women, and similarly supported a proposed amendment to include female voting rights in the 1884 Representation of the People Bill. Writing to Millicent Garrett Fawcett, one of the leaders of the suffragist movement, Caroline Ashurst Biggs listed her aunt (and James' wife), Caroline Ashurst Stansfeld, as being on the executive committee of the London National Society for Women's Suffrage (NSWS) when it was established in 1867; Caroline Ashurst Biggs was herself assistant secretary of the same organisation at that time. As with the 1866 petition, these overlaps emphasise the closeness of the family and the alignment of political belief. Female suffrage was to be fought for, and won, by the entire family.

by petitions to Parliament, memorials to Ministers, and attendance at numerous public meetings. In many sessions the number of signatures attached to petitions for Women's Suffrage has doubled those sent in for any other measure. In 1875 they reached the unsurpassed number of 415,622, of which about half were women. In the preceding year memorials signed by upwards of 18,000 were presented to Mr. Gladstone and Mr. Disraeli. Many petitions and memorials are signed by women-householders only—as, for instance, one lately collected in Birmingham from 4,216 women-householders, being more than one-half of those canvassed.

During the past seventeen years upwards of 1,700 public meetings have been held in the United Kingdom in support of this movement. Huge meetings by women only assembled in the Free Trade Hall, Manchester; Colston Hall, Bristol; Town Hall, Birmingham; and in the largest halls of Edinburgh, Glasgow, Nottingham, Bradford, and many other towns, to urge the removal of this disability.

V.—*What support has this measure gained in the House of Commons?*

Since Mr. John Stuart Mill first introduced it in 1867, it has received increasing support in votes. In the last Parliament a majority of Members were in its favour. These belonged to all parties, Conservative, Liberal and Home Rulers (including members of both Conservative and Liberal Administrations); and the Bill "to remove the Electoral Disabilities of Women," has been brought in by Conservatives and Liberals, so that this measure is in no sense a party measure: 110 Liberal M.P.'s signed a memorial to Mr. Gladstone, asking him to include it in the Reform Act.

VI.—*What benefit to the State or to Women themselves would arise from Women's Suffrage becoming law?*

It is generally admitted that the efficiency of a Representative Parliament is in direct ratio to the

variety of the classes and the interests it represents, while the interests of a non-represented class are confessedly liable to be misunderstood and neglected. A legislature, from whose election so large a proportion of the responsible citizens and holders of property in the country is excluded, must necessarily be ignorant of, and postpone to more leisure time, the claims of those who are not its constituents. There are many national subjects, such as the laws affecting pauperism, education, diminution of crime, public morality, sobriety, &c., on which women, as voters, might bring to the public service not only general but special experience and knowledge. As taxpayers, they have as great a concern as men in the methods by which the national taxes are raised and expended. As subjects, they are equally concerned in the laws which control the State. Much legislation affects men and women equally; women, therefore, have an equal right with men to be consulted in the election of their legislators, but this claim is further increased by the circumstance that under many laws, such as those affecting the property and legal status of married women, and custody of children, their succession to property, &c., women are held, and will remain as long as they are disfranchised, under a special disadvantage. Inasmuch as every class of men has found that direct representation ultimately secured for them educational, industrial and social reform, it is fair to assume that the same constitutional privilege would secure the same results to women.

NATIONAL SOCIETY FOR WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE.
Central Committee: 29, Parliament St., London, S.W.

Printed by Shaw & Spinks, Dockhead, London, S.E.

Public figures

The Ashurst women enthusiastically participated in some of the key female suffrage organisations of the era. Caroline Ashurst Stansfeld served on the Central Committee of the NSWs between 1871 and 1877, and continued her involvement until 1883, by which time she was suffering ill-health. Emilie was a member of the executive committee of the campaign to reform the married women's property law; this movement succeeded in 1882, when married women were finally permitted to have the same rights to property as non-married women. She then joined the Women's Franchise League (WFL) in 1889, which had been established that year by Emmeline Pankhurst. The WFL advocated the more radical argument that married women should be permitted to vote in local elections, rather than simply those who met the property qualifications – who, in practice, were largely widows or spinsters. After all, married women now had rights to own property independently of their husbands. Such an argument pre-empted universal suffrage and was therefore highly controversial. Equally, Caroline Ashurst Biggs was editor of *The Englishwoman's Review*, the longest-running feminist publication in England, from 1870 until her death in 1889. The magazine sought to discuss middle-class women's issues, such as economic independence, access to higher education and the professions, and equal voting rights. Again, the Ashursts found themselves leading the way in the march towards female suffrage.

Fighting for votes

The beliefs of William Ashurst and his descendants were therefore deeply entrenched into the family's identity. Fighting for votes for women over three generations, the Ashursts were involved in key landmarks of the suffrage movement, often in highly public and controversial settings. Familial relations were politicised and practical, whilst built on a profound shared understanding of what the family stood for: political and social equality. Radical perspectives filtered through these connections. The younger generations were influenced to follow in the footsteps of their mothers and aunts in the search for female rights, which they believed to be integral to a fairer future. As Caroline Ashurst Biggs ended her call to arms in her letter to all Englishwomen, "is the world so full of honour, honesty and charity that we can afford to dispense with so powerful a contingent?"

THE ASHURSTS AGAINST SLAVERY

BY CLARA YEO



*National Portrait Gallery, Benjamin Robert Haydon
The Anti-Slavery Society Convention, 1840.*

Ashursts Against Slavery

Although Parliament abolished the slave trade in the British Empire in 1807, it was not until 1833 that it became illegal to both purchase and own slaves in the majority of British colonies. It took a further 10 years, until 1843, for the same to apply to colonies under the control of the British East India Company.

However, across the Atlantic and elsewhere, slavery continued. British campaigners now turned their attention to the worldwide abolition of the institution of slavery, including through the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society.

Only certain freedoms

In Room 20 of the National Portrait Gallery in London, one can find a large painting which shows the grand surroundings of Exeter Hall, replete with classical pillars,

golden chandeliers and rich red drapery, crammed full of men and some women. This painting depicts attendees of the World Anti-Slavery Convention in 1840.

Among the attendees, but sadly not depicted, were William Henry Ashurst and two of his daughters, Eliza and Matilda.

Some of the painting's elements might well have been romanticised, for the welcome presence of women in the painting belies the difficulties women faced in having their voices heard – and even in being seen. Men were allowed entry to take their seats as delegates, but women were relegated to the gallery as observers.

Even campaigners who had, in Elizabeth Neall Gay's words, "braved the fury of the seabed" travelling from America to be delegates at the Convention were refused entry on the basis of their sex. Most of the first day of the 12-day Convention

“To employ your efforts to annihilate slavery throughout the world, are you to commence by saying, you will take away the rights of one half of creation?”

was consumed by debating whether women should be allowed to participate.

Unsurprisingly, given his views and the hopes he expressed for his daughters, William Ashurst was one of the three British men who spoke in support of the female delegates. He incisively pierced the hypocrisy of the male delegates, asking whether “to employ your efforts to annihilate slavery throughout the world, are you to commence by saying, you will take away the rights of one half of creation?”

Unfortunately, the majority were not swayed. William Ashurst along with William Shaen and James Stansfeld, two junior associates at his firm, made their displeasure evident by seating themselves in the gallery, with the women.

On a more positive note, the experience catalysed efforts to attain equality between the genders both in Britain and in the United States. The treatment of female campaigners at the Convention became an oft-discussed topic both among observers and in the Ashurst family. Matilda’s daughter Caroline described her mother as having been “roused to white heat” by the debate. During their visit to London, American campaigners Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton resolved to hold a convention on women’s rights, which materialised as the first of its kind, the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848.

Looking west

Transatlantic friendships bloomed at the Convention, including those of the Ashursts with William Lloyd Garrison, Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Neall Gay. William kept up a correspondence with Garrison, with whom he shared support for women’s rights and anti-slavery.

William became the London correspondent of Garrison’s weekly abolitionist newspaper, *The Liberator*, serving as an important link between the British and American campaigns. He wrote about developments in Europe, including the Great Famine in Ireland as well as the activities of Giuseppe Mazzini, a revolutionary and an Ashurst family friend, in Italy. The strength of his attachment to the cause was further demonstrated when he travelled to America to visit Garrison and other abolitionists in 1853.

Upon William’s death, the news was broken to Garrison and *The Liberator* via a letter from Matilda. *The Liberator* described him as “our widely honoured and revered friend ... an eminent Solicitor of London, and supporter of the cause of freedom at home and throughout the world”. It published a long eulogy and called his loss “as universal as the globe”. It took another decade before *The Liberator* achieved its aim and ceased publication due to the loss of its raison d’être – the Thirteenth Amendment to the US Constitution finally abolished slavery in the United States in 1865.

The Ashursts’ involvement in anti-slavery continued with William Ashurst’s granddaughters. Though published anonymously, a three-volume anti-slavery novel titled ‘*White and Black: A Story of the Southern States*’ has been attributed to William’s granddaughter Elizabeth Ashurst Biggs. Expressing her truth through fiction and behind a veil of anonymity was perhaps her way of finding a compromise with a world which still stymied women’s political expression and harshly judged women’s literary output.

Notable by omission

A short stroll from the Houses of Parliament, where so many legislative victories have been won, is a small park. Victoria Tower Gardens is bordered on one side by Parliament’s golden edifice and on another by the silvery-grey River Thames. When walking across the park, one comes across a curious monument. The base is octagonal, with four archways big enough to walk through, but otherwise the effect is that of a spire having been stolen from some tower and transplanted there. The style is recognisable as Gothic, but rather than muted colours, its roof is adorned with bright shades of pink, green, blue and orange.

This is the Buxton Memorial Fountain, commissioned by the son of Thomas Fowell Buxton in 1865, to commemorate the role of Buxton and other Members of Parliament in the abolition of slavery in the British Empire. It is a lovely memorial, save for one omission.

Queen Victoria used to be the only woman honoured on the monument, but the figure of her, along with those of seven other rulers of England, has since been lost to time or opportunists. The contributions of all other women, including Buxton’s daughters as well as the Ashursts, to the abolition of the slave trade, are not marked.



Buxton Memorial Fountain.

FRIENDS OF ITALY

BY ELLEN ARNISON

“Hope nothing from foreign governments. They will never be really willing to aid you until you have shown that you are strong enough to conquer without them.” It was a lesson Giuseppe Mazzini, an Italian politician and journalist, whose efforts helped bring about an independent and unified Italy, learned the hard way when in 1844 he was betrayed by the British Government when they conspired to open his private letters.

However, the scandal did lead to a deep and enduring friendship with the Ashurst family, with whom he shared many values and opinions.

Just as William Henry Ashurst had been set on the course of his life and supporting social equality of the sexes after being deeply affected by seeing the unfair treatment of a young girl who was tried for murder, the moment Mazzini, born in 1805, set off on the road to joining the Ashurst “Muswell Hill Brigade”, can be pinpointed exactly.

Mazzini told how the course of his life was set by an incident in 1821. As a teenager, walking in the streets of Genoa he caught sight of a ragged Italian refugee begging for food. The previous year, the man, Captain Rini, had been a uniformed officer in the National Guard who was part of a brief early effort at revolution. Mazzini was so moved by the sight of the man’s degradation and the sudden understanding that “the conquest of liberty was not only a possibility but a duty”, that he switched his studies from medicine to law and he became an “ardent revolutionary patriot”.

Determined to bring his country together as a nation, the first attempts at uprisings, in Sicily, Abruzzi, Tuscany and Lombardy-Venetia, were not successful. However, Mazzini kept going, campaigning and setting up several organisations aimed at unification or liberation of other nations. He also created an Italian school in London.

In 1843, he instigated a riot in Bologna and sent two young officers of the Austrian Navy, brothers, Attilio and Emilio Bandiera, to land near Consenza. However, the plot failed when they were arrested and executed. Mazzini was devastated by the deaths and accused the British government of passing information about the expedition to the Neapolitans. The government admitted that his private letters had indeed been opened and the contents used to bring down the uprising.

The news of this intrusion into private correspondence on behalf of the government by the Post Office caused outrage among Britain’s liberals, including the Ashurst family and William Ashurst’s articled clerk, William Shaen.



Mazzini painted by Emilie Ashurst.

William Ashurst was very keen to meet Mazzini and offer his support and sympathies. In July 1944 Elizabeth Ashurst and her brother William were sent to his lodgings on Cropley Street, on their father’s behalf, with an invitation. The Ashursts would have been thrilled when the invitation was accepted for the following Sunday. Not only did it mean they had a charismatic and interesting new dinner guest, but it was something of a victory in social circles as theirs was the only English family visited by the glamorous foreigner. In 1851 and 1852 William Ashurst was a founder of the society of the Friends of Italy and of the Peoples International League.

Scottish writer and philosopher Thomas Carlyle criticised Mazzini’s attachment to the Ashursts, writing to a friend: “He stays constantly in a circle of Ashursts etc: and, I conjecture is glad to be worshipped in that circle, without inquiring too strictly what a circle it is!”

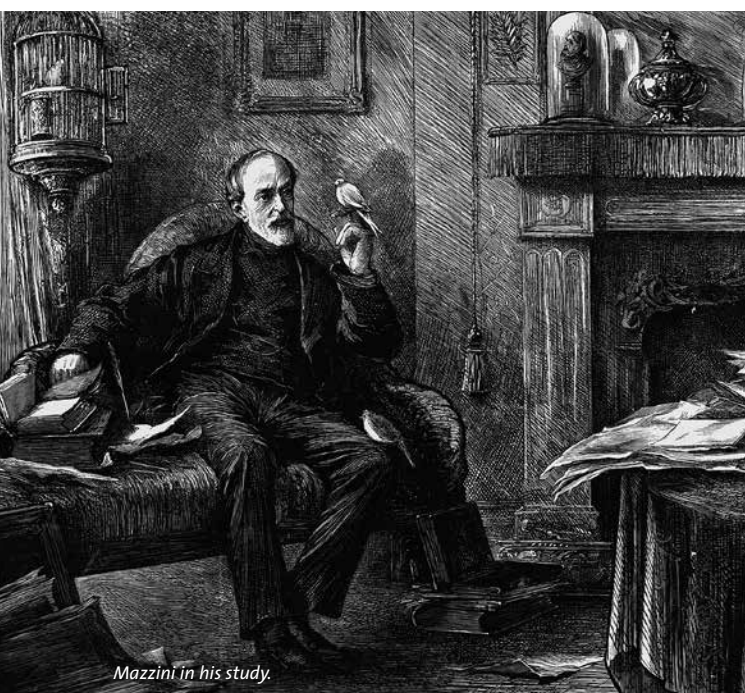
Very quickly Mazzini became close to the whole Ashurst family, and Elizabeth – Eliza – in particular. There were rumours that Eliza wanted more than just friendship with

Mazzini. Indeed, while many society women would have been keen to become his favourite, his self-styled position of asexuality and higher-calling provided something of a protection. Eliza had to settle for honorary “sister” and enjoyed his loving support for the rest of her life.

He was particularly encouraging of her translations of George Sand’s work into English. Sand, born Amantine Lucile Aurore Dupin in 1804, was a socialist and novelist, more popular at the time than Victor Hugo and Honore de Balzac. She was a friend of Mazzini and they shared many revolutionary ideas.

Possibly in an attempt to come to terms with disappointment that romance did not spark with Mazzini, Eliza struck up a relationship with a French artist in Paris. She married Jean Bardonneau in 1848, against the wishes of Mazzini and her family. Mazzini had even written to Bardonneau on a visit to London to persuade him to board a ship and leave England... and Eliza. His attempt to split them up failed and she died in childbirth in 1850. It was Mazzini who brought the sad news to her sisters, Emilie and Matilda who were in Genoa at the time. Her body was sent back to England for burial in the family vault in Highgate Cemetery.

Over many years, Mazzini and his adopted family were close – with around 1500 of his letters to the Ashursts published into a collection by Eliza’s close friend Elinor Richards, who picked up the unfinished task after Eliza’s death. It’s not surprising that Eliza’s sister Caroline and her husband James Stansfeld named their son Joseph after Mazzini, who doted on him like an uncle.



Mazzini in his study.

Caroline idolised Mazzini from girlhood. During her free time, while her classmates were reading romances, she busied herself “collating and copying out the speeches of the patriot and close family friend Giuseppe Mazzini for reproduction in a provincial newspaper”. In an oft-repeated anecdote, when asked about her religion, Caroline replied: “I’m a Mazzinian.”

Her adoration was clearly returned: Mazzini’s letters to Caroline are the most tender. She was a symbol of perfect womanhood to him. After Joseph’s birth, he referred to her as “the rose and her bud” and as a “ministering angel” and turned to her for help, not just with personal and domestic matters, but with his literary and political work. Caroline and her husband were members and supporters of the Society of the Friends of Italy and became embroiled in many of his schemes, sometimes carrying out dangerous activities such as securing money and documents for Italian revolutionaries or providing places for them to hide. In 1864, James was implicated in a plot to assassinate Napoleon III and had to leave his government post.

“Love and respect women. Look to her not only for comfort, but for strength and inspiration and the doubling of your intellectual and moral powers. Blot out from your mind any idea of superiority, you have none.”

Giuseppe Mazzini

The family’s affection for Italy spread beyond Mazzini. Eliza’s younger sister Emilie, who was Mazzini’s biographer and literary editor, had married Sydney Hawkes. However, the marriage floundered. She was able to divorce in 1860 after the Act of 1857 allowed for divorce without an act of parliament. Her divorce was dealt with by Ashurst’s partner John Morris. This left her free to marry Venetian Carlo Venturi. Venturi was devoted to Mazzini’s causes of Italian unification and had deserted the Austrian Army. They met in 1859 on a train when Emilie was travelling with her brother and his wife Bessie, and married in the summer of 1861. Emilie became known as Madame Venturi.

Mazzini and his countrymen were influential to the Ashurst women but also influenced by them. The relationship lasted decades. It is very likely he was thinking of them when he wrote: “The Family is the Country of the heart. There is an angel in the Family who, by the mysterious influence of grace, of sweetness, and of love, renders the fulfilment of duties less wearisome, sorrows less bitter. The only pure joys unmixed with sadness which it is given to man to taste upon earth are, thanks to this angel, the joys of the Family”.

LITERATURE, WRITING AND TRANSLATIONS

BY JOSIE OLIVER



George Sand by Nadar, 1864.



Masthead of The Liberator

“Tell me every bit of thing”: the Ashursts and the written word

Writing was central to Ashurst family life. Whether in the form of intimate correspondence within their close social networks or public petitions in papers and pamphlets, the written word reaffirmed relationships and formalised the Ashursts’ political and cultural outlook. The Ashurst women translated political and early feminist texts, wrote fiction, and edited journals on themes close to their own hearts, such as female rights and anti-slavery. The vibrancy and passion of the family – for justice, equality and each other – shine through their writings. Their words provide a unique insight into the family psyche and the construction of their own narratives.

Reaffirming relationships: binding the family together

Long before WhatsApp, iMessage and FaceTime, the sole means of personal communication was the letter. Correspondence oiled social and political networks; created an air of intimacy; and maintained connections. Giuseppe Mazzini, the Italian republican exile, is the most prominent example, with over 1,500 of his letters to the Ashursts surviving. These offer a glimpse into the workings of the tight-knit family and indicate the regularity with which news was circulated. In 1848, for example, Mazzini demanded that Emilie “tell [him] every bit of thing concerning [her] and the family”:

“Why does Caroline never write?... You have been in the country: where? At your sister’s. What is she doing... What is William about? How is his health? Is he, and Sydney, James and [William] Shaen – the Triumvirate – acting politically in any way?”

Mazzini’s rapid bursts of questions demonstrate the interconnectedness of the Ashurst network, presuming that Emilie could deliver detailed news of her sisters, father, brother-in-law and even her father’s apprentices. Intense relationships were therefore carefully upheld through such updates, both familiar and – as the pointed final question suggests – political. The Ashursts had first contacted Mazzini in 1844 following the revelation that the British government was reading his letters. They went on to help to establish a secret postal network between Paris and London for Italian revolutionaries. Correspondence could be in itself a political act.

Fast-forward 30 years, and Matilda’s daughter, Caroline Ashurst Biggs, is found writing to another recognisable name: Millicent Garrett Fawcett, a leader of the movement for female suffrage. In one letter, Caroline mysteriously informed Millicent that she held the minute book of the London Committee of the National Society for Women’s Suffrage (NSWS), but that, when the London and Central Committees had merged in 1877, she had received “the express & solemn stipulation that it should never be opened”. “I don’t know if any member of [the] Committees has a right to consult it!” she told Millicent. “There may be very uncomfortable secrets inside... what do you think?” This intriguing letter (on page 22-23) shows Caroline fostering an informal relationship with Millicent whilst still deferentially asking for Millicent’s judgement. At the same time, we learn about the tensions between different branches of the NSWS, one of the leading suffragist organisations of the period. Correspondence strengthened affinities and maintained the radicalism of the Ashurst network.



Caroline Stansfeld.



Emilie Ashurst.

Constructing a narrative: self-awareness and identity

Writing letters allowed the Ashursts to develop and cement a core identity. In a second letter to Millicent, Caroline recalled signing the famous petition “of the 1500 women which J. S. Mill presented [to Parliament] in 1866” as a means of remembering a date. This self-conscious reference binds Caroline closer to Millicent through shared beliefs, but also emphasises Caroline’s own role in the suffrage movement and participation in key events. Emilie similarly used language as a means of constructing a desired self-image and narrative. Having no children of her own, she often referred to young activists as “family”, calling the Irish nationalist John Dillon her “son” and signing her letters to him “tua madre di cuore” (your mother of the heart/ adoptive mother). By positioning herself as a mother to the next generation of progressives, Emilie highlighted her significance to each of her “children” and presented herself as wise, loving and maternal.

Interestingly, a key pillar of both Caroline’s and Emilie’s public identities was their connection with William Ashurst himself. In a move to reinforce her ties to her grandfather, Caroline published two short stories under the name Carey Search, a nod to his pseudonym, Edward Search, which he had used to publish articles on anti-slavery in *The Liberator*. Emilie published a “Brief Record” of William’s life, recounting in detail the development of his principles and his “talent and extraordinary industry”. In doing so, Emilie drafted the narrative of her father that she wanted told: a progressive liberal, to be admired and emulated, and whose commitment to and passion for equality was handed down to the next generation. Emilie held the pen, drawing William’s image into popular memory.

Politicising text: literature and translations

In the nineteenth century, middle-class multilingualism was common. The Ashurst sisters were able to read and write in both French and Italian; Maude Ashurst Biggs, one of William’s granddaughters, also included Polish in her repertoire. This skill provided more than simply the opportunity to read foreign literature. Rather, translating offered a means of circulating political ideas and texts around Europe, bringing people into contact with new arguments and ideals. Eliza translated the novels of George Sand, an extremely popular female French writer who wrote on feminist and socialist themes, into English in the 1840s. Emilie acted as Mazzini’s literary editor and translated his collected works, aiming to bring his philosophies to a wider English audience. In the 1880s, Maude attempted to encourage interest in Polish independence by translating the epic poems of the political activist Adam Mickiewicz. Likewise, literature provided women with an opportunity to address issues they regarded as important. Elizabeth Ashurst Biggs published *White and Black: A Story of the Southern States* in 1862, an anti-slavery three-volume novel, and Caroline Ashurst Biggs’ *The Master of Wingbourne* covered feminist themes including illegitimacy and forced marriage. Through the guise that the ideas presented were not their own and were even fiction, translating and writing literature permitted women to have a powerful public and – even more significantly – political voice.

Shout it loud: public voices

In 1859, William's daughter Matilda angrily criticised the Northern Reform Society for refusing to campaign for universal suffrage, complaining in the Newcastle Chronicle:

"I feel it an injustice that I, who am equally taxed with men, should be denied a voice in making the laws which affect and dispose of my property, and made to support a State, where I am not recognised as a citizen... The Northern Reform Society, which takes its stand upon "justice", should claim for us at least that we be exempted from the duties, if we are to be denied the rights belonging to citizens."

Matilda's burning sarcasm demonstrates how little she was afraid of offending readers – not by the stringent opinions themselves nor by the fact that it was a woman holding them. Over the course of the nineteenth century it became increasingly acceptable for women to publish under their own names. Caroline Ashurst Biggs wrote two articles on female suffrage: *Ought Women to have the Right to Vote for members of Parliament?*, a reasoned argument with evidence supporting whether women should, would and could vote; and *Letter from an Englishwoman to Englishwomen*, a persuasive appeal urging women to join the fight for suffrage. She was editor of *The Englishwoman's Review* for nearly 20 years, to which two of her sisters also contributed. Meanwhile, her aunt, Emilie, was editor of *The Shield*, a significant journal in the campaign to reform legislation requiring suspected prostitutes to endure intrusive examinations for venereal disease, between 1871 and 1876. These positions at the pinnacle of well-established journals indicate the growing opportunities for women to write on political topics as well as the prominence of the Ashurst women in some of the fundamental campaigns of the nineteenth century.

Looking at their own words

The written word, both personal and political, was a key means through which the Ashurst women were able to leave their mark on the world. Correspondence reinforced social, familial and political networks, as well as permitting the construction of public identities and shared narratives. The women acted as conduits for the spread of political and philosophical ideas around Europe, allowing them to participate in and influence such discussions through translating and writing literature. Finally, the Ashursts were not afraid of broadcasting their opinions to a wider audience. Journals and pamphlets provided a space in which political and social issues could be debated by women as well as by men. To understand the family's passion for justice, we should look at their own words.



Eliza Ashurst from an unfinished sketch.



Matilda Biggs and her eldest daughter, Elizabeth Ashurst, from a daguerreotype around 1848.

19. Morning Hill Square
Feb 21. '11



Dear Mr Fawcett

The Minute book of the London Committee of which Mr Taylor and I were Secretaries was given over by me to Miss Owen, but was afterwards returned - three or four years ago - when the London Committee amalgamated with the Central, with the express & solemn stipulation that it should never be opened.

It is now lying along with the other minute books in a drawer in the office at Berners Street, tied up as when it was

This was not absolutely the first meeting at which women spoke - as there had been one in Manchester April 14. 1865 at which Mrs Pochin, Miss Becker, & Miss Anne Robertson of Dublin were among the speakers. There are no pamphlets containing reports of these meetings, unfortunately but you will find any or all of them in the library at the office, & I will mark the volume, so that Miss Torrance will be able to find it easily for you. If I can give you any other dates or facts I shall be very happy to do so, as I have copies of all our

sent to us, and I don't know if any member of Committee has a right to consult it! There may be very uncomfortable secrets inside which the London Committee did not wish the Central to know. What do you think?

The meeting in Conduit Street, the first meeting of the London Society, was on July 17th 1869. The speakers were Mr Taylor in the chair, Mr Hare, Mr Boyd Kinnear, Mr Mill, Rev C. Kingsley, Mr Fawcett, yourself, Lord Houghton, Mr J. Morley, Sir C. Dilke, Mr Taylor, Professor Matton & Mr. Stansfeld.

pamphlets & reports here at home in addition to the copies in the office.

The second London meeting was at Hanover Square Rooms on March 26th 1870. Professor Cairnes spoke at this as well as Mr Mill, Miss Taylor, Sir R. Anderson, Lord Amberley, yourself, Hon. Anson, Herbert & others.

Believe me sincerely yours

Caroline A. Biggs.

WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE EXTRACTS.—No. II.

The Late MISS CAROLINE ASHURST BIGGS.



If women respect themselves, they will make the acquisition of the suffrage the foundation stone of their political building.

It is now no longer argued that the influence of women, as such, will lower the public standard. The bulk of the women who have voted for school boards, municipal councils and county councils are industrious, economical, self-respecting, law-abiding. Some are landowners who form a seventh of the landed proprietors of the whole country: others are farmers who are at least as sober and industrious as their male compeers. Some are women of independent means, others are shopkeepers, schoolmistresses, artists, and lastly there are thousands of hard working factory women. Those who vote do so sometimes to protect their own interests, but more frequently the interests of something they hold dearer than themselves. The absence of these women from the Parliamentary polls at the time of a parliamentary election, is a distinct loss to the intelligence as well as to the law-abidingness of the electorate, as for whichever side their votes were cast, the probability is they would be well considered, and given from a sense of duty. Can the nation afford to throw away such an electorate? Can women themselves afford to let their influence rest upon the favourable impression they may produce upon other voters, and not upon the straightforward use they may make of their own ballots? Is the world so full of honour, honesty and charity that we can afford to dispense with so powerful a contingent?

Letter from an Englishwoman to Englishwomen.

**CENTRAL COMMITTEE OF THE NATIONAL SOCIETY FOR WOMEN'S
SUFFRAGE, 10, Great College Street, Westminster.**

ELIZA, GWYNETH AND THE 1919 ACT

BY KSENIIA SAMOKHINA



Gwyneth Bebb and her first child, Alice Diana, aged 20 days.

In 2019 as an ambitious, newly qualified lawyer, it is hard for me to imagine that only 100 years ago women were not even considered “persons” in law. It is a given nowadays that girls study law at universities, pass bar exams, practise as lawyers and preside as judges. However, we should not forget how it all started and the people behind this dramatic change.

In the late nineteenth century, women were generally not allowed to even study law, let alone work as solicitors or barristers. Eliza Orme (1848-1937) became the first woman in England to receive a law degree, graduating from University College London in 1888. In 1879 Eliza applied to the Law Society for permission to take exams and qualify as a solicitor, but was refused. Nevertheless, Eliza opened her own practice as a conveyancer (albeit unofficially) and did patent and conveyancing work, as well as publishing various articles about women’s access to education and the legal profession. She was an early pioneer, fighting for her rights to be recognised and to be treated as equal by her male peers.

Another key figure in this story is Gwyneth Bebb, who studied jurisprudence at Oxford, and received first-class marks (but was not awarded a degree, in accordance with university regulations for female students at the time). In 1913, Gwyneth, along with three other Oxbridge women (Maud Crofts, Karin Costelloe and Lucy Nettlefold), applied to the Law Society to sit the solicitors’ examinations. Their

applications were rejected for the same reason given to Eliza Orme – in a legal system based on precedent, women could not be admitted as solicitors as they had never been admitted previously.

Bebb, Crofts, Costelloe and Nettlefold could not accept this, and decided to bring a case against the Law Society demanding recognition them as “persons” under the Solicitors Act 1843. The case was dismissed by the High Court. A newspaper article covering the story read, “Are men lawyers afraid of women’s brains?” (see page 11), and that might have been the case. Gwyneth did not give up and appealed to the Court of Appeal in December 1913. The appeal was dismissed as Parliament, and not the courts, needed to change the situation.

The Court of Appeal acknowledged that Gwyneth Bebb was a distinguished student likely to be “far better than many of the male candidates who will come up for examination”. A private members’ bill was brought before Parliament but was dismissed. After the First World War, the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act 1919 was passed and women were allowed to practise law. Despite her instrumental role in bringing the issue to Parliament’s attention, sadly Gwyneth never had the opportunity to achieve her ambition of being a barrister. After a difficult second pregnancy and labour, Gwyneth and her baby daughter died in 1921. However, her place in history and her contribution to this cause will be remembered forever.

100 years down the line and we are presented with completely different statistics - Lady Hale was appointed first female President of the UK Supreme Court in 2017 and there are more women (50.8 per cent) than men on the roll of solicitors in England and Wales as of 31 July 2017. Meanwhile at Ashurst, we have new gender diversity targets set for 2022 – 33 per cent of the global partnership to be female. The persistent imbalance at senior level across the profession shows that there is a lot of work to be done before a 50:50 balance of gender equality can be reached in the legal sector. With more firms shifting their focus to flexible working and the introduction of shared parental leave in 2015, women should have more opportunities to progress.

“FIRST LADY LAW AGENT”

BY ANNA SURMA AND JENNIFER BRESLIN

Born in Scotland in May 1896, Madge Easton Anderson's parents could not have known that 24 years later she would become the first woman admitted to practice as a lawyer in the United Kingdom.

Madge spent her early years in the Hutcheson's Girls School, situated in the southside of Glasgow. Her father was an instrument carpenter and she was the youngest of three Easton Anderson daughters. There is no information available about how she developed a passion for law and it is not known whether anyone else in her family practised law.

Madge continued her education in Glasgow University from 1913, where she completed her Master of Arts Degree in 1916, with her curriculum consisting of French, English, Latin, Greek, Zoology and Moral Philosophy. A year later she achieved a Bachelor of Laws degree.

She was known to be an extraordinary student. Her devotion and hard work shone through and she achieved a first class certificate with merit in Evidence and Procedures and multiple awards throughout her studies. She also volunteered via the University's voluntary organisation, providing free legal advice to the underprivileged Anderston Community in Glasgow.

While studying at Glasgow University she was encouraged by John Alexander Spens to undertake training with his firm Maclay, Murray & Spens.

After completing her degree she was initially refused admission as a law agent – a Scots woman was no more a “person” than an English woman. This changed in 1919, when the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act was passed. A year later, Madge applied again to be admitted to the Incorporated Society of Law Agents and became the first woman to be admitted to the legal profession in the United Kingdom.

She went on to have a successful career in law and to provide legal advice to the poor for many years. She set up her own firm in Glasgow in 1927 and ten years later became the first woman qualified to practise as a solicitor in both Scotland and England. In another first, she set up the first British

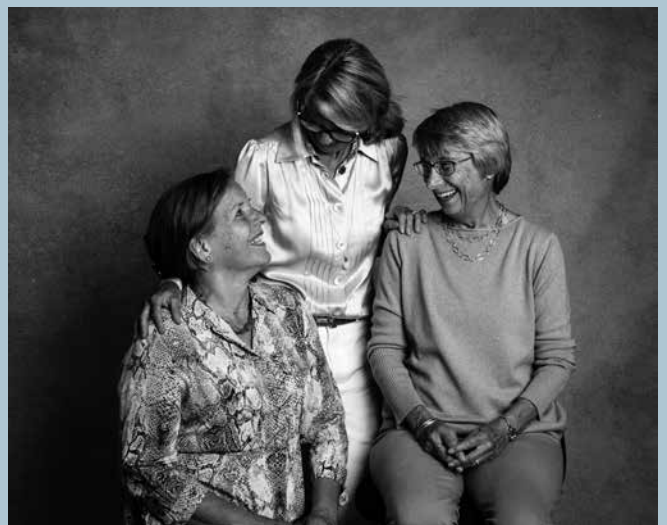
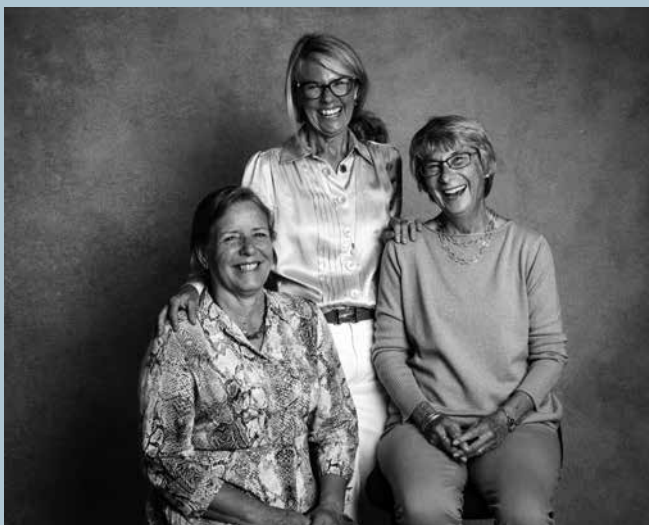
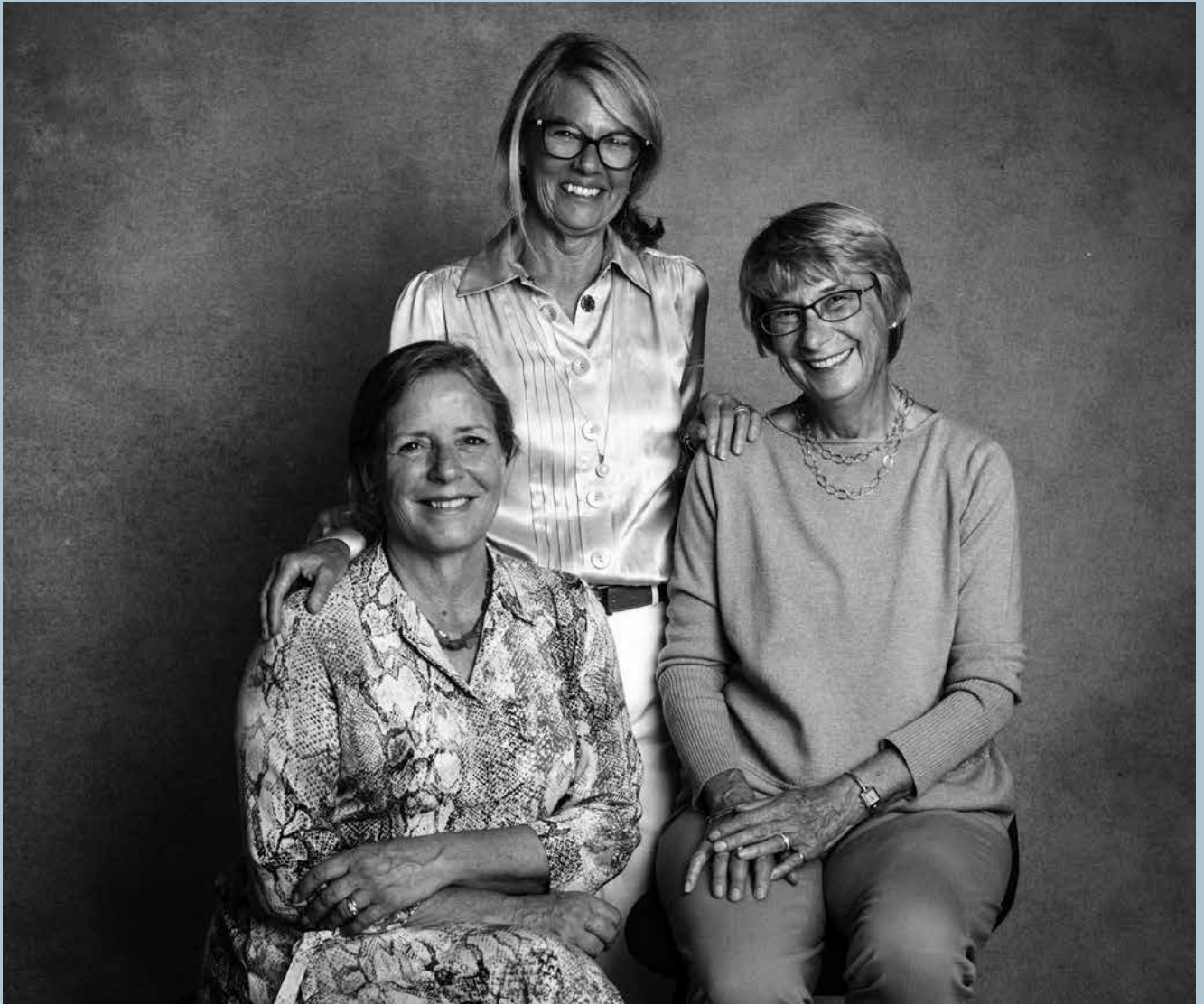
WOMEN LAW AGENT.



A studio portrait of Miss Madge Easton Anderson, M.A., LL.B., of Leven Street, Pollokshields, Glasgow, whose petition for admission as a law agent was granted in the Edinburgh Court of Session, yesterday.

law firm run exclusively by women when she went into partnership with Edith Annie Berthen and Beatrice Honour Davy in London.

After a long and successful career breaking boundaries for Scottish women, Madge Easton Anderson died on 9 August 1982.



Ashurst's first three female partners: Elizabeth Morris, Susan Roy, Linda Walker.

PART TWO

WOMEN AT ASHURST

LINDA HUMPHREYS-EVANS (NÉE WATSON)

FIRST ARTICLED CLERK, 1964 AT ASHURST 1964 – 1972

Linda Humphreys-Evans was the first female articulated clerk at Ashurst, joining in 1964. She completed her training at the firm in 1969 before leaving in 1972 to have two children. Linda returned to the legal profession in 1985, becoming a partner in a small non-contentious firm based in Knightsbridge. In 2000 she joined the Girls' Day School Trust as their Legal Advisor. Moving from London in 2004, Linda worked as a locum in various legal firms in Berkshire and South Oxfordshire.

A portrait of Linda Humphreys-Evans, a woman with short, wavy, light brown hair, smiling at the camera. She is wearing a dark blue top and a necklace with several large, round, metallic pendants. The background is a neutral, textured grey.

"I do remember attending some meetings when all the men present stood up as I entered..."

Q: How did you start your career in law?

I was educated at 'A School for Young Ladies', and as this suggests it was not aiming for high academic achievement. I, and my peers, proved an exception and rather than the usual three pupils staying on to study A levels there were fourteen of us. We all achieved fine results but were given no career advice. I decided that the law interested me. Having been in a boarding school for many years I was not attracted to the prospect of more years at a university but was keen to 'get out' and work whilst studying so I took the five year option.

Q: How did people react to you being a lawyer?

I am sure my parents were delighted. Before I was a lawyer, I recall being in a City wine bar with friends, including some other young articulated clerks, when I heard the comment "we don't want women in the law". I was

and impervious to this kind of reaction but it is funny I should still remember that!

To those who did not know me well, especially men, it seemed I was difficult to assess and talk to so I usually stopped mentioning my profession socially. This sometimes resulted in amusing situations when I could not resist the chance to reveal all when the situation deserved it!

Q: How did the training as an articulated clerk work?

I joined Ashurst, Morris, Crisp & Co at 17 Throgmorton Avenue in September 1964 and was articulated to Max Herbert Heilbut after being enrolled as a student with the Law Society. I keep the documents relating to this with my Practising Certificate, which is signed "Denning M R", and am amused to note that on the formal printed Law Society receipt for the £20 enrolment fee "his" has been amended by hand to read "her" (pictured on page 45).

My time in articles was very well-managed. I assisted in the various departments and attended meetings both in and outside the office. I was at Ashurst when big corporates like Trafalgar House were becoming clients and there were a number of significant takeovers – it was very exciting.

Q: What was life at Ashurst like when you joined and what's changed?

Everything was slower. You had the joy of dictating a letter to a secretary who would type with a carbon copy for the file and then you'd have at least three or four days until you received a reply. We articulated clerks could spend many happy hours in the library proof-reading long corporate documents. However when there was a takeover there would still be the times when it was necessary to work all through the night, especially being an international firm.

As everything in our lives has sped up there is much more pressure and a greater demand for immediate attention.

Q: What was dress in the office like?

Formal and smart. Jobbers from the Stock Exchange wearing top hats strolled up and down Throgmorton Avenue and many other men were still wearing bowler hats. By the time I started work the men at Ashurst had stopped wearing bowlers, I think, but some other solicitors working at firms nearby still did and I was told they were often thrown up in the air to be caught by umbrellas, resulting in holes in the crown!

As a child of the 1960s I was following the current fashion, such as short skirts and black tights, but just would not have dreamt of wearing trousers.

Q: Were you aware that you were the first when you joined?

I obviously knew I was the first girl to be articulated at Ashurst but I was not aware that I was one of only a few in the City and that this was a major step forward, not only for Ashurst but for women in the legal profession.

Looking back, I am sure I will have received the traditional timely respect shown by a man for a woman but would not have associated this with being an exception and, as far as I am aware, we articulated clerks were all treated equally. It was a bit like playing golf – everyone had their handicap, but it didn't mean that you couldn't just work together. Now, thinking about it, I wish I had been more aware, but maybe that might have made me uncomfortable. I do remember attending some meetings when all the men present stood up as I entered and were obviously careful with some of their language but that did not surprise me. Otherwise, I was totally unaware that I would be a brick in the wall of the history of Ashurst, a 'trailblazer', and no one made me aware of this.

Q: Why do you think it took so long from the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act 1919 to female clerks appearing in the City?

It could be a reflection of the general progress of women's liberation in spite of the awareness of sex discrimination, especially in one of the predominately male professions. Also, it seems that most women were not educated to consider a professional career and, without the role models, given the confidence to aim for this. My schoolfriends and I all went out and made

our own way but we were not encouraged to seek professional careers. How things have changed!

Q: So, after your five years of training, you qualified at Ashurst?

Yes, but I regret that I did not stay on for very long to enjoy getting really stuck in – after a couple more years, I had this wonderful mistake of "whoops! I'm pregnant".

Q: Did you consider asking for maternity leave?

Oh no! I was being paid very little and it didn't even occur to me to ask for maternity leave or to try to stay on or to negotiate a return. Luckily my husband and I didn't depend on my income. Possibly foolishly, my pleasure at being employed by Ashurst was not with a view to the potential income this would bring.

I took a few years off in the end. One baby became two and I was delighted to spend time with my children as they were growing up.

Q: When did you go back to work?

Ultimately I was less in demand at home and the years were passing so I decided to return to work. I started working as a lawyer again in January 1985. I had a friend with a practice in Beauchamp Place, South Kensington, and he was keen to have some assistance with an ever-increasing workload so I joined him and we later became partners. I started working three days a week but soon became full time and we worked together for 15 years.

Q: What did you do next?

Commuting to work on the train one day, I came across the advertisement for the legal advisor to the Girls' Day School Trust and as the profile seemed to cover all my experiences I decided to apply. In spite of my mature years and having never been to an interview, I was offered the job and started as soon as I could. This involved a wide and varied range of legal work which included trust matters, legal disputes and other aspects arising in relation to the 25 schools, which were mostly situated in listed buildings, as well as school tribunals, health and safety and care of the school archives.

With family commitments, I decided to retire from London in 2004 and continued locally in the law as a locum until 2008. Since then I have been involved with many varied local activities.

Q: Do you have a particular favourite memory of your time here?

My visits to the High Court with Max Thum were very special and quite often involved a visit to the Wig and Pen Club, now a Thai restaurant, opposite the Courts. I also remember feeling quite comfortable travelling in the lift with D'Arcy Biss, the senior partner, whilst he puffed away on a cigar and also having serious legal conversations with Richard James as he practised his golf swing with an upturned umbrella - sometimes exclaiming "I've got the secret!"

Q: What would you say to young women at the start of their careers?

In spite of the fact that women now definitely have a place in the legal workplace, and everyone accepts that we are equal, walk tall and be sure of yourself and your right to be there. Also, if you can, find a job that suits you and you will enjoy going to work. It's a short life and, if possible, you need to feel that it's working for you.

HILARY JORDAN (NÉE GRAHAM)

EARLY FEMALE ARTICLED CLERK, 1975
AT ASHURST 1975 – 1985

Hilary grew up in Yorkshire and was one of Ashurst's first female articulated clerks, joining in 1975. She worked at the firm for ten years, the last eight in the litigation department.

In 1985, Hilary moved to the forefront of the privatisation of the telecommunications industry when she joined British Telecom.

Since retiring, Hilary has used her expertise in pro bono work. She set up a trustee company to manage the private park behind her house and has been its Company Secretary for the last five years. She is the Secretary of the Park Social Club and leads eight annual Park fundraising events. She is also a School Governor.



"As I saw it then, I went to the wrong university, I was from the wrong part of the country, I had a northern accent and I was the wrong sex. But I am grateful to those who said I would not be able to get a job in the City of London, because it made me do it."

Q: How did you start your career in law?

We did not receive much career guidance back in 1969. Most of my friends wanted to become teachers. One day I woke up thinking: "I know – I'll be a barrister". I spoke to the deputy headmaster and he explained the difference between barristers and solicitors. I studied law at University College London (UCL). Whilst there, I realised that with no parental funding, it would be better to become a solicitor as there was pay during training. I am very glad that I made that choice.

My mum died when I was 13. My dad had been running his own business but was unable to continue without my mum's assistance, so he sold it and became a bus driver. He

used to say that I was Alice in Wonderland if I thought that I could go off to London and become a lawyer - it felt like a different world to him. I planned to return to the North-East to practice, given that my brother was abroad and my dad was on his own.

Someone at university said that I was wasting somebody else's place as I wouldn't get a law degree because I didn't take the degree seriously and was going out too much. The joke is that I got as good a degree as he did.

People kept saying: "As you're a woman, and a Yorkshire woman at that, you will never get a job in the City of London". I realised afterwards that they were not saying this to be rude, but rather to get me to do it.

Q: Why did you choose Ashurst?

At UCL at least a third of my intake were women. A friend from Whitby, North Yorkshire said: "I work for Ashurst Morris Crisp & Co. and they do not have women". I thought, "then I will apply to them!"

I did not put anything in my CV that showed I was a woman, and Hilary can be a boy's name. When I got a call for an interview, the caller said: "Oh, but you are a woman. I'm not sure that will be alright – I'll check and call you back if it isn't".

I went out for the rest of the day so that I could avoid a call to tell me that it was not alright!

The interview was enjoyable. The interviewing partners were well mellowed after their Friday lunch. The following Monday I got a call to say that I had the job.

Q: What was your training contract like?

I started in conveyancing. My principal used to tease me, telling me that one of my jobs was to clean his shoes. Of course, I gave him short shrift. He would ask me to call a wine bar to check whether the Blue Stilton was ripe. I thought he was setting me up but one day they said that it was - we went there for lunch and I had my first Bath Oliver biscuits. I grew very fond of him because he was a great character.

Unfortunately, after six months I got diabetes and was off for six months. I then did litigation, and company and commercial law.

On qualification, I was told that I could do litigation, conveyancing or leave. Though very disappointed that commercial work was not offered, I agreed to do litigation.

I really enjoyed litigation, particularly employment law, which was just taking off then. Litigation kept my legal skills broader and prepared me for my next roles.

Q: Why did you leave Ashurst?

I was with Ashurst for ten years. Clients kept asking "when are you going to be made a partner?" I thought that was never going to happen, so I decided to leave. Interestingly, the first female partner at Ashurst practised conveyancing!

I had a deal with a male colleague – every time we got a pay rise, he told me how much it was so that I could be sure that I had not been discriminated against. He terminated it the year he made partner.

Q: How did you feel about that?

I don't think I thought about it again. Sex discrimination and equal pay legislation had only recently come into force around this time and I just got on with what I was doing. I thoroughly enjoyed my time at Ashurst very much despite the discrimination.

Q: What came after Ashurst?

British Telecom (BT) became a public company around then. A friend working there approached me saying there was just the job for me, and so I became the commercial adviser for the London Region. It was very interesting. You don't always realise how much law you know until

you deal with people who know nothing about it. After overcoming the shock of joining what was still, in effect, the Civil Service, I really enjoyed the challenge.

I drafted telecommunications contracts required as part of BT's denationalisation and the contracts for when stockbrokers set up their own telecommunication systems after they all left the Stock Exchange following the Big Bang in 1986. It was very busy but fun.

The first optical fibre in the UK was being installed around the City of London and the project planning manager came to me for legal advice - he ended up becoming my husband.

I joined the BT Legal Department and supported the Commercial Contracts Team. As commercial adviser, I had learned a lot about the telecommunications business which distinguished me from their other lawyers. I became one of four Senior Lawyers reporting directly to the Head of the Legal Department.

There were many women in the BT Legal Department. In those days many women went in-house, because they could progress better than in private practice.

Q: Why do you think that was the case?

Because women were treated equally in-house.

After 12 years at BT I took a year off, and then worked at a company called Global Crossing, an American telecommunications company, reporting directly to the General Counsel.

Q: What was it like for you coming from the North?

As I saw it then, I went to the wrong university, I was from the wrong part of the country, I had a northern accent, and I was the wrong sex. But I am grateful to those who said I would not be able to get a job in the City, because it made me do it.

Q: Were there any restrictions as to what women could wear?

When I joined Ashurst, there was no dress code for women solicitors and none to take a lead from. I certainly did not wear trousers.

My dad gave me £20 upon starting work, so I went to Middlesbrough and bought a blue dress, a ginger overdress and a green skirt. I wore the skirt and overdress with different blouses, to disguise my lack of clothes. At BT, I started wearing skirt suits and later trouser suits.


Q: We now have just over 100 female partners at Ashurst out of around 420 – do you have thoughts on that?

That's still not very good is it – a quarter! When I joined there were 11 partners, all men.

LINDA WALKER (NÉE BAILEY)

FIRST FEMALE PARTNER, 1985 (PROPERTY, NOW REAL ESTATE)
AT ASHURST 1979 – 1994

A driven and pragmatic woman, Linda Walker paved the way for female partners in City firms. However, at the time, she considered that she was simply getting on with her work. In 1985, nearly 20 years after she started her articles, Linda became Ashurst's first female partner. She was the only female partner for six years until Elizabeth Morris joined her.

A portrait of Linda Walker, a woman with short grey hair and glasses, smiling. She is wearing a light grey sweater and a gold chain necklace. Her hands are clasped in front of her. The background is a textured grey.

"There was certainly no networking in the 1990s and I can't recall any other female partners at the time."

Q: How did you start your career in law?

I'm not a very patient person and, at school, when everyone was talking about university and what they are going to do I thought, "I don't want to do any of those, what am I going to do?" I had a relatively bad education because my father was in the Royal Air Force and we moved around a lot with him. I went to 11 different schools.

There was a boys' school close to where I did my A-levels and several of the boys said they were going to be lawyers. So I thought, "I wonder what lawyers do?" You didn't have to go to university: you became an articled clerk.

I started my articles in a two-partner firm in Stafford. They had never taken on a woman before, there were just two partners and secretaries. They were very nice and taught me a lot.

Q: In the mid-1960s only around 7 per cent of solicitors were female. With there being so few women, did you ever think that law might be quite difficult for you?

No. It never crossed my mind virtually the whole of the time I spent practising law that there might be a problem with my being a woman. People would come along and say, "how is my lovely Linda today?" which you wouldn't be able to do now. I ignored it as I just thought I was equal to them.

My time at Ashurst was interesting and I learned a lot. IBM, Trafalgar House and MEPC are among the key clients I remember working with. I also worked with the company department when any property issues arose.

Q: Do you think Ashurst was particularly radical while you were there?

No. I don't think anyone ever confessed to voting for the Labour party, put it that way!

Q: How many partners were there then?

Not more than 20. All the men used to go to a downstairs room for boozy lunches at the Eldon Street office. At that stage, I had divorced my husband, so I was on my own, and I found it quite useful going into these lunches, because it meant that I could have a decent lunch, work a bit later until half seven, go home, watch TV and have supper.

My position was very lonely because there weren't any other women. I was an only child so I was used to it.

Q: Were important issues discussed in those lunches or were they just social?

I used to go in to lunch earlyish and quite often none of the others came in for about half an hour - by then, I was ready to go back to work. Once the other partners came in, I was gone. But there were one or two partners who were doing the same thing as me.

Q: When did you leave and what did you go on to do?

I left in 1994. The culture was changing in the City. There was an attitude of "we have to get this done, no you can't go and have lunch, we have to finish this deal". For instance, I had to go to Norton Rose for a corporate meeting and the lawyer for the American firm said, "no one is leaving this room until we have a deal". You had to be available 24/7 and because I lived in Islington, which was quite close to the office, I often got called back to work at night.

Q: How has the legal profession changed since you joined?

Now you have to have a degree and do the Law Society exams that you have to pay for, so quite a lot of people just can't afford it. That was the good part of doing the five-year articles - you got paid while you learnt on the job. I took my Part 1 exam after one year in the office and subsequently took my Part 2 exam. The council paid for these and gave me a living allowance. They also bought all the textbooks I needed.

Q: We've heard stories of women around that time coming into the office wearing trousers and being told to go home and change. Was it like that for you?

Certainly at Clifford Turner, where I was from 1975 to 1979 before Ashurst, no women wore trousers.

Once when we moved offices and had to put a lot of things into crates, I wore trousers and a senior property partner said "you should wear trousers more often". But I never did, because you just didn't do it.

Q: Moving into the 1990s there were more and more female partners in the City. Was there any networking amongst female partners across firms?

There was certainly no networking in the 1990s and I can't recall any other female partners at the time.

Q: What was the attitude to having a family?

At Clifford Turner they asked me outright if I was going to have children. I said "certainly not yet". I thought it was a fair question because it had been all men there.

At Ashurst, I don't think it was actually mentioned. They just wanted to know how much I knew and how much I'd done. While I was at Ashurst I do remember that a couple of women were pregnant. The initial comments were along the lines, "she'll have to be sacked"! One of the men would say it and most would nod in agreement.

A female lawyer who worked for me had two children whilst she was at Ashurst, but she was very forceful. Another decided when she had the baby that she didn't want to come back to work.

Q: Did you realise how significant it was to be one of the first women in the City?

No. I didn't even think about it. I just got on with work for my clients.

ELIZABETH MORRIS (NÉE GATLING)

SECOND FEMALE PARTNER, 1991 (LITIGATION)
AT ASHURST 1983 – 1997

Elizabeth Morris was the second female partner at Ashurst, joining an all-male partnership as a newly qualified solicitor in 1983. Elizabeth built a reputation as a skilful litigator and considerate leader and became an equity partner in 1991. She became the first married female partner and first partner to become a mother. 'Retiring' from Ashurst in 1997, Elizabeth has been a full-time mother to her three children and actively involved in voluntary work. Her daughter, Letty, will shortly start her training contract at Ashurst.



"I am so glad I was able to encourage women following behind and their feedback makes the testing times in my career seem worthwhile."

Q: Why did you study law?

The opportunity to strike out in a new and erudite field was what drew me to study law. I had no experience of the legal world – other than a week making tea in a solicitors' office in Surbiton – and no family or friends were lawyers so it really was a leap in the dark!

My parents' generation often remarked "Law! Gosh, you must be clever". It seemed unusual to them for a

girl to go into law and in fact in 1980 only around ten per cent of solicitors were female. Although I considered myself orderly and clear thinking, I never thought of myself as particularly clever. Being female didn't feel a bar or even a relevant consideration. Indeed, when I was at Bristol university in the 1970s the ratio of women to men studying law was 50:50 and there was a feeling of equality.

Q: How did you start your career at Ashurst?

I wanted to qualify into litigation and responded to an Ashurst ad – I hadn't heard of the firm before. An all-male interview was par for the course. A salary of £10K (double my articulated clerk's pay) sealed the deal for me and my career at Ashurst began! It was a great move – the working atmosphere was dynamic and the people interesting and fun. Five years later, I was made an associate partner and three years after that an equity partner. There was no structured career progression timeline – I think it was a case of being good at your job.

Q: Did it feel daunting to start your career in the 1980s knowing that there were so few women in senior roles?

I wasn't daunted and I take my hat off to my parents because they never doubted my ability. My schooling, especially at Wimbledon High where I was head girl, also nurtured my self-confidence. I was fortunate to grow up in an era when doors were opening and there were fewer barriers for women. It never crossed my mind I couldn't do what I set my mind to; I just assumed I could.

Q: What was the culture like in the firm when you were at Ashurst?

Far from being dry and dusty as I had imagined in my uni days, Ashurst was anything but a stuffy working environment. I was lucky to have supportive work colleagues. Nevertheless it took courage to walk into the partners' drinks and dining rooms as one of very few women.

The daily partners' lunches - a privilege throughout my time at Ashurst and a veritable feast – were a positive interaction when partners could talk things through and bounce ideas off each other. I saw many developments in communication whilst I was there from telex, to fax etc. The BlackBerry smart phone was introduced just after I left in the late 90s. Up until then, working remotely was difficult and when on holiday, you could not easily be reached – it is hard to imagine this nowadays!

Q: What are your memorable moments as a woman lawyer?

Being a woman didn't hold me back at Ashurst, until I had a family that is. Mostly, I felt respected by male colleagues and even had the advantage of being noticed as a minority. My personal approach was to focus on being a good team member, regardless of gender. Many juniors/trainees have since shared that this approach provided an invaluable model for them. I am so glad I was able to encourage women following behind and their feedback makes the testing times in my career seem worthwhile.

When I started as a lawyer, I became aware that women could be perceived as lesser than men. In my first weeks in articles, my boss took me to a Fleet Street wine bar. I was staggered to discover women were not allowed to buy drinks and could not stand in the bar area, but had to sit at the back. On another occasion as an articulated clerk I accompanied a partner to a conference with a QC who thanked the partner for bringing his secretary!

One summer, Ashurst and its client, Trafalgar House, got together for a cricket match. I agreed to play even though I'd never played cricket before and was the only woman on the team. When the Chief Executive bowled down at full speed it was terrifying! Yet I managed to survive, didn't get out for a duck and had pride of place in the team photo taken at the end.

Q: What was it like to be the first partner to take maternity leave and become a working mother?

Announcing my engagement was nerve-wracking in a way that I don't think men experience. I was aware that it would be perceived as having professional implications and was concerned colleagues would think I would be less conscientious about my career.

Judging when to have a family so as to balance the interests of the firm and family life was difficult. No one had paved the way ahead of me. To deliver on my commitment as a partner, I thought I ought to wait two years before starting a family. Even then I was worried I might be asked to reconsider my future with the firm. It was even more precarious as a partner than as an employee, as whether you were in or out was decided by a majority vote of the partnership. Younger generations will be incredulous to hear there was no maternity policy in place for employees or partners. As it turned out I was given four months' maternity leave at full pay which seemed very fair. However, I worked around the clock right up until my son Joseph was born in October 1993, and as he was born late, I got less than the full four months.

My assistants – including Ben Tidswell and Simon Bromwich – covered my absence brilliantly and we showed maternity leave could be done. After my second child, Letty, was born two years later, a demanding case required I return to work early and attend a meeting in Paris when she was just six weeks old! It was very challenging to suddenly switch between nurturing mother to a newborn at home and 'tough lawyer' in the office. Although parents continue to face this challenge in the workplace today, it is hopefully helped by longer maternity leave and by a greater understanding at Ashurst of the challenges that women, in particular, face.

Q: What drove your decision to leave in 1997?

I would have liked a four-day week, but it was refused by the partners who insisted that partnership required a full-time commitment. As a committed partner, I was very disappointed about this. Within five years or so, things changed at Ashurst with more women advancing to senior levels and part-time working for partners becoming acceptable. I am sorry the changes came too late for me. Having been in such a privileged position as a partner at Ashurst, any other job didn't have quite the same appeal! I've just reached what would have been my retirement age from Ashurst and muse on how different things would have been if I had been able to keep my Ashurst partnership.



Elizabeth and her daughter Letty.

SUSAN ROY

THIRD FEMALE PARTNER, 1992 (CORPORATE)
AT ASHURST 1985 – 2011

Susan Roy studied law in Australia before joining the firm in 1985. In 1992 she was promoted to the partnership as Ashurst's third female partner, and the first female corporate partner.

After spending two years in our Singapore office, she retired in 2011. Susan has maintained a connection with the firm, working on a consultancy basis for one client who has requested to specifically work with her.



"I personally liked being in a room full of men and being the only woman there. It gave as many, if not more, advantages as disadvantages."

Q: How did you start your career in law?

I studied law in Australia but my family is from Scotland. So I thought that on graduating I would work in the UK for two or three years, before returning to join a firm in Australia.

It was 1985, a boom time in the City. There weren't enough young lawyers coming through, so it was incredibly easy to get a job. I didn't know anything about the firms in London so I attended an initial five

interviews, starting at the beginning of the alphabet. I was offered a job by four of the firms and chose Ashurst because I liked the partners who interviewed me better than any of the others.

I originally wanted to be a litigator but the senior corporate partner who interviewed me and offered me the job said, "you don't want to be a litigator, corporate is much more fun!" I will be forever grateful to that man, we did have such great fun.

Q: What was life at Ashurst like when you joined and what's changed?

Work was fun! People were supportive and loyal. The partners were, in the main, all friends. If a partner had a party, other partners were invited. As you became more senior, you became a part of that club. It was a very friendly, close firm. I'm sure that there must have been people that didn't get on, but you didn't see it.

I'm probably biased but I think that Ashurst was *the* corporate firm. Big enough to do really exciting work, but not so big as to do some of the larger privatisations happening at the time that could take years. We acted for all the major merchant banks and major corporate clients. It was the early days of venture capital and private equity work.

We didn't have mobile phones or emails then. Once I was asked by a senior partner to go up to Barrow-in-Furness for the day, to draft heads of terms. When I arrived, the client said that we were not just going to negotiate heads of terms, we were going to stay until we had drafted and signed the entire sale and purchase agreement! I had gone there without any precedents. All I could do was ring the office and ask one of my friends to read the list of headings to the clauses of our precedent. We then wrote the whole agreement from scratch, including the warranties and a tax indemnity! I had been very proud of the white linen dress that I had worn to the meeting but the dress didn't look so good by the third day. A lesson in being prepared, I have never worn a white linen dress to the office again.

Q: Did you face certain challenges because you were a woman?

I was lucky enough to be brought up without any distinction being made between the abilities of men and women in an academic or work environment. I was of course aware that there weren't very many other women at Ashurst, or indeed anywhere in the City, but I didn't really think too much about it.

I remember very few issues about being a female lawyer. Only one occasion actually sticks in my mind. When I was still fairly junior, a client telephoned the partner to say, "what are you doing putting a lass in charge of our affairs?" I happened to be in the room and the call was on loud speaker. The partner did not hesitate in saying that I was the right person for the job and that the "lass" would be continuing to deal with the transaction.

Of course it was stressful at times, but I always thought that if you worked as hard as you could and did your absolute best, and were reasonably confident that your best was good enough, then no one could ask more of you.

Q: We understand that you're still consulting with one client.

Yes, I met R.E.A. Holdings plc, literally on my first day. I was taken to a meeting at Rothschild to discuss the merger of part of R.E.A.'s business with two other businesses and the flotation of the new entity. I have continued to work with R.E.A. since.

Q: There were so few women in the City when you started. Were there networking opportunities?

I don't think there was much networking in my early days, certainly not in the formal sense that there is today. Clients were originally friends, or 'chums'. That probably did make it a bit harder as a woman, but I personally liked being in a room full of men and being the only woman there. It gave as many, if not more, advantages as disadvantages. I personally didn't feel the need to reach out to other women, which was lucky as there were very few around.

Q: Did you have any role in recruitment? Do you think you were demonstrating a point about women being in the partnership?

I was part of the recruitment team, visiting universities and interviewing candidates. Most young women were positive, but I do remember an open day where I found it astonishing, and very annoyingly negative, that one young woman kept saying, "there's no point having a career in law because you can't progress as a woman. No women make partner". I was a partner by then and remember telling the group that the comment was simply not true, or helpful, but several of the women there would not change their minds, even after knowing who I was!

Q: Why do you think there were so few women in the industry then?

When I started more women were joining as articulated clerks but most left soon after. I don't think the men were making a decision to keep women out or saying, "we're not going to make so and so a partner because she's a woman". I think that many women decided jointly with their husbands, that they would stay at home with the children, or at least be able to attend school events, cope with homework, or be home for dinner. Men did not "have it all" either, they missed much of their children's lives. You can't have everything. I share the view of a former senior partner, the issue is not, and cannot be, about work/life balance but work/life fit. Everyone has to make their own mind up about what fits for them, as an individual or as a couple.

Q: We understand that there was a time when women didn't wear trousers and there are rumours that an Australian lawyer changed that trend.

Women didn't wear trousers for many years after I started. It may have been as late as 1999 when I wore trousers to the office. I may have been the first. I remember purchasing a pair of black trousers to wear with a very bright pink jacket for dress down Friday. I only wore trousers on Fridays.

I do like clothes. One thing I miss now that I am retired is not having a reason to buy the clothes and shoes that I did when I was working. When I started, most women wore blue or grey suits. I wore dresses and contrasting skirts and jackets. I liked colour, which was slightly radical. I admit that I dressed to be noticed. What was the point of spending money on clothes if no one notices? Although being compared with a liquorice allsort was not one of the better compliments that I had!


JAN SANDERS

FIFTH FEMALE PARTNER, 1994 (CORPORATE PROJECTS)

FIRST FEE EARNER WHO RETURNED TO WORK AFTER MATERNITY LEAVE, 1989

AT ASHURST 1987 – PRESENT

Jan Sanders was the first female qualified lawyer to have the right to return to work after maternity leave. After the birth of her first child, Lauren, in 1989, Jan also became first female lawyer to work part-time. Jan continued to work as a partner at Ashurst until May 2018, when she became a consultant. Since 2017, Jan has been sitting as a magistrate.

A portrait of Jan Sanders, a woman with short brown hair and bangs, wearing a light blue button-down shirt. She is looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. The background is a textured, mottled grey-blue.

"I cannot think why women should have been prevented from practising as solicitors. Women are so plainly capable at succeeding in this profession."

Q: How did you start your career in law?

At 16 I thought about leaving school as most of my friends were leaving to become secretaries or join banks. But I wanted to get my A-levels so I decided to go to college and persuaded my parents and the school that I was doing so in order to take A-level law and become a solicitor although that was just an excuse! On my first day at college I was the only woman in the law class and I thought I'd made a huge mistake. Fortunately, by the time I got to my second lecture I was in a mixed class. I

was hooked and never wanted to do anything else after that.

At first I wanted to practise family law but the experience I had at Withers was totally different to the work I had done in the vacations at a local law firm practising legal aid and it was not for me. My articles included a stint working in the corporate department with Michael Johns who later joined Ashurst and I quickly decided that this was much more my style and so I qualified into the corporate department.

Q: What were your first impressions of Ashurst?

I joined Ashurst at the end of March 1987 when we were based in Eldon Street. I thought that Ashurst was a large firm, but in hindsight it was quite small with only 29 partners. It was a really good firm and the work was exciting. Private equity was in its infancy and there was a real buzz about the work we were doing. Ashurst always had a reputation for punching above its weight.

The culture was very different back then. There were cigarette boxes at reception for clients and partners used to drink every day at lunchtime. In terms of the hours we worked, they probably weren't too dissimilar to now albeit that the pace was slightly slower because you didn't have mobile phones or email.

We also had a coffee lady called Annie who used to deliver coffee to the partners. At lunchtime the partners used proper linen napkins and Annie used to take them home to launder and starch them!

Q: When you joined the firm, do you remember any female partners?

I think Linda Walker was the only one when I joined, but Elizabeth Morris came soon after and then Susan Roy.

Susan was made up the year before me but I'd had two children so I'd had the equivalent of 18 months out of the office. In the 1990s people were being made up after around six or seven years, and 18 months out of six or seven years is a considerable period of time so I did not feel that was unfair. I am not suggesting that the same would or should apply now.

Q: What made you ask to work part-time?

When I had my first child, Lauren, in 1989, I thought: "Just because nobody has done this before doesn't mean I can't".

It was more difficult because there were no policies in place, so I went to the people I worked with most and said I would like to work three days a week in return for 3/5ths of my salary. The male head of HR expressed the view that part-time working could never work for a transactional lawyer. However, the firm backed me and bought me a fax machine to have at home and that was that.

Shortly afterwards I changed to four days a week as it was very stressful and like trying to go on holiday twice a week when it came to leaving the office.

I probably still worked half my Fridays. No one ever told me I had to work – it was my choice. I thought then (and still do) that the key to making the arrangement work was flexibility on both sides. Transactional work requires engagement and is fast-moving. Clients had an expectation that you would be available. This sounds ridiculous now; you could either explain or just say that you were in another meeting but at the time clients and fee-earners were not at all used to part-time working.

Q: Did you ever consider it a deterrent that no one at the firm had taken paid maternity leave?

No. The first time I took maternity leave, I was allowed to come back because I had the statutory right to, but I only received the statutory maternity pay of six weeks at 90 per cent of salary and then maternity allowance of approximately £32 per week. I wanted to have children, but I was always the main breadwinner (even on only

three days a week). When I had my second daughter, Chloe, we had moved to a larger house with a much larger mortgage. I simply couldn't afford not to be paid while on maternity leave.

There were still no policies in place and no one else had been on maternity leave as I recall so I asked and I was given half pay for the duration of my second maternity leave. I was always conscious that if I didn't make my part-time working and maternity leave work then I would make life even more difficult for the women behind me.

Q: What do you think has changed at both Ashurst and in the City?

There have been so many changes in the law, the firm, the City and the profession. I spent a lot of my career not thinking about whether men and women were treated differently – we were all lawyers striving to get the best deals and do well for our clients. The first time I came across discrimination, I had no idea that I was being treated differently on the grounds that I was female and thought I had done something wrong or wasn't good enough. The partner eventually told me "you do realise why he said that, it's because you're a girl". I guess from then on I was more conscious of it.

A couple of years ago we were looking at bonuses based on chargeable hours and why there was a male/female disparity in the sums paid. We discovered that women often volunteered for the less "glamorous" and more administrative jobs. This meant they weren't getting the exposure to clients that enables one to build a reputation and practice and also would enable them to record more chargeable hours.

We've come so far from those days. Clients actively require us to promote female talent and encourage flexible working which is great.

Partners used to say that they felt like trustees, just looking after the firm for a certain amount of time until they passed it on to the next generation. I certainly feel that and when I look at how much the world has changed and how things have changed during my time here I just feel so lucky to have been part of it.

Q: What would you say to young women at the start of their career?

I attended a seminar on bias in the workplace that was run by a woman. She explained that you shouldn't try to be a man, because you're not. Women and men have different skillsets and that is a blessing. Women are often (although not always) better at picking up emotional responses to acts, for example during a negotiation looking at people and being alive to the reactions of others and using that to their advantage. Never try to be a man; try to embrace the natural skills you have as a woman.

Q: Did you know that women were previously disqualified from the profession on the basis of sex?

No, it never occurred to me. I cannot think why women should have been prevented from practising as solicitors. Women are so plainly capable at succeeding in this profession.


MARY PADBURY

FIRST FEMALE VICE CHAIRMAN OF ASHURST, 2013

FIRST FEMALE CHAIRMAN AT BLAKE DAWSON WALDRON, 2005

AT BLAKE & RIGGALL, BLAKE DAWSON WALDRON,
BLAKE DAWSON, AND ASHURST, 1981 – 2018

Having led Blake Dawson into a full merger with Ashurst, Mary Padbury has undoubtedly been instrumental in shaping the future of the firm and has a correspondingly fascinating career journey. Drawing on her diverse experiences of practising in London in the mid-1980s and being at the helm of Ashurst's expansion as a regional and then global firm, Mary reflects on the changing attitudes towards and opportunities that have been available to female lawyers.

A portrait of Mary Padbury, a woman with short, wavy reddish-brown hair, smiling. She is wearing a bright pink blazer over a white collared shirt. The background is a dark, textured blue.

"In my view, we should focus on qualities like selflessness, influencing skills and resilience. Our appraisal system doesn't always measure these qualities."

Q: How did you start your career in law?

My father was very keen to be a lawyer but his studies were interrupted by air force service in World War II. He ended up working at a company to support his family.

I was the last of three children and he'd given up on my siblings doing law. I studied law in deference to him. Although I was much more interested in classical studies and Russian literature, the moment I started studying law I enjoyed it. It was both challenging and interesting.

I studied IP at university not long after it was introduced as a subject. At Blake & Riggall (before it merged with Dawson Waldron to become Blake Dawson Waldron, then Blake Dawson, and now Ashurst), whenever little bits of IP work came in, I volunteered.

The firm seconded me to Bristows, a boutique IP firm in London. There were some excellent female solicitors at Bristows but no female partners. We were right at the point when people were more open to the idea that you should be made partner on merit and it should have nothing to do with gender or indeed anything else. It was a fantastic experience. I made a lot of good friends who remain friends today and of course learned a good deal more about IP.

Q: Was there anything of note then about gendered expectations in the legal industry?

After completing my articles, I was assigned to Property Law which I was pretty useless at and not personally interested in (although an important area of law of

course!). At the time I did wonder if that was gender-based. Property Law was seen as a good career for women, with more regular hours than M&A, for example.

The inherent assumption was that women should be at home with the kids. That was a deeply-held view for quite a period of time and I suspect that there are a few people who still hold those views.

I remember thinking that I'd been put in a box. My reaction to that was to let the firm know about an offer from another firm which enabled me to do some IP work. The firm said, "don't be silly, don't go, you're doing a good job, and we'll send you overseas to learn more about IP as we can't train you properly here".

You had to be a bit determined about what you wanted to do so you weren't typecast, although I am still surprised I did this.

Q: Tell us about your journey to partnership? Did you feel that you faced certain challenges because you were a woman?

I don't know whether I thought about it in those terms. I was ambitious. I did think, from quite an early stage, that I'd like to be considered for partnership on my merits.

Blake & Riggall was open to developing an IP practice but I needed to demonstrate that there was a business case. I was very fortunate that no one else was keen on IP in Melbourne, and I was lucky with the timing because it was just as that area of law was really taking off. Everyone was happy to let me get on with it and I had a bit of a free hand. That probably made my path relatively easy. It was great fun building up the local practice and the merger with Dawson Waldron, who had a strong New South Wales practice, really helped. I really loved it.

In saying this, it used to be said – and it of course annoyed me – that IP was a suitable area for women because you could work flexibly, more readily, as it was more nine to five, which of course it wasn't. Conversely something "serious" like M&A or banking was seen as less suitable work for women because you had to work through the night and so on, although of course we have many female partners now who disprove that.

Q: It seems as though there was an assumption that only men would have long and successful careers. When was there a shift in mindset?

If you were very single-minded about your career, it may have been easier to push for consideration. It was perhaps harder for those juggling children and family life with their careers, although a number of women were made partner around the same time as me, so I think that perception was changing.

Formal structures to support diversity grew over time. There was a fantastic woman, Marlene Murray, who came in from Amex in the early 2000s to lead our HR function in Australia, who was light-years ahead. She said, "we must have policies for flexible work and be more structured generally so we have a fair and rigorous system to recruit, promote and pay people on merit". She made a big difference.

Q: Do we still need to do more for gender balance and diversity?

Generally to help people develop, you've got to give them opportunities before they're ready. We're less likely to do that with women, given their propensity to hold back. If you have someone who is desperately keen to do a leadership role and someone who is not sure they want to do it or have all the attributes, it is more likely you will default to the person who is keen. In fact, you should sit back and think about who is the best person to do it and who is most likely to develop the most in the longer term. This requires some courage on all sides both to appoint and to accept appointment. If you give people a real sense that they can progress, they'll almost always surprise you in a positive way.

I think the firm has made great strides on diversity more broadly but I don't think the war is won. We won't be a fully inclusive and diverse workplace until people take it as a given that we should just focus on merit and be alive to the different biases we all have so we don't recruit and promote in our own image.

It is not straightforward and I think it is something which will take a while to change, but at its heart, this is what leadership is. In my view, we should focus on qualities like selflessness, influencing skills and resilience. Our appraisal system doesn't always measure these qualities.

Q: What advice would you give to young lawyers?

Whatever opportunities present themselves, grasp them, you never know where they are going to lead. Seize the day. Sometimes you have to learn to be a bit more pushy or braver than you feel.

You will ultimately have a successful, rewarding and enriching experience if you're doing what you enjoy with people you like and respect. When I think back, the things that really matter at the end of a career are the friendships, the laughs, the clients you really feel you've helped, and the relationships you've built up. I guess we should all ask, "have we left the firm in better shape to support all its current and future stakeholders?"

Occasionally if you're not happy or if you don't think something is right, or you're not enjoying yourself, say so. You sometimes imagine everyone must know, but often they don't. You can always do this in a pleasant and constructive way.



Linda Humphreys-Evans (née Watson) entering an Ashurst party in 1967.



Hilary Jordan (née Graham) and colleagues at an Ashurst party.



Ashurst staff at an event at Mercier's Champagne house. Pictures show ball in the cellar and car rally through the champagne countryside.



A partners' dinner at the Ritz on 8 June 1993, to mark Martin Bell's retirement.



Ashurst dinner at the Savoy – Elizabeth Morris features on the right with the red earrings with her husband John Morris.

ASHURST MORRIS CRISP



M. G. H. BELL
R. B. JAMES
M. J. A. THUM
B. M. WALKER
L. D. EUTMAN
A. J. SOUNDY
C. D. CROSTHWAITE
I. R. SCOTT
M. A. F. MACPHERSON
J. N. MAY
D. J. MACPARLANE
J. YOLLAND
D. E. P. ALBERT
G. S. GREEN
C. J. AMOS
M. C. JOHNS
D. R. PERKS
C. M. CROSTHWAITE

E. C. A. SPARROW
L. A. BAILEY
R. J. FINBOW
P. HARWOOD-SMART
C. J. ASHWORTH
D. R. KERSHAW
A. W. N. KITCHIN
J. A. SULTOON
M. D. CUNLIFFE
S. J. MACHIN
I. B. NISSE
J. N. SHELDON
J. C. EVANS
W. INNES
J. A. NIMMO
R. B. WALSON
C. VIGRASS

ASSOCIATES
J. J. ELLISON
R. S. GUBBINS
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G. S. WHEATCROFT
J. P. PEARCE
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S. A. HUMPHREY
D. E. LANGLEY
C. J. LEACH
C. J. D. MILLS
S. A. PRICE
I. J. WEBB
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15th April 1988

Dear Mum and John...

A copy of the new note-paper
for your records!

Elizabeth/

PARTNERS



Martin Bell *Lawyer*



Richard James *Company*



Max Thell *Company*



Barry Walker *Company*



Laurence Palmer *Property*



Andrew Seaward *Company*



Christopher Crosthwaite *Company*



Ian Smith *Company*



Alexander Macpherson *Company*



John May *Company*



David Macfarlane *Company*



John Holland *Company*



David Albert *Property*



Geoffrey Green *Company*



Jack Arnes *Law*



Michael Johns *Company*



David Perks *Property*



Charles Crosthwaite *Company*



Edward Spence *Company*



Linda Bailey *Property*



Roger Pittman *Company*



Philip Ramsay Grant *Law*



Chris Raftery *Company*



David Raftery *Company*



Alan Kitchin *Company*



Jeff Salmon *Company*



Michael Gurdle *Property*



Stephen Martin *Law*



Ian Moss *Property*



Jeremy Stratton *Company*



John Evans *Company*



Bill Webb *Property*



James Winick *Company*



Christopher Vigosa *Company*



Roger Williams *Company*



Richard Cuthbert *Company*



Charles Leach *Property*



John Watson *Law*



Guy Whitworth *Property*



Adrian Clark *Company*



Adrian Clark *Property*



Julian Elms *Company*



Mark Wiggall *Company*



Brian Crook *Property*



Charles Geller *Company*



Elizabeth Morris *Company*



Ian Webb *Company*

SENIOR ASSOCIATES

Tony Brown *First L. R.*

Company

Dale Langley *Company*

Arwen Murphy *Company*

Sharon Price *Property*

Barbara Allen *Law*

Jeremy Hill *Company*

Adrian Knight *Company*

Steven Roy *Company*

Jan Sanders *Company*

Royal Ward *Company*

Anthony Connors *Property*

Ian Denton *Property*

David Elery *Company*

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Geoffrey Patten *Company*

Mark Rose *Company*

Paul Randall *Law*

Michael Patten *Company*

Orlando Webb *Company*

Orlando Williams *Law*

Sandra Woodall *Property*

Susan Crawford *Law*

James Bagwell *Company*

Mark Eley *Company*

Barbara Keith *Property*

Rosalee King *Company*

Wendy McCall *Property*

David Moore *Company*

Nigel Part *Company*

Judith Sharnock *Property*

Mark Slater *Company*

Nan Thomas *Company*

Partners from an Ashurst brochure from the early 1990s. Elizabeth Morris and Linda Bailey (now Linda Walker) feature.



Linda Humphreys-Evans' admission receipt from The Law Society. Note the manuscript amend from "Mr" to "Miss" and "his" to "her".

ANGELA PEARSON

FIRST FEMALE GLOBAL GENERAL COUNSEL, 2018

BOARD MEMBER, 2014

PARTNER, 2006 (DISPUTE RESOLUTION)

AT ASHURST 1993 – PRESENT

In May 2018, Angela was appointed as Ashurst's first female global General Counsel. She leads the firm's Office of General Counsel and Risk and Compliance function.



"I was part of the trainee revolution. We petitioned the senior partner to be allowed to wear trousers!"

Q: How did you start your career in law?

I fell into law. It was luck. I had no lawyers in my family and neither of my parents had been to university. I got some university prospectuses and read up and received an offer from Queen Mary College, University of London. I realised from the first year that it was a subject that I really enjoyed and wanted to pursue a career in.

I trained at Linklaters and qualified there, staying for about four years. I was part of the trainee revolution. We petitioned the senior partner to be allowed to wear

trousers! I was a bit subversive - before we were allowed to wear trousers I wore a pair of culottes that looked like a skirt. The partners finally gave in and from then on we were able to wear smart trouser suits.

Linklaters is a great firm but I looked around and saw very few women and the women that were there I didn't identify with – they were all public school with stripy shirts and cashmere jumpers and pearls. As much as I tried to put myself into that box, I knew I didn't fit. I also wanted to be doing more general commercial litigation.

Ashurst Morris Crisp was a smaller firm, but had a really strong brand for corporate work. I applied to Ashurst to do commercial litigation, was offered a job and joined Edward Sparrow's team.

Q: Were you looking ahead when you joined?

Yes – I absolutely wanted to be a partner. I think that people made a decision relatively early on whether to follow that path. In disputes there were one or two female partners and so at least some role models. Elizabeth Morris was the partner there in the early days of my career and she worked incredibly hard. I remember working with her and hearing her talk to her little boy late at night – at that time there wasn't remote working so if you were in the office, you were in the office. It was quite difficult to have a balance.

Q: What was life at Ashurst like when you joined?

It was a bit of a boys' club. You were sometimes taken to client lunches or dinners that you probably didn't need to go to because you were an attractive female. I certainly had some uncomfortable situations with clients. But it was different to Linklaters because it was a more open and relaxed environment. It was less hierarchical, people worked hard but also had fun. I felt more true to myself – I didn't have to be a version of myself to succeed.

In terms of work allocation, I felt that I got a fair share of the work. When I started I worked on one of the biggest cases in the department. We were acting for Invesco who were embroiled in the Maxwell scandal and being pursued in relation to some of the pension fund's missing millions.

I do think that some women had to run a bit faster to achieve partnership and some of my male contemporaries were made up quite a few years ahead of me. I remember going in to my appraisal each year with my business case, my list of clients and my revenue and asking what I needed to do to become a partner. My goal was crystal clear. All the stars finally came into alignment and I was made partner. My career then changed gear and my trajectory was almost like a rocket. I went up the equity quickly and took on leadership roles.

The thing I really love about Ashurst - and that applies to men and women – is that everybody has different journeys. People can push on and make partner at any stage. There is not a one size fits all.

Q: How did you manage to balance family life and work?

With some difficulty. I had my first child and was made a partner within the same year. However, I had a supportive partner, David, and an excellent nanny. I also realised early on that you did not have to be perfect at everything and compromises were necessary. Happy clients and two happy children could be achieved, but not a "show home" house and at all times being perfectly groomed.

Q: What's the best advice you've received?

I remember when I had my baby and I was thinking about coming back, saying to Jane Hanna, a partner and friend in the Dispute Resolution team: "how did you do it?" She'd had two children and she was still able to go home most evenings and see them before starting work again. She gave me a good tip which is put your child to

bed at eight pm instead of seven so that you can get home and see them before they go to sleep. It worked for me and so I have passed it on.

Q: What do you think of the progress of women in law?

We are making progress, over half of our promotions to partner this year were women, but we need to stay focussed. The first step is to get women in and then to retain them and that's where the issue still is: making this an attractive career. You have to make sacrifices in your personal and social life. The responsibility for childcare still often falls to the woman. If you're in banking or corporate transactions or working on a busy case, it can be a challenge to get home. I don't think that Ashurst or any other firm in the City have got it right yet. Things are moving in the right direction, for example with maternity leave; I took five and a half months and now women are taking nine months to a year and it is no longer inevitable that it will result in a pause to their partnership track. If you know that you can spend time at home and still be successful that's a better model than saying goodbye to your child until you have succeeded in your career.

It is also about having a sustainable career as a partner. We should be able to look up in the future and see equal numbers of women in their late 40s and 50s still working at a high level, just as you see the men.

Q: What makes a successful woman in a law firm?

There are many different personalities of women at the firm. I think we definitely have some things in common though. We're resilient. We're ambitious. We're supportive of other women. I'm competitive and I think that's what has kept me wanting to succeed. "why shouldn't I be the client relationship partner for that client?" or "why shouldn't I take that leadership role?" If I were to look at my female partners, we are all ambitious and enjoy our work.

It's quite hard to do this job well unless you like the law and you like and understand the business of law. It has changed in recent years. Before you could do well if you were an excellent lawyer. However, the market is now highly competitive and over-lawyered. So you also need excellent client-facing skills and the ability to win work. You need to be able to sell yourself, your team and others in the firm.


Q: What sticks in your memory?

A very fond memory was at a dispute resolution retreat we decided to do some team building and hosted a Eurovision Song Contest. Each office had to prepare with people from another office a traditional song. Michael Madden, the then Practice Head and I were the compères for the evening. I wore a huge curly blonde wig and a red ball gown and tried to speak with an Eastern European accent! It was great fun.

RUTH HARRIS

FIRST FEMALE LONDON OFFICE MANAGING PARTNER, 2019
PARTNER, 2006 (GLOBAL LOANS)
AT ASHURST 1995 – PRESENT

As a Global Loans partner, London Office Managing Partner and, until recently, the co-chair of the Admissions Committee, Ruth is a real leader at Ashurst. Having first arrived in 1995 as a trainee, she has risen through the ranks, impressing clients and colleagues alike. Alongside her remarkable career, which has seen her focus on real estate finance, she has five children.

A portrait of Ruth Harris, a woman with long, wavy blonde hair, smiling warmly at the camera. She is wearing a dark, long-sleeved top. Her hands are resting on a light-colored wooden surface in front of her. A ring is visible on her left hand.

"I suppose I never doubted that if I had something interesting and relevant to say and I said it in the right way that I would be listened to."

Q: How did you start your career in law?

It was not necessarily law in itself that I was attracted to. I knew from my visits to London as a child that I would really like to work in the City and, after gaining work experience in accountancy firms and law firms, I knew that I would enjoy working in a professional services environment. I was attracted to the idea of working in teams with a wide variety of people and having opportunities to travel.

At that point I was studying economics and having enjoyed a few weeks at a law firm in London I switched to studying law for my final degree. If I'm honest, one of the biggest attractions was that by switching to law I would get an extra year at university!

Q: Did you think it was significant at the time that you were a female lawyer?

My memory is quite hazy on this, but I can't remember giving it a second thought. No one had ever said to me that being a woman would make anything different. Looking back, although the client meetings I attended were heavily male-dominated, my intake of trainees was very balanced.

I do think it is incredible that only 100 years ago women were held to not qualify as "persons" for the purposes of the Solicitors Act 1843. We had come a long way by the time I was drawn to law. Things are a lot better now. But there is still work to do to achieve a fully inclusive meritocracy.

Q: Have you ever felt that you've faced any particular challenges as a woman and how did you overcome these?

I actually have a low sensitivity to the fact I am a woman. I didn't feel different or treated in a way that was to my detriment. Looking back, I would often be the only female at a meeting. It didn't make me uncomfortable. I suppose I never doubted that if I had something interesting and relevant to say and I said it in the right way that I would be listened to.

Q: How have you found your new role as London Managing Partner?

I am really enjoying it. It's given me the opportunity to discover more about who works at the Ashurst London office. I'm discovering talent, enthusiasm and commitment that I didn't know about before. It's been exciting and inspiring helping Ashurst London to achieve its ambitions – how to make us successful by working together.

Q: Do you think it is significant that Ashurst has a female Managing Partner?

In terms of being a female managing partner, I don't feel different to anyone else. We have many male lawyers and members of the business services team that share a similar approach to me. Being female is only part of who I am. I suppose, for some, who perhaps have come from backgrounds or families where being a woman and having a career is not encouraged, having a female office managing partner may open up their minds to other ways of thinking. In that sense, it is a very positive thing. It is evidence of Ashurst having a level playing field.

Q: How have you found managing a work-life balance?

To be honest, quite hard. It's always a challenge. I love my work and I absolutely love being at home with my kids and husband. There are just not enough hours in the day! That being said, my kids have benefited in many ways from having a working mum, and I do think as they get older they recognise that. It sounds very basic but they all can do their own washing and can cook meals. Even Max (my 10 year old) makes the best banana cake ever!

I couldn't have carried on working for so long without the support of my husband. I have been incredibly lucky that he is very hands-on. I think my family sometimes wish that I could spend more time with them, but if I did I reckon that they would soon wish I was at work more!

Q: What is your favourite memory of Ashurst so far?

One of my very first experiences at Ashurst was being invited with the business services team to go paint-balling. It was one of my funniest Ashurst days out and was a really lovely and welcoming gesture to be invited.

I also remember as a trainee, feeling like I had made it as a City lawyer when I was sent a magnum bottle of Veuve Clicquot champagne by the financial director of Veuve Clicquot. That felt great!

Q: How can we encourage women at senior associate partner level to stay?

I don't think the question really is how to encourage more women to pursue careers in Ashurst to partnership level or heads of function level. I think that implies a lack of interest or effort, which I don't see. It is more about how do we identify and promote the right people with the right skills to partnership.

I think if we focus on being a truly inclusive meritocracy then we will see a natural balance established. We may need to be a bit smarter in the way we identify the skills we need. Certainly legal skills, but wider skills of communication, ability to work in teams, entrepreneurial skills, and empathy for example.

If your question is how to persuade more women to pursue senior roles rather than other careers, including creating a family home – there's not one answer. It may be partly about showing it is a viable option and seeing successful women who have commitments outside of work reach leadership positions.

Q: Can you remember much about women at the firm when you joined?

The year I joined Ashurst, one female partner left and the reason I was given was that it was too hard to work and bring up children. There were a few other female partners (including Elizabeth Morris who interviewed me and who is also featured in this publication) so I had role models.


Q: What would you say to young women at the start of their career?

Be precise about what you are good at. It's absolutely fine to be aware of your weaknesses and to work on them, but make sure people know what you are really good at. Showcase it.

GABRIELLE SAMUELS

EXPERTISE COUNSEL (GLOBAL LOANS)
AT ASHURST 1999 – 2019

Gabrielle worked in the Ashurst London Global Loans department for 20 years where she was responsible for the technical development of lawyers, acted as knowledge counsel to the team and led on technical analysis. Gabrielle was a founding member of the LGBT+ group at Ashurst, Spectrum, and has been an active member of the Ashurst LGBT+ community throughout her time at the firm.

A portrait of Gabrielle Samuels, a woman with dark curly hair, smiling at the camera. She is wearing a dark blue short-sleeved top with a white floral pattern and a silver watch on her left wrist. The background is a plain, light grey.

“By being out at work, I have always hoped to be a beacon for others. I have made myself as visible as possible as an out woman to try to create a safe space into which other people can feel comfortable coming out.”

Q: How did you start your career in law?

I started studying civil engineering at university. After a year, I realised that I had little enthusiasm for the subject and even less aptitude. I spoke to my older sister who suggested that I do law, a “good subject” instead. I thought, “alright, I will look into that!”

Whilst studying for my law degree, I actually thought I would end up teaching, as an academic; I guess that in some ways I have, given my role as a knowledge lawyer. I had no active plan to pursue this though and in the late 1980s, when I graduated, it was a time of huge expansion in the City, so I followed the tide and got a job at Allen & Overy as an articled clerk.

After qualifying as a solicitor, I joined the restructuring and insolvency group. After a couple of years, I wanted a change so I did a client secondment with NatWest Markets, firstly in London and then in Hong Kong. I then spent some time in A&O's Hong Kong office as a general banking lawyer, and realised that I preferred mentoring juniors and helping other people to work more effectively than actually doing deals myself.

I decided that I wanted to be a teaching lawyer so I took four months off to mentally re-set (and have a good time) and on my return to London, I joined the A&O training team. It didn't take long though for me to appreciate that it is difficult to do legal training in isolation from wider legal technical work – I knew that I needed to be a full-service professional support lawyer as knowledge lawyers were then called. In December 1998 a role came up in the Ashurst banking team and I found that the partners who interviewed me were keen to listen, which was a good sign, and they persuaded me that I could do good work at Ashurst.

Q: What was your experience at Ashurst like as a gay woman?

By the time I joined Ashurst, I was out as a gay woman to my friends and family but I hadn't previously been out at work; it just seemed too difficult. There was no LGBT+ community at my previous firm and there were no out women at all. I chose to remain invisible. However, in the last six months or so that I was at A&O, I realised that being invisible was not in fact at all comfortable and it certainly wasn't insulating me from homophobia as people would sometimes make comments about other people in my presence.

When I joined Ashurst I had decided that I would come out after six months. I hoped that would be long enough to be established and be known for my work rather than my sexuality. By the time that the six months elapsed, I was in a relationship with my now wife. I told my secretary that I had a girlfriend, saying “it's not a secret” in the hope that she would spread the word as quickly as possible – but as it turned out she wasn't very ‘gossipy’! In any case, I found out quickly enough that as an LGBT+ person you never stop having to come out anyway.

My partner was pregnant with our first child in 2001. At that time, men were given two weeks off for paternity leave but there was no policy for gay couples having a baby. The banking team's lead secretary said she didn't see why I should be treated any differently to a man and that she would speak to HR, which she did. HR agreed I should get two weeks off and then changed their policy immediately to include same sex couples.

I also remember when an associate who I didn't know very well ran into me by the lifts and he congratulated me on the pregnancy, referring to Tamar as my wife.

At that point I didn't refer to Tamar as my wife as we weren't married and indeed at that time couldn't be, but the gesture meant a lot to me. I thought that it was a massive mark of respect. Every time somebody referred to Tamar as my wife it was an affirmation. Now we actually are married it is still a significant act for me to refer to her as my wife when talking to strangers: plumbers, delivery drivers and so on. I always hold my breath a little and hope that the person doesn't blink, which so far nobody has!

By being out at work, I have always hoped to be a beacon for others. I have made myself as visible as possible as an out woman to try to create a safe space into which other people can feel comfortable coming out.

Q: How was Spectrum (Ashurst's LGBT+ network) started?

It was in the early 2000s, the first meeting was held in a rooftop bar with about half a dozen of us. We had a chat about forming some sort of a group with which you could relax fully and talk about your girlfriend or boyfriend and just feel a sense of community.

Around that time, my wife was a volunteer at London Friend, the oldest LGBT charity in the country. So through them I arranged the first LGBT speaker at Ashurst to give a talk about the charity and we also sponsored their Pride banner.

The more socials we had, the more I wanted to encourage not just lawyers to join but also people working in business services. I figured that our posters advertising our events would be every bit as important as the events themselves. The posters would give the community visibility and would show staff that we were now an accepted part of Ashurst and would help reassure people that it was okay to be out at Ashurst. Many of us were happy to have our faces on those posters; female invisibility was (and is) a big issue for me plus I was super happy to have the posters do the work for me of coming out to all the staff who I didn't know personally.

By the mid-2000s, we had a diversity committee which was led by a partner, Erica Handling, who felt very strongly about the importance of diversity and inclusion. It was brilliant to see her support for funding and for hiring a diversity manager which put much more momentum behind diversity initiatives.

Another significant initiative has been the Allies programme, which has been a real support. It gives space to Allies who may have very close friends or family who identify as LGBT+ and who themselves seek a sense of community. Anyone can be an Ally and many people have been great Allies to me.

Q: What do you hope to see next from Spectrum?


There is still a lack of senior women who are active within the Spectrum community but there is a growing community of LGBT+ women who are forging their paths at Ashurst. I very much hope that women will continue to find the courage to be out at work and thereby help to provide the safe space into which other women can come out.

Spectrum is about visibility: it's people saying “we are here”. In the past, there were very few people who were comfortable coming out, whereas now people are much more open about different things. I recently heard a respectful discussion among a group of trainees and a straight partner about drag kings and queens so we have come a long way!

AILEEN JOHNSON

HEAD OF KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS, 2018
AT ASHURST 2000 – PRESENT

Aileen joined Ashurst in 2000 and worked as a professional support lawyer (PSL) in the Construction team before moving into her current role as Head of Knowledge Systems.

A portrait of Aileen Johnson, a woman with shoulder-length brown hair, wearing a white textured cardigan over a black top and a large, colorful, abstract necklace. She is smiling slightly and looking towards the camera.

"I have definitely noticed the movement towards more flexible working, even in the last two years; working flexibly is accepted and expected."

Q: How did you start your career in law?

There are no lawyers in my family – we mainly had farmers, engineers and nurses! I've always been attracted to law and decided I wanted to be a lawyer when I was 15 or 16 years old. I liked the problem-solving aspect of it.

I studied law at UCL and went on to be a trainee solicitor, qualifying at another law firm. I practised in construction, property litigation and general commercial litigation which I really enjoyed. It was very busy at the time I left private practice (when I was two years qualified). Despite the heavy workload, I liked the variety of the work and enjoyed going to court.

Q: What made you decide to leave private practice?

Although I had enjoyed much of what I had done as a trainee and junior lawyer, I had acquired a huge caseload of set-fee work. There was obviously a lot of pressure to bill as much as you could but this was particularly challenging in a set-fee context. There was also a risk factor in managing a large number of cases. The cases were less interesting to me and I felt that there was less opportunity to develop in new areas.

When I left private practice, I relocated to California with my husband who was on secondment. This was during the technology boom of the late 1990s. I fully

intended never to go back to law and was determined to never to do another timesheet. I had nightmares about being chased for timesheets during my years off!

Q: Why did you choose to join Ashurst?

When I returned from California two and a half years later, I had a contact at Ashurst in the legal support department as it was then called. It had recently been set up. I came in for an interview with Jeremy Thomas, the partner heading up the legal support function.

I only anticipated doing the job for six months and I am not sure I really understood what I would be doing! One of the good things was that there was a lot to choose from so I had a central role as well as the construction PSL role - I enjoyed both of those. I was able to make the most of the opportunities that were there.

Knowledge management was at a much earlier stage and the legal support department was very much in its infancy. There was a big drive to get standard documents on the system and have them look and feel similar - I understood that it would involve developing a house style for the firm and people seemed to think that it would be challenging to get all departments and offices to agree on it. I remember working with Jeremy, David Kershaw, Nigel Ward and David Perks on the English language house style guide.

Although it underwent a major change in 2003 when we rebranded from Ashurst Morris Crisp to Ashurst, that house style guide still forms the basis of the one we use in the firm today.

Q: How has your role evolved over time?

After coming back from maternity leave in 2006, I took on a purely central role. The role of the whole knowledge management function has changed so we do much more client-facing work now. I really enjoy having direct contact with clients. This has become an increasingly important part of knowledge and expertise. Our clients expect quite a lot from us on a "value-add" basis. It is important that we work in a collaborative way with them to deliver this. All services, including value-adds, are expensive to deliver and we need to make sure that we are really making a difference to the client's business.

Q: Was it easy to take maternity leave at that point?

Yes, pretty much. I felt that the firm was very supportive. I actually took adoption leave - at that time there wasn't a policy so I negotiated the same arrangement as for maternity leave. I returned to work, at least in my own mind, on a trial basis. I had no intention of staying if it became unmanageable.

It was important to me to have a life outside work. It was agreed when I came back that I would work three days a week and that is now four days a week (and it has been built up by choice). I don't think I would have come back full time.

This was partly because I really wanted to spend time more time with the children when they were young, but partly because it is important to have time for me too! Being really busy at work and going straight into a really busy weekend - there's no time to switch off.

Q: Do you have any reflections on why so many of the individuals working in knowledge are women?

I think women have been very good at spotting opportunities to do things differently. I became a PSL years before I had a family as I wanted to do something that interested and challenged me while still having

a life outside work. One of the frustrations of being in private practice for me had been that I was often under such time pressures that I didn't feel that I had got to the bottom to an issue whereas one of the good things about being an expertise lawyer is that the documents you're working on form the basis of all the deals the firm does. You have the time and the space to do the research and consider all the issues properly. That is something I really enjoyed when doing the structured PSL work.

Q: How have the roles of women changed over the years?

Things have changed since I was a trainee solicitor - which was at another firm: for example, a shuttle bus used to take us to court and there were photos of page 3 girls in the post room where we had to wait for the bus. Displaying these pictures seemed to be readily accepted by everyone except the female trainees. For the Rugby 7s tournament the female trainees were asked to be cheerleaders. When we protested, one of the female partners told us to stop taking ourselves so seriously. That certainly wouldn't happen now.

Q: Do you think that the firm has been more open to expertise staff working flexibly than other lawyers?

The firm seems accommodating for everyone, particularly with maternity leave, support and working flexibly. Managing the demands of client work will always be challenging. With knowledge and expertise becoming more client-facing, we all need to meet those challenges. We are still lawyers and acutely aware of the fact that the client comes first - we operate in an intensely competitive market. If we can't deliver on time then another firm will. We don't work in the same way as transactional lawyers but if we need to provide input on a pitch for example we obviously have to do it whether or not it's the weekend or we are on holiday.

I have definitely noticed the movement towards more flexible working, even in the last two years; working flexibly is accepted and expected. Being part of a global business means that we have to work at the time that suits other parts of the business and our clients - we have to be flexible to fit in with a 7am or 10pm call or meeting.

Q: Is there any advice you would give to people going into a PSL role?

Try not to specialise too early in your career and put your hand up to try different kinds of work. Five or six years qualified is a good time to go into a PSL role. Keep broadening your horizons.

Q: What would you say to young women at the start of their career?

Go into an area that really interests you. Keep looking forward for progression and your next move. Make sure that the team you are joining is diverse at every level. Lastly, take charge of your own career; you might need to push hard and articulate what you expect.

SARAH SIVYOUR

EXECUTIVE TEAM, 2019 (CO-HEAD OF PROJECTS & REAL ESTATE)

BOARD MEMBER, 2018

PARTNER, 2012 (REAL ESTATE)

AT ASHURST 2000 – PRESENT

Sarah joined Ashurst as a trainee in 2000 and became a partner in 2012. She was elected to the Board in October 2018 and joined the Executive Team as co-head of the Projects and Real Estate Division in May 2019. She has previously held the position of UK Training Principal.



"I remember my early partners' conferences - in particular one in Dubai - and walking into a sea of beige chinos and blue shirts."

Q: How did you start your career in law?

I'm from Huddersfield but had moved south to study French and German at Oxford, St Hugh's College, which was set up to give women the opportunity to have a university education.

I had all these grand ideas as a teenager. I wanted to become a criminal barrister, but when I looked at what that involved and the cost, it was probably not the right way to go. My uncle, who was in real estate and had worked with a large number of lawyers over the years,

told me that if I wanted to be a lawyer I would need to start in London.

I met my husband shortly after I graduated and he got a job in London, so I moved and did my conversion and LPC in London.

When applying for firms, I picked the ones that wanted a CV and a cover letter. This was 1999 where you didn't have internet or social media, so I didn't know very much about law firms or what being a lawyer in the City was really about. I ended up with two interviews and two training contract offers. I just picked the one I liked best!

Q: Why did you choose Ashurst?

It was the people I met that drew me to Ashurst. I was interviewed by Roger Finbow, the training principal at the time. During my interview he asked me a couple of obvious questions like why I wanted to be a lawyer, but otherwise it was a chat about our interests and how we spend our time outside the office. My decision to choose to come to Ashurst was based on a very unscientific gut feeling.

Q: Has the dress code changed since you joined the firm?

It has changed massively. I remember being students and being excited to go out and buy our suits for the office. Skirt-suits were very common at the time. Then, we received a letter over the summer saying “we are changing the dress code to smart-casual”. That was an absolute nightmare, nobody knew what that meant, and we had spent so much money on suits and shoes which we no longer had to wear. The phrase that everyone remembers about this hilarious dress code was “no spandex”.

Q: What was life at Ashurst like when you joined and what has changed?

Technology is really the thing that has changed the most. We used to negotiate documents with travelling drafts – essentially, you would mark up a document in a particular colour and there was a recognised order. You would start with red, green, then blue, and send this backwards and forwards, through the post or sometimes by fax. There was no such thing as tracked changes – you had these hilarious coloured mark-ups.

Q: How did you find being a woman in the real estate industry?

Working in real estate was good training for becoming a partner! I remember my early partners’ conferences - in particular one in Dubai – and walking into a sea of beige chinos and blue shirts. It was easy for me, working in an industry which is very male dominated, as I was used to frequently being the only female in the room. It’s clearly a problem more generally because of the lack of gender balance within the industry, but it has never proven a challenge for me in terms of what I wanted to do.

Q: Tell us about your journey to partnership? Did you feel that you faced certain challenges because you were a woman?

It has never crossed my mind that I cannot do something because I am a woman.

In terms of my journey, I was lucky because there was a partner who said when I was about two years qualified “if you want to be a partner, you just need to tell us so we can support you through it”. That was good advice and I decided quickly that was what I wanted to do. There is no point sitting around until you are eight years qualified and then suddenly deciding that you want to be a partner.

Q: How have the roles of women changed over the years?

When I started in the 2000s there were far fewer women in senior roles, which meant you had to come in very confident with what you wanted to do and how you were going to get there.

The partnership has also changed. It isn’t just senior men with stay-at-home wives, which is what it used to be. Male partners now have working wives, and many women are partners, which is a really positive thing. The partnership has also become a lot younger. In saying this, the secretary or executive assistant role has always been dominated by women which is a bit of a shame but this is also starting to change too.

Q: Do we still need to do more for gender balance and diversity?

It is still really tough if you want to have a family. Unless your other half is earning shedloads of cash, or unless you’re really committed to this as a career, I completely understand why some people take a step back. A large reason is because we aren’t brilliant at the concept of part-time working. Part of that is because if a client says “jump”, you basically say “how high?” It is very difficult to communicate to a client that a fantastic fee-earner will be working on a matter, but he or she will only be available at certain times. We seem to pretend that even if people are working part-time, they are still working full-time.

Going forward, it takes a long time to change the gender balance within an organisation because you can’t just recruit loads of lateral female partners. If we did that then all of the female partners in London would be working for the same firm! You need to grow it from the bottom and bring the juniors through. It’s also important for female partners to have the confidence to stand for the board and other leadership positions, because otherwise, we will not have a diverse leadership nor diverse policies.

Q: Do you have a particular favourite memory of your time here?

I have two actually. I did a lot of work on The Shard over a ten-year period. One of the partners who worked on the matter left the firm so it was the ideal opportunity for me to crack on with it and build the client relationship. That was an absolute standout project to work on and I probably got my partnership off the back of that.

Another fond memory was when Tim Regis was made partner last year. He sat with me for three years from when he joined as newly qualified lawyer from Allen & Overy. It made me feel old but it was great to see someone who I did a lot of work with and thought was really good make it through to partnership!

Q: What would you say to young women at the start of their career?


Go for it. Don’t be scared of biting off more than you can chew because nine times out of ten, you are far more capable than you think.

Also, relationships are important. People build successful careers off the back of the relationships they have forged. If you have that from the beginning, then you are set. Don’t give up and don’t compare yourself to other people. Hang in there and as long as you enjoy it, stick with it.

HELEN BURTON

EXECUTIVE TEAM, 2018 (HEAD OF CLIENTS)
PARTNER, 2001 (GLOBAL LOANS)
AT ASHURST 2001 – PRESENT

Helen is currently a partner in the Global Loans team. She started her career at Allen & Overy, moving to Weil Gotshal & Manges before joining Ashurst in 2001. Inspired by the issues surrounding retention of women in the legal industry, Helen was a founder of the Ashurst Women's Network in 2008 in order to provide a support system and create an accessible platform for discussion for women at Ashurst. Helen is also a significant advocate of diversity at the firm and is heavily involved in a number of diversity initiatives alongside her responsibilities as Head of Clients on the Executive Team.

A portrait of Helen Burton, a woman with blonde hair, wearing black-rimmed glasses and a white top. She is smiling and looking towards the camera. The background is dark.

"Be yourself, speak with an authentic voice, but also be confident, you belong in the legal world and the future is there for the taking as long as you move forwards with purpose."

Q: How did you start your career in law?

I fell into law, I wasn't sure what I wanted to study at university, and enjoyed both business-focussed subjects and the arts, so law seemed a good middle ground. I found I enjoyed the logic and intellectual challenge of law, and thus a legal career beckoned. My family are not from a professional background so they were happy for me to follow my own path.

Q: Did you think it was significant at the time you started your career that you were a female lawyer?

The gender make-up throughout studies and in my intake was pretty much 50:50, certainly not far enough from that for it to be noticeable.

It didn't feel significant that I was female when I started, but it was noticeable that there was a lack of female partners, which we questioned at the time. We were told it would just take time for us to work our way through the system – that was 27 years ago and we are still waiting – but things have got a lot better.

Q: Why did you choose Ashurst?

I chose to join Ashurst because it offered the ability to do fantastic market-leading work for exciting clients in a hugely supportive and challenging environment. The combination of people, culture and work was the thing that attracted me to Ashurst and is the thing that has kept me here for so long.

Q: What was life at Ashurst like when you joined and what's changed?

When I joined Ashurst things had relaxed a lot, but when I started my articles the dress code in the City was very formal and I was criticised a lot throughout my training for my sartorial choices.

I joined Ashurst as a partner in the banking team, primarily supporting the private equity practice. As a junior partner in a very busy practice I spent most of my time working on high profile transactions, we were the front page of the FT pretty much every week, but also building networks with clients that I still work with to this day. Comparing a typical day back in 2001 to now, I still work with some of the same clients, but my practice has morphed to a lender side focus. I also spend more time marketing, and working on my other responsibilities, such as with the clients and markets group, driving forward the fund industry and my role as a member of the executive team of the firm.

Generally, there are far more women in the partnership, in the firm at senior positions, both as lawyers and in business support, and in management. Diversity of thought is hugely important when it comes to delivering to the partnership and to our clients, and thus diversity in all its personifications is to be applauded.

Q: How have you found managing a work/life balance throughout your career?

Managing a work/life balance can be tricky in a service environment; ultimately if we don't respond to the client request another firm will do. However, there are certainly things that one can do to manage a lack of balance, and lack of balance can swing both ways, either too much work or too much life/family. I have found that creating relationships which make open and frank discussion possible can be a good way to address issues, both internally within the firm and with clients.

Q: Have you ever felt that you've faced any particular challenges as a woman and how did you overcome these?

I have never felt I have faced any particular challenges, but I have been very lucky to consistently work with incredibly successful and supportive female partners, from qualification to reaching a senior position in the partnership. Accordingly, it never even occurred to me that being a woman was an issue.

I have never felt that different expectations have been applied to me in my career, but it is true that women tend to be more willing to take on pastoral roles within the firm, which can lead to an ever increasing burden in the eternal search for a work/life balance.

Q: We understand that you set up the Women's Network in 2008 – what inspired you to do this?

Strictly speaking the diversity committee was set up by Erica Handling on the way to a pitch, however the promotion and retention of women was something dear to the heart of both of us throughout our careers, and thus we had been working to help improve gender equality for some time prior to the establishment of the diversity committee.

Q: How has the approach to mentoring at Ashurst changed over the years?

I think there is a blurred line between mentoring, sponsorship and general support for people with potential. Whatever it is called, it has always been there to some extent, but more naturally worked to favour those who looked like the people who were in positions of power. Formal mentorship programmes help to artificially create relationships which mean that the sponsorship and support is available to those who would otherwise have missed out, but you still need to earn the respect and support of your mentor to turn things from a more formal relationship to one where the mentor is willing to have some skin in the game.

The reverse mentoring programme has been fantastic, giving me an insight not only in to the world of my mentor, but also for having made me realise how much I still have to learn about myself.

Q: In relation to categories other than gender (e.g. race, disability, sexuality, social class), how do you think that these have changed during your time at Ashurst? How do you think these have interacted with gender?

Gender is usually very visible, it is easy to measure, and as the old adage goes, what gets measured gets done. However, we need to take all the learnings we have from the gender strand and bring it to bear to the other strands. Obviously the issues are often very different and the obstacles are not necessarily the same, but many of the solutions, such as role models, promoters, sponsors, measurement, support networks, etc are helpful whatever the diversity strand.


Q: What would you say to young women at the start of their career?

Be yourself, speak with an authentic voice, but also be confident, you belong in the legal world and the future is there for the taking as long as you move forwards with purpose. And finally, make sure the client is at the heart of everything you do, with a loyal client base you will have a more rewarding, and enjoyable, career.

CRISTINA CALVO

FIRST FEMALE BOARD MEMBER, 2011
PARTNER, 2004 (REAL ESTATE)
AT ASHURST 2003 – PRESENT

Cristina is a leading real estate lawyer and, in 2011, was the first woman to be elected onto the Ashurst board. She continues to hold a number of senior leadership roles across the firm.

A portrait of Cristina Calvo, a woman with long, wavy blonde hair, smiling. She is wearing a light-colored sleeveless top and a necklace with white clover-shaped pendants. The background is a soft, out-of-focus grey.

“When I started, all I wanted was to become a partner. I was obsessed with this because it felt impossible for a woman in Spain at the time.”

Q: How did you start your career in law?

As a student, I was undecided between law and journalism. However, I thought that the travelling involved in being a correspondent might be less compatible with my desire to have a family so I chose law. I clearly did not realise then how much of my career as a lawyer would be spent travelling around the world!

I then worked at a small boutique firm for two years before working at Baker & McKenzie for eight years in the M&A department. At the time, there was no specific real estate department in most law firms. I began to specialise in real estate law when Hines (the American developer) came to Barcelona to develop the biggest shopping centre in Europe at the time.

Q: Did you imagine that you would find yourself in senior leadership roles at an international firm?

Absolutely not. When I started, all I wanted was to become a partner. I was obsessed with this because it felt impossible for a woman in Spain at the time. There were no female partners at Baker & McKenzie at the time, nor at any of the competitor firms so I wanted to prove that it could be done.

I had developed a very good client relationship with Hines alongside a partner who became my mentor. When the partner was going to retire he said that I needed to become a partner to continue the relationship with Hines, but other partners were very reluctant as Hines was the main client of the firm and they wanted the

business for themselves. He was honest enough to tell me of their intention to keep Hines away from me.

Around that time, I got a call from Ashurst.

Q: Why did you choose to join Ashurst?

It had come to a point where I doubted whether I was good enough to be a partner. Despite all of my efforts, I felt like I was banging my head against a brick wall. My father reassured me and told me I needed to make a change. So I decided to join Ashurst, even though that meant moving my family from Barcelona to Madrid. Hines followed, which was amazing.

Ashurst's offer was that if I met my business plan I would get partnership the next year. I did, and was made partner in 2004.

I feel now that I made a lot of sacrifices to become a partner, but I know that I would not have got there if I had taken my foot off the gas pedal.

Q: How did you manage your career alongside raising your family?

When I was a senior associate in Barcelona, I became pregnant and I was told to stop doing deals and move to the "back office" to do the annual and corporate accounts. I said, "No, I don't want any special favours and I am going to stay doing deals". Later in my pregnancy, we were in the middle of a deal and it got to 11pm and I hadn't eaten. I said I needed to take a quick break to get some food and the partner said, "No, you need to stay, no special favours remember!" Of course I just ignored him and went anyway.

There was a general consensus then that you could have children or a career but you couldn't have both, which led to a guilty feeling that I should choose one or the other. It felt like people were trying to discourage me all the time, both at work and my friends at home. I have carried that guilt for a long time but recently have decided to let it go. This is who I am. I wouldn't have been happy with just a career or just family.

After becoming partner at Ashurst, I wanted to have another child and in fact I became pregnant a couple of months after I was made up. I really worried about letting the firm know, but the reaction was so different. Within a couple of days I had a laptop and a desk phone set up for me so I could work from home.

My maternity leave was actually only three weeks because I was the only real estate partner. I went on leave and left my practice in the hands of a finance partner. Then I remember the client called me whilst I was at Ikea with my mum and the baby and said, "You need to come back – your partner is very nice but he doesn't know anything about real estate!"

So I was back the next day, but flexibly. I would go to work in the morning, come back at lunch time and in the meantime the nanny would give the baby a bottle and I would work from home in the afternoons. Sometimes I just brought the baby into the office and the secretaries would take care of her when I was on a call. We were working a lot with a client in the US so we had a lot of calls with Texas in the afternoons. I was at home with headphones and feeding the baby as these were three-to-four hour calls. Somehow I made it work.

Q: That sounds exhausting. Where did you find your motivation?

It was my business, I was growing it. I just couldn't drop off. I had all the support I needed. My clients were understanding and the firm was very supportive.

I didn't mind going back to work because I felt that business was going well. Clients were coming. I was exhausted for sure; but I felt that it was working. It gives you so much more energy when you are motivated and supported.

Q: How have the roles of women changed over the years?

Things have changed a lot in 20 years, and for the better. 20 years ago you did have to put up with being the only woman in the room, and people making jokes about you or making a pass at you. I have three daughters (and one is studying law at university), and sure, we could have made more progress in terms of statistics, but the overall approach is completely different now. I had to be very resilient, which has made me a bit tough sometimes. But I am proud to have been one of those tough women who have broken the glass ceiling. There's a lot still to do but it is significantly better now.

Remember that every generation has its own challenges. 100 years ago a woman could not even be a lawyer, and in my mother's generation you would be expected to leave paid work entirely when you got married, let alone have children. My experience was the same as that of many other women in my generation.

Q: When did the firm start to recognise you as a leader?

In around 2009, Charlie Geffen, who was then the Senior Partner, asked me if I wanted to join the Admissions Committee. I was on that for two years and then the opportunity to run for a board position came in 2011. I decided to go for it. There was an understanding that it was time for a woman to join, so I was running against other female partners to fill the vacancy. Joining the first board meeting was really funny. I felt they were all on their best behaviour because I was there. At the first meeting they were all dressed very smartly and looked uncomfortable. I said, "what would you do if I was not here?" and one of them said they would normally take their jackets off and I said, "you can still do that!"

Q: What did you learn from being on the board?


It takes you to a different level and makes you mature as a partner and as a person. As a partner, you usually just see your bit of the business, your market and your office. When you go on the board you get a helicopter view of the whole business, so your own issues become almost petty. You also have to learn to delegate well and trust your team, as your deals continue to go on even if you are in a board meeting in another part of the world.

It is a tough job – it's about making decisions with incomplete and imperfect information and taking responsibility for it. You need to read between the lines and see where the cracks are and challenge everything that is proposed to you to make sure that it is sound. Sometimes the amount of information and responsibility you have can weigh heavily on your shoulders but it is important work, and I'm proud that I have opened the door for others to follow.

JASMINE TIW

PARTNER, 2015 (GLOBAL MARKETS)
AT ASHURST 2006 – PRESENT

Jasmine Tiw is a partner in the Global Markets team specialising in structured products. Jasmine studied in Singapore, and is both Singapore and English law qualified. Jasmine moved to London to explore new horizons, and joined the Ashurst Securities and Structured Finance team (“SSF” as it was then) in 2006. She is one of the first Asian women to make partner in London.

A portrait of Jasmine Tiw, a woman with long dark hair, wearing a dark blue short-sleeved top. She is sitting and looking towards the camera with a slight smile. The background is a textured grey.

“The more we can express our individuality and culture, the more confidence it would give to other people who may be in similar situations.”

Q: Can you please describe your journey into the City?

I grew up in Singapore and went to law school there. Truth be told, I was more interested in studying economics, but at that time it wasn't perceived as a very strong degree in Singapore. South-East Asian cultures tend to focus on professional degrees and young people were encouraged to go into industries that would "help the nation prosper". Professions like law, medicine, engineering and accountancy were encouraged and had a certain prestige, unlike in the UK, for example, where there is more focus on Arts, History, and Languages.

I remember fighting my parents about pursuing law until the day of the law school application deadline. I woke up in the morning and thought, "okay, let's just go for it". The application comprised an interview and a written essay. I hand-wrote my essay that morning while everyone else had theirs typed out!

After graduating, I qualified into a Singapore law firm. I started my career in litigation, but knew it wasn't for me early on, so I moved to the corporate team. Shortly after, the partner I worked for moved to the Singapore office of DLA Piper. I joined him and became English law-qualified in the process.

I moved to London as I wanted to live and work overseas. A friend of mine asked if they could show someone at Ashurst my CV. A few days later I was contacted to come in for an interview. I hadn't realised it was a formal job application until that point!

Q: What were your first impressions of Ashurst?

My ex-boss from tried to dissuade me from joining. He had completed a stint at Ashurst many years ago and in his experience the firm was very white and male, and he was concerned that I wouldn't be given the same opportunities.

When I joined in 2006 there were lawyers from over 30 nationalities in SSF. We were hiring from everywhere and it was such an interesting time and place. Because of this, I was unaware and disbelieving of the obstacles that I had been told about.

Then I went on my first hockey trip with the wider firm, and realised that I was the only non-white person there, and one of a handful of women. Sport was my passion growing up (even though people may not believe it now), and this was the first time that I had a brush with feeling like... something about this game is different.

Q: How did you find working at Ashurst and being from a minority background?

It was different then because people didn't understand and appreciate cultural differences in the same way that they do now.

Although I grew up speaking both English and Chinese, I have had people ask me to repeat myself again and again, even though I was being very clear. It felt as though they were trying to correct my accent. Of course, there were people who were interested in my heritage and used my accent as a platform for genuine discussion, but there were those who used it as a way to express a preference for me to be more anglicised.

There was also a point where I felt that Asian people were placed in a corner. We weren't being recognised as a minority group, and our challenges weren't on the agenda. Perhaps it is a reflection of some Asian cultures to be polite and not make a fuss. Over the years, I've had to challenge myself to speak out. Ten years ago I wouldn't have felt empowered to say "you should not make that

joke or comment again. It is offensive to me, and these are the reasons why".

Q: Tell us about your journey to partnership. Did you face certain challenges because you were from a minority background and/or a women?

I think the challenges for me really started to come into focus when I became more senior. When your appearance, cultural background and the way you express yourself are different, and no one or not many people around are like you or understand your experiences, you can feel quite isolated.

Looking back, I think my partnership track could have been different. Of course you need to have both a business case and a personal case for promotion, but there were numerous times where I felt that I had to do more in order to receive the same recognition or to justify my case.

The partnership process can be very subjective, and the "soft skill" or personal factors at play are difficult to nail down. For example, I was told that I didn't have enough "presence" with clients compared to other male colleagues, despite the fact that I am confident and happy being myself and dealing with my clients in my own way. I also had very supportive clients who were actively encouraging and pushing for me to go for partnership. It was also suggested that I had to discount certain client support because that particular client had a diversity agenda. I thought to myself, even if this is the case, why would it make me any less deserving?

As I've moved through my career, there were moments where I doubted myself. How am I going to make it when no one else looks like me? I also had moments where I wanted to stop fighting the "institution". It can be demoralising when you don't see results immediately, but I think some progress has been made.

Q: Do you think that the legal industry is different for women?

I would be lying if I said that I didn't have to think about my personal decisions more carefully. I took a sabbatical for health reasons a couple of years back, and it took me a long time to even ask for it because I was worried that it would justify some people's doubts about my motivations and in turn jeopardise my promotion prospects. I was pretty hard on myself. But if someone else had come to me in the same position, I would have told them to not worry, and simply do what is right for them. This might be the case for other women, so every time you have doubts, give yourself the same advice you would give someone else.

Q: What would you say to young women at the start of their career?

I'm afraid I'm still learning, but I think it would be nice if women were more supportive, and forgiving of one another. We can be too hard on each other. When a woman meets another woman, there can be an expectation for that woman to understand you completely, all of the time. That is impossible as we are individuals and are different.

I would also encourage women to seek mentors and sponsors who are not just the most influential men they know. This may be an efficient way to progress your career, but it will not help change the system.

Be brave, and be yourself. The more we can express our individuality and culture, the more confidence it will give to those around us who may be in similar situations.

KAREN DAVIES

BOARD MEMBER, 2018
PARTNER, 2012 (CORPORATE)
AT ASHURST 2011 – PRESENT

Karen is head of Ashurst's corporate practice in London and has recently topped a table of UK corporate partners for having worked on the most valuable deals in the first six months of 2019. Karen was also listed as the most prolific adviser by value by Mergermarket for 2017.

Since November 2017, Karen has also been a member of the Ashurst Global Board.

A portrait of Karen Davies, a woman with long reddish-brown hair, smiling. She is wearing a light pink button-down shirt. The background is a textured grey.

"I never felt excluded but probably felt, at times, I had to work twice as hard."

Q: Tell us about your career journey?

I undertook my training contract at Freshfields and I was the youngest ever trainee and still hold the record I have been told!

I subsequently moved to Clifford Chance, where I had more of an opportunity to do the work I wanted to do. Unfortunately I came up for partnership around the time of the recession and there were no slots in London. I was offered a position in Japan, which didn't appeal as I love doing London M&A work.

I joined Ashurst in 2011, with a view to establishing myself and building up a practice as part of the Corporate team. I was fortunate in that a large number of my clients at Clifford Chance followed me and they were impressed with the Ashurst brand and way of working.

The corporate team was very different in 2011 when I joined – there was only one female partner. Now we have four, including Tara Waters, who was made up last year, and Gaby Jones, who was promoted this year. One of the aspects of the role as Head of Corporate London

(and which I also enjoyed when on the Admissions Board) is being able to watch and support exceptional talent coming through.

The profession has come a long way and we at Ashurst have certainly come a long way through the actions of Ben Tidswell, Paul Jenkins, Deborah Dagleish and Jason Radford, all of whom are champions for gender diversity.

In 2017 there was a risk that there would be no female representation on the board after Angela Pearson's and Jennie Mansfield's three-year terms coming to an end. I was very fortunate to win the election. It's been a fantastic experience and privilege to help shape the direction of the firm at such an exciting time.

Q: Do you think you had sufficient support to help you progress?

Yes, indeed. At the time I was running for the board position, there was tremendous support and encouragement from partners across the network.

When Mergermarket announced that I was the top UK M&A partner for H1 2019, I got many emails from partners across the network congratulating me – including from a large number of our amazing 100 women!

In my role as Head of Corporate London, my fellow corporate partners and team have also been very supportive and are great fun to work with.

Q: Did you have a female role model?

Unfortunately at my previous firms there were no female partners in my team at that time. For me it has always been about working with a wide range of different partners and observing how they work. Even now when I work with people like Ben Tidswell, Logan Mair and Giles Boothman, who are very senior partners I can still watch and learn from. That is why I love this job, as you never stop learning, whether its technical skills, business development skills, understanding and learning about your clients' business or developing and running a team.

Q: Do you think the legal industry can do more to support women at the mid-level stage which is crucial to progress to leadership positions?

I want people in my team to know that they can progress to leadership positions and in Corporate in particular. Gaby Jones is a great example of that. Making it work is all about collaboration, communication and supporting one another. The approach in the legal industry is not going to change overnight and we have a way to go, but when I look back to when I started out and indeed the progress made by Ashurst since I have been here, I am proud of how far we have come and I think we are making brilliant progress.

Q: What advice were you given as a junior lawyer?

Being a technical lawyer is just part of it; you need to take the time to understand your client and their commercial objectives to be a good business developer. Work hard (but pace yourself and learn to use the downtime between deals) and always be a team player.

Q: How important is work-life balance?

It is very important and I think that is the big distinction between us and the magic circle/US firms. I think the culture here at Ashurst is that we do work hard, but as

a team we find ways to support one another so that we can make our personal commitments whilst at the same time meeting client demands. You need to make sure you spend quality time with your friends and family and find the right work-life balance. I haven't always got it right, but am getting better at it!

Q: What do you enjoy about public M&A work?

I like the fast-paced nature of the transactions, and the fact that they are often high profile and public also adds to the fun. I have been fortunate to work on a number of hostile takeovers including the Kraft takeover of Cadbury. No deal is ever the same and you never stop learning.

I am also able to work with a wide range of clients across a wide range of industries. Not only do you get to work with top management teams across those businesses, you get unique access to their business. I particularly remember the eBay acquisition of Skype. It was the first deal I ran on my own as a senior associate from start to finish, being able to spend time with the eBay team in Menlo Park, California, and see first-hand how a tech company operates and thinks at that time was really interesting.

Q: Do you have any favourite memories?

It has to be AVEVA's £3.5bn reverse merger with Schneider in 2017. It was the most complex multi-jurisdictional deal that I have ever worked on and it took us three attempts to get it away as it was so complex and difficult to deliver at client level. I was also proud to work with a great team of over 100 fee earners here at Ashurst across practices and offices which made it great fun. Following the merger, AVEVA has now grown to be a FTSE 100 client of the firm.

Something really funny – when I was at Freshfields during our induction we were given this book and it was how to “project a professional image”. The book is hilarious and – when you look back at it – so dated. Everyone had to wear suits and you could never dress down. Part of the course included how to dress, apply make-up and how to groom your nails appropriately. It is an indication as to far we have come as a profession.

Q: How do you see the future of women in the legal profession and at Ashurst specifically?

Full of promise. I was the first female Head of Corporate London so I would love to see that trend continue! If you look at our associates, 57 per cent are now female and I am really rooting for as many of them as possible to come through to partnership.


Q: In terms of the wider firm, what kind of initiatives do you think are required to better support women?

Sponsoring and mentoring are good but it's quite informal and adhoc across the firm. We could perhaps make these more formal and encourage more male partners to become mentors, too.

CAROLINE RAWES

EXECUTIVE TEAM, 2015 (CHIEF PEOPLE OFFICER)
AT ASHURST 2015 – PRESENT

Caroline joined Ashurst in 2015 to become the head of the global HR function after more than 25 years' experience of working in international services firms. Caroline's focus is ensuring that the leadership and talent agenda is in line with Ashurst's strategy. As a member of Ashurst's Executive Committee, Caroline has a key role in shaping the firm.

A close-up portrait of Caroline Rawes, a woman with short brown hair, smiling warmly at the camera. She is wearing a light-colored top and a thin necklace. The background is dark and out of focus.

"Unless a woman had stated that she was ambitious and wanted partnership, that remained a question, whereas I never saw it questioned about men."

Q: When you first joined the legal industry, what was the culture around women?

When I first started in the legal sector, we had pretty much 50:50 female graduates and male graduates joining the profession. So the phrase of “when we have equal numbers of men and women, then it will just work its way through” has been used for years. The real issue was that we had a lot of talented women coming into the sector, but there was a real drain of those people over time. The proportion of men and women at different stages in their legal careers dropped and dropped with seniority.

The culture and the working practices at the time were much more heavily stacked towards the male norm. So, the women who became partners then were possibly under more pressure to show the types of traits that are more commonly seen in men. I’ve spoken to a few women at the time who felt they had to behave like a man in order to make partnership. Women had to make some fairly stark choices at the time about what a career in partnership meant, and there was much less flexibility in the way people worked.

The working practices meant that the only way to work was by coming into the office, and therefore you couldn’t really leave the office until your work was finished. It tied people to these ways of working. As a result, there were fewer role models around, and less diversity and ways in which people could succeed, full stop.

Q: Do you think arrangements like flexible working will make a difference to the future of women in law and where they can get to in their careers?

Flexible working makes a massive difference. I remember first being given a Blackberry and it completely revolutionised the way that I was able to work.

At the time, I was the only woman at my level in business services who worked flexibly, and I opted to go to work three days a week. Lots of peers and colleagues said to me, “if you can manage it then that’s great, but good luck”.

There wasn’t that sort of camaraderie or support, so it was quite isolating. But by the same token I was given a Blackberry as a priority by my female boss who was very supportive and that made a massive difference. It allowed me to continue to have a career that I love, that I am passionate about, but also to spend time with my kids in the way that I wanted to when they were really young.

Using a Blackberry made it less visible to others as to what my working patterns were. I had to hide it to a certain extent until I felt I could be open with people because I had made it work. I wanted to show people that it could work, rather than present my desire for flexible and part-time working. Smarter working together with technology comes hand in hand in terms of people’s ability to manage the different responsibilities they have.

Moreover, the far wider diversity that we now have means that there isn’t just a single path to success. There is more focus now in what you can achieve, rather than the path which you take to make that success. There used to be a path that said if you weren’t a partner after six to eight years after you’d qualified, your opportunity was

gone. I’ve seen a number of women and men now take a longer route to partnership, but one that is comfortable for them.

With more diversity of gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation and social background coming from our trainee intake, there was greater recognition of valuing different perspectives, as opposed to people having to conform to one way of doing things. Individuals started to feel that there were more people to draw on, more people to learn from, more role models, more examples, and that gave people confidence to plough their own path.

Q: When you first entered the legal industry, did you stop and think that the way women were treated was unfair?

That is a difficult question to answer in a way because I am all about looking forward and being optimistic. It is just incredible how quickly the sector has changed, and how far we have come. But, with that as a caveat, one of the things that I saw and have seen in my time are just many more assumptions being made. Not from a perspective of unfairness. But simply, where people’s lines of sight were focused on what they knew and what they understood, they inadvertently marginalised others.

For example, it was always assumed that a man was ambitious. But, unless a woman had stated that she was ambitious and wanted partnership, that remained a question, whereas I never saw it questioned about men. Rarely does a man get questioned about when he wants to have a family and how that is going to impact his career, but that is still a question that many women have to face. I completely applaud one of our male partners here who took six months shared parental leave. It was the first time that some of the partners had to ask a fellow male partner about those choices. I welcome that openness.

I remember a discussion a long time ago, not at this firm, about who should be in contention for partnership out of five people. With the three men, it was absolutely decided that they were clearly on track and keen, but when we came to discuss a woman, assumptions came up: “well, she’s on secondment, and she’s just got married to someone in Australia, and I don’t know if she might want to go back to Australia, and so not so sure there”. I said, “well don’t we need to ask that person about her career? Who is going to have a conversation?” It transpired she was hugely ambitious. The clients thought she was absolutely fantastic and she is now head of a department at another firm, and a successful partner.

It was making sure that people took a broader perspective and tested their assumptions.

Q: If there was one lever you could pull to make Ashurst more inclusive, more diverse, more representative, regardless of cost and practicality, what would it be?

It would be for every function and practice group to develop their own Diversity & Inclusion plan. We’ve done an awful lot at a firm-wide level and we now need to bring it down. For every practice and function group to have diversity and inclusion in their plans would be fantastic.

NICOLE WILLIAMS

COUNSEL, (INVESTMENT FUNDS)
AT ASHURST 2016 – PRESENT

Nicole is Counsel in both the Investment Funds and DCM teams at Ashurst and is one of the most senior women from a black, Asian or minority ethnic (BAME) background at the firm. Originally from Yorkshire, she studied law at the University of Manchester before securing a training contract at magic circle firm Allen and Overy. After practising for a few years, Nicole was offered an amazing opportunity to go in-house as senior legal counsel and managing director for the Bank of New York Mellon (BNYM). Having successfully operated in this role, Nicole made the decision to return to private practice in 2016, when she joined Ashurst.

“Talented lawyers don’t fit into a single demographic: they are every ethnicity, race, gender and class and an innovative and progressive firm recognises and reflects this.”

Q: Please can you describe your journey into the City?

I attended a state school in Bradford and following my A-levels I chose to study law at the University of Manchester. I decided on the university for a number of reasons but principally because it was a Russell Group university and had showcased a successful careers programme at its open day. I had no connections of my own in the legal profession therefore Manchester was able to offer the perfect blend of academic challenge and practical career advice.

I secured a training contract with Allen & Overy in my second year of university. After my degree I studied the LPC in Nottingham following which I decided to take eight months out to travel before starting my training contract in London.

Q: What was your experience of training?

I really enjoyed my time at Allen & Overy. I liked the work and the people. It definitely took time for me to settle into both living in London and also working life. On the whole though I found the work challenging and interesting.

I was lucky that at different stages in my training contract I had very good supervisors who helped me to grow as a lawyer, in terms of both my technical skills and also my confidence. When you have a supervisor who inspires and invests time in you, it makes a huge difference in how you develop and grow in the role.

Q: How did you end up working for Ashurst and why did you choose it?

I qualified into Capital Markets at A&O and after a few years at the firm, I was sent on secondment to BNYM. Upon my return to A&O I was approached by BNYM and offered a senior role at the bank as a Managing Director. I felt this was an opportunity I could not let pass and though I wouldn't say I was ready to leave private practice, I was excited to undertake a new challenge.

I enjoyed my time at BNYM, however, there were many things I missed about private practice and therefore in 2016 I decided to move back into private practice.

I chose Ashurst because I felt that the firm ticked those boxes most important to me at that stage in my life and career. Ashurst offered good quality work and had a respected and impressive client base. I felt I would be able to develop with my team and have a role in the shape of the business rather than just churn documents. I also liked the Ashurst culture and people.

Q: Did you have a role model or mentor?

On arriving at the firm, I was assigned a mentor, which was Jon Gale. Having Jon as a mentor has made such a huge difference to my time at the firm. I feel very lucky to have been able to have access to someone who has shown a genuine interest in my life and career and taken the time to listen and advise me. I am also mentored by a MD at a Goldman Sachs. He has also been a great sounding-board and confidant.

Q: As a woman from a BAME background, did you think about diversity before you joined the firm?

The diversity of Ashurst was a question I posed to people who I knew at the firm before accepting my offer. I wanted to get a general feel for the firm because I think, like most people, you want to feel that you will fit in. Had Ashurst not been as diverse as it is, would that have stopped me from joining? Probably not, but it would

have definitely been something I would have worked hard to change. Talented lawyers don't fit into a single demographic: they are every ethnicity, race, gender and class and an innovative and progressive firm recognises and reflects this. If it doesn't then in today's society it will fail to be innovative and it is unlikely to progress.

Q: Do you think that there are any other difficulties associated with being one of the first BAME women to achieve certain milestones?

There is the fear that you can be the first and the one who breaks the status quo but that certain people may not respect your achievements independently. For example, that some may say that your achievement is mainly attributable to the institution needing a "first" or to "address an imbalance". While it is important to know that the opportunities are there for BAME women and that as a BAME woman (or just as a woman) you will have an equal opportunity to achieve the same goals as your contemporaries, when you do achieve those milestones it is important to remember that you have done so because you are good at your job, nothing more and nothing less.

Q: Do you think that this industry is different for women?

Opportunities are there for women and I would not necessarily say that being a woman would hold any female lawyers back from being promoted. However, I think the idea of taking time out of your career to look after children can impact the career decisions a person may make and, although many men would like to take time out to look after their children in their child's first year, in the vast majority of cases it is still the female parent who does this. For those wanting to take time out in their career to look after children, I think it is right to say that your career decisions and your personal life decisions are intricately intertwined.

It is important that law firms continue to look at the ways in which they can support family life across the board and make sure that partners understand that they need to look after the long term interests of those associates who take time out. I hope that in the future this profession will have cultivated an environment where the decisions surrounding having a family impact both men and women equally (well, as equally as is physically possible).

Q: As one of few senior women at the firm from an ethnic minority background, what advice would you give other women?

I think my advice would be to always believe in yourself and remember that you belong here. I recommend female associates (and male associates) get a mentor early in their career and especially in at that critical two to five PQE period where you may find yourself needing to make important career/life decisions. You should find someone who can remind you of your achievements, help you see things more clearly, and will give you independent advice with your best interests in mind.

It is also important to express your interests to those around you so that your career aspirations are known (for example, a particular type of work you would like to have greater exposure to or secondment opportunities). This may well open up opportunities that you may not have ordinarily known about, or felt confident enough to put yourself forward for.

CATHERINE GOKAH

COUNSEL, (INVESTMENT FUNDS)
AT ASHURST APRIL 2018 – PRESENT

Catherine is currently Counsel at Ashurst and is one of the most senior women from a black, Asian or minority ethnic (BAME) background at the firm. Catherine has had over a decade of experience specialising in Investment Funds, having worked both in-house and in private practice. She began her legal career at Simmons and Simmons, before moving to Covington and Burling. Catherine has also worked in-house at major international banks. She joined Ashurst in February 2018.

“Diversity should just be part of life – we will naturally have a diverse workforce if we have a culture that embraces differences.”



Q: How did you become a lawyer, and what influenced that decision?

My mother was an immigration judge. I grew up watching her and knew that I had the same skills. I was always interested in the business side of law, and so I decided that I wanted to be a solicitor in the City.

I worked at UK and US law firms before moving in-house for three years, which I did primarily because I had two young children and wanted to be there to support them through the early part of their education.

Q: During law school and your training contract, what was the gender balance like?

There were as many females as there were males throughout my studies and training contract. The difference was that the majority of the males were very focused early on achieving partnership. They had decided before they started their training contract that they wanted to aim for partner. In contrast, many of the women I came across were not as focused on that same goal. That has a lot to do with confidence. I believe that as women, we are safe in the knowledge that we can compete intellectually, but don't always have the confidence to believe that we can be partners. It's not always that we put ourselves down, but that we don't tend to shout about our strengths.

I don't know why that is because we do see many more female partners now, including at Ashurst which is leading the way. However, I think that for a woman it takes somebody to tap you on the shoulder and say, “I think you're good enough” for us to really recognise our

own abilities and trust that we have the necessary skills to occupy more senior positions. I have heard this from women in professions outside the law as well.

My eldest son came back from football training one day and said “Mummy, I was amazing today!” I didn't know what to say – I was conflicted thinking should he be so pleased with himself and confident in his own abilities! I have never heard a young girl say that about herself although she may be quietly confident.

I also believe that a part of the reason women may not be as forceful in pushing themselves forward in their careers is that women are wary of being characterised as pushy, bossy or even difficult if they do. These are labels which are often attached to “strong” women in the workplace and are difficult to shake off.

Q: Throughout your career have you ever had any role models?

From a career perspective, I've never had anybody that I necessarily looked up to or modelled myself on. My mother in the sense that she was a professional, but she knew nothing about my sphere of law. There aren't many senior black females in City firms, and so there was no particular role model for me early on in my career.

For most of my career I have been the only black female in my role. I think you just have to forge your own path and do things as you would do them.

I have been lucky at Ashurst because there are senior lawyers who I consider mentors. It was difficult in the past because the senior people were all from a particular background and, perhaps it was a generational thing, but it was not as easy to network.

At the time I did not realise that this was a disadvantage, but now I recognise that you need a champion and mentor in order to progress in your career. Mentorship is important because there are some things that you cannot teach yourself and that others need to show you how to navigate.

Q: Did you find support from your peer group when you couldn't access mentors or role models?

The younger generation is lucky to have peer support because as I was going through my career there was no-one and women of colour did not know how to connect with each other.

The first time I appreciated that peer support was available and acceptable was at Covington where the African-American lawyers' group approached me, as I was the only black associate lawyer in the London office. We would have webinars and I would think "oh, there are other people like me in the firm!"

A good thing about Ashurst is that it is a friendly environment which embraces difference.

Q: What cultural change are you most proud to have seen in law?

I think it's good that there are more females and people from different socio-economic backgrounds, it's become a more diverse profession.

Diversity removes another layer that you no longer need to think about when you are doing a job that is already challenging. It enables you to feel more comfortable in the workplace, and that helps.

Whilst we celebrate the cultural advances that Ashurst has made in recent decades, I think it's important to recognise that there is more change to come.

Q: As a black woman in this profession, have you ever seen yourself as a trailblazer?

I know people may characterise me as such, but I don't personally think of myself as a trailblazer. There are definitely people who ask me about my career, however, I don't think I've done anything special, just my job.

Oprah Winfrey says that by just doing what you do, you are being an example to others. And so, you strive to succeed, and just by doing that and pushing the boundaries, you are trailblazing without knowing that you are the first.

At Covington I was the first black British lawyer in the London office, but since then they have had others. I'm happy if I helped pave the way for other black lawyers at the firm.

Q: What are your thoughts on female retention in law generally?

It's difficult to manage both a family and a career. As you become more senior there is more responsibility and pressure on you and at the same time you might be dealing with a growing family and small children. It is a lot to handle, and so I understand when women decide to take a step back whilst their children are young.

You need a support network which might come from family, or from the office in terms of flexibility and workload. Law firms are only now starting to think about how to help people with young children to manage their work and home life. Younger generations will benefit from this but so will the law firms because then perhaps more women will stay on in the profession and firms will benefit from retaining that knowledge and experience.

There is still some way to go. We should be more open about how these things impact us but there is a fear

because you don't want to be seen as the "lawyer-that's-a-mother", you just want to be seen as a lawyer who also happens to be a mother.

Q: What are your thoughts on the retention of people of colour in law?

People of colour have tended not to consider City law firms as a career choice because they were seen as reserved for particular types of people. The workplace environment is important because in order to be able to thrive in the environment that you're working in you need to feel comfortable in it.

Also there aren't many partners of colour in City firms and as a result there may be a perceived glass ceiling.

However, I think over time as more people of colour enter and progress through City law firms these views will change. Again, Ashurst is leading the way with its various diversity initiatives.

Q: Regarding recruitment, how would you deal with unequal privileges that we have?

I have interviewed potential trainees who come from different backgrounds, and you can obviously tell those that have been trained to present themselves in a certain way. There will always be differences in candidates – you will have some people from top public schools and those who have not had those advantages and at first sight may not appear to possess the same skills. In my view, the interviewer should be astute enough to appreciate the skills that those from a less privileged background already have and can bring to the table. The interview process should also be designed to enable those from less privileged backgrounds to shine. I believe diversity has a lot of benefits.

Q: What do you think about the economic perspective or business case for diversity – does that help or hinder the cause?

I don't see why we should have to make an economic case for diversity – to me it's a no brainer. Diversity enables people to bring different things to the table – why wouldn't you want to embrace it? I just don't understand the gender pay gap and why we have to justify the fact that women are equal.

Diversity should just be part of life – we will naturally have a diverse workforce if we have a culture that embraces differences.

Q: What do you envision for women in law in the future?

I hope it will be more meritocratic in terms of reaching partnership – I think that is where the most work is needed. We need to have pathways for females to progress up the career ladder, recognising that women will not necessarily put themselves up first. There are too many challenges to becoming a female partner, and I don't think it should be that hard.

A particular obstacle is balancing a family with work, but I'm grateful that I have reached a place where I am comfortable where I am – I've got my job and I've got my family, I would not be complete without both. It's hard work but you can have both sides of your life.

Q: What would you say to young women at the start of their career?

Be more focused from the beginning and plan ahead. It's your career, take control of it and plan – the partners are here to facilitate your progress but at the end of the day, you determine where you want to be.

THE MALE PERSPECTIVE



Ashurst and Trafalgar House Cricket Match, July 1987

*Back row: Peter Coles (of Trafalgar House), Cliff Mills, Max Thum, Edward Sparrow, Geoffery Green, Peter Sayer, Ray Smith (of Trafalgar House)
Front row: Neil Robertson, Steve Machin, Ian Scott, Elizabeth Morris, David Evans, Rob McCreath.*

IAN SCOTT AT ASHURST 1968 – 2009

Ian Scott joined Ashurst in 1968 in the Company department, having completed his training at Sharpe Pritchard & Co. In 1972, he became the thirteenth partner at Ashurst Morris Crisp, at the age of 29. From 1997 to 2005, Ian ran the Delhi Liaison Office, and retired from the partnership in 2009.

ROGER FINBOW AT ASHURST 1975 – 2017

Roger Finbow joined Ashurst in 1975 in the Corporate department, and retired from the partnership in 2009. Roger continued to work as a consultant until 2017.

EDWARD SPARROW AT ASHURST 1975 – PRESENT

Edward Sparrow first joined Ashurst in 1975. He qualified as a corporate assistant and became a litigation partner (the twenty-first partner at Ashurst) in 1981. Having retired from the partnership in 2018, Edward continues to work as a consultant at Ashurst.

Ian, Roger and Edward have all enjoyed long careers as partners at Ashurst, and have worked with many of the first women in the London office over the years. Here they reflect upon this period of great change in the industry.

Q: How did attitudes towards women in law change during your time at Ashurst?

Ian:

When I joined, there were very few women in the profession. I also had the impression at that time that a lot of women were becoming solicitors in City firms with a view primarily to finding a rich merchant banker they could marry! This has of course changed dramatically and did so during my time. Many more women trained to become solicitors and made it clear they were there for the long-term. This helped to change the attitude amongst partners that women were not as good an investment as men, as before it was a worry that they would leave to get married to the mythical rich merchant banker. It seems to me that women are now judged on their ability and accepted as wanting a career, and of course are now able to take maternity leave and return. No doubt there is more to be done in this area but the change from 1968 to now is enormous.

I would like to think we were reasonably progressive in my time, at least in comparison with other firms – although my wife would not necessarily agree! I remember that when I was involved in recruiting articulated clerks (now trainee solicitors) around the mid-1970s we had an all-female entry of articulated clerks in one year. Admittedly only three in number, but no men!

Roger:

When I joined, there was nothing like the sophisticated recruitment process there is now. My joining was partly due to nepotism, which was then quite common: I knew a QC who told me I should talk to his friend, the then senior partner of Ashurst. I think it was this largely nepotistic approach to recruitment that contributed to the low recruitment of women during my time as a trainee – only one in the three years of my training and the first year of qualification.

The argument always was (and I think there was some truth in it at the time) that although a woman would be acceptable as a litigator or a property lawyer, the banks and corporates who were our principal clients wouldn't accept dealing with a woman lawyer. But that all changed when banks themselves began recruiting women in large numbers, and by the time I was responsible for trainee recruitment (about 1990) it was roughly 50:50 each year.

Edward:

My education was at a boys-only school and a male-only college at university. So working with women as colleagues was a big change.

I am not sure that the core attitudes have changed. Women were always accepted in the law and their opinions valued. I never witnessed overt bias or abuse – although one female colleague described, at a previous firm, having been chased round her desk by a senior barrister during a conference. However, since 1975, the number and seniority of women in the law has greatly increased as has an appreciation of the differences between the genders in a work context, the particular challenges faced by women in the workplace (particularly in the context of child bearing and rearing) and the existence of unconscious bias.

"It seems to me that women are now judged on their ability and accepted as wanting a career, and of course are now able to take maternity leave and return. No doubt there is more to be done in this area but the change from 1968 to now is enormous."

IAN SCOTT

Q: Were you aware of any of our "first women" in your time at Ashurst?

Ian:

At Ashurst it felt that a barrier had been broken when Linda Walker (née Bailey) became a partner in the property department. This was followed some years later when Elizabeth Morris became a litigation partner and Susan Roy and Jan Sanders in the company department.

Roger:

My one contemporary woman was a litigator called Hilary Graham. I wasn't aware that she was a "first" in any sense, but she was pretty resilient in a largely man's world.

Edward:

I knew and worked with Hilary Graham and Joan Taylor (the first and only female Legal Executive). I also recruited Elizabeth Morris and Susan Roy. However, I was not aware of their respective "first" statuses.

Q: How were competing commitments between home and work, such as marriage and family life, dealt with at Ashurst?

Ian:

When I joined and became a partner there was a policy that “you cannot fight on two fronts”. If we discovered that someone was having issues at home, be it personal relationships or health, then they would be encouraged to take time off to try to deal with the personal issues. It was easier in those days as the firm was much smaller - only 90 people in total when I joined. I do vividly recollect in the 1990s insisting that an assistant went home and stayed there until fully recovered as he was showing signs of breaking down due to the pressure being put upon him by another partner.

I found that as I became more senior and involved in major transactions that the competing commitments between home, marriage, children and work became difficult to manage and, due to pressure of work, I found myself cancelling, dropping out of, or not attending more family and social commitments than I should have done.

In my case it is rather ironic. I used to be asked by the HR Department on a regular basis to give new joiners an introductory “welcome to Ashurst” speech and one of the points I always stressed was that it was vital to ensure that you had a life outside the office, that you must organise your social life and not cancel social engagements etc.

Roger:

Shocking though it is to say so, in my early years there was no doubt that partners regarded women lawyers with some suspicion on the basis that they would leave to have children and not return. That view was particularly tough on women who had decided not to have a family.

That had significantly changed by the time I became managing partner of the corporate department in about 2003: we worked hard to accommodate women lawyers’ childcare challenges, with home-working and part-time working. But it has to be said that it remained a challenge in the corporate department.

Edward:

The senior partner when I joined was said to encourage young partners to get married either to keep them out of trouble or to keep them hungry. However, individual partners were very supportive when it came to wedding, maternity, and paternity leave. In relation to work/life balance, one did what was necessary at work and then went home but the work demands were very different and much lighter. I did not have a good attendance record at my children’s sports days but I was there for all seven births. Jay and I received a letter from the senior partner after our fifth child congratulating us but instructing us not to have any more!

Q: What was the dress code when you joined Ashurst and did this change over time?

Ian:

When I joined it was very much suits and ties with quite a few waistcoats for professional staff. At some stage – I would guess late 1990s – we had dress-down Fridays and then, the current regime. If however you were attending a client meeting it was suits and ties, which I understand is the same today.

I still smile at an incident when the changeover to more casual gear on any day of the week took place. I was on one of my trips to Delhi when the changeover, unbeknownst to me, took place. I came back into the London office and was surprised at the number of people in casual dress about the place. At lunch that day I asked why there had been such an increase in the number of people in the post room (they were traditionally the only men not required to be in formal clothing). This caused considerable mirth amongst the partners.

Roger:

It was strictly suits and tie for men and formal business wear for women. Gradually dress-down every day became the norm, though still smart casual. Where we’ve got to now, from recent observations looking around the office, is further than I would regard as appropriate, but then I’m old-fashioned!

Edward:

Always a suit. As a trainee, I wore a brown suit with a blue check and brown shoes and got away with it! Until the 1990s, there was a rule that women could not wear trousers. The code did not change until the late 1990s/early 2000s when we first had dress-down Friday and then for a short period complete dress-down.

“The number and seniority of women in the law has greatly increased as has an appreciation of the differences between the genders in a work context, the particular challenges faced by women in the workplace (particularly in the context of child bearing and rearing) and the existence of unconscious bias.”

EDWARD SPARROW

Q: Were you aware of other characteristics such as social class, race, disability etc., being factors in life at Ashurst?

Ian:

I think there was a feeling of superiority if you had been to a well-known public school and recognised university when I first joined. The university prejudice at Ashurst became much less of an issue when John May, who had not been to university and was a five-year articles man, passed out top of the Law Society finals exams winning the major prize. Martin Bell, who also had not been to university, was recognised as our best technical lawyer for many years. I think the public school issue has also very largely gone away now. I remember some time ago realising that I had no idea where people had gone to school as opposed to when I first joined and knew which schools all professional staff had attended – and also realising it was not the least important or relevant.

Roger:

In relation to recruitment, the need to address issues of diversity grew throughout the 1990s and beyond – first in relation to BAME candidates, and then other categories. I was particularly proud to have recruited our first wheelchair user (who is now a partner at Pinsent Mason) and our first blind trainee (who went on to run the London Paralympics and is now a member of the House of Lords).

In terms of social class, my experiences in recruitment and then as a part-time lecturer at Essex University, whose law faculty intake is almost entirely from non-selective state schools, led me to found City Solicitors Horizons, the aim of which is to train, mentor and coach prospective solicitors from disadvantaged backgrounds who are currently reading law at university (but often not firms' "favoured" universities). About a third of students are BAME and the remainder are "working class white", a category which is the most disadvantaged of all.

Edward:

I was never aware of differences of social classes. There was not much diversity in terms of race until the 1990s.

"Shocking though it is to say so, in my early years there was no doubt that partners regarded woman lawyers with some suspicion on the basis that they would leave to have children and not return. That view was particularly tough on women who had decided not to have a family."

ROGER FINBOW

Q: What were some of the other key changes?

Ian:

I loved my time at Ashurst and feel in many ways that I was lucky to be in practice when I was. It was a period of great change.

When I joined in 1968, there were photocopiers but they were very basic. There were electric typewriters, but not automatic ones – they were not introduced until the early 1980s. There was telex, but no fax or computers. This meant that everything moved at a slower pace: when you received an agreement, particularly from a non-London firm, you could amend it in red ink, post it back and could happily not expect to hear back for another few days. This meant there was more time to consider matters – instant response was not expected as now with e-mail. Matters were progressed by letter, at meetings or over the phone rather than remotely by e-mail.

There were also greater breaks between transactions which enabled you to recharge your batteries. Time recording and hourly rates were not the standard method of charging. There was more client loyalty and you did not have to pitch for jobs in the way you do now.

One of the downsides was that when on a job you had to do it in the office and could not, after a meeting, go home and redraft. You had to be in the office, make manuscript changes and then wait while your secretary or the night secretary typed it all up ready for the next morning. This meant spending more time away from home and family which was not good.

This does not mean that it was better in my time – it was different. Times have changed and in order to thrive, the firm has had to adapt.

Edward:

Where do I start? When I joined Ashurst the firm was made up of around 100 people, 12 of which were partners. Until 1968, there was a limit of 20 partners maximum across the City. Ashurst had been based in the same office for nearly 90 years. We had no other offices globally, no computers, no mobile phones, and very few precedents to work from. Alcohol was served in the partners' dining room and there were pub lunches for the articulated clerks, as well as monthly partners' meetings over dinner. The pace was slower as all communication was by letter, telex or a speaker phone on the partner's desk. I remember that the lift at Herbert Smith's office was operated by a man pulling a rope!



Photographs of women at Ashurst taken in collaboration with First 100 Years.

PART THREE

SHAPING THE FUTURE

100 IN 100

CELEBRATING REACHING 100 FEMALE PARTNERS,
100 YEARS AFTER THE SEX DISQUALIFICATION (REMOVAL) ACT

BY DEBORAH DALGLEISH AND EMMI MÄKI HARJU

It has only been six years since the newly merged Ashurst and Ashurst Australia first set global gender targets. However, the progress towards better gender balance over that time has been marked and is a good illustration of how setting a target can help focus minds and drive action. Ashurst's first female board member was only appointed in 2011 but already more than a third of our senior leaders are women. 2019 has seen Ashurst reach over 100 female partners globally and we are on track to reach one third female partners by 2022.

Now, it seems extraordinary that it took so long for this issue to be a focus – but the context in which women have struggled for more equal opportunity and representation has been (and, more than society cares to admit, continues to be) extraordinarily challenging.



Over the years there have been many excuses as to why women shouldn't participate fully in the same fields as men – including being too emotional to argue dispassionately (in court or elsewhere) or that women are physically incapable of coping with long hours and stressful situations.

The idea continues that some types of jobs are more 'suited' to a particular gender and these ideas influence the subjects that young women study. Gender stereotypes take hold at a very young age. They impact how we perceive masculinity too; for example, in the NHS only ten per cent of nurses are male.

Women have now been able to practise law for 100 years – but the problem has been retaining and promoting rather than attracting women to the profession. We know that diversity and variety delivers added value in ideas and approaches – and yet there is an almost inevitable pull towards having one single idea of what a leader should look like which then influences our assessment of who is suitable to lead.

By failing to acknowledge and adjust gender imbalances, businesses miss out on a significant part of the talent pool at all levels – a particular problem in the technology sector where there's an ever-growing demand for new skills in new areas.

Gender inequality in a business can hinder its ability to align with changing consumer needs. It's easy to dismiss this in the context of commercial legal advice needed by companies rather than individuals, but we have all heard about the general counsels who tell their professional services advisers not to field a panel of 'straight white men' only. Our clients are a major driver of change.

There's a persistent (if less clearly expressed these days) idea that taking clear action on gender equality will somehow involve moving away from a meritocratic approach. Improving the role of under-represented groups in the workforce is seen as positive discrimination – and can even be perceived by those 'benefiting' from it as being the subject of remedial treatment.

A truly inclusive workplace levels out the playing field so that there is equal opportunity for all and so that appropriate adjustments are made for any pre-existing disadvantages. When so much of the inequality in a 'civilised' working environment is unconscious, it is sometimes hard to see that it is there at all – particularly if we are in a position of privilege ourselves. When we see something tangible like "100 in 100", we know that progress is being made.

LEARNING TO SAY “NO”

BY CRISTINA CALVO

As Steve Jobs once put it, “Focusing is about saying no”, but as we know only too well it is more easily said than done.

When I was a child, my mum chose my clothes, often in a style I thought was hideous, but I could not bring myself to say to her that I didn't like them for fear of hurting her feelings, so I ended up wearing things I secretly loathed.

One other less frivolous example which illustrates my inability to say no relates to my unsolicited, unwanted and often unwelcome role as family counsel, and even worse, mediator. I am told that the reason I have “landed” this role is that I am always prepared to listen; but I think it is because I never say no, because I am always ready to help, even when I am overwhelmed by my own problems.

Does any of this sound familiar? All too often, we cannot bring ourselves to say no when we want to and know we should. This happens to everyone, but particularly to women, because we naturally tend to be more empathetic than men.

If this inability to say no is disruptive and potentially dangerous at a personal level, at work it can become a real deterrent in our career progression. People who can't say no end up doing the things no one else wants to do – those very things which imply a lot of work in the background and little or no credit for all the time and effort they entail. Whichever role you have at the firm, you will surely have noticed, experienced or even practised the common tendency to overload those who never say no whilst staying away from those who do.

In today's world, the boundaries between work and home are disappearing, as we find ourselves being reachable (and expected to be available) 24/7. People are under increasing levels of stress and pressure, struggling to juggle work and family and ending up burned out by overwork. The risks of over-committing to our health and our own wellbeing is a hot topic at the moment, but the impact on our career is less obvious, and therefore often overlooked.

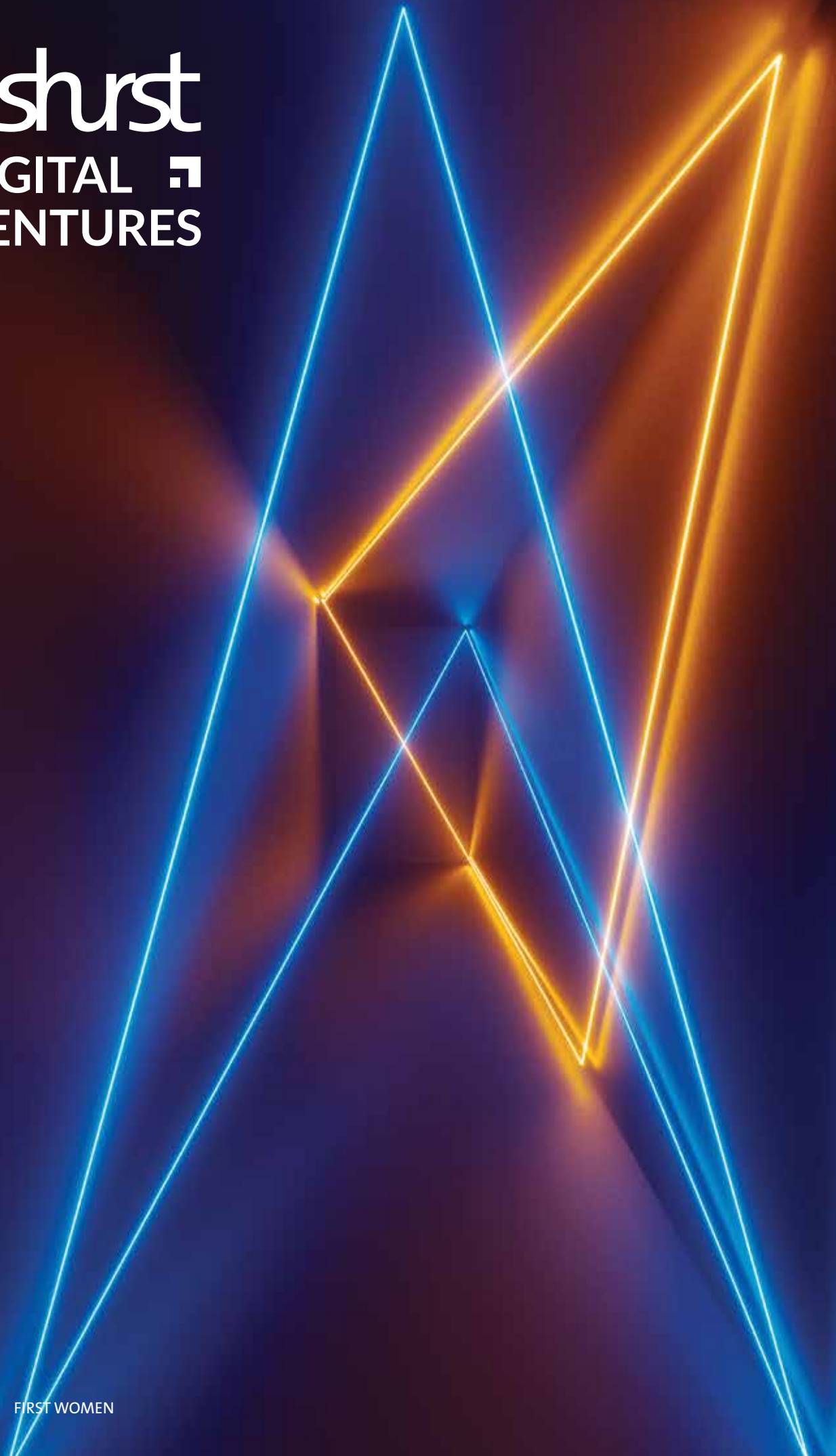
When we say yes when we want to (or should) say no, it is often either to preserve a relationship, to avoid unwanted reactions or because we fear losing something (a deal, or a promotion), even if it means jeopardising something else that is more important to us. Some, women in particular, often say yes simply because they see that the cause is a good one and they want to be part of it, or because they would feel bad if they refused to help.

What we don't realise is that we are most likely already over-committed, and don't really have time for yet another initiative or role without endangering our own position and/or our future prospects. Because every time we say yes

to one choice, we are saying no to others. Therefore, only if we are able to say no to competing demands on our time and energy will we be able to have space for the things that really matter.

If your career progression matters to you, you need to make sure you spend enough time doing the things that will help improve your performance at work, your personal brand and your visibility, both externally and internally.

This does not mean that we need to drop all selfless pursuits, but it means choosing carefully, calculating the demand on our time of every task we take on, and prioritising correctly to avoid becoming overwhelmed by tasks that distract us from our objectives and impact negatively on our career progression.



Tara Waters and Sarah Chambers are in the vanguard of the digitalisation of law firms. As leaders of Ashurst Digital Ventures (ADV), they are pioneering a dedicated business unit which aims to equip Ashurst clients with innovative digital tools.

Q: Can you describe your career paths to Ashurst?

Tara:

I grew up in the United States, and somehow, mine was probably one of the first households in the country that actually had home internet, as my dad was friends with the IT department at our local university and convinced one of them to come to our house and install an internet line. And so tech was something that I grew up with.

When I graduated in 2000, I went straight into the tech industry in New York City. After a few years, a former colleague who had moved into law convinced me that the legal industry needed more women and more people who understood technology.

I went to law school in the US and then the opportunity to move to London came up. I worked for a few years, predominately as a corporate and finance lawyer, and tried to stay connected to the tech community here. I moved to Ashurst in 2014.

I've basically made my career out of the marrying of my tech background and my legal background, which I feel very lucky to have been able to do, because not everyone gets to turn their career into the thing that they love.

Sarah:

I did law at university, a training contract at a law firm and qualified into the financial services and regulatory team there. To all intents and purposes I was a "normal" lawyer for the first part of my career.

As part of my fee-earning, I started working on an online commoditised information product that my last firm had launched, called navigator. I then had my first child and came back to work but only wanted to work part-time. At that time, there were some lawyers who had come back from maternity leave to work full-time but no one was working from home or trying to do anything flexibly, so there wasn't really a pattern to follow.

It was difficult to see how to balance doing three or four days a week with my fee-earning work. I ended up working more and more on navigator, and eventually moved on to that exclusively.

I joined Ashurst in 2019 and I suppose my story is about moving out of law in the traditional sense, and thinking about how to deliver legal services via the medium of technology. It's been a revelation. If someone had sat down with me nine years ago when I first started off on this route, and said, "These are all things you're going to have to do – can you do them; will you do them?" I would have said "no" and likely turned down the opportunity of my career. By saying "yes" to one thing it led me down a completely different path.

Tara:

Having confidence in yourself and being willing to take risks and try new things can be really powerful. For example, as soon as I heard about ADV, I knew I needed

to be involved; I went directly to the people developing the concept and said, "If this is happening, I want to lead it". So I was backing myself a hundred percent on that front. This enabled me to be brought into the fold and be part of the conversation about defining the roles and shape of ADV. We're doing something that the firm's never done before, thinking in ways the firm's never thought before.

Q: What cultural changes have you noticed in the law during your careers so far?

Sarah:

There has been a move away from lawyers being on a total pedestal – this almost untouchable, academic position within firms, to a much more democratised place where everyone has their input and their value. It is a lot more collaborative, creative and less "stuffy" or formal.

Open-plan working and collaborative spaces in the new London office, as well as the casual dress code, really reflect that shift in mind-set.

Tara:

To some extent, I think these changes reflect the influence of other industries where change has already had a significant impact. Law, unfortunately, is behind the times in terms of adapting to change but we're catching up. And amazingly and fortunately for us, Ashurst is not only committed to capitalising on that change but looking at ways to we can be at the forefront.

For example, there's a growing recognition within Ashurst that diversity across multiple levels, including diversity of experience, is really critical to the success of the firm and that we need to be open to who everyone is as a whole – where they came from, how they grew up, what their family is like, what they've done outside of the office.

Q: What changes have you noticed in attitudes towards women in law?

Sarah:

It has changed massively. When I came back from my first maternity leave (in 2010) – I was the first person in my department to come back and work part-time. Since then, lots of men and women have done the same.

Tara:

Another big change is that the lack of progress towards diversity and gender parity is now seen as a significant negative, both within law firms and by our clients.

I think that's forced us all, particularly the people who were blind to these issues, to actually take notice and to think critically every time we're looking at opportunities to put people in front of clients or to put teams together. Now when people see an all-male panel at an event or an all-male pitch team, someone will usually say, "Whoa, this doesn't look right. We need to change this".

"There has been a move away from lawyers being on a total pedestal – this almost untouchable, academic position within firms, to a much more democratised place where everyone has their input and their value."

SARAH CHAMBERS

Q: Tara, how are things changing in the partnership?

Tara:

I think we still, to an extent, recruit people and build teams that reflect ourselves. As long as the senior level of lawyers and partners in a law firm are overwhelmingly male, it is much more difficult for women to see a future for themselves, unless you have some very 'woke' senior male lawyers in your team. But we're getting there. People are waking up to the importance of diversity and gender parity more and more every single day.

Everyone knows the statistics: businesses perform better when they have women on the board and management teams. I think the acceptance of that has finally landed and what we see now is many more male and female partners sponsoring and promoting the women. That definitely played a role in my path to partnership. My sponsor, Karen Davies, is the head of our team and she supports me and all the women on her team. She makes sure we're getting the opportunities that we deserve, particularly when some of us may have, in the past, been more reticent to put ourselves forward for those opportunities.

I think as more women enter the partnership, we will get better at retaining female lawyers by those partners saying, "Let's make this work for you. I've done it and you can do it too. I'm going to set the example for you and pave the path for you". I think that's really important.

"I've basically made my career out of the marrying of my tech background and my legal background."

TARA WATERS

Q: For so long the main path to senior roles in a law firm has been to get in to a department and stay there, steadily rising up the ranks. Do you think that is changing?

Sarah:

I can see that change in younger people coming into the industry now. When I first started out, there was very much this notion of "You come in, you do your time and there you go" – if partnership is not the route then "off you go" – but there is much more variety in careers paths now and partnership isn't the only goal. I think that's an incredibly freeing notion.

Tara:

When I started my legal career, I actively didn't want to be a partner. Up until I was told "Listen Tara, we want to put you forward to become a partner", I genuinely thought that wasn't going to be my path. I never questioned my ability to be a partner or fulfil that role, but I came into this industry with that not being my goal. What changed for me was firstly, having the opportunity laid out in front of me and secondly, reaching a point in my career where I felt really engaged and excited by the challenges of partnership.

I believe that part of the reason that we struggle to retain senior female lawyers in the industry is that they don't actually love (or even like) their job, so for them it's not worth it. The hustle and the extra time and the extra

effort that we need to go through to be senior lawyers – it's not worth it if you don't actually enjoy what you're doing.

We need to pay more attention to what makes people happy and where they perform at their best. We also need to acknowledge that what you are interested in can change over time. So I think we need people to speak up and say, "I've been in this team for a few years but actually I don't feel super passionate about what I'm doing; I do feel super passionate about X. Can I lateral over into a different team where they are doing more of that?" and for the firm to say, "Yes, absolutely. We would love for you to stay with us. We think you're great." That would allow us to try different things and find our home in the firm.

Sarah:

We could do much better at this. My sister works in an organisation where they move jobs every three years. It's a real leveller in terms of what they do and how it's done. It's a bit confusing when everyone starts moving but rather than hope that you'll happen on the thing that works best for you, it gives you a better opportunity to find it, and to grasp it, and equally to keep building a wider range of skills and relationships.

Q: What one thing would you do to help the firm to reach gender parity in leadership and management roles?

Tara:

I'll say two controversial things. One would be to make everyone reapply for their job – re-assess their skills for the role they need to fulfil today. Two would be a complete redefinition of the partnership and how we're assessed.

As an industry, we are obsessed with certain metrics, particularly financial ones, which I think, at all levels, don't take into account all the skills that everyone brings to the table. I think if you look solely at financials and billable hours, you will always be skewing towards the male, for whatever reasons that are underlying that. I don't think those reasons are going away.

I think if we can rebalance and recalibrate the way we assess people's performance and how then we make decisions about promotions and their ability to fill a leadership role, I think we would see a drastic change in terms of who is actually sitting at the top.

Sarah:

I agree, for me it is all about a reassessment of value. What we mean by 'value' and where we find it, and moving away from the notion of it being very much tied to how long you sit at your desk. It's really looking at our services holistically and figuring out where you find value.

"I think taking stock and looking back really makes you realise how far we've come and particularly over the last 10, 20 years."

SARAH CHAMBERS



Sarah Chambers – COO of Ashurst Digital Ventures EMEA (left)
Tara Waters – Partner, Corporate Transactions, and Co-CEO of Ashurst Digital Ventures EMEA (right).

Q: Are there any other thoughts you would like to share, on this occasion of 100 years of women being able to practise law?

Sarah:

I think taking stock and looking back really makes you realise how far we've come and particularly over the last 10, 20 years. The pace of change has increased dramatically.

I've been thinking about what I would say if any of my daughters wanted to go into law and what would their working careers look like. I just hope that none of these things are issues for them – that these are not fights they have to fight, or awkward conversations they have to have. That they can just come to work, do their work, be the best they can and be recognised for their contributions.

Men stand to benefit massively from making it a non-issue, too. So it's a win-win.

Tara:

I think it's interesting that in 2022, it will be the firm's 200th year and I'd be keen for us to reflect on what our founder William Henry Ashurst, known for being progressive, would think? I think it would be interesting if, as a firm, we stopped and said "In 200 years – what should we have achieved? Would William be proud of us today? And where wouldn't he be proud of us?" We can then use these next few years to change those things.

"I think as more women enter the partnership, we will get better at retaining female lawyers."

TARA WATERS

ADVICE FROM A (REFORMED) BOX CHECKER

BY EMMA TRAN



I am a Vietnamese-Australian, born in Hong Kong, and now practising at Ashurst in London. In Vietnam, if you are “tính nóng” you are hot-natured (which is an imperfect translation, but the closest I can manage). Both mum and dad are tính nóng, which means I’ve inherited the trait twice over! Combine that with Australian gusto, and we have a very dangerous mix.

I have moved through primary school, high school, and university with this combination and it has served me well. However, upon becoming a qualified lawyer, I quickly came to the realisation that I’ve successfully manoeuvred through my early years not only because of this character trait, but perhaps more so, because there have been boxes that every student needed to check to succeed. And being a box checker, this suited me just fine.

Get into a grammar school – check, graduate in the top 0.4 per cent of the state to get into law school – check, get a distinction average to be eligible for a graduate position at a big city law firm – check. All of these requirements, these checks, were objective, linear, and must be given to you no matter your gender, heritage, social class, disability, what you looked like, whether you were introverted, extroverted, or whether you were tính nóng or not.

The requirement to check boxes has continued as I’ve progressed in my career. However, different boxes now apply to different people, and the boxes, I’ve realised, are not all the

same size, shape, or colour. As a female lawyer, I feel that I am expected to take on a more active mentoring and caretaker role than my male colleagues. This expectation is usually expressed as “we would like you to do x, because you’re good at it and you care about people, so you should take this person out for lunch, and organise drinks with this client, and write a detailed feedback for this trainee and that trainee and another trainee”. This is not to say that I do not enjoy this human element of the job, because I definitely do, but it feels slightly unfair that such responsibilities often fall on female members of the team – not to mention that it takes a toll on their billable hours (the main metric that law firms judge a lawyer’s worth against). Mentoring, feedback and caretaking are important; caring about your colleagues and your team is important; and therefore it should be a shared responsibility. For those to whom such responsibilities come less naturally, they should be encouraged to develop these skills in the same way that we are encouraged to develop drafting, research, and time management skills. Don’t you think? A good friend who works at a large consulting firm has told me that they appraise their employees (at all levels) and allocate bonuses using a number of metrics, two of which are (a) how supported did you feel working with X on a scale of 1 – 5; and (b) would you want to work with them again on a scale of 1 – 5. Perhaps this is something that law firms should introduce.

In addition to box checking, I’ve quickly realised that my tính nóng would serve me better if curbed. Although we urge women to be brave and assertive, to “talk proudly, laugh loudly, eat with gusto and learn widely”, this message does not reverberate as fervidly (in my opinion) within the walls of big city law – at least not in the moments that matter. This is not because we want women to be diffident, or because I want to be diffident, but because we (women) are expected to pick our battles more carefully, and not react actively every time we are miffed. This is a mature and measured approach, particularly in the workplace, but it also creates a catch 22. If you do not call out bad (albeit unintentional) behaviour, for example when you or a female colleague is spoken over in a meeting, or when you or a female colleague makes a point in a meeting which is glossed over, only to be given due consideration when the same point is made by a male colleague, you normalise bad behaviour. Although such scenarios are slight and perhaps trivial in isolation, the combined effect can be, and often is, powerful, and stays with you longer than you want to admit.

I would like to go on record to say that I do not think that my allocated boxes are holding me back from career progression (yet). I know I am valued by my team, and well-



Emma and her parents.

liked by my clients. In saying this, I am trying to fit, and am being expected to fit, within an environment that was not designed for a 5 foot 2 (ok - 5 foot 1 and a half!), Vietnamese-Australian woman, with *tính nóng*. This has been an intensely self-reflective, and at times lonely, experience. I have to ask myself which parts are genuine career development markers, and which are shaped by cultural or gendered expectations. If I do not take that person to lunch, or take on that extra matter, would it impact me negatively? And if I do take it on, would it be worthwhile? Armed by three years in a supportive team, and after speaking to numerous inspirational women as part of the Ashurst First Women Project, my key takeaway is that I am responsible for creating the work environment and the boxes that I want to check, rather than those originally allocated to me. And so over the last six months, I have begun to re-shape these boxes (ever so slightly) to make them a more comfortable fit.

I offer the following advice, which is not ground-breaking or new, but it is achievable and has helped me enjoy my time at work immensely more. This is important, because I think that sometimes we forget that work could, and should be, enjoyable.

1. **Create space for the work you enjoy** – I have made sure that I seek out work that I am interested in, and make time for causes that I care about, including the First Women Project and pro bono matters relating to female rights. Although I am sacrificing billable hours, I'm doing so on my own terms.
2. **Fill your airtime** – I have tried creating a platform for myself to express my views, which I would have

otherwise internalised. For example, I might ask to take up a few minutes at the end of a meeting or for an extra 30 seconds with a partner to clarify what he/she means. I find it easier to speak freely and honestly when I know I have allocated airtime, and a captive audience also helps.

3. **Amplification** – this is something I read that Michelle Obama's staffers adopted when President Obama took office. In summary, when a woman in a meeting made a key point, other women would repeat it, giving credit to its author. This forced the men in the room to recognise the contribution, and denied them the chance to claim the idea as their own. I have applied amplification to others as well as to myself. For example, I would say "I think, (insert name of colleague who is less outspoken), made that point in the previous meeting, it's a good one", or "I made the same point in a memorandum for a different client, let me send it to you in case it is helpful".
4. **Working from home** – I have started working from home when I need a mental health day. A mental health day is not a euphemism for me lying on the couch watching re-runs of Love Island (which actually sounds great), but it means I can sneak in an extra hour and a half of sleep after a late finish, and then work without distractions while a load of washing is on.
5. **Saying no** – this is an oft-repeated mantra which is easy to suggest and difficult to implement. However, I've found that it gets easier with practice, and in most scenarios, someone else will be happy to (or begrudgingly) take on the matter for you and the billable timer keeps ticking.

A LETTER TO THOSE WHO WILL FOLLOW

BY SOFIA ASLAM



A recent knock on the door really brought home part of my journey into the legal sector and some of the conversations that followed helped me to reflect on my expectations before entering the industry.

As a hijab-wearing Muslim woman from an ethnic minority background, I always knew that I would stand out when I got to the City. It wasn't difficult for me to identify the absence of others like me in this career and I was apprehensive about what this meant for a future lawyer. Walking into any law firm on your first day as a trainee is incredibly intimidating, but all of the things that made me different were visible and made me identifiable. I questioned whether I would lose opportunities, be treated differently or whether people would assume that I was only here to fulfil a quota. Gaining success on merit and hard work has always driven me. I want access to opportunities and I want them because I deserve them – not for any other reason. It wasn't just these things that terrified me, I also thought heavily, and admittedly still do, about how difficult it is to balance all of the different parts of me. Would coming into the work place feel like turning on a professional switch that meant diluting my personality or leaving parts of my identity at the door? Would my peers respect that I don't drink alcohol, or that I choose to eat a halal diet and pray five times a day? I worried about how my beliefs and choices might impact my ability to build relationships with colleagues or clients. I didn't ever feel that it was okay for me to compromise parts of my identity in order to be successful in this career and it scared me that people might expect otherwise. I had so many questions and didn't know if I would ever be able to say them out loud.

To my relief, my time at Ashurst feels a lot warmer than I expected at this stage. Not all of my apprehensions have gone away and there is still a lot of work to be done in increasing the representation and retention of ethnic minority women (and men) in the industry. In many situations, I remain the only person who is noticeably different and I am definitely still trying to accept that being easily identified isn't always a bad thing. Your differences don't automatically detract from the value that you provide in your work. There are still days where I feel myself juggling all of the different parts of my identity and I wonder if I will ever be able to change that. Despite these apprehensions, through the first year of my training contract, I have met so many hardworking and brilliant people who have inspired me to have hope that change will come in the years to follow. I am guided by mentors who are genuinely invested in my journey and provide me endless support, reminding me that above all else: I belong because I worked hard to be here.

I recently spoke with Farzana Ali, who is a Senior Associate in the Global Markets team at Ashurst, about this. Farzana was the first hijab-wearing trainee at the firm, and joined in 2007.

It took 10 years from then before the next female trainee to wear the hijab started at the firm (Humera Haroon, March 2017). I joined the following year, along with Zarin Begum who also wears the hijab (September 2018). In talking to Farzana, I was able to have a completely honest conversation with someone who could help me navigate through my thoughts and experiences. She just got it, you know? For the first time since entering the City I finally felt like I could, and did, belong. I experienced a sense of safety that I had previously thought to be impossible. I wasn't the outsider anymore.

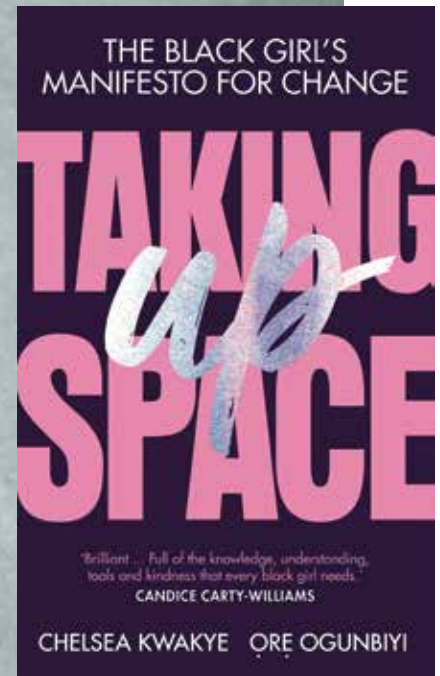
Now, I'd like to return to that knock on the door. A timid young hijab-wearing girl from an ethnic minority background had nervously approached my office a few weeks ago. Su was a student on one of our social mobility work experience schemes. She was lost and I had shown her to her desk, not thinking twice about that encounter. Later in the day, I ended up speaking with Su and some of her peers. The other students asked Su how she knew me and I was taken aback when Su told them that she had only approached me because seeing someone who looked like her made her feel safe. This situation reminded me why representation of minority groups is so important in creating an inclusive working environment. Representation matters. It matters because of the relief that I felt when I met Farzana and the comfort that made Su approach me. It matters because those interactions are able to have such a substantial impact on people's lives, ambitions and career decisions. If there is anything that I have learnt through this project, it is that there are endless possibilities held in diverse talent and although the first 100 years of the history of women in law have held some phenomenal firsts, there are so many which are yet to come.

I guess I don't really know what I had hoped to inspire when I started to write this letter, but now that I've reached the end, my purpose feels a little clearer. I hope that it brings you some ease to know that I am a (proud) Muslim woman from an ethnic minority background and I am working on finding a place for myself, and for others like me, in this industry. I hope that as you all take your places, this conversation has been had a million times over and there is nothing more to be said. Ashurst will feel like family for you in the same way that it has for the other women whose stories have been documented in this publication.

If that change hasn't yet arrived, then I hope that this letter inspires you to start a conversation about the things that matter to you. I have found being transparent about my experiences quite difficult but direct and honest conversations are so instrumental in bringing change to this industry that I continually force myself to find a voice, if not for myself then for others, and I encourage you all to do the same. Speak openly and sincerely about your journey into the legal industry, about the challenges you face and about the change that you'd like to see. Those open conversations are the change that I hope to have inspired with this letter.

TAKING UP SPACE

BY CHELSEA KWAKYE



Chelsea Kwakye is a future Ashurst trainee (joining in 2020), and co-author of *Taking Up Space: The Black Girl's Manifesto for Change*, published in 2019 by #Merky Books.

"How about 'Shaking the Table'?"

I typed NO in bold capital letters.

"Wigs off?!"

"Ore, you are joking, right? Absolutely not."

"Well, this is the last suggestion I'm giving because you've turned every other one down without offering an alternative."

"Take Up Space' sounds good. What do you think?"

"What about 'Taking Up Space'?"

"Yes – that's it."

When deciding the title of the book I co-authored with my best friend Ore Ogunbiyi, we decided on *Taking Up Space* because it captured so much, yet left room for debate and discussion. *Taking Up Space* explores what it means to be a black woman within higher education – something that is rarely discussed. In the book, we talk about everything from the barriers of entry into university, activism, mental health

and the importance of diversifying our curricula. The book addresses and acts as a guide for young black women and non-binary students in the hope that their experiences will be validated, but we also hope that the experience resonates with everyone.

Currently, "taking up space" is well known for its proximity to the body positivity movement on Instagram and social media, where individuals aim to shatter impossibly narrow beauty ideals. It has also been used in feminist movements which urge women to be unapologetic in how they navigate the workplace, public and private spheres. As disparate as these movements seem, the message remains: to take up space is to know that your voice is valid, that you deserve to be in the room and finally, celebrating all of your wins first, rather than leading with your losses.

However, Ore and I were told that for a book that was meant to be inspirational and positive, *Taking Up Space* as a title sounded negative. One literary agent called it "discouraging". Without hesitating, I scrambled to find another phrase to replace the title that we had come to love. But then I stopped and reflected. What drew me to "taking up space" was that it conveyed everything we were trying to achieve in the book.

We wanted it to be honest, direct and at times, painful – exactly what it feels like to take up space in institutions that were never made for you.

Around this time, I thought a lot about what “taking up space” meant to me as a young black woman. What does it really mean to take up space? How do we understand space and if we’re taking it up now, who occupied it before us? Are we reclaiming it or is the struggle less to do about “taking” and more to do about creating the space in the first place?

I was sitting in a coffee shop when I saw the news online: in 2015, Cambridge University accepted only 38 black students in an intake of 2,573 undergraduates. I was one of them.

I wondered, when people read the news and think about “black students”, what or who, do they see? If all 38 of us merged together – what would we look like, would we all sound the same and would we have the same interests? I felt frustrated that our experiences had been distilled into a statistic, a headline. There was something about being part of a statistic that made me deeply uncomfortable. As black students, we were not one homogenous group. Instead, we all had different stories to tell.

I thought long and hard about a practical solution – one that would pull the multi-layered experiences of black students into the mainstream. How could we move beyond the numbers to reveal that we were real people?

I decided to write a book, and while writing, I discovered some very uncomfortable truths.

They say, “black women will always be too loud in a world that never intended to listen to them”. When I read the blogs, articles and listened to talks about taking up space, they make it sound so simple. They say it’s all about *confidence* and making your voice *heard*. But I couldn’t shake the fact that I had been trying to do the exact opposite. I did everything in my power not to be heard and I would prioritise the comfort of others around me. I would choose: do I take up space as a woman today, or a black person? Rarely have I felt there is enough wriggle room to take up space as a black woman.

At present, issues of ‘diversity’ and ‘inclusion’ exist as abstract concepts, targets and frameworks. Some institutions still see D&I as something that can be scaled up, ticked off and moved off the agenda and are unaware of the long-term commitment and significant investment of resources that such initiatives require. Even worse, many don’t stop to try to understand why institutions are not inclusive and representative in the first place and why this has been accepted as the norm for so long. Who are the gatekeepers and why are they so reluctant to change?

“Taking Up Space explores what it means to be a black woman within higher education – something that is rarely discussed.”

Instead, I want to focus on the benefits of meaningful inclusion and what that looks like. When we talk about inclusion, we naturally tend to address the more critical and uncomfortable side of this conversation that involves everyone – not just underrepresented groups. Topics on race, gender, class, sexuality and ableism should not be expected to fall solely on the shoulders of those within those categories. These topics must be appropriately addressed by all those who feel passionate about them to broaden the conversation, beyond defined social categories.

“There’s humility in admitting that you might not actually know it all and courage in then going out into the world to find out more. I try to practise this every day.”

Throughout my experience, the racial and gendered aspects of my identity have made taking up space harder. Harder to accept the constant pushback, harder to ignore the sense of helplessness and harder to keep going when you felt like you had a different standard of proof to everyone else. Speaking up as black women has always come with risks. I realised at 18 that taking up space for me would always be inherently contentious and political because of how far my identity is drenched in a history of misogynoir (misogyny specifically directed towards black women), racism and classism.

However, I also discovered some brilliant truths.

Sometimes when you speak, people actually do listen. Since publishing the book, it has been an incredible journey. People are riled up, speak passionately about change and for once, I have started to imagine what a truly equal society will look like. I find glimmers of hope and optimism when people strive to learn and consider other experiences because they realise that we all need to shuffle to make sure there is room for everyone. The First Women project is just one example of this. Not only will Ashurst be celebrating the 100th anniversary of the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act 1919, it has also made a brave commitment to listening to, and archiving, the histories of women and their contributions to the legal profession.

They also say, “when you’re accustomed to privilege, equality feels like oppression” and, to be honest, comments about filling quotas, and being a decorative nod to equality still haven’t stopped. However, I am grateful for the countless people who have witnessed the struggle and have found ways to help, support and encourage. I am also grateful to those who have made it their responsibility to learn more about the experiences of others and how they may be helping or hindering that particular experience. There’s humility in admitting that you might not actually know it all and courage in then going out into the world to find out more. I try to practise this every day.

As the poet Vanessa Kisuule has written, “*Maybe you will knock patiently at the door or flex your muscles before karate kicking it down. It doesn’t matter. As long as you know you don’t belong outside in the chill of indifference and fear*”.

A FOUNDER'S FIRM

GENDER RIGHTS, PRO BONO AND THE RADICAL LEGACY OF WILLIAM ASHURST

BY CLAIRE FOUREL AND ALICIA WELLS



Members of the Ashurst Gender Rights Pro Bono Steering Group.

The founder of the firm, William Henry Ashurst, was part of England's 19th century's radical reformer movement, which sought to change "existing economic, political, or social structures by word or deed".¹ William Ashurst was a fervent supporter of "rights for all" – his family stood for ideals of political and social equality. He demonstrated these beliefs through wide-ranging pro bono work to support the abolitionist movement or the introduction of the uniform penny post which would benefit society at large, rather than the privileged few. Contemporaries remarked on the way in which Ashurst made sure that his legal practice and expertise remained available to all:

"None were so poor but he would serve them; none were too obscure to win his powerful consideration. In the midst of the most valuable consultations, he would give an audience to the humblest victim of oppression; in the midst of the weightiest causes, he would accord a hearing, with the kindest smile, to a poor man who had travelled from some far town in England to seek his advice; and he seemed to attend to such persons first, precisely because they were never likely in any way to repay him. Nor was his sympathy limited to country or clime".²

As discussed in Part One of this book, William Ashurst also had a deep-rooted ideal of female emancipation and equality which he expressed in the public spheres through his advocacy work, and in the domestic sphere with his children who were raised to be independent women. Today, with the spotlight in the UK on the gender pay gap, and the #metoo and #timesup movements, gender rights and equality are at the forefront of current debates. This has led to the creation of an Ashurst gender rights pro bono committee to focus the firm's pro bono practice more closely on these issues. If understanding the past may give meaning to the present, to what extent is the legacy of William Ashurst and his family reflected in the firm's present pro bono work, and how does this sense of history and continuity inform the firm's cultural identity and values?

William Ashurst championed women's equality and advocated for women to have the right to actively participate in "public advocacy, management and business arrangements". He brought up his daughters to be economically emancipated, recognising the need to raise "his girls to callings which would render them independent should fortune ever play them an evil trick", and they too would go on to become advocates for women's rights, helping to organise petitions and committees on women's suffrage. When reflecting on the causes which William Ashurst and his family championed, it is somewhat difficult to imagine a time in this country where women did not have the right to vote or where commercial slavery was widely accepted in day to day life. However, at the time, it cannot be underestimated how championing these causes would have been viewed as radical and extreme in their divergence from the fixed social order of the time. The foundations of the firm were truly rooted in radicalism.

200 years on, equality and access to rights have evidently progressed since the time of William Ashurst, although we are still far from a world where gender equality is a reality. The World Economic Forum states that “at current rates of progress, it may take about 202 years to close the economic gender gap globally”.³ In 2017, only 27.5 per cent of the world’s ministers and parliamentarians were female.⁴ Globally, one in three women will have experienced physical or sexual violence, mostly by an intimate partner.⁵ Over 200 million girls and women alive today have undergone female genital mutilation.⁶ Globally, over 100 million adolescent girls are not in school. Addressing such important gender rights challenges will require concerted, sustained and “radical” efforts to overcome them. Through their pro bono practices, law firms will be able to contribute in small ways to being agents of change to bring about reforms in law and practice to resolve some of these systemic issues.

In 2018, the Ashurst London pro bono practice created a gender rights pro bono committee (the Committee) to focus more specifically on gender rights issues and consolidate the firm’s past experience in this field. The objective was to develop the firm’s technical expertise and knowledge in gender issues so as to play a more active and strategic role in addressing structural disadvantages faced by marginalised women and girls. The Committee identified various charities working on wide-ranging issues such as FGM, forced marriage, sexual and domestic violence, and access to education and equality of employment, and started conversations about providing them with legal pro bono assistance and working in partnership to bring about change together. Almost a year on since its inception, the Committee has reached out to over 30 gender-rights-focused not-for-profit organisations within the UK, received a dozen new instructions, and engaged nearly 100 lawyers in the work in eight offices in the Ashurst network. Much like the firm’s geographic and client footprint, and in-keeping with its founder’s internationalism, today its pro bono work has a global and cross-office focus, recognising that many of the greatest gender challenges exist overseas as well as locally.

As we celebrate 100 years of women being able to practise law in the UK, we are able to reflect on the firm’s past with its radical founder and his daughters, its present with now over 100 female partners, but also its future and how the firm may contribute to the empowerment of women and girls and realisation of gender rights. Words can be co-opted and change their meaning; in more recent times, the label “radical”, much like “feminist”, has taken on different connotations in popular usage and in the media – connotations which are sometimes negative. In common parlance, it is a word that now may evoke an absolutist approach to politics, or an association with instability or even extremism. However, if one looks at history,

in particular English radicalism of the 19th century and various social movements such as women’s rights or racial equality, radicalism is defined as “liberal humanitarianism, a pattern of reform that is non-class and non-ideological”,⁷ and a radical as an individual who believes that there should be “social or



Members of the Ashurst Gender Rights Pro Bono Steering Group.

political change” and that the way things are done should be challenged. Reflecting on the beliefs and connected social activism of William Ashurst and his daughters places Ashurst and the pro bono work it does to support gender rights today in a dialectic of new or modern radicalism, relevant and connected to our times, with a clear linear thread connecting the firm to its past and founder. In light of William Ashurst and his daughters’ radicalism, it is a word and legacy that the firm can proudly claim, and which can inform the firm’s pro bono work today, in furtherance of equal rights for all, and the empowerment of women and girls around the world. Radicalism is a part of the firm’s past, present and future identity, and continues to inform its values.

1. The English middle class and the ideological significance of radicalism, David Nicholls 1985
2. The Liberator 18 January 1856, <http://fair-use.org/the-liberator/1856/01/18/the-liberator-26-03.pdf>
3. <https://www.weforum.org/projects/closing-the-gender-gap-gender-parity-task-forces>
4. OECD (2019), Women in politics (indicator). doi:10.1787/edc3ff4f-en (Accessed on 02 September 2019)
5. <https://www.un.org/en/sections/issues-depth/gender-equality/index.html>
6. <https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-protection/female-genital-mutilation/>
7. The English middle class and the ideological significance of radicalism, David Nicholls 1985

MALE CHAMPIONS OF CHANGE

BY PAUL JENKINS, GLOBAL MANAGING PARTNER



When I became Ashurst's Global Managing Partner I made a personal commitment to play a direct role in the advancement of women in leadership positions and improvement of gender balance within the firm. In 2017, I was the first law firm leader to join the Male Champions of Change group. The group is comprised of male CEOs from a number of Australian and international companies within the Australian business community, including Goldman Sachs, AMP Capital, Qantas, Commonwealth Bank of Australia, AGL Energy and Lendlease, who commit to use their individual and collective influence to elevate the issue of women's representation in leadership onto the national business agenda.



Women at the RISE forum.

As a Male Champion of Change, I was inspired to create Ashurst's Committed to Change programme, which encourages partners to be actively involved in taking forward our diversity strategy. Since the launch of the programme in 2017, over 100 partners have joined and participated in a number of initiatives, such as reverse mentoring. Reverse mentoring has played a critical role in encouraging visible leadership within the firm and role-modeling inclusive behaviours, and ultimately in achieving better gender balance.

Fostering an inclusive culture is key to Ashurst's vision of being the most progressive global law firm and in 2017, we adopted the business goal of "being renowned for diversity internally and by our peers" which has facilitated a sustained focus across our five diversity strands, and set the foundation for the development and implementation of a number of initiatives to support the advancement of women.



For instance, this year, I was delighted to once again sponsor our annual RISE Forum, which is designed to contribute to a more balanced distribution of equity between men and women, more female partners overall, and ultimately to achieve greater diversity within our senior leadership team. The Forum brings together female partners and business services leaders from different offices, with the aim of supporting their career development, encouraging stronger connections to be built, and providing them with a clear voice within the firm.

Our aspirational gender targets aim to improve gender balance across the business. First set in 2013, there is no doubt in my mind that the stretch targets have sustained our focus and delivered a step change in our approach and attitudes. With 25 per cent of the partnership now female, we are on track to reach our target of one in three female partners by the end of 2021.

As we celebrate a century of women being admitted to practise law in the United Kingdom and celebrate our own century of 100 female partners at Ashurst, I am excited about the commitment from so many at Ashurst to drive greater gender equality. I am confident that together we will create a more inclusive workplace for all.

THE FUTURE OF WOMEN IN LAW

BY ALEXANDRA BROGAN

Throughout the First Women project, and particularly when sitting down to write this article, I really expected there to be a eureka moment. A moment where a lightbulb would explode as one of our interviewees shared an idea that solved every single one of the problems surrounding women who work in the legal world in one smooth statement. With every First Women team meeting attended, every interview conducted and every transcript read, it really did feel like we were on the edge of something huge. And yet, we came no closer to the answer.

And so you can imagine my excitement when I found that the Law Society of England and Wales would be publishing a report in June 2019 titled “Advocating for Change: Transforming the Future of the Legal Profession through greater Gender Equality”. Perfect. The report would contain the findings of 712 female lawyers who attended 34 international roundtables held in 21 cities across 18 jurisdictions. I was confident that this was it – the holy grail. Until I opened the report.

The report did not contain the holy grail. Don’t get me wrong, the report is fantastic and highlights how far the legal sector in the UK has come compared to many countries. But it also most definitely did not contain the answers. I read the report again. Nope. Definitely not there.

Instead, it highlighted three key issues that the Law Society thinks that it is integral to combat:

1. To break down traditional gender roles and stereotypes;
2. To close the gender pay gap; and
3. To increase flexible working.

I know what you’re thinking – these issues are old news. And yet consistently across all 34 roundtables, in 21 cities, these were the answers given by women as to how we work towards an equal workplace for female lawyers. I reached out to the Women’s Networking Group at Ashurst and asked if they could ask their mentor groups to discuss what they felt were the barriers still facing women in the legal workplace. Unsurprisingly, the results were almost identical to that of the Law Society.

For a brief moment, I considered whether this meant we had “beaten” gender inequality in the legal world. If we are already implementing the key objectives recommended for

change, then hadn’t we already won? Not quite. But looking deeper into the responses of our interviewees, the women’s mentee groups and the Law Society report made me realise that perhaps the future is closer than we first thought.

1. To break down traditional gender roles and stereotypes

“Less judgement, more empathy, more support and more infrastructure is what women in the legal world need.”

PADMINI SINGLA, ASHURST ALUMNA,
NOW GENERAL COUNSEL (EUROPE) AT KENNEDY WILSON

A number of our interviewees expressed that they were nervous to tell the partnership that they were pregnant and/or delayed becoming pregnant because of the fear it would impact their career. While women today have a greater level of statutory protection in place while on maternity leave, it was interesting to find that our mentor groups all still raised pregnancy and its impact on their career prospects as a concern. The Law Society equally found that females worried that their colleagues had deeply ingrained negative assumptions about women lawyers of childbearing age.

While the legal industry has made unbelievable progress in redefining a woman’s job in the past 100 years, the legacy of the gender stereotype undeniably lives on. ‘Imposter syndrome’ is a psychological pattern in which an individual doubts their own accomplishments and has an internalised fear of being exposed as a “fraud”. Some mentor groups used the phrase imposter syndrome, while others did not – however it was evident at all levels that most women had at some point in their career experienced it. For example, the Law Society has recognised that across all jurisdictions clients are happier to pay higher fees when quoted by male lawyers and that women are more likely to be challenged on their bills, even when a fixed fee had been agreed. These subtle hangovers of the female stereotype of the 20th century ultimately can add up and feed into remuneration, promotion and a female employee’s sense of self-worth.

In response to the legacy of gender stereotype, the Law Society has found that women want to continue to be developed and trained throughout their careers, and want continued training for everybody in unconscious bias. Additionally, there were calls across the mentor groups for encouraging women to take ownership of their own professional development and to build their self-confidence, both in the office and with clients.

2. To close the gender pay gap

"We are obsessed with certain metrics, particularly financial ones, which I think don't take into account all the skills that everyone brings to the table. I think if you look solely at financials and billable hours, you will always be skewing towards the male."

TARA WATERS, ASHURST DIGITAL VENTURES

A consistent theme throughout the women's mentoring groups was the idea that billing figures do not necessarily represent achievement. Focusing purely on billing can drive a face time culture and encourage inefficiency in order to put down more hours while under-recognising the skills that are vital for a good practice, but not technically "chargeable work". Until we find a way to value the different contributions that women make to the workplace and ensure that they are properly and financially recognised, we will never be able to truly close the gender pay gap. In the financial year 2018/2019, Ashurst introduced a new discretionary bonus plan which aims to provide sufficient discretion to take account of an individual's wider contribution to the firm. A clear step in the right direction that will hopefully continue to develop year on year.

The gender pay gap, and the reporting requirements that come with it, are probably the most infamous measure of inequality in the UK. Moving forward, the Law Society envisages reporting being required to measure ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation and socio-economic background pay gaps to give a more comprehensive picture of the overall state of equality and inclusion.

3. To increase flexible working

91 per cent of respondents to the Law Society's survey felt that a flexible working culture was critical to improving diversity in the workplace. Padmini Singla, one of our First Women interviewees, observed that many women leave the workplace because they are unable to balance the hours which take a toll on their family. Investments in infrastructure, and in particular in IT, mean it no longer matters where you work from, and can help to give women the support they need.

There is no denying that our move to the London Fruit and Wool Exchange has brought with it a huge increase in flexible working. At the time of writing this article we have been in the building four months and feedback suggests that 85 per cent of participants have used their laptop to work remotely and 69 per cent have worked from a location that is not their allocated desk. However, flexible working means more than just the ability to take your work home with you. Flexible working can also include the ability to work reduced working hours, job share, take extended leave or have alternative work patterns – all of which are still foreign concepts to the majority of the legal industry.

It is also becoming evident that it is no longer just women that value the opportunity for a more flexible working pattern. Many consider flexible working (and moving away from a face-time culture) to now be a generational not a gender issue. Now that we have the technology in place to facilitate flexible working, it is critical that we continue to challenge the stereotypes and perceptions surrounding it. In particular, it is important that we encourage an environment where assumptions are not made about the circumstances surrounding the choice to work flexibly.

"I think that the wider diversity we now have in the firm means that there isn't a single path to success. You have started to see people going out to work, taking an in-house role, coming back into practice, taking time out to study or just do different things. People are beginning to go off the beaten track to partnership."

CAROLINE RAWES, CHIEF PEOPLE OFFICER

Flexible working also comes with further challenges: the perception that flexible working means open-ended availability; that not being available 24/7 means a lack of commitment; and concerns that those who work flexibly may miss out on opportunities. Our women's mentoring groups have discussed the potential for recognised alternative career paths within the firm and for senior leaders to lead by example and demonstrate that working flexibly is culturally acceptable and will not negatively impact your career.

The First Women Project has taught me that overcoming the barriers preventing women from entering and progressing the law has not been easy. But that does not mean that it's now time to sit back, or believe that it is not our personal responsibility to keep on pushing for change. It is up to each and every individual in the legal world to be the change that they want to see.

There has been a period of unprecedented and rapid change throughout the past 100 years and I have no doubt that there will be change that we cannot even yet dream of in the next 100. It is often difficult to recognise change as you live through it, but I have confidence that the future for women in law is starting now.

"Remember that every generation has its own challenges. Sure, we could have made more progress in terms of statistics but the approach of the legal world is completely different now. 100 years ago a woman could not even dream of being a lawyer."

CHRISTINA CALVO, REAL ESTATE PARTNER

WOMEN OF ASHURST: A PHOTO MOSAIC

BY ANNA DELGADO AND PATRICK KEENAN



To us, this artwork represents a number of things. Firstly, it recognises Maud as one of the first female solicitors, and with her, the rest of that ground-breaking generation who did so much hard work in the face of entrenched resistance. Secondly, the smaller constitutive pictures are intended to record and recognise the contribution that the women of Ashurst have made, and continue to make, to building this firm.

In researching Ashurst's history, and hearing the stories of its first women, we were struck by the fact that, in the past, such contributions had not always been properly recognised. This was the culture elsewhere in the City as well as in public life in general.

What makes the culture of an institution? Culture can be hard to define, but it is ultimately made up of the accumulation of many small things over time. The physical environment is an important element of this. The pictures that we decide to hang on our walls; the images that we see every day in our office; are significant. In boardrooms across the City, in law firms (as was the case in our old office), university colleges, and even in the National Portrait Gallery, wall space is overwhelmingly taken up by portraits of former presidents, chief executives, chairmen and senior partners, who tend to be male and of similar backgrounds.

Of course it is right that our former leaders are remembered, but we should also recognise everyone who has helped to make Ashurst a modern and dynamic place to work (and still a somewhat 'radical firm'). This is especially important given that some groups did not always enjoy the opportunities and rewards that their talents may have warranted, or may have had to work a bit harder and make greater sacrifices to get the same rewards. We hope this artwork will contribute to nudging our institutional culture in a more inclusive direction.

We would like to thank First 100 Years for their collaboration, the Ashurst First Women project team for organising the commission, and the hundreds of Ashurst women who participated by allowing themselves to be photographed by Marcus Jamieson-Pond for this wonderful project.

2019 was a milestone year for Ashurst. In addition to marking the first 100 years of women in law in the UK, and for the first time having 100 female partners globally, we also moved to a new permanent home at the London Fruit and Wool Exchange, Spitalfields. In order to recognise the centenary, we have, in collaboration with the First 100 Years charity, commissioned a piece of commemorative artwork. The artwork is a photo mosaic comprised of photographs of the women who are part of life at Ashurst in 2019. These tiny photographs make up a larger image of Maud Crofts, one of the four claimants in the 1913 *Bebb v The Law Society* Court of Appeal case which hastened the reforms which would permit women to practise law. Maud subsequently became one of the first women to be admitted as a solicitor in the UK in 1923.



MAUD CROFTS 1889 - 1965

“WE WOMEN WANT NOT PRIVILEGES BUT EQUALITY”

Maud Crofts (née Ingram) was born in 1889, the child of Middle Temple barrister Thomas Lewis Ingram. She attended Cambridge University and studied History and Law, in which she achieved first class honours. However, she was not eligible, by virtue of her gender, to receive a degree from the University. Maud defined herself as a suffragist rather than a suffragette, favouring education and legal reform over civil disobedience as a route to achieving gender equality. She argued that allowing women lawyers would improve legal outcomes for all women, as they would benefit from more understanding and sympathetic representation, particularly in family and industrial cases.

In 1913, Maud, together with three other young aspiring lawyers, Lucy Nettleford, Karin Costelloe and Gwyneth Bebb, challenged the Law Society's decision to refuse to admit women to its examinations. This challenge was unsuccessful in court, but succeeded in raising awareness of the cause.

Thereafter, Maud joined the Committee for the Opening of the Legal Profession to Women, which successfully campaigned for the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act 1919, which allowed women to practise as lawyers for the first time in the UK.

Maud took up the newfound opportunity with relish. Qualifying as one of the first female solicitors in 1923, she worked until the age of 66 at a firm which she founded along with her husband and brother. Here, Maud put her pre-1919 arguments into practice, becoming a leading expert in family law, representing many prominent female clients and advising women's groups. She became the first published female lawyer in the UK when she wrote “Women under English Law”, an academic study of the legal position of women in England, in 1925. Balancing her practice with her family, Maud raised two children. Her daughter, Rosie, and granddaughter, Mary, would both go on to become solicitors.

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The First Women Project Team

Pictured (from left to right, back to front): Lewis Hammond, Ellen Arnison, Patrick Keenan, Alex Brogan, Sofia Aslam, Emma Bridger, Clara Yeo, Onis Chukwueke-Uba, Rosie Stanger, Alicia Wells, Emma Tran, Josie Oliver, India Case, Yoana Georgieva, Heshow Abdollah, Millie Gibbs, Kseniia Samokhina

Not pictured: Deborah Dalglish, Catherine Banks, Emmi Mäkiharju, Nicole Gillen, Katherine Kulakowski, Antonia Johnson.



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BEHIND THE SCENES

THE ASHURSTS IN THE ARCHIVES: CAROLINE ASHURST BIGGS AND THE FIGHT FOR FEMALE VOTING RIGHTS

BY JOSIE OLIVER

On 22 June 2019, I took a train up to visit Manchester Central Library. The Library holds a collection on Women's Suffrage – a collection which contains a handful of writings by William Ashurst's granddaughter, Caroline Ashurst Biggs.

Born on 23 August 1840 into a radically politicised family, Caroline was destined to follow in her parents' and grandparents' footsteps, becoming passionately involved in a range of social and political causes. As her obituary, written by "a friend", summarised:

"Brought up under the spell of such traditions and surroundings, and feeding from her earliest years on the story of freedom... what wonder if the young impressionable girl became fired with the same spirit of enthusiasm too, and resolutely took her modest part in furthering what those around her had at heart?"

As the name of the Manchester collection suggests, Caroline's lifelong calling was female rights. She edited *The Englishwoman's Review* for nearly twenty years, wrote the chapter on Great Britain in the monumental *History of Woman Suffrage* and published articles in favour of votes for women. Two such pamphlets are held in Manchester. The first is entitled *Ought Women to have the Right to Vote for members of Parliament?*, and was published in 1879. It is a Q&A-style article, rationally discussing how many women would receive the vote, what levels of support there were currently in Parliament, and – the million-dollar question – "are women capable of voting?". The second pamphlet held in the Manchester archive is rather different. Published posthumously in 1889, it is a fervent appeal to England's women, ending on powerful rhetorical questions as she sought to convince the women themselves that the answer was indeed yes.

As well as Caroline's public discussions on votes for women, I rather unexpectedly came across two handwritten letters from her addressed to Millicent Garrett Fawcett. Millicent was one of the leading suffragists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, spearheading the largest suffrage organisation, the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS), between 1890 and 1919. To find Caroline corresponding with such a significant figure indicates Caroline's own importance within the suffrage movement.



Millicent seems to have asked her for information for an article regarding the early committees of the National Society for Women's Suffrage (NSWS), taking advantage of Caroline's close involvement with both *The Englishwoman's Review*, which had reported on the meetings, and her role as secretary of the London branch of the NSWS between 1867 and 1871. In one letter, Caroline mentions that she herself signed the petition "of the 1500 women which J. S. Mill presented in 1866", and references her own aunt, Caroline Ashurst Stansfeld, who sat on the executive committee of the London NSWS when it formed in 1867. In the second, Caroline mysteriously tells Millicent that she holds the minute book of the London and Central branches of the NSWS, but intriguingly had received the "express & solemn stipulation that it should never be opened". These letters give a personal insight into the networks formed between those at the forefront of the movement for votes for women, and cements Caroline as part of this crusade.

In Caroline's obituary, her anonymous friend wrote of her "facile pen and fertile brain". The two letters and two pamphlets written by Caroline and preserved in the Manchester archive give testimony to this contemporary perception and I feel privileged to have experienced this first-hand.

THE ELIZABETH OGLES OF ASHURST

In 1846, Elizabeth Ogle, known as Bessie, married William Ashurst Jr, becoming part of the Ashurst family. Her husband worked for the next 16 years at the firm which continues to bear his father's name, before becoming solicitor to the Post Office. 172 years later, a second Elizabeth Ogle, this time known as Lizzy, moved from New Zealand to join the global loans team at Ashurst in London. When Lizzy joined in May 2018, she had no idea that she shared a name with William Ashurst's daughter-in-law.

Clara Yeo, one of the First Women researchers, noticed the coincidence when Lizzy arrived to have her photograph taken for the First 100 Years photomosaic. Lizzy subsequently got in contact with her family back home in New Zealand who confirmed that Bessie Ogle was indeed a distant family relation. Lizzy's aunt sent a copy of the Ogles of Rothbury family tree which noted Bessie's marriage to William Jr, whose role was recorded as "Solicitor to H. M. Post Office".

The Ogles are an old English family stretching back as far as the Norman Conquest. In the early twelfth century it is thought that Robert Ogle built a castle at the town of Ogle in Northumberland; the accompanying manor house, extensively rebuilt in the mid-seventeenth century, is owned by descendants of the Ogle family today. Five or six generations ago, three Ogle brothers emigrated to New Zealand, and it is from these Ogles that Lizzy is herself descended. Bessie, meanwhile, was born in 1823. We know relatively little about her life, but she would have been part of the Muswell Hill Brigade which was centred on the Ashurst family. She and William Jr had no children and she died after fifty years of marriage, in 1896.

This unexpected connection is just one of countless Ashurst anecdotes which we have uncovered over the past year as we have sought to learn more about the women of Ashurst. The coincidence of the two Elizabeth Ogles of Ashurst show us just how many stories the firm has to tell.

