

FREETHS OXFORD MANAGING PARTNER

Sarah Foster talks firm plans for the future



BY PENNY
HEIGHWAY

CONSULTANT

T: 07393 782702
E: pennyheighway
@chadwicknott.co.uk

Chadwick Nott

FREETHS

PENNY HEIGHWAY TALKS TO SARAH FOSTER ABOUT FREETHS OXFORD PLANS FOR THE FUTURE, 10 YEARS AFTER PENNY WORKED AT THE FIRM THAT WAS THEN HENMANS LLP.

Featured: Sarah Foster, Managing Partner Freeths Oxford.

Freeths merged with the well-known Oxford firm Henmans LLP in 2013. How have you seen the firm change over that time?

Henmans was Oxfordshire through and through. Anthony Henman (father of professional tennis player Tim) had been Senior Partner for a number of years and the firm's clients were impressive—they ranged from a mix of local landed estates, Oxford colleges, through to international insurance companies.

Freeths was a long established national heavyweight which has been on an incredible growth journey in recent years, establishing and expanding offices in Birmingham, London, Manchester, Leeds, Sheffield and Liverpool—with another new office opening in Bristol later this year.

"I have never felt that I needed to be anything other than myself here. We continue to strive for equality and diversity, but we were doing that well before the other firms in the region had put it top of their agendas."

- SARAH FOSTER

Since the merger we have grown into Oxfordshire's leading law firm in terms of number of lawyers, annual turnover and Top Tier rankings in the legal directories. I would say the merger has enhanced the breadth of services we could offer clients, which has added to our appeal, but what has impressed me most is that we have retained our family orientated culture. We may have grown in numbers, we are now 120 with a turnover of £11.5m last year, but the vast majority of the staff who were with us in 2013 are still with us, as are our clients, and we are still even based in the same great office.

What stood out to me about the firm 10 years ago was the very equal male to female Partner ratio. Has that remained the case, and if so, has that had an effect on the development of the firm?

Yes, I remember both you and I were made up to Partners whilst pregnant with our first children, which was pretty ground-breaking back then! Thinking about it, I suppose I never questioned whether partnership or becoming Managing Partner one day would be achievable because it was the "norm" to strive for promotion—we were encouraged.

I have never felt that I needed to be anything other than myself here. We continue to strive for equality and diversity, but we were doing that well before the other firms in the region had put it top of their agendas. I think our equality in our partnership numbers inspires all junior staff that getting on in Freeths is based on work merit and that a life choice, like having a family, is not going to be detrimental to their career. We strive to make the return to work really easy for our staff in many ways and have always actively encouraged flexible and agile working.

Yes work/life balance does seem to be important at Freeths. Practically how does that work day to day?

We certainly believe that family time is just as important as work time. Technology has made it very straightforward to accommodate staff who want to work from home regularly or from any of our offices. The vast majority of our fee earning staff have a mobile, laptop, and remote log-on facilities.

We also regularly sponsor events where staff can attend with their families and enjoy spending days out together. For example, we've sponsored the Blenheim 7k Fun Run, the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford Playhouse and Oxford Lieder to name a few.

Similarly, we also encourage our lawyers to give back to the community. For example, we sponsor the Right to Read scheme, where we go out and read to children in local schools; and the Business in the Community Scheme, where we run mock trials in schools and colleges, and mentor university students.





ABOVE: FREETHS 2018 PROMOTIONS

Additionally, promotions at Freeths are very much within an individuals' control. If you want it and work hard then there is a clear path to partnership. However we know that partnership is not for everyone and you will still be recognised and valued if you choose a different career route.

Where do you see the Oxford office in the next 10 years?

We are currently Freeths' second largest office but our aim is to grow further to 200 staff and to increase turnover to over £20m. We will do this by both nurturing our own home grown talent and recruiting externally. Our plan is to grow our market share and to remain as Oxfordshire's "go-to" law firm for businesses and high-net-worth individuals.

You moved from Lovells in London via Newcastle firm Crutes to Oxford. What would you say to someone considering a move here?

When I moved here, I wanted to get away from the hustle and bustle of city life to start a family with my husband, but I didn't want to work for just any firm. Work quality was important. I was looking for a firm that had a client roster of national and international businesses and also a great reputation in the legal market. This is where Henmans in Oxford initially came in—they were well respected by many law firms in London, acting for the likes of Zurich, Hiscox and BMW. I knew I wouldn't be sacrificing my exposure to City quality work and, in fact, I was given more direct access to work with well-known clients, which has helped me build long lasting business relationships. Over the years I've found that in Oxford you can build a strong and lasting support network of contacts, clients and friends.

Oxford and Oxfordshire is also a beautiful place to live and work. I love the variety of what the region is able to offer me and my family—Oxford isn't all about ink pots and quill pens! It really is an amazing city and there is something for everyone whether you like sports, history, art or literary and music festivals. Also important for me is the accessibility of London, which is less than an hour away on the train. There is no other place that I would rather live or work—evidenced by the fact that I've now been here for 20 years!

What type of lawyers are you interested in hearing from as part of your growth strategy?

As a full service office we are very keen to hear from lawyers at all levels from pretty much all practice areas. However, we are very proactively recruiting in Corporate, Private Client, Dispute Management, Family and Commercial Property. We have been advising many of Oxfordshire's businesses and private individuals for decades and we like our lawyers to enjoy building long lasting relationships with clients. We take it as a given that most lawyers have the experience and expertise, but we especially look for a genuine enthusiasm and the ability to think laterally and be entrepreneurial in their approach to the law.

For instance, we really encourage our junior lawyers in their networking and business development skills and support them in their progression. This is achieved via cross office Cluster Groups which are hugely successful in encouraging cross referrals and the office Initiative Group which is responsible for running social and other events—Partners are not allowed to attend either group!

We also like our lawyers to have a life outside of the office and law and believe this helps our lawyers build stronger more satisfying and influential relationships in business and the local community. This is actively encouraged by the firm. For example I have recently taken up triathlon training, which I do most mornings before work and particularly now as I have an Ironman competition coming up in May in Lanzarote!

Do you have any advice for potential trainees looking for a training contract?

It is a very crowded market out there for law graduates and there are now many different routes to the law rather than the traditional training contract route.

We have implemented an **apprenticeship programme** to make it easier for people to access the legal sector with a view to becoming a Solicitor without having the burden of student debt. We provide on the job training, whilst individuals complete and achieve qualifications through college or university. At the end you qualify as a Solicitor or Legal Executive.

We also run a Legal Assistants programme for all graduates. Over the period of the programme the Assistants are assessed on their ability to learn on the job and to adapt to various challenges faced when working on client matters along-side our lawyers. If they do well they are offered a training contract which starts the following year. We will have 7 trainees in the Oxford office in March 2019 and I would like to increase this number in future years.

What have been your career highlights to date?

Being appointed as the Oxford office's Managing Partner must be up there! I really love my job, and, in particular, the variety of it. Whilst I have suffered sometimes from "imposter syndrome," I have tried not to let fear of the unknown or the potential to fail stop me. I am very much hoping this mind-set will get me through the Ironman triathlon in a month's time!



For more information and a confidential chat about Freeths Oxford and any current opportunities for legal roles in the South East region please contact Penny Heighway.

Chadwick Nott
www.chadwicknott.co.uk