

Nothing to fear

Richard Smyth begins *Legal & Medical's* regional focus with an examination of why England's North West remains a hotbed for claimant personal injury work



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Richard Smyth is a freelance journalist who specialises in personal injury reporting

On 22 August 1985, the No. 1 engine of British Airtours Flight 28M caught fire on the runway of Manchester International Airport. The ensuing blaze resulted in the tragic deaths of 53 passengers and crew. This was a trigger moment for Manchester's claimant personal injury sector: in the wake of the disaster, the city built a network of specialists to rival any in the country.

A glance at the latest Chambers directory shows that the North West remains a serious powerhouse in all branches of the claimant PI industry. Geraldine McCool of MPH Solicitors, one of the country's leading specialists in civil and military aviation law, is in no doubt that the events of summer 1985 – and the dynamic response of one Manchester lawyer in particular – were the driving force behind

the city's ongoing success.

"Rodger Pannone gets massive credit for this," McCool says. Pannone is an iconic figure in Manchester legal circles. A resident of the city since 1964, he repeatedly led the way in the handling of high-profile claims. Last year, collecting an outstanding achievement award at the Manchester Legal Awards, he reflected on his legacy (although he himself is too modest to ever claim it as such). "I believe that Manchester lawyers and other professionals are a match for those in any city in the world," he said. "That has changed over the last 30 years."

Next generation

"Our young lawyers really want to be the next generation of great PI lawyers, following in the footsteps of Rodger Pannone," says Pannone LLP's Deirdre Healy, one of the industry's most talked-about, up-and-coming professionals. McCool, who joined Pannone in 1986, explains the significance of the Manchester disaster and the firm's response. "It was the first time that claimant PI solicitors in

this country organised themselves into a group steering committee and worked effectively with American attorneys, and that resulted in the mid-Atlantic settlement," she says. "That was pretty key. And we had a number of disasters after that, all of which Pannone-Napier handled: the Piper Alpha oil rig disaster in July 1988, the Lockerbie bombing in December of the same year, and the British Midland air disaster at Kegworth the following January.

"We looked at filing Piper Alpha in Texas; Lockerbie we did file in Florida and the trial was held in New York; and British Midland at Kegworth was filed in New Orleans," explains McCool.

Through these important and high-profile cases, Manchester established an unrivalled base of expertise on which subsequent generations of claimant solicitors could build.

"Rodger Pannone created a golden generation of great PI lawyers, many of whom have gone on to create their own firms," Healy comments. "Potter Rees and MPH are both good firms spawned by Rodger."

Developing field

A similar story can be seen to have developed in another high-profile PI field. John Pickering was one of the great pioneers in claimant work relating to the terrible impacts of asbestos. First at Thompsons and, from 1979, at the head of his own firm, Pickering led the legal fight against asbestos and the asbestos-related cancer mesothelioma.

Kevin Johnson, now a highly regarded asbestos specialist at John Pickering & Partners' Liverpool office, recalls joining Pickering in Oldham as a newly qualified solicitor. "It was a fantastic experience," he says, "being able to learn from the foremost asbestos litigator of his generation, I'd say. It was a great privilege."

Johnson observes that the experience the



Photo courtesy of george.green/Shutterstock.com



“ It is genuinely very friendly, people are very kind and there is an entrepreneurial spirit ”

firm gained in the industrial heartlands of the North West has since allowed it to take on asbestos-related cases from across the UK and beyond – with considerable success.

“We’ve got offices in Manchester, Liverpool and Halifax, and all of the areas where we have offices are unfortunately quite notorious [for asbestos use],” he says. “In Manchester you’ve got the asbestos mills, where the asbestos was manufactured and made into textiles and

the asbestos sheets that were used in construction. Then in Liverpool there’s the maritime side of it – the docks where raw asbestos was imported and dockers unloaded sacks with raw asbestos spewing everywhere. We’ve also got lots of ship building and ship repairing, which was quite notorious for asbestos being used.

“And they’re all industrialised areas, so they all used asbestos in construction generally. So you’ve got the entire gamut in the North

West, from import through to manufacture through to the use of the product.”

As a consequence, Johnson adds, the region maintains a “good concentration” of specialist asbestos solicitors. John Pickering & Partners now take instruction from clients as far afield as Canada, Australia and New Zealand – “anywhere where there are people who’ve been exposed to asbestos when working in the UK.”

Deirdre Healy is also quick to note that her firm’s client base extends far beyond Greater Manchester. “I act for clients and their families who have suffered catastrophic injury across England and Wales,” she says. “People come to us from

The Case Management System of choice for the ABS era

Proclaim[®]

01274 704100 | www.eclipselegal.co.uk



E C L I P S E



all over as a result of our expertise.”

By now it’s a familiar pattern: North West know-how being put to work on a national – and indeed international – scale.

Healthy competition

But experience and expertise are only two elements of a thriving legal culture. Firms also need a healthy business environment in which to flourish – something that Manchester as a city has gone out of its way to encourage. And the legal sector has found to its benefit that growth engenders growth.

“It reflects very much the policy of the city council, who should get credit,” says Geraldine McCool. “Sir Howard Bernstein, as Chief Executive of the council, was someone who was really interested in growing the developing businesses.”

McCool points out that operating costs in Manchester allow firms to be competitive on a national basis: “A massive feature here is that we’re able to keep our overheads very low. The rent is very reasonable, and again you have to look at things like the city council’s policy on business rates, etc. – they have been very encouraging.

“If you look at the commercial firms such as Addleshaws, who are so good and so strong here, one of their selling points is: ‘We can do it cheaper in Manchester than in London, and we can do it just as well.’ That is an absolute key message. In my aviation work, I’m up against City firms. In my Ministry of Defence work, I might be up

against a Treasury solicitor. We can battle with the best – and we do it cheaper. Post-Jackson, that’s going to become absolutely pivotal.”

The size of the Manchester PI sector – “absolutely massive” according to McCool – and the high level of competition encourage not only an uplift in standards across-the-board but also a productive culture of community and collaboration. McCool identifies InjuryLawyers4U, the brainchild of veteran Manchester PI lawyer Andrew Twambley, as a key example of North West networking. “There are so many [law firms] from the North West,” she says. “So it’s a bit short-sighted to say that if you have a lot of competing firms in an area, it’s bad for business.”

But could there be a yet more fundamental and people-centred reason for the continuing strength of PI in the region? McCool is open to the idea that Manchester simply has a different way of going about business than other cities: “It’s genuinely very friendly. People are very kind. And there’s an entrepreneurial spirit.”

Deirde Healy agrees that there is “something special” about the city. And in the future? “I am sure we will still be fighting for victims of injury over the coming decades,” she foresees.

“I think everyone’s going to have their challenges,” McCool concedes. “But I think Manchester’s got nothing to fear.” ✚



About the research

Legal & Medical’s regional focus has been compiled with the help of the *Chambers Guide*.

Chambers and Partners can trace its roots back to

1989 when it produced the *Chambers Guide* to the legal profession. Now, more than 20 years later, the firm has evolved but remains the pre-eminent legal publisher worldwide.

Operating from London and Hong Kong, a 130-strong research team conducts in-depth interviews in 25 languages to produce six annual guides ranking the best law firms and lawyers in 180 jurisdictions around the world.

The six guides are currently: Chambers UK, Chambers USA, Chambers Europe, Chambers Asia-Pacific, Chambers Latin America and Chambers Global.

The research has been described as “the gold standard” by the *New York Times* and relies on market feedback from clients, lawyers, barristers and independent sources to assess who are the leaders in their respective fields. In determining whether a law firm or a set of barristers will be ranked, they measure:

- The work that firms and sets have undertaken over the past 12 months
- Feedback from clients in the market focusing on the commercial awareness, client service, strength of department and industry knowledge

For more information on the 2012 edition, visit www.chambersandpartners.com

Personal injury: Mainly Claimant

Leading firms in the North West

Band 1

Irwin Mitchell

Pannone LLP

Band 2

Fentons Solicitors LLP

John Pickering and Partners LLP

MPH Solicitors

Potter Rees, Serious Injury Solicitors LLP

Russell Jones & Walker

Thompsons

Band 3

Burnetts

JMW Solicitors LLP

Stephensons

Leading individuals in the North West

Band 1

Pauline Chandler, Pannone LLP

Carol Jackson, Pannone LLP

Kevin Johnson, John Pickering and Partners LLP

Catherine Leech, Pannone LLP

Geraldine McCool, MPH Solicitors

Hugh Potter, Potter Rees, Serious Injury Solicitors LLP

Richard Scorer, Pannone LLP

Band 2

Jonathan Betts, Irwin Mitchell

Grahame Codd, Irwin Mitchell

Tracey Graham, Russell Jones & Walker

Band 3

Gordon Cartwright, JMW Solicitors LLP

Matthew Clayton, Fentons Solicitors LLP

Geraldine Coombes, Irwin Mitchell

Ed Fletcher, Fletchers Solicitors

Nick Gutteridge, Burnetts

Dominic Hems, MPH Solicitors

Carolann Hepworth, John Pickering and Partners LLP

Deborah Johnson, Fentons Solicitors LLP

Chris Sutton, JMW Solicitors LLP

Patrick Walsh, Pannone LLP

Andrew Welch, Stephensons