

# OPEN, TRANSPARENT - YET ALWAYS PRIVATE



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DMH Stallard is a law firm that has a reputation of working closely with successful businesses. However they also have a renowned private client practice with the same level of expertise and approach to client service as their commercial offering. Ian Trevett spoke to Lorna Fairbairn, the Head of their Private Client Department.

Having qualified as a solicitor in 1987, Lorna can already point to an incredibly successful career having spent some 28 years in the legal profession. Starting out as a litigator in a boutique firm in London, she quickly established a reputation as a leading lawyer while working on some of the most high profile cases in the UK, including the Herald of Free Enterprise ferry disaster in the late eighties.

Despite Lorna's early success it was clear that

she had bigger ambitions and she soon decided to set up her own firm out of an office based in Farringdon and on the door step of London's booming legal community.

Lorna remembers, "It was cut-throat at the time and I often wondered whether I was biting off more than I could chew but I'd learnt my trade well and with a little luck, was convinced it was the right thing to do."

The move turned out to be an inspired one and over the next few years Lorna's reputation grew, not only as a great lawyer but also someone who was business-savvy, as she steadily built up her practice into a profitable business that was attracting attention from bigger firms.

In 2001, Fairbairn Morris merged with DMH, an extremely ambitious firm that was probably the most forward thinking firm in Brighton at

the time. Soon after that, the joint entity merged again with a London firm called Stallard, creating what is now DMH Stallard.

Lorna is now Head of Private Client and a member of the Leadership Team at DMH Stallard, helping the firm to continue to grow. She splits her time between London and the region.

"Although we are seen by many as a successful commercial law firm, our Private Client operation is in fact a significant part of DMH Stallard - following the merger earlier this year with Guildford firm AWB Partnership, it now contributes to over 20% of turnover and our private client team is significantly larger than many of our competitors in the region. We believe we are the number one choice for successful individuals who want a quality service from lawyers who work hard to support and protect



Lorna Fairbairn, DMH Stallard Head of Private Client

their success both in business and in their private lives.

"We expect to see growth of the private client practice across all the offices over the next few years. Brighton is still of course very important

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to DMH Stallard as it's really where the firm grew up. We retain an office in the centre of the City in Jubilee Street and we plan to expand our private client team there, given our long standing connection with the people of Brighton and Hove and the surrounding area.

"I also spend a lot of time at the Gatwick office where we work very closely with the corporate

team, who often ask us to offer advice for their business clients. And, of course, we have Private Clients, who want business advice, and we can call on our colleagues in the same way.

"In London our specialist Family practice is gaining more and more plaudits as they continue to undertake high profile and sensitive divorce cases for a range of clients, including senior directors and executives. The London team is set up to cater to individuals who work in and around the City who want the flexibility of being able to meet their lawyers during working hours. Clients can also benefit from our specialist real estate lawyers who have already seen an increase in clients investing in property following the recent pension changes.

"Many of our clients are the owners and directors of successful businesses, and we advise them on the full range of personal matters including divorce and family matters; looking after elderly and vulnerable people; design and intellectual property advice; employment advice; moving house and wider advice covering all property and planning matters; tax planning and insolvency; personal injury; and wills and estates. Few firms can rival the depth and breadth of our expertise.

"We are committed to enhancing the experience our private clients have with us. In a crowded and highly competitive legal market it's

very important to us that we build a relationship with our clients, and with that, gain their trust and confidence so that we can support them throughout their private and business lives."

No matter the client or their needs, Lorna and her team are clearly dedicated to meeting them. They actively focus on working to achieve the best possible outcomes through close personal attention. Indeed, if a meeting at one of their offices is not convenient they will travel to a client's home or even another location such as a care home or hospital - whatever is most suitable for the client.

But what strikes me most is just how open and transparent Lorna and her team are. They use plain English and offer flexible fee structures, anything from traditional hourly rates through to fixed fee arrangements, depending on what most suits the client's individual circumstances.

"We know that cost is always important to clients" says Lorna. "We provide accurate estimates and regular cost updates, as well as comprehensive breakdowns to show how prices have been calculated. Prices will always be exactly what we say they will be with none of the hidden extras such as postage, copying or 'non-standard circumstances' which can add as much as 30% to the price of some services.

"Communication is key and I think this is why 80 per cent of our day to day work comes from longstanding clients or on the basis of their recommendation. Clients' get a rapid response to their enquiry and then we get to know them, identify their personal circumstances and requirements, such as key deadlines, priority outcomes, and how best to communicate with them throughout. We work diligently to deliver their required outcomes working around, rather than being constrained by, technicalities or dated protocols. This might mean, for instance, that conveyancing work on their new home can begin straight away rather than having to wait until the mortgage offer is confirmed."

This collaboration within a large law firm is crucial, but I wonder if Lorna misses having her own firm. "It was the right decision and I am very pleased to be an equity partner with DMH Stallard. I've worked closely with Richard Pollins our Managing Partner for a number of years and it really is a great place to work. I know that DMH Stallard is going places and I really feel part of our success story."



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