Since 1761

A history of Fosters Solicitors


www.fosters-solicitors.co.uk
An Introduction

Fosters is a modern law firm, working hard to provide a really good service to our clients. We rarely have time to look back, but our 250th anniversary galvanised us to open up the old metal trunks in our strong rooms and to research and record where we have come from.

It is a good story. I hope you enjoy it!

We have asked several of our former staff to record their memories and also Dr Marriott, a direct descendant of the first William Foster. Some brief extracts from their memories are included here.

And we have included brief notes about the firms that have joined Fosters in recent years – Russell Steward (Norwich) F W Standley (Wymondham) and Dunne & Crome (Lowestoft).

Finally, inside the covers are photographs of staff and partners, past and present – this is the story of all those people.

Thank you to everyone who has worked on this project, particularly Bruce Chilton, Emily Newborough, Mike McAuley and Lucy Wright and to all those who have given time to record their memories.

Above all, thank you to the people and businesses of Norfolk and Suffolk and beyond who have trusted us with their affairs during four centuries, and to our staff past and present, who together have made Fosters what it is today.

This is our first shot at our history. I look forward to hearing about further information, stories and corrections for a future edition!
A history of Fosters Solicitors

In November 1761 William Foster (aged 23) qualified as an attorney and set up his own practice at 29 St Giles Broad Street, Norwich (opposite the site of City Hall clock). His practice grew and in 1771 he took on an articled clerk, the dashing 18 year old Charles Cooper. Foster still have a desk from this period with a “W” inscribed into the top – William Foster’s own?

Charles Cooper arrested

Charles Cooper qualified as an attorney in 1776 and immediately became a partner with William Foster. Foster’s son (also William and then aged 18) joined as an articled clerk in 1778.

William Foster II

William Foster II became a partner in 1784. A successful lawyer and a Whig, he attracted important clients, including Thomas Coke, the owner of Holkham Hall and 30,000 acres of land. Thomas Coke (later Earl of Leicester) gained worldwide acclaim as ‘Coke of Norfolk’, an agricultural reformer who sparked off the British Agricultural Revolution, which was crucial to feeding the growing cities and sustaining Britain through the 22 years of the Napoleonic Wars.

The partnership with Cooper was dissolved in 1784. The reasons are not clear. Cooper went to be a successful barrister, but also sailed close to the wind. It is known that on a stormy night in 1796 (12 years after leaving Fosters) he was arrested as he crossed Bishop’s Bridge, Norwich for allegedly embezzling clients’ money. He seems to have escaped trouble and continued his career at the bar.

William Unthank and move to Queen Street

In 1786, William Unthank became a partner. A ‘zealous friend of freedom, humanity and justice’, he was also a shrewd investor buying land in what was to become the ‘golden triangle’ in Norwich. Unthank Road (at the time called St Giles Gates) was renamed in his memory.

In 1798, the growing firm moved from St Giles to 11 Quaker Street in Norwich (the premises now known as Old Bank of England Court). In 1810 William Foster the older died, nearly 50 years after founding the firm.

Queen Caroline’s acquittal

In 1820, mass celebrations broke out when Queen Caroline, wife of King George IV, was acquitted on a charge of adultery. The King, whose own behaviour had been appalling, had wanted rid of the Queen. When she refused his demand that she renounce her title, he had her charged with adultery.

There were celebrations across the country – including at Fosters’ offices in Queen Street. Fosters still holds the bill for wine and hire of glasses and lanterns (two glasses broken!). The lanterns would have been displayed in the office windows to show support for Queen Caroline and avoid attack by the mob.

Move of offices to Bank Place from Old Bank of England Court

In 1825, Monsieur du Pain provided the entertainment at The Angel Inn, Norwich, when he dipped his feet in boiling lead!

The young William Foster III was an expert carriage driver, winning a bet that he could turn round a coach and horses in the narrow courtyard of the Quaker Street offices. Soon after, the offices were sold to the Bank of England and Fosters moved to Bank Place, Norwich, on the site of what is now the Royal Hotel. William Unthank’s son, Clement William Unthank, became a partner.

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1835...

William Foster III became leader of the Whig Party in Norwich. The Whig government was pushing through liberal voting reforms. Feelings between the Whigs and Tories ran high and headquarters, the Angel Inn Norwich (in the site of The Royal Arcade). Stones, potatoes and bags of flour were thrown from the windows. Polling booths were set on fire. Throughout, bands ‘played stirring tunes’. The Lord Mayor read the Riot Act and called in the 7th Hussars to restore order.

1838...

A Tory election leaflet in 1835 gives a caricature of Sir William Foster and criticises lawyers generally: ‘I know you Lawyers can with ease, twist two words and meanings as you please’.

1866...

Gurneys Bank was the only one to survive the crisis. Other banks in London, Liverpool, Manchester, Derby and Bristol went into liquidation, along with more than 200 companies.

1870...

Gurneys Bank later became part of Barclays.

1888...

The first tram line opened 1866. The Royal Hotel, its curved front built to allow the tram to slide by.

1893...

Run on Gurneys Bank

On 10th May 1866 the biggest wholesale bank in the world, Oswald Gurney & Co collapsed owing £11 million. This caused panic and riots on the retail banks owned by the Gurney family.

Sir William Foster

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1897...

1902...

1914...

1920’s...

1939...

1951...

Mundesley, forgery and a death

In 1897 Edwin Calvert, persuaded his partners to open their first branch, Osborne House at Mundesley, which was then seen as having great potential for growth with the arrival of the railway and a grand hotel. Although the Mundesley office had closed by 1914, one hundred years later Fosters are proud still to have clients there.

In 1906, John Sheppard, whilst cleaning Charles Foster, and cashed them at Barclays for £190.18s.0d, hundred years later Fosters are proud still to have clients there.

Soon after, Charles Foster, then aged 77, collapsed and died on his way home from the office. He had continued his business, public and charitable commitments to the end. Francis Marriott was appointed partner in his place.

By 1907, Foster had installed one of the first telephones in Norwich

High Scandal: The Colonel and his daughter

One long standing client, Colonel Clementance of Wrentham Hall, a friend of King Edward VII, had serious problems. Clementance was delighted when Oliver, his wayward only child, became engaged to Georgie Montague, a match approved by the King. But Oliver rebelled against his father’s wishes and fell for another man, Lord Alfred Douglas (‘Bosie’). Bosie, the son of the Marquis of Queensbury, was notorious for having a homosexual affair with Oscar Wilde. A love match with the Marquis of Queensbury, who accused Wilde of being a ‘posing Sodomite’, led to Oscar Wilde being sent to prison for two years hard labour and scandalised the nation.

In 1902, to Colonel Clementance’s horror, Bosie and Olive divorced and married. They had a child, Raymond. The Colonel and Bosie remained bitter rivals, fighting for custody of Raymond. With Clementance on one occasion apparently kidnapping Raymond whilst he was in Bosie’s care.

In all this feverish turmoil, the partners in Fosters did what they could to look after Raymond’s welfare. Fosters was affectionately of Edwin Calvert calling him ‘Growly’.

The Great War

The First World War had an immediate impact on Fosters, with partner Francis Marriott and clerks Ralph Lewens, Hugh Gemmard and articled clerk Edgar Collison all enrolled. Sadly, Edgar Collison (2nd Lieutenant in the Norfolk Regiment) was killed in action on the 26th June 1916, aged 25.

Fosters at War – again!

As war was declared several Fosters’ staff immediately enrolled in the army. Clifford Osler was discharged in 1942, permanently unfit due to nervous disorder, and returned to work at the office. A A Frost was wounded and admitted to an emergency hospital in Essex, whilst Edmund Thorpe served in the Army from 1940 to 1946. Two young men, not yet to join Fosters, also fought in the war. Carl Pickering was wounded when his tank ran into an ambush. John Whitbread flew Lancaster bombers over Germany and later trained pilots in Canada.

Norwich suffered severely from bombing. Fosters’ offices escaped damage, but tax rooms a few feet away on the other side of Queen Street were ganged by an incendiary bomb.

The inter-war years

In 1915, aged 25. Hugh Grimwade wrote from the trenches in France, complaining that the worst bit was the wet weather. Francis Marriott, a Captain in the Royal Artillery in France, wrote often about business but also refers to the wet weather, and how hard it is to obtain Leave. He won a Military Cross for gallantry.

Post War Years

Partners Edwin Calvert (aged 88) and Francis Marriott died in 1911 and 1913, both still working at their deaths. Stella Cooke (an employee since 1919) became a partner on the death of Edwin Calvert, and Carl Pickering on the death of Francis Marriott.

In 1946, John Whitbread joined as a partner and in 1966, Foster Calvert & Marriott moved to 60 London Street, their old offices under threat of demolition for road widening. The partners grabbed the moment to shorten the firm’s name to ‘Fosters’.

Staff remember urgent trips to court in John Whitbread’s Hillman Minx convertible driven by the skill of an experienced pilot.

By 1954 Carl Pickering and John Whitbread were in their early 60’s. A newly qualified solicitor, Andrew Saul, joined, followed a few years later by Ian Curtis, Bruce Childs, Catherine Biff, Jeremy Ives and others. Pickering and Whitbread retired, along with managing clerk David Ong (after 40 years service). The firm was modernising and once more growing fast.

A Festival of Britain

Queen Elizabeth II

The 1920s and 30’s were years of depression. Many of the firm’s landed clients would have been damaged physically and financially during and after the First War. By 1922, Fosters had divided their offices and sublet the front part, moving their clerks to the rear part of the offices. The partners worked at their deaths. Stefan Cooke (an employee since 1919) became a partner on the death of Edwin Calvert, and Carl Pickering on the death of Francis Marriott.

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**1990’s**

New specials and growing fast

Fosters developed new specialisms in litigation, family, injury claims, company law, crime and mediation, alongside its old strengths in conveyancing and trusts and probate.

A branch was opened in Bungay. Extra space was taken on in Norwich at 61, 66 and 67 London Street and at 124 Bank Street and Wades Court.

In 1992 the partners brought in an external management consultant. The resulting recommendations helped catapult Fosters forward. By 1997, the firm was winning awards for client care, staff care, training and management and in 1999, The Lawyer Best Medium Sized Law Firm. Further awards have followed since.

**New headquarters**

Fosters had outgrown its moody collection of different offices and the search was on for new premises, culminating in the opening in 2000 by Cherie Booth QC, of Fosters new Norwich headquarters at William House, Bank Place, just a few feet from the Royal Hotel, the site of Bank Place, Fosters’ offices in the 19th century.

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**Russell Steward**

In 2003, Fosters acquired the substantial practice of Russell Steward.

Founded around 1900 by Russell Steward, a well-known Norfolk sportsman, he practised on his own until joined by Alan Stevens in the 1940’s and James Hipwell in 1950. Russell Steward was a character in the Norfolk mould, refusing to wear a suit to court, he always wore a corduroy jacket.

More new partners joined Fosters in 1997 onwards including Ian McClay, Steven Green, Lucy Spooner and Steve Stewart.

Andrea Spooner became one of the first non-solicitor law firm partners in England. Fosters by now also had “staff” offices in Ipswich, Bury St Edmunds and Gorleston.

**Wymondham:**

FW Standley & Son

With Russell Steward came their Wymondham branch, the firm of FW Standley & Son which Russell Steward himselfes had had acquired a few years previously. Founded in 1872 by Frederick Standley who was succeeded by his son Lionel and Lionel’s son Percy, the Standleys had served the people of Wymondham and its surrounds for generations.

In 2003 Fosters moved the small, thriving practice just a few yards to newly converted offices at Bucker House, 1 Maddleton Street, Wymondham.

More new partners joined Fosters, including Carol McGuire, Debbie Reynolds, Trace Guest and, later on, Adrian Newborough and Robert Pike.

**Lowestoft:**

Dunne & Crome and the secret agent

In 2007, the Lowestoft firm Dunne and Crome merged with Fosters.

Dating back to the 19th century, the firm was then known as Watson, Ennett and Boycott. Nicholas Ennett gained some fame at the time, writing several books including ‘Shoots from a Lawyers Gun’ – a witty exposition of the laws on shooting and gamekeeping, and the anonymously titled ‘Ferrets, their management in health and disease’. Nicholas Ennett served in the First World War as a British secret agent, spying on German warships in the Baltic. On one occasion, hearing that the Germans had put a price on his head, he approached his partners and offered to help them find the wanted man. Ennett assumed the concept of the ‘Q Boat’ – small, heavily armed boats and ships, disguised as harmless merchantmen – which acted as lorries for German submarines.

Dunne & Crome purchased the firm, which was later taken over by the Dunne family. In 1987 Dunne & Crome merged with Bailey Crome – and at that time had ten partners.

**Premier League Partnership**

In 2011, Fosters celebrated its 250th anniversary by forming a working partnership with Norwich City Football Club – in celebration promoting the Premier League. The partnership came after many years of association between the two, and involved mutual support between Foster and the Canaries, and benefits for Canaries supporters.

Fosters took over the storage of clients’ documents for Lloyd & Co (which had closed) and opened a new office in Thetford. Damien Moore, Rebecca Laws and Amanda Nuall were appointed as partners.

Over 250 years, Fosters has seen immense change and taken part in extraordinary events. Now a modern business, it has kept to its values: hard work, good humour and service. In difficult times, the future looks bright.
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Memories of Fosters

Dr Francis Marriott

My father joined Fosters in 1906. The attraction was my mother, Nora Foster, the daughter of Charles Blackwell Foster. The Great War must have got in the way. My father served in the Royal Artillery in France. Charles Blackwell Foster died during the war, and for a car hire firm cleaning limousines and funeral cars. Francis and Nora married in 1920 and I was born in 1926. I remember often going into my father’s office at Foster, Calvert and Marriott’s offices. It was dark and surrounded by papers and filestied up with red tape and black metal boxes.

My father used to drive our family in his old car, a 1904 Wolseley, on holidays and was even known to drive it abroad. The same car now regularly takes part in the annual London to Brighton veteran car rally.

Vivian Duffield – joined Russell Steward in 1961 as Office Junior

In 1961, when I was 15, I got a job as office junior at Russell Steward on £4 per week. The senior partner, Mr Stevens, was an eccentric, and very funny. I liked him. The secretaries would all purposely move the carpet outside his room to an angle where they passed. We were reduced to giggles when he came out and yet again straightened it. I kept asking for a pay rise – he smiled and said nothing.

When Russell Steward joined Fosters in 2001, I took my debt collecting work and continued it there. I quickly learned that the Foster people worked hard. They were also very welcoming and shared the liking for boozy parties.

John Overton – joined Fosters in 1962 as Office Boy

In 1962, aged 15, I got my first job – as office boy at Foster, Calvert and Marriott. I was called ‘Boy’ by most people in the office. I had to start before 8am, set the clocks, make coal fires and fill ink wells. At 11am I made tea and coffee with bleets and saucers on the open fires.

I was interviewed in 1963 by Mr Hawes, the senior clerk. He dictated very slowly. Really, I could have easily written what he said longhand.

The typing pool had blazing fires in winter. We were experts at proof reading documents – errors were disasters and meant doing the whole document again. Everything was very formal. We were all called ‘Boy’ – so I was ‘Miss Green’.

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Mr Pickering was quiet, formal and prim. If I went into his office, he always offered me one of his strong cigarettes.

John Webber joined – the exact opposite of Carl. John was boisterous, loud and informal – we all moved on to first name terms – even the ‘Boy’.

Ru Overton (nee Green) – joined Fosters in 1962 as Secretary

When I started, it was like stepping back into the era of Charles Dickens. The cupboards still contained old quill pens and bottles of ink – all bone dry.

Mr Peter Standley, my mentor, was also Clerk to the Wymondham Magistrates. There was a regular stream of people coming from the Court to the office to pay fines and pay and collect maintenance.

One of my first jobs was to run the ‘wet letter machine’. As the years passed, I did most conveyancing and wills. We also collected sums for many local landlords – I was the ‘chief rent collector’. The office was always bustling with activity.

Michael Armstrong – joined F W Standley & Son in 1964 as clerk

Life in Queen Street was often like episodes of ‘Fawlty Towers’. Once, a pigeon came down the chimney into Stefan Cooke’s room. He ran around shouting “Boy! Boy! – Catch the pigeon!” John, Mr Hawes and Mr Cooke got the pigeon, but the room and all three of them were covered in soot.

Another time, the door to the kitchen on the second floor jammed shut. How were the partners to get their tea and coffee? ‘Boy’ John was sent up a ladder, but the ladder was slightly too short to pass down to Mr Hawes the trays of tea and coffee! We secretaries were carried with laughter at Mr Hawes’ negotiations with John above. John was not keen to jump with the coffee. They ended up lowering cups of tea and coffee in a waste paper basket on the end of a rope.

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Memories of Fosters

Martin Dunne – joined Gerard Dunne & Co in 1965

In 1962 the British Docks Board sought permission from Parliament to fill in Lowestoft’s Hamilton Dock, where the inshore fishermen’s fleet docked. I acted for the fishermen, whose livelihoods were at risk. The proposal hit an unexpected problem – an emergency debate on the Falklands War!

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The Royal Navy’s fleet was sailing and the House of Commons was packed. The Emergency Falklands Debate had to wait because of our objections to the dock scheme. In the end, a compromise was reached to protect the fishermen and the dock was not filled in.

There was another attraction to being in London for three weeks. My girlfriend worked nearby in the Café Royal. I took her for a visit to the Houses of Parliament with my ‘special pass’. It clearly impressed her because we were married within the year!

Barbara (‘Babs’) Babstock – joined Fosters as Secretary in 1969

In 1969 I started a ‘one month’s trial’ at Fosters – it lasted 26 years! The gals at London Street all got on very well together. We all gathered on Christmas Eve afternoon on the top floor – I think the men must have felt left out! Mr Pickering, for example, would not come up the winding stairs. Several times he stood at the bottom of the stairs and shouted at us about the noise. He caused lots of hushed laughter, particularly as John Wiltshire was usually with us!

During the 1980’s and 1990’s Fosters grew and grew. We had offices in lots of buildings – including the back of Lloyds Restaurant. In 1991 I moved – but I couldn’t stay away and for several years went back to do sickness and holiday cover as the firm grew bigger and bigger – very different from the little, old fashioned, firm of solicitors I had joined ‘for a one month’s trial’. It was all a very happy part of my life.

When I joined, John Wiltshire was still with the firm. He was the only person I have met who used a monocle to read with.

Fergus Muir – joined Fosters in 1989 as Outdoor Clerk

‘When I joined, John Wiltshire was still with the firm. He was the only person I have met who used a monocle to read with.

Fosters offices in 60 London Street were like a rabbit warren. As the numbers grew Fosters took over more space on the second and third floors of 61A London Street, the second floor of 66 London Street and then Wades Court and 14 Bank Street. Running up and down all those stairs helped my fitness and stamina as a keen cyclist.

In the early 1990’s, Fosters had about 25 people and the whole firm socialised together. One of the outstanding good points of Fosters, was that all the partners and staff went on easy first name terms. It was quite unlike that in all the other solicitors’ offices in Norwich which I knew from visiting most days.

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