

1761...



William Foster, Attorney

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.

Fosters still have a desk from this period with a 'W' inscribed into the top – William Foster's own?



William Foster's desk

1776...

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.



A line engraving of Norwich published in 1792

The partnership with Cooper was dissolved in 1784. The reasons are not clear. Cooper went on 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 Bishops Bridge, Norwich for allegedly embezzling clients' money. He seems to have escaped trouble and continued his career at the bar. Perhaps William Foster foresaw problems and ended his partnership with Cooper before it affected the firm.

1784...



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 critical to feeding the growing cities and sustaining Britain through the 22 years of the Napoleonic Wars.

Key to the Agricultural Revolution was enclosure – doing away with the old system of shared open fields and common land, and replacing it with modern farms each with their own fields. The reforms were pushed through by Parliament, and Commissioners were appointed to divide up the land, parish by parish, deciding who would get the best land. In Norfolk, the partners in Fosters were appointed Commissioners for numerous parishes, travelling round the county and making decisions that would transform the landscape.

English Leicester sheep introduced by The Earl of Leicester



1786...

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 Queen Street in Norwich (the premises now known as Old Bank of England Court). In 1810 William Foster the elder died, nearly 50 years after founding the firm.

1820...



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.



'Head and Brains', c1820. Satirical cartoon showing the public support for Queen Caroline when George IV attempted to divorce her

1821...

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

Bills held by Fosters for 1821 include one for a lead coffin, a hearse and black coach and for the interment of William Foster II at St Stephen's Church, Norwich. His son, a third William Foster, became partner in his place.



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 Queen 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.

1770
Captain James Cook lands in Australia and claims it for Great Britain



1776
America declares Independence



1789
French Revolution



1801
Census of Norwich population: 36,906

1805
Battle of Trafalgar

1815
Battle of Waterloo – end of Napoleonic Wars



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

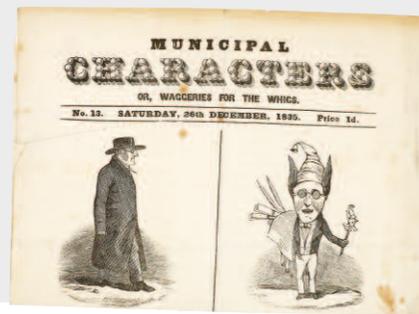


1835...

Reading the Riot Act

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 in the 1830's a battle broke out at the Whig's headquarters, the Angel Inn Norwich (on the site of The Royal Arcade). Stones, vegetables 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.

A Tory election leaflet in 1835 gives a caricature of William Foster and a satirical poem criticising his 'FOSTERing care' and 'brainless head – whose vacant face, the lines of Folly we can trace' and calling him 'Silly Billy'. It also criticises lawyers generally: 'I know you Lawyers can with ease, twist words and meanings as you please'.



1838...

Sir William Foster

William Foster III followed his father as the Earl of Leicester's legal adviser. In 1838 William Foster became a baronet and was later elected Mayor of Norwich.



Norwich Market in the mid 1800's

William Unthank died in 1837, leaving his land to his son Clement, who was able to retire in 1853 (until the 1980's most partners worked until their death). Clement Unthank was wealthy enough to buy a large house in Kensington, where he kept eight servants, as well as his country house at Intwood Hall, near Norwich.

Other partners joined, including John Robberds in 1841, Randall Burroughes in 1843, and Francis Foster and Charles Foster (sons of Sir William Foster). Fosters' clients now included many of the leading landowning and banking families.



1866...

Run on Gurneys Bank

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

On the 11th May a 'large and most influential meeting of the principal gentlemen, merchants, traders and citizens of Norwich' was held at the Guildhall to save Gurneys Bank. Sir William Foster was one of the leading supporters. The Norwich Gurneys Bank was the only one to survive the crisis. Their other banks in London, Liverpool, Manchester, Derby and Bristol went into liquidation, along with more than 200 companies. Gurneys Bank later became part of Barclays.

Sir William Foster died in 1874 at his home, Churchman House, Norwich (now the Register Office).



Painting at Churchman House, former home of Sir William Foster



1870...

Suicide of client Sir Robert Harvey, owner of Harvey & Hudson Bank

Another Norwich bank, Harvey & Hudson (clients of Fosters) moved in 1866 from premises in Upper King Street, Norwich (now The Norfolk Club) to the top of Prince of Wales Road – the Crown Bank (now Hardwick House – the offices of Savills). In 1870 the owner, Sir Robert Harvey, shot himself in the grounds of his mansion at Crown Point near Trowse. He had been making risky investments and a fall in prices had left the bank in a hopeless position. Robert Harvey's estate was bankrupt. Gurney & Co stepped in to take over its business.



Multiple Portrait of the Harvey Family of Norwich commissioned in the early 1840s. Sir Robert Harvey is the young boy bottom left

1888...

Charles Foster's family life

Charles Foster gained a reputation for hard work. As well as client work, he was Clerk of the Peace and the first Clerk of Norfolk County Council.

Charles Foster was also Lieutenant-Colonel of the Rifle Volunteers. He once stayed up all night to clear his office work so that he could take his crack team of riflemen to win a national competition the following day.

In 1889, Charles Foster (aged 60) married Gertrude (41). They had a daughter, Fanny, and moved to White Lodge, Southwold (overlooking Sole Bay). Each day his coachman drove him in a pony and trap to Beccles. From there he took the train and then walked to Fosters' offices at Bank Place. The network of new railways made such a journey possible.



Norwich Station opened May 3rd, 1886



1896...

Office demolished for tramway

Meanwhile, there were many changes at Fosters. John Robberds died in 1883, Francis Foster in 1894 and Randall Burroughes soon after in 1898. They were replaced by Charles Blackwell Foster (son of Francis) in 1888 and Edwin Calvert in 1896.



New tramlines and the Royal Hotel

The old, narrow lanes of medieval Norwich were no good for trams, which needed wide streets and gently curving corners. A new network of tramlines converged at Fosters' office at Bank Place, which was demolished in 1896 and was replaced by the Royal Hotel, its curved front built to allow the trams to slide by.

A fine plaster ceiling at Bank Place was carefully taken down and installed in the new hotel.

Fosters moved to 2 Upper King Street, a fine new red brick building (now a wine bar) on the corner of Upper King Street and Queen Street.



Part of the ceiling at Bank Place

1832 Great Reform Act

1837 Queen Victoria is crowned



1841 Census of Norwich population: 62,344

1844 Norwich/Gt Yarmouth railway lines opened

1853 Crimean War



1867 Last public hanging in Norwich of twenty-two-year-old Hubbard Lingley, executed for the murder of his uncle

1872 Secret Ballot Act

1876 Alexander Bell invented the telephone



1881 Census of Norwich population: 87,842

1893 Minimum school leaving age increased to 11 years old

1894 Norwich Castle becomes a museum instead of a prison

1896 Amalgamation of Gurneys and Barclays Bank



1897...



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 1911, one hundred years later Fosters are proud still to have clients there.

In 1906, John Sheppard, whilst cleaning Charles Foster's office, stole two cheques, filled them out and cashed them at Barclays for £190.18s.0d, before fleeing from Norwich. When the police finally caught him, he had £115 in notes hidden between his shirt and underwear.



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, Fosters had installed one of the first telephones in Norfolk

1902...



High Scandal: The Colonel and his daughter

One long standing client, Colonel Custance of Weston Hall, a friend of King Edward VII, had serious problems. Custance was delighted when Olive, his wayward only child, became engaged to George Montague, a match approved by the King.

But Olive rebelled against her 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 lawsuit 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's Custance's horror, Bosie and Olive eloped and married. They had a child, Raymond. The Colonel and Bosie remained bitter rivals, fighting for custody of Raymond, with Colonel Custance 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 interests, acting as his trustees. Raymond wrote affectionately of Edwin Calvert calling him 'Growly'.

1914...

The Great War

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



Troops are prepared for action with a quick 'back and sides' in Norwich Market Place, 1915

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.



1920's...

The inter-war years

In 1915 Charles Blackwell Foster died, the last of the Foster family in the firm. His death left his daughters, Nora and Beryl, stretched financially. Captain Marriott returned from the war and he and Nora were married in Chelsea in 1920.



Francis Marriott

The 1920's 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 own entrance to the side door at 11 Queen Street.

On 3rd September 1939, the day Britain declared war upon Germany, George Hague died, having worked at Fosters since 1872, 67 years. Starting as bill clerk he had risen to become Fosters' accountant.

1939...



Fosters at War – again!

As war was declared several Fosters' staff immediately enlisted 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, yet to join Fosters, also fought in the war. Carl Pickering was wounded when his tank ran into an ambush. John Wiltshire flew Lancaster bombers over Germany and later trained pilots in Canada.

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



1951...

60

Post War Years

Partners Edwin Calvert (aged 88) and Francis Marriott died in 1951 and 1953, both still working 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.

In 1964, John Wiltshire 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 plain 'Fosters'.

Staff remember urgent trips to court in John Wiltshire's Hillman Minx convertible driven with the skill of an experienced pilot.

By 1980 Carl Pickering and John Wiltshire were in their early 60's. A newly qualified solicitor, Andrew Saul, joined, followed a few years later by Ian Comer, Bruce Chilton, Catherine Iliff, Jeremy Ives and others. Pickering and Wiltshire retired, along with managing clerk David Ong (after 40 years service). The firm was modernising and once more growing fast.

1900
Electric trams
operate in Norwich



1901
Queen Victoria
dies



1902
Norwich city Football Club
formed, nicknamed the Citizens
renamed the Canaries in 1907



1914
First World War begins

1918
First World War ends

1920
Republic of Ireland
gains independence



1938
Norwich City Hall
built

1939
Second World
War starts

1942
Baedeker raids
on Norwich

1948
National Health
Service set up

1951
Festival of Britain

1953
Coronation of
Queen Elizabeth II



1990's



New specialisms 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 68 London Street and at 14 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.



Partners Jeremy Ives and Bruce Chilton receiving The Lawyer Award from presenter John Humphries

2000...



New headquarters

Fosters had outgrown its motley 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 Plain, just a few feet from the Royal Hotel, the site of Bank Place, Fosters' offices in the 19th century.



Artist's impression of the William House reception

More new partners joined from 1997 onwards including Iain McClay, Steven Green, Lucy Simpson, Andrea Spooner and Chris Brown. Andrea Spooner became one of the first non solicitor law firm partners in England.

Fosters by now also had 'call' offices in Ipswich, Bury St Edmunds and Gorleston.

2001...

Russell Steward

In 2001, 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.



James Hipwell

Alan Stevens built up the property side, and James Hipwell the court work. James later became Lord Mayor of Norwich and Coroner. His outspoken – but often common sense – pronouncements as Coroner made him a favourite of the national press. Later partners included Brian Jarvis, Bill Armstrong, John Riddett and Jackie McClay.

Russell Steward's impressive Georgian offices in Tombland, Norwich, are now a Japanese restaurant.

2003...

Wymondham: FW Standley & Son

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

In 2003 Fosters moved this small, thriving practice just a few yards to newly converted offices at Becket House, 1 Middleton Street, Wymondham.

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



Helen McDermott opens Becket House

2007...



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, Everitt and Boycott. Nicholas Everitt gained some fame at the time, writing several books including 'Shots from a Lawyers Gun' – a witty exposition of the laws on shooting and gamekeeping, and the intriguingly titled 'Ferrets, their management in health and disease'.

Nicholas Everitt 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 pursuers and offered to help them find the wanted man. Everitt invented the concept of the 'Q Boat' – small, heavily armed boats and ships, disguised as harmless merchantmen – which acted as lures for German submarines.

Mills & Reeve purchased the firm, which was later taken over by the Dunne family.

In 1987 Dunne & Co merged with Bailey Crome – and at that time had ten partners.

2011...

Premier League Partnership



Norwich City Manager Paul Lambert with Fosters partners

In 2011, Fosters celebrated its 250th anniversary by forming a working partnership with Norwich City Football Club – itself celebrating promotion to the Premier League. The partnership came after many years of association between the two, and involved mutual support between Fosters 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 Nudd 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.

1991 The First Gulf War

1993 Norwich Castle Mall opens

1994 Norwich Library burnt down – many historic records lost

2001 Terrorist attacks on World Trade Center



2002 Norwich City Football Club celebrates its centenary

2003 Britain joins USA in an invasion of Iraq

2007 Bank run on Northern Rock signals international credit crisis

2008 Estimate of population of Norwich: 137,000

2010 Norwich City Football Club champions of Coca-Cola League One promoted to The npower Championship

