COWARD CHANCE: THE FIRM 1910–1945

In 1910, at the age of 65, Cecil Coward became senior partner of the firm; Bourchier Hawksley, then 59, was the next most senior partner. Frederick Chance, the oldest of the three new partners created that year, was 48 and had already built up a reputation in the City as an 'expert in commercial and general common law litigation'.[1] His partnership was a recognition of his value to the firm while at the same time it also satisfied the personal ambition which had led him to leave Freshfields, where partnerships were restricted to members of the Freshfield family, to join Hollams, Sons, Coward & Hawksley. He was undoubtedly the most able of the new partners, owing his position entirely to his own merit. The other two, Robert Coward and Ernest Hawksley, represented the second generation of their respective families. In their time with the firm, Coward until 1928, Hawksley until 1923, neither of them achieved significance in the profession in the way their respective fathers had done.

The firm became Coward & Hawksley, Sons & Chance; in the event, the partners' fear of losing the goodwill attached to Sir John's name proved groundless. More than thirty years later a young solicitor found that the close association of the firm with the name of Hollams continued to be made among the clerks to the courts and barristers' clerks. Delivering papers he was asked whether he was from Hollams and, when he replied in the negative, adding he came from Coward, Chance & Co., the clerk responded briskly, 'That's what I said – Messrs Hollams.' By 1912 the firm had been in offices in Mincing Lane for a century although its five partners and staff numbering between forty and fifty occupied considerably more space than in the days of Anthony Brown. Between 1910 and 1941 the firm took up the whole of the first floor of number 30 and sometimes one or two offices on other floors, as well as part of the basement for storage. Most of the rest of the building was occupied by the London Commercial Sale Rooms, whose traders helped to give Mincing Lane its distinctive smells of rubber, tea, cocoa and coffee.[2]

Office practices remained of the nineteenth rather than the twentieth century and were by the standards of the City then, although perhaps not by the standards of the profession as a whole, distinctly old-fashioned. There was only one typewriter in the office in 1912 and most letters and documents were handwritten by the all male secretaries and clerks; after a sale had been held in the Commercial Sale Rooms the office boys were sent down to rescue the quill pens used by the merchants to augment the firm's own supplies. Letters had to be copied in the letter press, an unpleasantly messy process which involved dampening the ink or the special wafer thin paper that was used.

It frequently happened that the sheets were made too damp with the result that the letters were so smudged that they were unreadable. Nevertheless, they were sent out and many were returned by clients with requests for copies that could be read.

Most of the letters to clients in the City were delivered by hand by the boys.

There were six office boys in all in 1912, split between two offices. Three were in the charge of ex-army Sergeant Curd, in the general office which was at one end of the main corridor, close to Bourchier Hawksley's room. One of the three went off each morning with the papers to be taken to court in the red bag presented to Sir John Hollams and stayed all day to bring them back in the evening. At the other end of the corridor was Cecil Coward's room and close to it the enquiry office, under the charge of Sergeant Wimhurst, also ex-army, where the three other boys were involved in general duties and in operating the firm's three-line telephone which had been installed in a sound-proofed room. City solicitors as a whole had not taken kindly to the telephone when it was introduced in the 1880s, fearing breaches of confidentiality, but by 1912 most were becoming accustomed to using it. The firm had had a telephone as early as 1889, with the number Avenue 12074,[3] but even into the 1920s Cecil Coward and Frederick Chance were reluctant to use the instrument. Chance made one exception only to his usual refusal to speak on the telephone and that was for his clients 'the old Princesses at Kensington Palace'; they were Queen Victoria's widowed daughters, Princess Helena and Princess Beatrice.

The boys in both offices started at 9 a.m. and had to work late duties until 8 p.m.; frequently on Friday evenings letters had to be rushed to Waterloo to catch the mail train to Southampton for the boat to South Africa. Harry Smerdon, who was 14 when he joined the firm in 1912, was paid 10 shillings a week but, he recalled, there were opportunities to earn extra money. Some of the partners, especially Bourchier Hawksley, were often in Mincing Lane well after normal office hours and by staying to attend them, overtime payments could be earned. By contrast Cecil Coward was a man of regular habits: for many years he arrived at the office at 9.15 a.m. and, a stickler for punctuality, as the clock struck 7 p.m. he put on his hat and left. 'When, in his latter years, after an illness, he was told that these hours must be reduced, when the clock struck 4 he put on his hat with the same punctuality.'[4]

For the office boys, carrying the partners' bags also merited extra payments of 1*s*.6*d*. for one bag, 2*s*.6*d*. for two bags! Smerdon recalled:

very often one would have to go to Mr Hawksley's residence at 14, Hyde Park Gardens and get his bag with his dress suit and bring it back to the office and then when the post was cleared up take his bag with his ordinary clothes and also a bag with his working papers to Hyde Park Gardens and in my case many times I would have to rush from there to Victoria to catch the last train home to Sutton.

One particularly memorable such occasion occurred on 11 April 1914 when Hawksley went on from the office to attend the first night of Shaw's *Pygmalion* at His Majesty's Theatre, in which his client Mrs Patrick Campbell, 'Mrs Pat', took the leading role. On her behalf he had carried out in February that year the difficult contract negotiations for putting on the play, by no means the first of such transactions in which he had acted for her. One of her productions, in 1889, had been largely financed by another of Hawksley's clients,

Dr Starr Jameson. Hawksley acted for Mrs Pat on her personal as well as professional affairs. Her finances were always precarious and her children difficult; her solicitor was obliged once to appear in court on her behalf to explain why she had not put her dog in quarantine when returning from America.[5] Tradition has it that on one occasion Mrs Pat sent a cable from New York to Hawksley suggesting that progress with some litigation which had been going on for two years was too slow. He cabled back reassuringly, 'Early days, early days'![6] Mrs Campbell's connection with the firm seems to have ended after Hawksley's death.

The partners' rooms which fronted on to Mincing Lane were, like all the offices there, high-ceilinged and well proportioned. Cold in winter, they needed the fires that burned under the marble mantelpieces to reduce the chill. They were furnished with Turkey carpets, mahogany furniture, leather chairs and a washing cabinet with a tank for cold water at the back. This enabled the partners to wash in their rooms before going out for the evening or on other occasions. It was Hawksley's custom to ask for hot water and this led to a memorable 'incident'.

> *The boy concerned boiled the water, brought it to Mr Hawksley's room and poured it into his basin. A little later a furious ring on the bell brought the boy back to Mr Hawksley's room. 'I thought I asked you for hot water', said Mr Hawksley. 'Yes Sir I put it in your basin.' 'Yes I know you did, but what do you take me for, a ... lobster?'. The unfortunate boy had left it to Mr Hawksley to add his own cold water.*

Cecil Coward was a keen sportsman all his life. He was a member of Woking Golf Club, which had a 'strong legal flavour' and Bernard Darwin relates how Coward was noted for his speed of movement between Woking station and the course. All that could be seen of Coward was his 'coat of indefinably horsy cut with voluminous tails ... flying down the fairway to the first hole'.[7] Coward was also a horseman who rode to hounds until late in life. In the hunting season his bag had to be taken to the Monument station and put on the train, the boy carrier to be rewarded with a 'Thankee little man'. For some years he went to the office on horseback; later he walked from his home in Kensington. He always wore a top hat and morning coat. On arriving at the office it was his habit to strip, sponge down and change his underclothes in his room and the very regularity of his performance gave the office boys the opportunity to introduce new boys to the senior partner in circumstances calculated to embarrass the boy although not the partner. The new boy would be sent to Coward's room to ask for a book and, on entering,

> *would be shocked to see the senior partner, who was of fine physique, broad and some 6'2" or 6'3" tall in his birthday suit, performing his ablutions[.] The boy would immediately try to withdraw but the kind but firm command 'Come in little man, what do you want' prevented all escaping.*

Whether Cecil Coward knew of the joke or not is not recorded. He had, according to one member of staff who joined the firm in the 1920s, a sense of humour. In general, however, he was autocratic, a reputation he enjoyed in the profession at large as well as in the firm. It stemmed from his attitude to work:

> *Coward was a man of great industry, with the highest standards of professional honour and of how business should be conducted,*

and he tolerated neither laziness, shiftiness, nor incompetence in others. ... but his large staff knew him also to be just and kindly, and if once you had earned his trust he was your friend for life and never went back on his word.[8]

He held himself aloof from the staff, a tendency which became more pronounced after the war and as he got older. When he retired in 1928 he presented each of the three senior members of the staff, Andrews, Mileham and Orchard, whom he had known through their entire life with the firm, with a gold watch.

He did not socialise greatly with his partners. His son Robert was very friendly with Chance, with whom he played tennis regularly at Chance's home in Streatham. Robert Coward remained a bachelor and was 'very much like his father' although neither as dignified nor as remote. 'He wore large glasses and looked like an owl' and

he was of a nervous disposition and was very much under his father's thumb although he was well over 50. If he wanted to leave earlier he would enquire whether his father had left before he went and if his father had not left he did not go.

Between Chance's family and Hawksley's there was also a degree of intimacy. Hawksley's daughter Mabel stood as godmother to one of Chance's daughters whose sister remembered not only expensive toys given as presents but also visits to the Hawksleys' house in Hyde Park Gardens, which had a beautiful view of the park.

In 1914 Bourchier Hawksley suffered a stroke but soon after the war began he was back at work. The two junior partners were both away for much of the duration of the war; Hawksley's son Ernest held a commission in the Welsh Guards and Robert Coward, although rejected as unfit for military service, drove an ambulance in France. Chance's only son Frank, who had entered articles with the firm shortly before the war after spending some time in France and Germany, joined the army immediately and was killed, aged 21, during the battle of Mons in May 1915. Another articled clerk, Cedric Dickens – probably a family connection of the Hawksleys, for in 1902 Ernest Hawksley married Enid Dickens, the daughter of Charles Dickens' son Sir Henry Dickens, Common Serjeant – was also killed, as were a number of other members of staff. The offices in Mincing Lane were much depleted.

Writing to Frank Pitt-Lewis (see page 75) who was on active service with the 1st Battalion of the Devonshire Regiment, 'the Bloody 11th', in 1915, Frederick Chance noted the shortage of staff:

I need hardly tell you that I shall miss your valuable help (& am doing so already) but I should be a poor citizen if I said anything more about it. But if you hear of a competent chap who for lack of the regulation number of limbs or other good reason must stop at home don't forget that I am in real need of one.

He went on:

Now as to yourself I have spoken to Ernest Hawksley and he agrees with me that we should whilst you are a Tommy make up the paltry allowance the Government gives you to your salary as it was before we told you we should give you a rise. When you get your commission we will make up your salary to the increased figure. I hope this will be satisfactory to you and we shall look forward with pleasure to the time when you are with us again.[9]