

S O W H O I S . . . ?

Ashley Bidmead

Associate and English Solicitor at Viberts?

An alternative route to becoming an English Solicitor



For most people wanting to start a career at a law firm, having a good degree is the first step, but it isn't the only route you can take to eventually qualify. The SQE, or Solicitors Qualifying Examination, is a new route that aspiring solicitors can take to achieve their goal.

Ashley Bidmead, an English Solicitor at Viberts, is thought to be the first in Jersey to qualify using the SQE and that's not his only less than traditional approach to work...

The first thing that you learn when meeting Ashley is that, by his own admission, he doesn't fit into the usual mold for a lawyer. He works part-time at Viberts, and with his many other interests and roles, that works perfectly for both. Those other interests include his faith-based work, helping his father with his building business and there's even a family deck chair business. Not one for inaction, a lengthy academic route into professional life didn't appeal when he left school.

"I had friends who did that, but I didn't want to spend any longer at school. Back then it was easier to go straight into a finance job and be ahead of those who went into further education, so I think it would be a lot harder for people to do what I did now. There was pressure from school because I had very good grades, but I'd rather be paid for learning."

After getting his GCSE results and an interview at Viberts, he started in accounts, working in the probate department and gradually

taking on legal work associated with the estates and delegations accounts. It was something he stumbled into rather than through any conscious thought or plan. But before he was settled in that job, he felt another calling which took him to London.

"I'm a Jehovah's Witness and I worked in our main office in London as part of the printing team for the magazine. My brother and I are identical twins, and we went together. I was working with people who shared the same beliefs and a lot of them were quite young and we had a lot of fun. I'm still involved in it, and I teach the Bible and sometimes give talks at conventions to a couple of thousand people."

Faith and a natural aversion to arguing are perhaps part of the skillset that Ashley relies on as he specialises in the administration of estates and delegations, a service that clients rely on in their times of need.

"It just fits in perfectly with helping people and finding practical solutions at difficult moments in life. That's what I like about it rather than having to get involved in more contentious areas of law. We're usually trying to find the right solution and help someone rather than be involved in a contract dispute."

Working part-time at the law firm has not been a barrier to qualifying and the SQE route is designed to match the experience already gained while working in the industry. Ashley had already qualified as a Certified Accounting Technician, so it was a natural step to take.

"Lots of people go in with a law degree, but you don't have to. You can go in with any equivalent qualification if you've worked in the industry for two years. And that doesn't have to be in a law firm, it could be in a related industry, so an in-house counsel would be fine. The SQE is replacing the Legal Practice Course that most people in the industry would be familiar with. I was quite happy as I was but one of the partners suggested that it might be perfect for me. I thought it would involve a lot of work, but when I looked into it, I thought, this is doable. I did find it harder being in my late 30s than when I was doing my accountancy exams at 18. It's more of a challenge the older you get. There's more going on in life, and you don't learn as quickly."

The exam process for SQE is tough with two back-to-back three-hour sessions during which a candidate must answer 500 multiple choice questions, which works out at 90 seconds per question. ▶



Photographer: Robbie Dark



"You've got to be a quick reader and able to assimilate the information and read the questions very carefully. Sometimes most of the questions are very similar, with only one word that's different, so whilst it's multiple-choice, it's a difficult exam."

It took him just over a year to complete the qualification and, as an English Solicitor, Ashley can sign off lasting powers of attorney and certify documents, and he could go on to train as a Jersey Advocate, which would take another two years, if he wanted to. But for the moment, he's content working on lasting powers of attorney and probate law, having worked in that field while the law was being developed.

"It's enabled us to become experts in that area. The application of the law is really interesting. You are so much more involved in personal situations, changing the way we engage with people. We used to run curatorship services where an advocate is appointed to manage someone's affairs. If they were in a nursing home, we'd never see them, but we'd be making decisions about their money. Now, we have to consult them on decisions, and we must know what their

wishes are. We go and see them, get involved and, in some cases, decide whether they've got capacity to make their own decisions. That line is more blurred as there might be things they can decide for themselves. Sometimes those decisions are fascinating because it's much less black and white than it used to be."

And it can be really complicated. Ashley and his team are often making decisions on someone's behalf that are ones we might make only once in our lifetimes. There are often consequences to other parts of their work, such as how a Will might be affected if a property is sold to pay care home fees.

"That's the part I find the most interesting and I can work on what the numbers will mean compared to the person's wishes. It's about trying to do the best for that person, and I think that's what I bring to the team. You do have to think a bit outside the box, particularly when trying to do things like source a car for someone or whether to do some work at their property. Sometimes we have to come up with a unique solution that satisfies everyone."

Ashley goes on to explain how he and the team are regularly carrying out day-to-day tasks for their clients.

"I just like the fact that you've got real people real situations. It can be dealing with someone's will or estate planning, and I like the variety of that, but we're often dealing with some of the unusual situations that life throws up."

Ashley may work part-time, but that doesn't mean there aren't other things that fill the rest of his day. Although the deck chair concession is currently rented to one of the other businesses in St Brelade's Bay, it's still a family business.

"My mum's uncle ran one at Greve de Lecq and he heard that one had become available in St Brelade's Bay. They don't come up that often and at the time I was between jobs, and we thought it would be a great thing to do. I ran it for a few years and then my mum helped more and more, until she was running it with my help. We don't work it now, but we might in future."

"The trouble is the tourist season here is short. We probably had about 150 sunbeds and about 50 deck chairs so you make really good money on the days you sell out, but you can count on one hand how many of those days we get in the year. So, for now, it makes sense for the other concession to run our stack, but I really enjoyed running it as a family."

END



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