

Partner Ian Gill reflects on spending 25 years at AA Thornton and his career in Intellectual Property.



Ian Gill
Partner,
Trade Mark & Patent
Attorney

Ian Gill is a Partner and a UK Chartered Patent and Trade Mark Attorney. Ian is also a European Patent, Trade Mark and Designs Attorney.

A quick search on Google reveals that Gary Larson announced he was no longer doing the “Far Side” cartoons on 3 October 1994. (Google itself, so pervasive now, would not start for another four years.) 3 October 1994 was also the date that I started work at AA Thornton; 25 years ago.

As the years have passed – punctuated by personal and professional milestones like buying a house, transitioning from an employee to a partner, getting married, having children, move home (twice) and moving offices (twice) – many friends (and some family) started to question why I am still in the “same” job. Wasn’t I getting bored? Didn’t I need to move on to progress in my career? Or to remain sane? I’ll come back to those questions later.

Back in 1994, having finished an MSc in the Management of Intellectual Property and with a degree in Aeronautical Engineering behind me, I had spent the previous four months looking for a role as a trainee patent attorney. I had stumbled across the patent profession after my first degree. One of the more interesting modules in my engineering course was a brief look at the law relating to negligence and at the time I remember thinking that was more interesting than some of the engineering modules. (That legal module was interesting but not nearly as much fun as one of the projects we were set, which was to fire a rocket up an internal stairwell – the rocket had to go up as fast as possible and then deploy a

mechanism when it hit the top to come down as slowly as possible!) A career as a patent attorney seemed to be a way to utilise that engineering background and develop my interest in the law.

I worked through the CIPA membership directory and wrote to every partnership with more than three partners. I was reasonably successful in getting interviews but the partners at AA Thornton were the first to offer me a job. I was told later that the advertised role had already been offered to someone else, but John Lerwill, one of the partners at the time, decided he would also like a trainee and that I would fit the bill. I was living in Glasgow at the time and by the time I had worked my way back home the offer letter was waiting for me. It was not a letter I will forget - particularly because, in addition to the job offer and basic salary, I was offered £25,000 per month as a lunch allowance! This was a typo – it should have been £25 and this error was later corrected – but in those days I could easily have spent that on my lunches.

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I still recall the excitement of walking along High Holborn in my (only) suit feeling very grown up. I spent the first three days in the basement of the British Library, then located just round the corner in Chancery Lane, conducting a manual patent search for toilet roll holders! That set the tone for the glamorous years that followed, working by day and studying by night with the goal of qualifying as a patent attorney. Many patent attorneys had an active trade mark practice in those days and John was no different, but when

he sensed my interest in trade marks he seemed keen to pass those cases in my direction and once the patent exams were out of the way I moved on to the trade mark exams.

Many things have changed over the years. Possibly the most obvious change is technology. When I started I was greeted with a notepad, a pen and a phone on my desk. Our telex machine was still in use but fax had become the dominant method for rapid communication. Computers appeared on the desks of fee earners shortly after and emails gradually became more and more important. Now, on the rare occasions that the power goes out, work grinds to a halt; we cannot function without our computers.



Pictured above: A young Ian in our former offices

The cultural changes have been equally dramatic. By the time I started long boozy lunches were largely a thing of the past but a glass of wine or two when lunching with a client was to be expected. Partners' meetings have changed from the legendary meetings in the 70s and 80s when a bottle of brandy and a bottle of port would be consumed during the meeting to the present day when the strongest drink on offer is coffee.

Dress codes have become more relaxed with "Dress Down Friday" giving way to a semi-permanent state of casual clothing and, in the last couple of years, ties seem to have disappeared even when one is wearing a suit. Times have changed for women too – a female colleague who in 1994 had the temerity to wear a trouser suit, rather than a skirt, was asked to consider whether that was appropriate - to her credit she said yes. We still have a way to go in relation to equality but attitudes can and do change. Also the support provided to fee earners has been professionalised beyond all recognition. Where partners once dabbled part-time in areas such as IT or HR if they had an interest, we now have departments of professionals providing specialist high quality support.

I have also changed focus – I started as a patent attorney and now most of my work relates to trade marks. I was lucky enough to begin my training at a time when it was not uncommon to combine both disciplines and I think that does lead to a more rounded education – patents offer regular opportunities to get deeply involved in the technical complexities of a case but it can be years before the patent moves through to grant or the feature you are working on appears on the market; trade mark work has a faster pace and is more immediately commercial with our advice influencing the short term decisions our clients - but both areas have become increasingly complicated and a focus on one of those two areas was necessary for me to continue to improve. In the end, the decision to specialise in trade marks was made easier by an offer of partnership that was linked to taking over the trade mark practice of Dinah

Harrison, who was retiring, and that left little time to develop my patent practice.

Other things remain the same – we continue to attract fantastic new clients but we are still advising many of the businesses I started working for 25 years ago - one of the first trade mark search reports I reviewed back in 1994 was for a client who I had lunch with recently – and over time you often become the key source of IP knowledge for the client and are sometimes consulted on other key business decisions. It is these relationships with clients that add continuous interest to the advice we provide to them.

Speaking of relationships, it was through the IP social scene that I met my wife, Siân. She was (and still is) working for a competing firm (who shall remain nameless) and we got to know each other thanks to the intra-firm softball league that runs through the summer!

I was asked recently what I was most proud of achieving over the past 25 years and the moments when I feel particularly proud are the times when talented candidates choose to work for us over our competitors, new clients entrust us with their work or existing clients praise our performance.

For me this validates the work that has been done over years to make our firm a great place to work whilst offering exceptional client service. Also, very recently, the trade mark team were elevated to Tier 1 in the Legal 500 rankings – those independent rankings are heavily weighted towards feedback from clients and it was great to have the support of our clients in achieving this recognition.

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Education is also a key part of the role. Initially I was educated by others and it can be five years or more before a trainee is educated and skilled enough to be able to advise clients independently. The emphasis then shifts onto educating clients, and that strikes me as being essential if you want to build strong relationships with clients – if you advise without educating then the client relationships could be shallow and lack trust. The better informed and educated the client is, the more interesting and productive the interactions become. We also educate internally, both fee earners and support staff, and I have been lucky over the years to have some fantastically talented people to train. If you visit our offices you will see place mats and other materials bearing the slogan “It is our people that make the difference” and over the years I have come to appreciate just how important it is to invest in people.

Returning to the original questions of why I am in the “same” job - is it really the “same” job? It is and it isn't. I think we are lucky in professional circles to still do the work that attracted us to the profession so in that sense the job is the same – we draft patent applications, conduct trade mark searches, advise on validity and infringement issues - but in addition to that core professional work there are other challenges. We get to form relationships with clients and to look for new clients, we start training others and managing their progress, and we take on responsibility for running the business. You need to develop better people skills (not something patent attorneys are renowned for), and master the firm's finances and systems. All this comes on top of your core professional work and keeping on top of developments in case law and legislation so there is no shortage of challenge. On top of that, every day is different and almost every day brings something unexpected, whether that is a client in need of urgent advice or an issue within the firm that needs attention.

The professionalism of support and changing culture has brought with it more rapid change with recent changes including great modern offices, more home working, part time staff at all levels, wellness programs, mental health support, client care programs, a ‘solutions group’ to make suggestions regarding improvements to the business, and greater focus on equality and diversity.

When you combine this with fantastic clients, **the question that should really be asked is not why I am still working here after 25 years, but why I would want to work anywhere else?** •

Pictured below: AA Thornton staff at The Shard , Christmas 2018

