

60 SECONDS WITH... STEVEN BURKILL

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Steven Burkill is Head of the firm's Asia Dispute Resolution Group and Head of WFW's Bangkok office, which celebrates its 20th anniversary this month. He is recognised as a leading international arbitration expert in Thailand by legal directories Legal 500 Asia Pacific and Chambers Asia Pacific. In 2021, Chambers called him "fantastically commercial and strategic", and one client noted that "He is deeply involved in Thai culture and has a huge number of connections."

Q: What are the three things we should know about the Bangkok office?

A: The WFW Bangkok office was opened in May 2001 by Kay Kian Tan and me two decades ago with Ratthakarn joining a few months afterwards. Our first two secretarial appointments Khun Iew and Khun Jeab have also been with us from the start.

I'm really proud of the fact that we have grown into one of the largest international offices in Bangkok, with a total staff of seven partners and 23 Associates. Partner [Lui Ratprasatporn](#) and two associates recently joined our team, bolstering our corporate practice.

Of course, size isn't everything! Our team provides high quality English law and Thai law advice. We were recently shortlisted for 'Thailand Firm of the Year' by Chambers Asia Pacific and ranked in 11 areas of the most recent Legal 500 Asia Pacific Guide!

Q: 20 years is a huge milestone. How will the office mark the occasion?

A: Things are of course a little tricky this year. There will be a client event and a staff party, but the challenges presented by Covid-19 mean we have to think a bit more creatively!

Q: What was the journey that led you to your current role as Head of Bangkok?

A: It has been quite a long journey... I was seconded to the Singapore office in 1993 and worked regionally in Indonesia, Thailand and Vietnam. Advance Agro, a Thai company, instructed us on two major ICC arbitrations and in order to retain the work, we had to open an office in Thailand – the rest, as they say, is history... and yes, we still work for Advance Agro to this day.

Q: Was it always your goal to leave the UK and work in another country?

A: Not at all. Initially, when I was asked to go on secondment, I was reluctant and signed up for only two years. However, a month in and I was biting the hand off management to lengthen my stay!

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Q: How has the pandemic affected business and in what ways have you been supporting clients during this period?

A: The disruption brought by the pandemic has led to businesses having to handle a number of complex claims – particularly force majeure – testing clauses in a way that was never anticipated, particularly in our core areas of energy, construction and real estate. We've needed to think quickly to protect our clients' immediate interests and look forwards to try and safeguard our clients in the "new normal." It is a challenging time for everyone, and the adaptability of the Thai team and the clients we work with during this period has been something to behold.

Q: What are the current challenges and opportunities in the region? Do you work closely with any of WFW's other offices in the region?

A: There are multiple opportunities for us in Thailand and in the region in our sectors and areas of specialism. We work in teams across the Asia sectors and practice areas, rather than defining teams by office, and that has a positive impact on collaboration and creates opportunities as we can field strong, specialised teams for the work we are instructed on. As a firm it is also great to see us opening new offices in Düsseldorf and Sydney and growing our footprint at a time when other firms are pulling back. This is a testament to the strength of our business and brand.

Q: What do you like to do when you are not working?

A: I helped set up a swimming club in Bangkok which has become something of an obsession and it has grown to be the number one club in the country, with half of the Thai National team and the two representatives of Thailand for the Olympics. So, I spend a lot of my time at the swimming club every weekend.

Q: What has living in Thailand taught you the most?

A: To be more than a lawyer – to be entrepreneurial; to manage and build a business; to work with, learn from and appreciate cultural differences.

Q: Do you miss anything about the UK?

A: Oh, that is easy: Leeds United, fish and chips and my Mum – I'd better say, that isn't in any particular order!

Q: What's your favourite thing to do with visitors?

A: Bangkok to Ayutthaya via the Chao Phraya River on a scenic cruise. Lunches at any number of the fantastic eateries in Bangkok. Watching Leeds United at 2 am in the morning because of the time difference! Taking visitors to our swimming club (and them being mortified when they do not find it as exciting as I do).

Q: What advice would you give to someone considering a career in the law?

A: Choose your firm carefully and seize opportunities when they cross your path – you never know where they may take you!

Q: How would you describe Watson Farley and Williams?

A: Truly international. Very entrepreneurial. We have a team of driven partners with niche expertise that puts them at the top of their game – not just legally but commercially, too. They are mostly decent human beings as well which is great.

Q: Why do you think it is important to maintain connections with past colleagues?

A: There's often a strong connection between teams who have worked together in law firms – there are often long hours put in on challenging matters while (mostly!) maintaining a sense of humour. It's great to stay connected and hear what people are doing. There is always something to learn or a new perspective to consider from people who are now working in different roles/industries. We have a good proportion of people who return to WFW after leaving – I'm sure those connections have something to do with that.