

## FIVE MINUTES WITH... ANDREW BAIRD

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Andrew Baird heads our Dubai office and is a partner in the Asset Finance Group. He has a wealth of experience in cross-border asset and project finance, with particular emphasis on the marine transportation and offshore sectors. Another of Andrew's key practice areas is Islamic finance where he has acted on a wide range of transactions for banks and owners of assets of all classes, from shipping and offshore assets through to real estate. Clients describe him as a "great lawyer with lots of regional experience," adding: "He's been absolutely superb. He always makes himself available." \*

**Q: Tell us about your career to date. What were you doing before you joined Watson Farley and Williams?**

A: I trained at Gouldens (now Jones Day) when trainees were still called articled clerks – so a long time ago... I joined WFW on qualification in 1989 and am on my third stint, twice as a partner. I had a year at HFW in the mid-90s and spent nine years at BLP in the noughties.

**Q: Did you always want to be a lawyer? What other careers did you consider?**

A: Originally I was going to study music but rather lost interest when I was studying for my A levels. I was then going to study agriculture and forestry, but realised that there was about a 90% unemployment rate for graduates; law seemed a better option.

**Q: Tell us a bit about your career path with the firm. What led you to your specialisation?**

A: When I joined the firm, I had originally been looking for a job in investment banking. After Black Monday in 1987 banks contracted their workforce massively and the effects of that were still being felt at the end of the 1980s. So there were no banking jobs available. I decided instead to join a banking-focussed firm. WFW seemed a good fit – young and energetic. I was promised – by a certain Frank Dunne – 50% asset finance and 50% core banking. It turns out that the sum of that was 100% shipping finance from the word go. Although my practice has encompassed leasing and tax structured finance, maritime and offshore related work remains at the core.

**Q: You left the firm and returned on more than on occasion. What prompted these decisions and why did you decided to come back?**

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A: The move to HFW was triggered by a perception that partnerships were a bit scarce within the shipping team at the firm. I was hired by HFW to kick-start a bank-focussed ship finance practice but the move coincided with a move towards more formal bank panel appointments and that proved a hard sell from that platform. I got a call from Mike Vernell about six months in asking if I had had enough and wanted to come back and that was hard to refuse. My second return, from BLP resulted from an invitation by the then managing partner. He asked me – after an unspecified number of drinks – if I had ever thought about coming back. The rest as they say is history.

**Q: Tell us about your highlights as Head of the Dubai office.**

A: Getting the office open in the first place was a monumental effort given the large amount of red tape that there is in the UAE. And the first year was very exciting with a small but very focussed team. We have promoted a partner from within the office – we made up Mike Savva last year. Winning the UASC/Hapag-Lloyd bank side mandate was a fairly significant event for the office. We haven't won many awards as yet but winning the Walkers 2017 quiz night was a major highlight.

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

A: You need to wear a jumper – the AC is uncontrollable and seemingly always set to cold. We are fully open plan, so it can be a little noisy but at the same time it promotes collaboration. In work terms, always expect the unexpected.

**Q: What sectors is your office active in and what sort of clients does your office service?**

A: We are – as is the case with most of the firm's offering globally – pretty sector focussed. The office is particularly strong in the asset finance space and there is a heavy emphasis on maritime and offshore as well as aviation. Our corporate team is more broad-based and works with a variety of clients both within and outside our normal sector offering, although we are developing a particular expertise in utilities projects work. The disputes practice is more sector agnostic and focuses on DIFC court disputes, international arbitration and oversight of local court disputes.

**Q: What are the current challenges doing business in the UAE and the Middle East region?**

A: This is a big question. The drop in the oil price in conjunction with a general slowing down of the global economy has inevitably hit the economy quite hard, and in particular in the real estate and retail sectors. There is also a shifting demographic which has affected the schools as well as the healthcare sectors. Some commentators are saying that we are at the end of the "build it and they will come" era and that the economy needs to mature, with wider ownership and residency rights for non-Emiratis as well as significant economic diversification. We are certainly entering an interesting phase of the development of the regional economy and the pace of change is fast. So we are in challenging times. For our office the most important thing for us to do to meet the challenge is to keep focussed on what we do, and what the firm does, best.

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

A: Just say no...

**Q: How would you describe Watson Farley and Williams?**

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A: No firm is perfect – I have worked at a few so have some experience of this of course – but I have always found the firm to have a refreshingly open culture, and this means that you will generally always know where you stand here. It is also a firm populated for the most part by approachable and collaborative people. I also like the fact that we are – and are seen in the market as – people who don't just know the law but also understand the industries we work in.

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

A: As a leaver, you never know when you might want to come back. As I think I have ably demonstrated.

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

A: In addition to having a pretty busy time with my family, I am playing a lot of padel tennis at the moment, and also do quite a bit of cycling. Otherwise, I am an inveterate buyer of vinyl records and esoteric hi-fi.

*\*Chambers and Partners*