

# Trumans moves with the times

Marcus Priest

When Sydney lawyer David Scutts started at Truman Hoyle 50 years ago, partners at Freehills, then Freehills Hollingdale & Page, still did domestic conveyancing, top-tier firms had at most only eight partners, technology was the latest manual typewriter and a partners' lunch was down at the local bowls club.

"In those early years there were no mega legal firms or specialist boutique legal firms like there are today," Scutts says.

"In those days, there was not all that much law. People sued for debt and maybe defamation and family law was the big thing because people still had to establish fault to get a divorce. Every firm was virtually general practice and even the big firms relied on conveyancing work.

"Contracts were three pages long, not 50 as they are now, and there was just not the amount of legislation there is now."

But the biggest change has been at Scutts's own firm, once a staid, ageing general commercial practice. Founded in 1928 by Percival Garfield Truman, a member of the Australian Light Horse Brigade in World War I, Truman Hoyle is now touted as the new Gilbert & Tobin; a boutique firm of seven partners specialising in the media, IT, telecommunications and energy sectors. Clients include Hutchinson, PowerTel and the Mobile Carriers Forum.

In the firm's foyer, once filled with smoke billowing from the office



The seven partners of Truman Hoyle Lawyers: from left, Steven Goodman, Mark Vincent, Fiona Inverarity, David Scutts, Shawn Skyring, Timothy Edwards and managing partner Shane Barber.

PHOTO: TAMARA VONINSKI.

of the partner smoking up to 30 cigarettes a day, there are two large plasma screens which show not CNN or the latest share prices, but surf movies and music videos.

Within three years, the firm has gone from being a reminder of quieter and more leisurely times in the practice of the law, to a slick operation managed by young partners from larger law firms disillusioned with corporate practice.

Certainly, the firm has its sceptics. "They are all capable lawyers but to compare them with Gilbert & Tobin would be a very misplaced comparison," says one partner at a large Australian firm. "In the last

10 years, boutique firms have come and gone, but only one has really made it: Gilbert & Tobin."

But how the firm managed to reinvent itself is a fascinating case study in the life cycle of a law firm. And it has its admirers.

"It is a classic example of a first generation reinventing itself into a new firm that has adopted extreme focus in a limited part of the market and is earning the rewards... and is extremely profitable," says George Beaton, of Beaton Consulting.

In business terms, what happened to the firm in 2003 is called a backdoor listing — taking the shell of an old firm to start a new business.

Lawyers from Baker & McKenzie, Gilbert & Tobin and PricewaterhouseCoopers Legal all joined the firm when the two existing partners, Scutts and Tim Edwards, decided it either needed to change or close down.

"We knew we had to do something because we knew we were getting on [in age] and we all agreed on the people we wanted to bring on," Scutts says.

As Scutts describes it, Shane Barber, now managing partner of the firm, "came grovelling" from PwC Legal, where he had become disillusioned with the practice of law in a large firm.

Barber, formerly an Optus in-house lawyer, remembers his approach differently, but not the reasons for leaving. He rejects comparisons with Gilbert & Tobin, saying the firm is committed to staying at its current size.

"We were all pretty much at the top our game, but we wanted to practise law in a different way, which was more enjoyable and had a desire to contribute to public policy," he says. "Like many partners in law, we have all had a cathartic moment when you take stock and ask what it is all about."

And despite some scepticism about the ability of small firms to pick up big-ticket work, Barber insists it has been a lot easier than when they pitched for work at larger firms, as clients' expectations are different.

"Boards are very happy to add to their list of law firms a focused boutique firm," he says.