

A brief history of Ince & Co.



1870 - 1995



The first
hundred and twenty five years



When we decided to publish a brief history of Ince & Co. we had several factors in mind. Number one, obviously, was to mark the 125th Anniversary of the founding of the firm in the City of London. But we had other reasons as well to remember our heritage: we have a new generation of young lawyers who need to know the story of the firm - the personalities who forged the Ince ethos and made us what we are today.

From its earliest days Ince & Co. cherished its people and believed them to be its most valuable asset. This is a “family” firm in the true sense of the word: one need only look at the length of service of many of our staff to see it.

Looking ahead to our future we have much to learn from our past. The key elements of Ince & Co. have always been the quality of our people, their commercial awareness, their confidence, compatibility and team spirit. The search for the best commercial solution is one we shall always pursue with flair and expertise, whilst bringing a human face to the law. This was the recipe which made Ince & Co. what it is today and will, I am sure, guarantee that our firm continues to grow both in London and its expanding offices overseas.

We owe a great debt to Brian Waltham, retired partner and flourishing poet, who has written this brief history with the same elegance and wit for which his legal opinions were renowned.

Richard Sayer



A brief history of Ince & Co.

In 1866 Francis Ince, 25 years old, newly married and admitted only a year earlier, joined John Ingledew in Cardiff to form the partnership of Ingledew Ince. At that time Ingledew, some ten years his senior, was making £300 as Solicitor and £200 as Notary.

To put it mildly, Francis made quite an impact. He developed a practice in shipping and commercial law and by 1868 his one-third share of the profits exceeded £2,000.

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...

Ingledew's London agent was a Mr Bennett. In 1869 Bennett dropped dead in his office and his clerks feared that the business would immediately break up. They sent a telegram to Francis, who had been articled in London and had sat for a time in Bennett's office, asking him urgently to come and take over. Francis discussed this with Ingledew and they agreed that he should do it.



Reading between the lines, it may be that Ingledeu welcomed the prospect of a quieter life without Francis. And Francis, for his part, insisted as a condition of his move that Ingledeu must take in as partner the young and bright Mr Vachell.

So 1870 is the year when the forerunner of Ince & Co. first established itself in London.

For a time Cardiff and London were in effect branches of the same firm (with Francis now taking half the profits of each). Cardiff became "Ingledeu Ince and Vachell" and London became "Ingledeu Ince and Greening".

Francis Ince has left his own record of these years. It confines itself largely to fact, with only the occasional burst of pride in achievement. But from his and other accounts, two things come through. The first is that Bennett's practice, although honourably conducted, was in a shambles and needed radical re-organisation. The second is that Francis had to start from scratch in developing a London practice in shipping and commercial law. Armed with a letter of introduction to Messrs Shaw Savill, he laid the foundations of the London firm.



Greening was not a success. In Francis' words, he was "a good clerk, but a bad master". He was soon "persuaded to retire" and the London firm became Ingledew Ince.

Ingledew retired in 1880 and this seems to be the date, although it may have been a little earlier, when the partnership between him and Francis was dissolved and the London firm became independent of its Welsh parent. Colt had replaced Greening and on Ingledew's retirement the London name became Ince and Colt.

Francis wanted his sons to follow him into the practice, but in this he must have been somewhat disappointed. His eldest son, Gerard, was taken in as partner in the later 1890's, but never seemed to fit; he retired through ill health in 1907 and went to live in the south of France. Then there was John who had trained as an engineer, but, in a major career change, qualified as a solicitor and joined the firm as a partner in 1900. The firm's name changed to Ince Colt and Ince. From contemporary accounts it seems that John's heart was always in engineering and, although he did his best in the law, he never achieved any great prominence.



As to the practice during these years, the archive includes a long and valuable note from Mr Jackson. He, in 1872 at the age of 18, had become Francis' secretary and stayed with him for 47 years. It is in his record, rather than in the factual account left by Francis, that the key to the firm's growth is to be found: - hard work, good thinking and winning cases. He also credits the firm with the somewhat dubious honour of inventing "one ship Companies". It is interesting too that according to Jackson, Francis never went to counsel for an opinion. He made up his own mind.

... "He also credits the firm with ... inventing 'one ship companies'..."

What was Francis Ince really like? Part of the answer is recorded by Ernest Wilson:

"On his desk Francis had a stand holding a dozen or so rubber stamps. In a moment of irritation he threw the whole thing into the fire. I arrived to find old Jackson picking the stamps out of the fire and saying: "Oh sir, you are such a fool sir! Francis, now benignly smiling, said mildly: "I know I am Jackson, I know I am".



There is more than a hint or two in Jackson's account that, with an ageing Francis and his two sons making no great mark, the commercial and shipping practice was tending to decline in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Perhaps it is for this reason that in 1913 Edward Roscoe was taken in as partner, whereupon the firm became Ince Colt Ince and Roscoe.

In 1918 when the aftermath of war - disputes over prize money, contraband cargoes, wartime charterparties, arguments between marine and war underwriters - was beginning to generate its mountain of legal problems, the firm had the good fortune to recruit Ernest Wilson as partner.

He, as time was to prove, was a superlatively good lawyer and in his own words: "I still long to be on board and off to sea in any ship I see in dock". Much of the firm's work was then non-maritime and non-commercial, including the then equivalent of legal aid. But Ernest, like Francis before him, rapidly built up a maritime/commercial practice, including a series of 'scuttlers' in which usually, but not always, he acted for underwriters. He became respected and trusted as a lawyer in the insurance market to an extent which must be rare indeed. Often a dispute between underwriters was settled on his word alone, as unofficial arbitrator.



He also had a sense of fun. There was a vexing point in marine insurance law which had never been settled by the Court. Ernest conspired with a friend in another firm to construct a completely fictitious case. With due solemnity they went through the motions of litigation and concocted an agreed Statement of Facts which left the Judge with no alternative but to decide the point. Perhaps it is best that this case should not be identified.

As a last word on Francis, Ernest in his memoir, gives advice as to how to deal with what must by now have become a formidable old gentleman: *“never open his door at the wrong moment or you’ll get a textbook thrown at you and, above all, find his spectacles”*.

.. *“never open the door at the wrong time ... and above all, find his spectacles”*.

At this time the firm was housed in St Benet’s Chambers (now demolished) in Fenchurch Street. Ernest writes of it with affection, even though there was no hot water and the toilets frequently overflowed “leaving inches of water in the corridors”.



But the firm needed more space and in 1929 moved to 10/11 Lime Street. On the floor above was one of its competitors, Messrs Wm. Crump & Co. Later, in the 1950's, Crumps had some very pretty secretaries who were known among the younger partners on the floor below as "The Crumpets". At that time Crumps were short of young men. In the Christmas party season there was much traffic up and down the stairs.

In 1932 the firm had further good luck when Jack Griggs joined the partnership (thereupon Ince Roscoe Wilson and Griggs). Jack quickly became prominent in shipping and commercial law, particularly in maritime salvage and collision and the problems created by the Spanish Civil War.



Jack Griggs

Equally important, and in some ways even more important for the firm, Jack had a flair for administration. Long before Ernest retired in 1957, Jack had effectively taken over the running of the firm. There can be no doubt that the shape and style - and, indeed, the means of success - of the present-day firm were fashioned by Jack Griggs, although it was not until after the war that he was able to put many of his ideas into practice.



As one important example of these ideas, in the late 1940's and early 1950's, he did something which is now the norm in the City, but was then well ahead of its time. He recruited a series of young partners, not on the basis of family or whether they could buy their way in with capital, but on the basis of their ability to do a tough job. These included John Chetwood, Bob Crawford, Donald O'May and Brian Waltham. (It is worth noting that, losing his own name, Jack also changed the firm to 'Ince & Co.').

The result was spectacular. Hungry young partners brooded hard over legal opinions, travelled at the drop of a hat, sat up half the night and, more often than not, won cases. Under Jack's guidance, they gained as clients Greek, American, Turkish, French, Chinese and other shipowners, foreign lawyers, charterers, shippers, salvors, oil interests and whoever was concerned with the movement of goods. They also gained a large share of work for underwriters, not only marine but reaching into other areas such as aviation, professional indemnity, non-marine and reinsurance.

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All this meant more hands on deck and once again the firm needed more space, moving to Knollys House in 1972. Potential trainees, assistants and partners were (and still are) rigorously vetted, but the firm grew from 6 partners and a total establishment of less than 30 in 1953, to its present 52 partners and a total strength of over 300.

From the 1950's onwards, there were two other developments, both of which have benefitted the firm and deserve a mention.

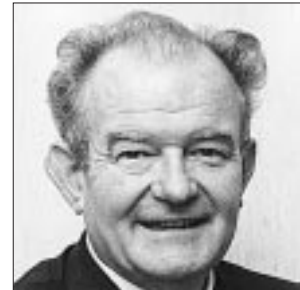
First, increasingly the firm began to take 'foreign pupils', usually young lawyers, but also young executives of shipowners, underwriters and merchants. It was, and still is, beneficial both ways: the pupil could get to know the firm and thereafter the firm had acquired a client or correspondent in a foreign city.

Second, the firm began to open offshore offices: Hong Kong 1979, Singapore 1991 and Piraeus 1993. These have widened the firm's horizons and they have been and continue to be arenas where young assistants and partners can show their paces.



In the 1970's and 1980's with an enormously expanding firm, individual names begin to matter less than the corporate effort. It would need more than a short history to give each person his or her due. But one further name should be singled out to follow in the succession of Francis Ince, Ernest Wilson and Jack Griggs. It is that of Donald O'May.

Donald was the brightest of Jack Griggs' team of bright young men. He, like his eminent predecessors, quickly gained a reputation in the maritime/insurance/commercial community. Following in Ernest's footsteps, he was successfully involved in the second generation of postwar 'scuttlers' and, like Jack, he dealt with the aftermath of wars such as that between India and Pakistan. He became foremost among lawyers in the marine insurance market.



Donald O'May

Not only that, but it fell to him after Jack's retirement in 1976 to pilot the firm through the difficult channel from medium-small to medium-large. He did that job unsparingly and with distinction, but sadly he died from a heart-attack in 1988 at a time when he still had much to offer. Among the Ince & Co. 'greats', he must surely be the fourth.



A brief history must leave out a great deal - and much of it the very stuff of what, day to day, at whatever level, it was and is like to be a member of Ince & Co. But no record would be complete without a tribute to the succession of truly remarkable individuals who have made up the staff, some of whom have made their own characteristic contribution to the archive.

There was Charles Targett, who, as an office boy aged twelve, delivered letters in the City on roller-skates and retired as Chief Cashier when he was eighty. His record of sixty-eight years of service can surely never be equalled. There was George Newport, who in his later years wore a hearing-aid and who in negotiation with an opponent (so legend has it) used to switch it off when he had put forward his argument and his opponent was about to respond. There was Maurice Bartley, who on the telephone was convinced that the further away in a foreign country the other person was, the louder he had to shout. At this time, one side of the office opened on to a somewhat resounding well. On one occasion Eddie Norris of Crumps telephoned from the floor above to ask if he could speak to Mr Bartley about a case when Mr Bartley had finished discussing the same case with lawyers in Antwerp.



There was Joe Groves, a quiet man, whose great love was music and building organs. There was Winnie Hyland who, at the switchboard, instantly recognised any voice she had heard before. There was Andrew Stanton, whose passion was making wine. There was C.H. Collier, Owen Kennaby, Albert Seabrook, Maurice King, Terry Bates, Fred Mead

Some of them have been partners in all but name. The firm could not have thrived without them and is lucky to have had such people in it.

As regards a son to follow him, Jack Griggs was luckier than Francis Ince. On Donald O'May's death in 1988, Jack's son, Patrick, who joined the firm in 1958, and was rigorously trained up by Donald, took over as senior partner. For seven years he has been exactly what the firm needed: a quiet but very effective pilot. He now in 1995 leaves the helm to run the British Maritime Law Association.



Patrick Griggs

Following Patrick as Senior Partner is Richard Sayer who joined the firm in 1962 and has been involved in all the major maritime and commercial areas of the practice. What can an historian say to Richard ? Look to the future with confidence, guided by the lessons of the past.