



The Law Society

## **Pen portrait**

District Judge Michael Walker CBE

*25 February 2010*

supporting  
solicitors

## **1. Please describe your current judicial role and the route you have taken to get there**

Roles plural would be somewhat more appropriate! I wear four hats. I still sit about once a fortnight as a district judge at Wandsworth County Court, with a really enjoyable mixture of civil and family work. The 'day job', however, for the last two years has involved me being seconded to the Office of the Senior Presiding Judge for England and Wales in which capacity I have been a board member of HM Courts Service since April 2008, which is my third hat. And my fourth hat is that I have been Hon Secretary of the Association of HM District Judges since April 2000.

For me, the route to becoming a District Judge in April 1994 was the traditional one of sitting as a deputy District Judge from October 1991. It started with a week-long induction course but those 30 months did not just give me the training I needed to do the work of a District Judge. They also gave me an invaluable insight into what life on the bench is actually like, and made me realise that I wanted to be a judge full-time.

## **2. Why did you choose to join the judiciary?**

I have to be honest and admit that, until a District Judge asked me if I were interested, I had never given the idea any thought at all. Of course I was coming before District Judges almost daily as a high street legal aid practitioner, doing mainly matrimonial work, but I had never thought of doing the job myself. Anyhow, I thought about it, decided to apply to become a deputy and the rest, as they say, is history.

## **3. What skills did you bring to the judiciary as a solicitor and what skills do you think you have developed/improved as a result of being a judge?**

Much of what I do as a District Judge is dealing with people who are unaware of their legal position, unfamiliar with court procedure and unclear how to get their case heard. That is much the same as what solicitors do, day in and day out, taking instructions from their clients.

There is a misconception that to be a good judge you need to have been a good advocate. That isn't true. But I did find that sitting as a deputy was one long, invaluable, advocacy training course. My speeches as a solicitor became much shorter as I realised what the judge wanted to hear, and what was just wasting his time!

## **4. What qualities do you think are important for judges today?**

With the decline in the availability of legal aid, and the consequent rise in litigants-in-person, anyone sitting as a judge at my level needs to have a very firm grasp of the relevant law. Often, with litigants representing themselves on both sides, I am the only lawyer in court.

But what we call 'judgecraft' is more than just knowing the law. Being able to tease the facts out of witnesses, to listen to what people are saying and to engage with them in words they understand all count enormously. I always take the view that a job well done is when the losing party leaves my court believing he had a fair hearing and knowing why he has lost his case.

**5. What barriers still remain to solicitors entering the judiciary and what should be done to tackle those barriers?**

Attitudes are constantly changing but there is still a gulf between barristers and solicitors when it comes to pursuing a judicial career. For many barristers, there is almost an expectation that at some stage in their career they will seek a fee-paid (part-time) judicial appointment. But for solicitors, often in partnership with all the rigours of billable hours and the like, the same does not apply. However, I considered my two and a half years sitting as a deputy as the best on-the-job training I ever had and I would really like to think that it made me a better solicitor in the process. Thankfully, my then partners agreed with me.

**6. What would be your three 'top tips' for a solicitor thinking about joining the judiciary?**

Firstly, consider work-shadowing. Visit: [www.judiciary.gov.uk/workshadowing](http://www.judiciary.gov.uk/workshadowing).

If you like what you see, contact the Judicial Office at [workshadowing@judiciary.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:workshadowing@judiciary.gsi.gov.uk) to arrange to work-shadow an existing judge for anything up to three days. Seeing life from that side of the bench is absolutely invaluable. Secondly, apply first of all for a fee-paid (part-time) post rather than going straight in for a full-time appointment. Thirdly, keep an eye on the website for the Judicial Appointments Commission: there is a huge range of judicial jobs on offer and one of them might suit you perfectly. If it does, go for it. Was that a fourth?