



# Bond Pearce LLP

## City-quality work outside the City? Top trainer Bond Pearce shows the rest how it's done

It's a bright September morning at Bond Pearce's Bristol office and the managing partner is welcoming some new colleagues, explaining their key role in the firm's business strategy. An established new joiner would expect nothing less, but these aren't high-flying associates or influential partners – at least, not yet. Meeting the boss sounds like the last thing to calm a trainee's first-day nerves, but it seems to work. One recent starter recalls that, like much of the induction process, "it's the firm's way of letting you know what they expect of you and how you're going to get there – you feel like you're part of it from the start". Graduate recruitment manager Sam Lee has big plans for the new intake too: "When they arrive on day one, we want that entire group to be staying with us when they qualify in two years' time."

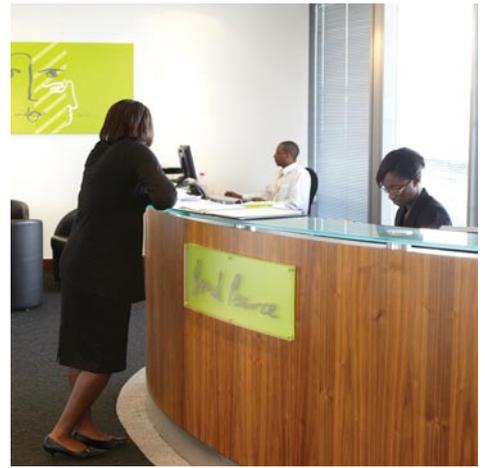
Sam's preparations start long before that first day. As the brains behind the recruitment programme, she talent-spots at open days and on vac schemes, and puts candidates through their paces at assessment centres. Once 15 delighted candidates have had the phone call and completed a victory lap of their kitchen, there is, as Sam puts it, "a really fine balance between keeping in touch and intruding on their lives", but one date in the calendar helps to make the training contract seem less daunting. Every July, dinner and drinks for everyone under offer, plus the first-year trainees, provide a good excuse to meet colleagues-to-be. The development sessions

beforehand are also a chance for Sam to gauge progress and tailor her training plans for when the new starters arrive.

This kind of thoughtful preparation will sound familiar to the firm's lawyers – and their clients. Meticulous service and a flair for understanding other people's ambitions have driven Bond Pearce to within sight of its own goal: to become a top 30 law firm. Already the joint-leading choice, regionally, for FTSE 100 clients, it continues to cultivate its public and private-sector connections, with Lloyds TSB, Marks & Spencer, English Heritage and other familiar names relying on its smooth-sharp blend of legal and commercial skills.

This year's Best National/Large Regional Trainer fended off some of its closest rivals in clinching the award, but as the partner and fee-earner statistics stack up, the firm looks leaner and hungrier than many contenders in its class. Trusting trainees to apply their skills means that Bond Pearce can continue to punch well above its weight. Far from scrimping on fee-earners' hours, it's about giving young lawyers the opportunities for which they've worked. "We have City-quality clients, but you're being put in the front-row seat to be involved," explains training principal James Robins. "Our trainees are working with partners who are leaders in their field; they're learning from the best people."

Surely few coordinators agonise over seat rotations as much as Sam: it says a lot that



one trainee not getting a seat that he or she wants is seen as a serious problem to resolve, not just a tough break for someone at the bottom of the pile. Allocations are planned with both commercial and personal development in mind, and partners and senior associates must make a compelling business case before a trainee can join their team. “We want to put everyone into a seat where they will be kept busy and productive and get the most valuable experience,” says Sam. This approach paid off for trainee Zoe Lane, who within a matter of months found herself reporting back on counsel’s work at the Royal Courts of Justice, attending a planning enquiry, helping to organise without-prejudice meetings in a mediation and taking a witness statement. For some LPC students, this is the stuff of anxiety dreams, but as Zoe explains, “if I wasn’t happy doing it or didn’t feel able, it wouldn’t happen. I was very comfortable because I felt so well prepared.”

Meanwhile, a secondment with B&Q’s in-house legal team will give Kate Steel from the Southampton office the perfect opportunity to experience a law firm from the other side. As James explains, “It’s absolutely consistent with the work that we do for them externally. Working with an international retailer is a really good springboard into one of our key sectors.”

Tris Tucker has also benefited, landing a role with a claims-handling company and discovering the workings of the London insurance market at first hand. He shrugs

off the idea that moving to the capital as the office’s first-ever trainee might have meant an adjustment for him or his new London colleagues. “After about six months as a trainee, they treat you like a qualified lawyer anyway, so I came in like a fee-earner – doing my billable work, with my clients, with my secretary.” Life in the Square Mile after qualification would give him further chances to work alongside City-pedigree partners in developing the firm’s professional indemnity practice. “We’ve been getting some big clients on board recently and the next couple of years are going to be exciting.”

However, top-notch work and inspiring role models are to be found in every office, as trainee Susanne Höse explains. Susanne fell in love with the Southwest after moving from Germany nine years ago. An art and design graduate, she worked for a graphic design company before finding her way – via a Plymouth University mentoring scheme – to a vacation placement with Bond Pearce and the people-focused work she had been missing. Now in her third seat, Susanne modestly insists that glowing reports on her client-facing skills are all down to watching and learning from her supervisor. “I can see how the partner is so good at making sure that the relationship is taken care of. It’s about having a very good knowledge of the client’s business and what they want to achieve – always seeing the bigger picture. I just really hope I can get to that.” Not many arts-graduate converters to law would

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see it as way of bringing out their creative side, but for Susanne there’s a clear connection: “It’s problem solving, isn’t it? Sometimes that way of thinking outside the box can be useful.”

Within a few months of the new intake starting, confidence is already high on both sides. So how does Bond Pearce get things so right? Enjoyable training certainly helps. The advocacy module has been Susanne’s highlight: “On the last day we had two mock trials. It was the longest day ever and we were exhausted by the end – we were playing each others’ witnesses as well – but it was really great fun.” Sessions on learning methods and interpersonal skills are as much about helping new starters to understand other people’s behavioural styles as about letting them discover their own. With only a handful of trainees in each of the Bristol, Southampton and Plymouth offices, this is a vital skill: they work with – and are supported by – colleagues at all levels. In addition to a supervisor, a trainee coordinator and a ‘buddy’, they can count on the associates around them to steer them right. “Particularly from newly qualified to six years qualified, there’s a tremendous willingness to help in coaching and development,” says James. “Many people will have been beneficiaries of it in the past – they’re happy to put something back.” As well as quarterly meetings to feed back on performance and discuss seat options, trainees are impressed that supervisors

somehow make time for regular chats and constructive advice. “You never feel that you’re flailing along, not knowing whether you’re doing it right or not,” Zoe says. Fitting in seems to come naturally: “I think that’s just about being emotionally intelligent. You know that as long as you’re sensitive to other people’s work pressures, no one’s unapproachable.”

As Kate explains, the firm’s size and ethos make for a broad-based social life, from office get-togethers to spur-of-the-moment evenings at the pub. “It’s quite organic and informal. The firm’s big enough to have a nice support network, but there’s not so many of us that you feel like you’re disappearing.”

The ultimate proof of success is the number of trainees progressing to qualification. Over three crisis-hit years for the legal industry, Bond Pearce has improved its retention rate from an already impressive 85%. Behind this statistic is a genuine desire for trainees to discover a rewarding use for their skills in different practices. “You have to be flexible in working with people and considering what their options are,” explains James. “We’ve worked really hard to show people alternatives and give them opportunities to explore them.”

However, Kate’s advice is not to sit and wait for the openings to come to you. “Take responsibility for your own training contract and think about what you want to get out of it,” she recommends. James agrees: “You



see some potential right at the start, you reward the trainees' effort, see them develop and hopefully flourish and grasp the opportunities. That is a really fantastic thing to witness – it's a privilege to see it work."

By **Theo Gott**



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**Method of application:** Employer application form

**Application deadline:** Apply by 31 July 2011 for training contracts commencing in 2013

**Method of selection:** Assessment day and interview

**Work areas**

- Acquisitions & disposals
- Alternative dispute resolution & mediation
- Banking
- Charities
- Claims management
- Commercial
- Company administration
- Competition
- Compulsory purchase & compensation
- Construction
- Corporate finance
- Credit management
- Dispute resolution
- Education
- Employment
- Energy
- Environment
- Financial services
- Food & drink
- Government & public sector
- Health
- Health & safety
- Immigration
- Information technology
- Insolvency
- Insurance
- Intellectual property & trademarks
- International
- Inward investment
- Leisure & gaming
- Liquor licensing
- Partnerships
- Pensions
- Planning
- Pre litigation
- Private client
- Product liability
- Professional negligence
- Property
- Retail
- Taxation & employee benefits
- Technology & ecommerce
- Transport
- Venture capital & equity investment
- Waste

**Offices**

Bristol, Plymouth, Southampton, London, Aberdeen

What trainees said:

***"As a place to train, Bond Pearce is second to none. You are given the guidance, support and resources expected of a large national firm, yet within that structure you are given the freedom and flexibility to develop as a practitioner in the way that suits you, as an individual, best."***

***"First-class support, advice and training at your finger tips to help your professional, and personal, development."***

***"Throughout my training contract at Bond Pearce I have been exposed to and worked on a variety of interesting and challenging matters. Each seat has taught me something new and I have had excellent quality training from my supervisors and colleagues."***

***"As a trainee, you really feel that the firm is investing in you, and that you are being equipped with the requisite skills and support to be well prepared upon qualification."***



# Burges Salmon

## It's six of the very best for this Bristol-based TARAs stalwart

The recruitment team at Burges Salmon are fast becoming the stuff of legend: in the seven-year history of the LC.N Training & Recruitment Awards, they have scooped the prize for Best Recruiter – National/Regional Firm an epic six times, including the last five years on the trot. With such a formidable reputation, it would be all too easy for the team to kick back, put their feet up and think, 'Job done' – but nothing could be further from the truth.

Indeed, it becomes clear very early on when talking to the firm that recruitment ranks right at the top of the list of priorities, and as soon as each cohort of trainees has finished their apprenticeship, an inquest begins as to how the process might be tweaked to make it better still. Each year, every aspect of the procedure – from application form to final interview questions – is put under the microscope and fine tuned wherever necessary.

"I think one of the things that makes us different, and that helps us win this award each year, is that the firm as a whole – from trainee level to partner – is aware that if we don't get the best people through the door, then we will suffer in two years' time," explains Natalie Byard, the firm's recruitment officer. "Each year, everyone involved in recruitment – trainees, partners and the recruitment team – sits down and looks at what's working and what isn't; then we decide the best way to proceed and take it from there."

One innovation to emerge from this review system has recently revolutionised the firm's selection process. "We are now running assessment centres as a result of a discussion a couple of years ago," says Roger Bull, one of the recruitment partners. "We decided we wanted to get more people in for face-to-face meetings. It's about looking for things that improve the quality of the process, the quality of the filter and the quality of the candidates we end up interviewing. You're able to obtain much more information on both sides if you've got people coming into the office. They have an opportunity to ask questions face to face, find out more about the firm and make a decision as to whether it is the right place for them; equally, for us, it is much easier to obtain a better picture of somebody's skills and abilities, and their drive, commitment and ambition, if they are in front of us than if we are simply reading an application form."

So successful were the assessment centres in 2009 that Burges Salmon almost doubled the number of candidates it invited to participate this year. That it could accommodate such a dramatic increase is in no small part due to the firm's swanky new flagship offices at One Glass Wharf in Temple Quay – something that Roger thinks has given the firm a new lease of life.

"It's a fantastic facility and has created a real buzz," he says. "It's enabled us to bring many more people in to assessment centres and has helped to really make an impression