

60 YEARS OF HONEY BARRETT

WHERE IT ALL BEGAN

How times have changed! Honey Barrett was started by Bill Honey in 1963 shortly after he qualified, working as a sole practitioner until 1968 when he was joined in partnership by Michael Barrett.

The firm started from Bill Honey's home, grew to an office at 10 Gildredge Road and then 55 Gildredge Road, where they were when I joined the firm in 1971.

At that time each qualified accountant had a team of about 4 trainees (called articled clerks – as we were contracted to a named accountant for 4 years, and generally couldn't get out of that contract unless both sides agreed) and each trainee learned by asking someone one year ahead of them. Most small businesses were 'paper bag' jobs – we just got a bagful of receipts and bank statements and cheques stubs (if we were lucky) that we analysed by hand on 'double analysis pads' (A3 size pre-ruled) – using blue ink generally, with all headings underlined in red using pen and ruler, and using pencil for things that might change. We then completed an 'extended trial balance' – again on our double analysis pads where we had columns for opening balance, bank account, cash account, debtors and creditors and adjustments – totalling it all across the page into 4 columns for expenses, income, assets and liabilities.

Trying to get the bank to balance was a slow and boring manual task – often accomplished by 'calling over' – one trainee reading out the bank statement and the other ticking it off on the handwritten analysis we had created.

If we were lucky some people had cash books – the Twinlock one was a really wide loose-leaf ledger so it had space for lots of different columns of income and expenses. It was rare that this was reconciled – so we still had to 'tick the bank' to match the figures.

We only had Olivetti adding machines then – with a handle you pulled down to print the figure you had entered on the 'till roll'. You could get quite fast with these with practice – and I became known as the 'till roll' queen for my speed at adding up with them.



Bill Honey



Michael Barrett

FOND MEMORIES AND FUN TIMES!

It was all good fun for the trainees, with lots of excitement when we finally balanced a tricky bank account. It was not a politically correct work environment – with the boys sticking pictures cut from Playboy on the walls and expecting women to make the tea but at the time that's how it was. We are much more respectful of each other now!

Nowadays, most businesses use bookkeeping software and reconcile their own accounts, so we rarely get the chance of a good meaty ticking exercise!

THE EQUIPMENT OF OUR TIME

When I first joined, we had the latest 'golf ball' electric typewriters which enabled the girls (and secretaries were always female) to type faster without the keys locking up as they were prone to do on the 'old' typewriters. The next level had Tippex tape so they could cover up mistakes and re-type over them, rather than having to start again. That saved a huge amount of time.

Accounts were always typed up from our handwritten accounts, and then the trainees would 'call them over' and 'cast check' them to make sure that the typist had got the right figures and that everything did indeed add up to the right total.

Photocopiers were in their infancy, using smelly paper that faded quickly and where multiple copies were needed this was done by using stencils and running these through a machine – so again needing 'calling over' to check that the stencil had been correctly typed before it was reproduced.

We used to provide secretarial services for local organisations – and collating large documents was done with piles of each page on top of the filing cabinets in the right order – with trainees walking round in circles picking up a page off each pile and passing them to the secretaries to bind or staple. It was fun mindless work, that let us gossip and laugh a lot.

Our switchboard (a modern one at the time with keys that went up and down to pick up different lines) was fun. Trainees sometimes got delegated to help out on the switchboard – and you had to remember which line related to which business – I can recall one trainee (who went on to be a senior partner in his own firm) answering the phone with our name, then the building society we were agents for, then each of the 3 business names for different clients we provided secretarial services for, before he finally got to the right name!



EVERYBODY MUCKED IN

This time-consuming manual work, and admin assistance all worked very well because trainees were very lowly paid then (my starting salary was £9 per week and I had to pay my own course costs out of this.) but it gave us a rounded education in everything that needed doing. Allowing for inflation this is about 1/3rd of what new trainees earn now – and they get all their course fees paid on top of their salary. Being cheap did allow us to have a go at tasks ‘above our level’ much more so than now when we need trainees to produce much more billable work to cover their costs.

We ran a building society agency so that provided still further experience – and gave us the chance to earn extra doing Saturday morning overtime. Imagine leaving an 18 year old alone in an office building for a morning with a large cash balance sitting in the drawer next to them and no security of any sort. It didn’t worry us in the least then! We also used to go to the bank and collect cash for wages for clients and return to the office to sort the notes and coins into pay packets – again without thought of the risks of doing this.

All systems were manual – so we completed time sheets by hand, and someone laboriously posted them to ‘time ledgers’ which we used to create bills. We had only just stopped billing in Guineas when I started.

Nowadays we post time to our electronic timesheets and it magically updates instantly so we can see time spent on a client at any time in real time.



BACK IN THE SEVENTIES

Honey Barrett grew fast in the early years – we opened the Bexhill office in 1974 and acquired a firm in Lewes with a branch in Haywards Heath, then opened a branch in Uckfield. The picture attached shows the conference we had in the early 70's to welcome the new firm to the HB family. Note the girls sitting at the feet of our bosses – can't see that working today!



As we grew, we continued to learn and develop and started using the first word processors – big bulky machines with just 64k of memory and a huge printer that we had to put in an acoustic box so we could hear ourselves think!

Double analysis pads were consigned to the scrapheap when we discovered firstly Supercalc followed by Excel – which can do so much more than just be a replacement for the handwritten figures (and continues to grow and expand all the time).

MOVING WITH THE TIMES

Now we have a fully connected computer system enabling us to work from home or anywhere in the world as well as in the office. We can talk to clients on video calls without the costs of having to travel to them and this has opened up our client base to bring in people from further afield in a way that could never have been envisaged when the firm started.

Instead of spending 'tax season' with trainees having to drive out to visit numerous clients to get returns signed and then hand deliver them to the local tax office, we now do it all digitally, so clients can see, approve and sign their documents instantaneously on-line.

Instead of having to hand write dividend schedules and tax returns, then get the schedules typed up, we have tax software that handles this almost automatically, avoids arithmetic errors and prints schedules at a click of a button.

Most business clients now have bookkeeping software that enables them to keep control of their finances and we offer full training for clients who are new to this. Reducing the old hand analysis and reconciliations means that we have more time to provide real business advice to clients, as well as provide more interesting work for trainees and qualified accountants.



CLIENTS AND THE TEAM

The range of clients has changed over the years with varying business and statutory requirements but the principle of helping people get what they want from their business whilst paying the least amount of tax legally permitted, and providing peace of mind that everything is being looked after remains. Our Eastbourne office looks after audits and the bigger advisory work, while our Bexhill office specialises in the medical profession, but all offices deal with a range of individual tax returns, one-off consultancy, and private businesses of all sizes – providing both compliance and advisory services.

The balance of our team has changed over the years so now there are proportionately more qualified staff v trainees (reflecting the business advisory role), but we continue to train people where we can rather than outsourcing all the low end work as so many firms do, so that we do grow our own senior staff who understand not just the technical skills, but also the people skills to ensure that we haven't lost the 'people first' attitude over the years.

Whilst we can do most things remotely now, we still meet people face to face if they prefer and we aim to treat every client, small or large, as an equally important individual. We still have some clients with us who started with the firm from the early days – where we've watched them go through from initial business ideas, to running a successful business and into retirement (and in some cases watched their children grow up and move into the business and retire too!).

We have a '25+ club' for clients who've been with us for more than 25 years and at the last count this was over 100.

Some of our team too are very longstanding too – the directors collectively have about 150 years' service and our secretary in Bexhill joined in 1976 and our office manager in Eastbourne came as a temp in 1992 and just stayed!



60th anniversary team event celebration



TRAILBLAZING THE WAY FORWARD FOR WOMEN

As a young firm in the early '70s we were trailblazers in employing women in training positions – and at the time I joined we had 2 female trainees and 3 experienced women accountants and bookkeepers v 6 male trainees – so nearly equal - at a time where on my final's course of 200 students, I was one of only 3 women.

I was the first female partner in a professional practice in our area in 1982 – newsworthy to the extent of making it to the front page of the local paper! Our current managing director is also female – the only one locally still, I think. Now we have 3 female and 3 male directors – a better balance than most firms.

I recall going on an audit with a brand new junior when I was first qualified – to find that the (elderly) male bookkeeper would not speak to me at all. Any questions I asked would be answered to the junior or ignored altogether; he even refused to shake hands when my boss introduced me to him! And one of the first CPD sessions I attended – evening meetings at a local hotel where local accountants from all firms came together to learn – the guy thanking the speaker at the end said it had been a very interesting and enjoyable evening 'in spite of the inhibiting presence of a female'! Thankfully we've come a long way since then.

As well as being at the forefront of female development in the accountancy business we have employed people from all over the world, of all ethnic groups and many religions over the years and our current team continues to reflect that diversity. We continue to look for people with the right qualifications or potential, who reflect our ethos of service to our clients and who want to look at the long term, rather than a short fix stepping-stone, so that clients can benefit from working with people who really understand them.



Liz Densley, Abi Newbury, Louise Underdown

WORKING LIFE CONTINUES TO EVOLVE

Life continues to change and post covid we have embraced a degree of flexible working which would have been unheard of before. Whilst it is great that we can function remotely, we have to be careful not to lose the 'osmosis' learning that takes place in the office by listening to how other people work and communicate which cannot be replicated using Teams or Zoom when you are not physically sitting in hearing distance of your colleagues – or the efficiency of just asking a quick question rather than stewing over something before contacting a colleague by phone/chat etc.

In the early years the professional team would all have been full time and most women gave up work, at least for a while, if they had a baby, now we recognise that people with family commitments need the flexibility of part-time working – if only for some years in their career - and this has enabled us to obtain, or retain, a good cohort of experienced accountants who in the past would have given up altogether or just done a bit of bookkeeping from home.



WHAT THE FUTURE HOLDS

So, we've gone from all handwritten work, using mental arithmetic and if we were lucky a hand operated adding machine to fast digital systems using fewer unqualified staff, but more qualified people to add value to compliance work. The systems can enable us to do things that wouldn't have been economically worthwhile in the past, such as detailed data analysis to show up more trends to help client businesses become more profitable.

We are starting to use AI to help with research, although it's still early days and answers are not trustworthy yet, but it does speed up where we can look.

Making Tax Digital will change things further over the next few years, where all business clients will need to come to terms with computer accounting or pay someone to do it for them. It won't remove the need to review the bookkeeping though, so compliance work will continue to be required for some time yet. It will be interesting for the next generation to see where the next 60 years takes us.

In 2023 on the 60th anniversary of the firm our founding partners Bill Honey and Michael Barrett have both passed away – the former at the very young age of 53 in 1993, and the latter more recently, but I hope that they would be proud of what we have achieved over the years.