Great sets of chambers draw their strength from founding figures who set standards and build reputations through great cases. So in Quadrant Chambers today we can trace the legacy of the success of what was originally 2 Essex Court and then 4 Essex Court in Middle Temple.

Many of today’s Quadrant Chambers members established their careers during the last 25 years of the 20th century in buildings which, frankly, harked back to Dickensian times. But that did not dull the quality of the work they did. And as chambers expanded and became ever more successful it meant that a new home had to be found appropriate for the demands of business in the 21st century.

Yet to understand fully Quadrant Chambers today it is necessary to peer back to the murky post-Second World War period and discern the beginnings of a continuous strand of culture whose influence can still be felt. From those roots there emerged three generations of barristers who created the outstanding record of achievement which provided Quadrant with the basis for its new approach to providing advocacy services in the 21st century.

The Barry Sheen Effect

The opening to the story lies with the arrival at 2 Essex Court in the late 1940s of Barry Sheen (later Sir Barry Sheen, 1918-2005) who had recently completed his war-interrupted law degree.

2 Essex Court at this point was a rather mixed set of chambers which had been bombed out of Lambs Building during the war and landed in Essex Court almost by chance. The set consisted of just a handful of barristers some of whose prime interests – often political (see below) – lay away from the courts. But there were able people too including Waldo William Porges (1899-1976), an Anglo-American, brought up in both the United States and England who gained silk in 1952 and went on to become head of chambers. Also based there was Sir David Cairns who had maritime interests and was later to go on to the Court of Appeal.

Barry Sheen was a young man in a hurry anxious to make his mark in the law after years at sea. Like Porges, who was head of chambers in the post-war years, he had been educated in both America and Britain but his studies at Cambridge had been suspended on the outbreak of hostilities and he joined the Royal Navy.

Barry Sheen helps to crack the code

By any standard Barry Sheen had a ‘good war’. Most notably, perhaps, he was serving as first lieutenant on the corvette HMS Aubretia when in May 1941 – while escorting a trans-Atlantic convoy – it depth-charged and brought to the surface a German submarine, U110. The U-boat commander attempted to scuttle the vessel but failed. What followed was to change the course of the war. While Sheen was interrogating the captured German sailors, a boarding party discovered an Enigma cipher machine and codebooks on the submarine. When handed over to Bletchley Park it gave British intelligence the critical edge in deciphering German communications.

Two years later, at the age of 25, Sheen was given command of the corvette Kilkenzie but when the war was over he returned to Cambridge to finish his degree.

When the war ended Sheen, by now in his late-20s, could at last get started on his legal career. Initially he joined 7 Kings Bench Walk in order to do criminal work. But given his naval background the lure of the sea was irresistible. There is some suggestion that he had wanted to another set of Chambers – what was the premier shipping set at the time – but there was
some opposition from the Head of Chambers who, perhaps, harboured doubts because of his glittering war record. So instead he moved to 2 Essex Court in order to work with Sir David Cairns who had some maritime interests.

Political leanings

Historically 2 Essex Court had been very political with several members who were either MPs or aspired to be MPs. Some of them were very rich and were famous for arriving at chambers in their Rolls Royces.

Amongst these politically-focused members it was probably Sir Samuel Knox Cunningham, 1st Baronet, QC (1909 - 1976) who was the most successful. Called to the Bar in 1939 he was an Ulster Unionist politician and MP for South Antrim. Following the 1959 General Election, Cunningham was picked by the Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan, to be his Parliamentary Private Secretary and when Macmillan resigned, he awarded Cunningham a baronetcy in his resignation honours. (Sadly, Cunningham was to attract a certain notoriety after his death).

Maybe the more extraordinary career, however, belonged to Sir Charles Fletcher Fletcher-Cooke QC (1914 – 2001) who started his ‘public life’ as President of the Cambridge Union in 1936. He was also an Apostle and a member of the Communist Party. After Cambridge he qualified for the Bar before war service in the Royal Navy intervened. Subsequently, in what might be regarded as the standard pattern of political evolution in the mid-20th century he migrated first to the Labour Party and then to the Conservatives holding the Darwen seat for the party from 1951 to 1983.

His most significant achievement was the introduction and passage of the Suicide Act 1961 which decriminalized suicide. He was knighted in 1981

Although Barry Sheen came from the same generation as these politicos his interests were very much focused on practising at the Bar and during the period from the 1950s to 1ate 1970s 2 Essex Court became firmly established as one of the leading maritime ‘wet’ sets in London. As The Hon. Mr Justice Teare comments, “I joined 2 Essex Court in 1975 as the 7th or 8th member of Chambers. Barry Sheen was Head of Chambers – a powerful and interesting personality – and he was the real begetter of the modern shipping set of chambers at 2 Essex.”

Under Sheen’s leadership the set was to attract a small but glittering number of young barristers who shared Sheen’s passions. Amongst these was Nicholas Phillips (born 1938) who was to become, perhaps, the highest profile of the 2 Essex Court alumni when, in October 2009, as Baron Phillips of Worth Matravers, KG, PC he became the first President of the Supreme Court of the United Kingdom.

Like Barry Sheen, Nicholas Phillips had served with the Royal Navy. Having studied law at Cambridge he undertook pupillage at 2 Essex Court in the early 1960s and subsequently obtained a tenancy. By the late 1960s, however, he was looking for broader commercial work at a time when 2 Essex Court appeared to be ever more specialist. As a result he moved to Brick Court Chambers. Meanwhile, at roughly the same time another member, Sven Olson, had just been made a County Court Judge. So by the early 1970s the number of practising barristers could be counted on one hand (and that included Simon Gault in pupillage).

The expansion begins

Small though they might have been in number the quality of the people was very high and the atmosphere, as Sir David Steel recalls it, very congenial.

“\nIn 1968 I joined 2 Essex Court. It was a pokey little place with no facilities. There was great excitement when we installed a telex. It was not greatly different from a set of chambers in 1900. And there were some people who were just occupants and did not practise seriously.

“Nonetheless the working barristers - Barry Sheen, Sven Olsen, Michael Thomas, Nicholas Philips and Tony Clarke (now Lord Clarke) – amounted collectively to a heavy team. Barry Sheen was a very nice man indeed and distinguished by
his excellent war record in the Royal Navy. Along with Michael Thomas and Nicholas Phillips – both also formerly in the Navy – their first hand experience of ships and life at sea added to the bonhomie and the atmosphere in chambers. There was almost a sense of ‘salt in the air’. And because of this it was a genuinely happy set. We had no factions, argument or unpleasantness. We were renowned, I think, for being relaxed and pleasant. This helped I am sure in attracting business.”

One of the most significant pieces of work picked up in the late 1960s was by Michael Thomas who advised on the ‘Torrey Canyon’ disaster which, at that time in the 1960s, was the largest vessel ever to be wrecked. This was also Sir David Steel’s first big case of note. “Michael Thomas, to whom I was still a pupil at the time, was junior to the Treasury,” explains Sir David. “I had to go and see the Attorney General and when he was told there possibly wasn’t a cause for action the look on his face was well worth watching!”

Those who lacked a naval background were inducted into it vicariously by Barry Sheen. As Tony Clarke recalls it, “I rather enjoyed the navigation and I very much enjoyed learning about ships and the way they operated, what went wrong and the skullduggery that went on.”

Barry Sheen – who was obviously a great talent spotter - went out of his way to introduce Tony Clarke to ‘everyone he knew’ and, once he had taken silk, included Clarke in a number of key cases.

Pauline Roberts, who joined as the office junior in the early 1970s, recalls vividly what chambers was like around this time. “There was still quite a Dickensian air about the Inns of Court. The older clerks still came to work in morning suits. I found it fascinating – and being the only woman I was treated like a princess – at least most of the time! There was still some male chauvinism around but by and large it was pretty good.”

There was an increasing buzz around 2 Essex Court and Michael Thomas QC was to have a key role on behalf of the Treasury Solicitor in the inquiry into the Staines Air Disaster in 1972. This followed the crash by a BEA Trident shortly after take-off from Heathrow in what was, notoriously, the worst air accident in Britain until Lockerbie. The inquiry was to be controversial not just for exposing a lot of poor practice at BEA (against a background of industrial action by pilots) but also due to the suicide of an Air Investigation Branch inspector. One positive outcome was the recommendation that British-registered airlines should install cockpit voice recorder.

It is notable that although chambers was developing an outstanding reputation for maritime work it also had sufficient profile in aviation for Michael Thomas to be appointed to this very high profile inquiry. “Despite our tiny size we didn’t actually feel small,” says Pauline Roberts. “There was a lot of work coming in and new pupils were arriving and turning into tenants so it felt busy. There was a feeling of expansion which continued for the next ten years.”

With just one clerk, John Aldred, in chambers at that time it was almost inevitable that Pauline would find herself drawn into a clerking role (which she retains still).

“There was a lot of shipping work around at that time but I was a young girl in a man’s world and I think it attracted a lot of attention at a time when opportunities for women in the workplace were just starting to open up a little. Suddenly, it seemed, people decided that they like working with us and it took off from there. We were working with all the major solicitors with shipping practices. Ince & Co, for example, were our main instructing solicitors at that time along with Norton Rose and Clifford Turner. So we built on these existing relationships but also extended them further by providing a very good service, by being approachable and dealing with our clients with honesty and integrity.

“I related well, I think, to the younger solicitors and as you grow up together they send you an increasing amount of work. But it wasn’t permissible to advertise or socialise in any way. And we couldn’t even go to solicitors’ offices for meetings. So we had to rely on growing reputations and word of mouth.”

Wider shores?

Sir David Steel was one of the key people in driving forward this reputation with the strong emphasis on shipping being increasingly consolidated. Yet at the same time there were anxieties about being boxed into a corner.
“Michael Thomas, Tony Clarke and I were always keen to broaden our horizons away from pure wet shipping and Admiralty (predominantly collision) work to other things,” recalls Sir David. “We tried hard to advertise ourselves as far as we could and indicate that we were open to other work. But our bread and butter remained collision and salvage claims.”

Trying to extend work beyond Admiralty presented, said Sir David, the classic ‘chicken and egg’ problem. “We couldn’t promote ourselves until we had done something non-Admiralty and we couldn’t do the work without promoting ourselves. But we did make it plain to all the solicitors who came to us that we should not be regarded as simply wet shipping lawyers but that we were capable of doing other, commercial-type work.

“We benefited from being led by people from others chambers who did have experience. Nonetheless it was a slow process to make good the claim that we could do anything other than shipping. Touting for work was frowned on anyway. So it was not an easy task but, informally, whenever we could – be it at lunch with clients or other social occasion - we tried to let it be known that we were interested in doing other types of work.”

Becoming more businesslike

Although a number of barristers struggled against the Admiralty straitjacket it was undeniably a well-upholstered ‘niche’ to occupy. By the time that Barry Sheen was appointed as Admiralty Judge in 1978 – when Michael Thomas took over in his stead - chambers had tripled in size due to its shipping reputation.

Indeed as Pauline Roberts puts it, by the 1980s 2 Essex Court was recognized as the ‘premier shipping set’ and it was a natural magnet for all the shipping inquiries (including most notably that into the Spirit of Free Enterprise disaster). It was also well-known for providing all the Treasury Juniors in Admiralty (a role that no longer exists).

For Sir David Steel the late 70s and early 80s were certainly a very active period. “We were always busy, things had taken off very fast,” he says. “But at the same time it was rather tidal. The tide of work seemed to go out in February but you had to be ready for it when it returned in August when everyone else was away. At that time I did a lot of work for the Russian merchant fleet and there was also quite a lot of travel to the US and Europe. And once I had taken silk in 1981 I was often in Hong Kong.”

Hong Kong was also to be the destination for Michael Thomas QC. Having succeeded Barry Sheen, he was Head of Chambers for five years (1978-83) after which he went to Hong Kong as the colony’s penultimate Attorney General. So it was during Tony Clarke’s time as Head of Chambers (1983-93) that serious attempts started to be made to diversify chambers beyond purely maritime work.

Charles Haddon-Cave (now the Hon. Mr Justice Haddon-Cave) was one of the key people who set out to expand from the shipping base. During the 1980s and thereafter he moved progressively into the fields of aviation, insurance, travel law and arbitration. He was to appear in many of the aviation route-licensing hearings before the UK Civil Aviation Authority and the HK Air Transport Licensing Authority and was instructed in major aviation (as well as marine) disasters including the Manchester Air Disaster, the Kegworth Aircrash, the Knight Air Crash, and the BP Trent disaster as well as the Herald of Free Enterprise and the Marchioness.

THE MANCHESTER AIRCRASH August 1985

On 22nd August 1985 the aircraft River Orrin suffered an engine failure as it was preparing for take-off from Manchester airport. The resulting fire led to the deaths of 54 passengers primarily due to the inhalation of toxic smoke which had escaped into the fuselage.

In the inquiry which followed, the families were represented by Charles Haddon-Cave QC. A number of important safety recommendations resulted including fire-resistant set covers, floor lighting, fire-resistant wall and ceiling panels.
It was also during this period that a new senior clerk, Gordon Armstrong, was appointed and major changes began to be introduced into chambers administration and governance. As Pauline Roberts remembers, “These innovations reflected the realization that we had to start to become more businesslike. Tony Clarke also understood that as we grew in size – and by this stage the numbers were well up into the teens– there could be a real danger if everyone were suddenly to leave. Historically the head of chambers would have been expected to suffer the consequences of that but it was clearly unsustainable in a larger organization.”

The upshot was that chambers became a limited company – 2 Essex Court Limited, a title it was to retain despite moving a few years later into 4 Essex Court. Meanwhile concerns were starting to be voiced about the state and size of the 2 Essex Court building.

Just how primitive the conditions at 2 Essex Court were is recalled by Luke Parsons QC who undertook his pupillage in 1986/87. “When we were in 2 Essex Court I was told that the only toilet facilities were a make-shift partition in the waiting room – and that was it. They were delighted when they managed to get a toilet put under the stairs. That was considered sophisticated.”

For all inquiries call 2 Essex

The paradox was that while the state of the building was increasingly wretched the profile of chambers under Tony Clarke’s leadership was becoming ever higher. It was typical, for example, that in the case of the ‘Marion’ (where the oil pipeline which served the Ekofisk field was severely damaged by the anchor of the vessel Marion) the plaintiffs were represented by Tony Clarke and Jeremy Russell while David Steel was on the other side representing the defendants. Simon Rainey QC who joined chambers in the mid-1980s recalls the atmosphere.

“Tony Clarke and David Steel always had big led cases so there was the chance for me to become involved as a junior almost immediately. Nigel Teare was the next person to take silk. After about three years I was the pet junior to Tony Clarke. It gave me a chance to see a master operating and a superb man in court. He was very, very clever and also very friendly and jolly. The only slight drawback was that I didn’t have the chance to do too much of my own advocacy.

“As it happens my first proper advocacy was in the Admiralty court in front of Barry Sheen. He had been softened up by Pauline Roberts who always wrote in advance to the Judge’s clerk to warn if it was a junior barrister’s first time out and asking that this should be borne in mind. Strangely he was very hostile towards us in court – however, he wrote me an extremely complimentary letter afterwards!”

Luke Parsons QC says that the spirit within chambers was enormously helpful to the younger barristers in these situations.

“When I started my pupillage the Head of Chambers, Tony Clarke, was on first name terms with everyone. He had an open door and you could always chat to him. His attitude was that other people’s cases were always much more interesting than his own because he didn’t have the responsibility for them. And he took it seriously. Often he would get back to you two or three days later to say that he’d had another idea in connection with your case. Now, when you have a Head of Chambers like that then it feeds itself all the way through to chambers as a whole. A consensus emerges that senior people should support junior people.”

Simon Rainey QC had a similar experience. “We were all on three floors and we drifted in and out of people’s rooms all the time, borrowing books and asking them for help. The senior barristers would be interested in what one was doing and regularly impart practical advice on how to deal with certain judges and so on. Our working day was 20% talking and 80% actually doing the work.”

This level of team work and mutual co-operation was to bear fruit in 1987/88 following the Herald of Free Enterprise disaster in Zebrugge Harbour. In the inquiry into what had happened, its causes and who was to blame almost all the key roles were
filled by barristers from 2 Essex Court. In short, when it came to matters of the highest legal importance in the maritime world then the Government turned to 2 Essex Court to sort it out.

The same pattern was followed a couple of years later after the collision on the Thames of the Marchioness and the Bowbelle which resulted in the deaths of 51 people. In the inquiry which followed a number of members of chambers were involved including Nigel Teare QC (on behalf of the Treasury Solicitor), Simon Rainey QC and Simon Gault on behalf of the owners of the Bowbelle and Charles Haddon-Cave QC on behalf of the families of the victims.

The case of the herald of free enterprise

In March 1987 British merchant shipping suffered one of the worst disasters in post-War history with the capsize of the ferry Herald of Free Enterprise outside the Belgian port of Zeebrugge which resulted in the death of 193 people. Although the accident was due to the negligence of the boatswain (who was asleep when he should have been supervising the shutting of the bow door) it became clear that the wider cause was systemic poor communications and bad management which went right to the top of Townsend Thoresen, the ship’s owners.

2 Essex’s predominant position in the shipping field was reflected in the number of key roles played by current or former members of chambers including Barry Sheen – by now the Hon. Mr. Justice Sheen - in his capacity as Wreck Commissioner.

New member of chambers Luke Parsons was lead by Nigel Teare who was lead by Tony Clarke who in his turn was led by Bob Alexander in what became a landmark case in transforming the safety practices on roll-on, roll-off ferries.

“Our involvement in such depth in the Herald of Free Enterprise inquiry during 1987-89 was recognition of our status in the shipping world,” says Luke Parsons QC. “I became involved because when the issue of corporate manslaughter came up everyone else was so busy on the inquiry that there was no-one else left. In fact, in my first couple of years it took all my time up. It was the first occasion that I met the families of victims of a tragedy and, of course, it requires enormous sensitivity. The same thing was to happen twenty years later during the Nimrod inquiry [into the fatal fire on a RAF Nimrod in Afghanistan] when I dealt with the forty relatives who were closest to the people who died.”

Practical Lawyers

The experience of being a young barrister in this period in the late 1980s harked back to a previous generation, as Simon Rainey QC recalls.

“There were many old-fashioned gentlemen at the Bar at that time and one felt as a commercial barrister that one was joining – and was being made to feel welcome – in a very select club. But standards were high. One was expected to argue succinctly, without any flannel. Moreover in those days there was a horrible thing, Commercial Court Summons Day on Friday morning, when one had to do one’s little presentation – not privately as today – but in front of everyone else however senior they were and however able. There could be forty of them all judging you – and maybe saying things like ‘What on earth is he talking about?’ That was a real testing ground!”

Simon Rainey QC’s career rapidly got going. Coming from a legal family background he had romantic ideas about the Bar and he was thrilled when his very first case made the court reports. He was also one of the first barristers in 2 Essex to do work regularly for what became ‘Magic Circle’ law firms.

“I was the spearhead for the breakthrough into commodities thanks to the work I did with Coward Chance and then Clifford Chance,” he recalls. “This arose out of an arbitration which I did before the Fine Sugar Association where there was a Coward Chance solicitor, John Bassindale, involved as adviser to the association. Anyway, he was so impressed by what I did that a couple of weeks later he sent me some work - and that was a great source of excitement amongst the clerks at that time.”
Simon Rainey QC emphasizes that his generation had learned from Tony Clarke and David Steel to be “Practical lawyers and I think that we have passed this on to our pupils. It’s our characteristic: ‘no nonsense, jacket off, roll up your sleeves and give advice as it comes’ approach is what sets us apart from other chambers. And I think that suited many firms of solicitors.”

The move to 4 Essex Court

With the growth in numbers in chambers it became necessary to find more office space to accommodate the new recruits. This was impossible within 2 Essex Court so a series of annexes was created, as Pauline Roberts recalls.

“In the 1990s a specialist aviation set in Bell Yard collapsed almost overnight. Arising out of that unfortunate development four of their eight aviation barristers joined us and thereby cemented our position in aviation. As a result of this and other organic growth we had to start taking on annexes all over the place - in Middle Temple Lane, Gough Square and Outer Temple. It wasn’t at all satisfactory given that we were trying to build coherence within Chambers.”

So by the early 1990s the options were examined for moving elsewhere. Understandably, there was a reluctance to move out of the Temple at that time because individual barristers were known by their Temple address. Plus, of course, there were advantages in being so close to the law courts. So it was a piece of good fortune that the neighbouring 4 Essex Court, Gordon Pollock’s set, decided (as Pauline Roberts puts it) ‘to be brave’ and move to a new building in Lincolns Inn Fields. This then released the whole of the building and the Inn was persuaded to allow chambers to move there provided that it gave up 2 Essex Court. “In fact we had wanted to have both 2 and 4 Essex Court but that just wasn’t possible,” recalls Pauline Roberts. “So the result for us was that we were able to reduce the satellite offices by one but we were still not all together which was a bit of a shame.”

In fact, the move coincided with David Steel taking over as Head of Chambers following the departure of Tony Clarke QC to the bench. (He went on to become Master of the Rolls, President of the Court of Appeal, Civil Division, Head of Civil Justice and then to Supreme Court Justice so became yet another very distinguished alumnus). Consequently chambers now adopted the trading name of ‘David Steel’s 4 Essex Court’ to distinguish itself from the original 4 Essex Court. (The business title though remained 2 Essex Court Ltd so there was plenty of scope for confusion).

“The move to 4 Essex Court gave us the luxury of three conference rooms and an arbitration room which represented a great advance on 2 Essex Court,” says Pauline Roberts. “By this time we were around 35 members and there was a strong feeling that we must keep on growing. In fact, there was a general view that ‘Big is beautiful’ at that time.” (It could be said that there still is).

Nonetheless during the course of Sir David Steel’s time as Head of Chambers the growth in numbers was more organic than planned. There were discussions about amalgamations with other sets but they were rejected. “It could be said that the only thing that happens when you become Head of Chambers is that people complain to you!” says Sir David with some wry amusement. “I had no agenda to enlarge the size of chambers but it happened nonetheless. Mind you, the benefits of growth are that you can spread the costs of overheads. Plus chambers was starting to become fairly corporate and we wanted to be able to offer an all-round service. That meant having people with a wide range of specialisms – insurance, air law and so on. In addition you wanted to be able to offer a team of people – and that was only achievable if you had a large group of people.”

David Steel champions London and the commercial bar

While Sir David Steel was Head of Chambers at 2 Essex he was also putting backbone into the commercial bar.

“I felt very unhappy that the commercial bar had no structure and hence in the early 1990s I was very much involved in creating COMBAR and was its first chairman,” he explains. “I felt that the commercial Bar should be giving a lead to the Bar generally so it was important for a commercial bar association to be created. It needed to be ambitions on the
international sphere and the first thing we did was to establish a North American Committee and that, I am pleased to say, has proved to be very worthwhile."

As a champion of London’s commercial Bar Sir David Steel was very clear about what the City had to offer.

“London has it all – the stock exchange, insurance, the judges and the lawyers,” he says. “Our judges are unique. The elite chambers in London are responsible for attracting the bulk of the work to London and make it a great money earner. The international business community is generally happy with the English common law adversarial system and values it over the continental civil law system.”

Moreover Sir David was a modernizer in more ways than one. “A large percentage of commercial barristers felt that wearing wigs and gowns did not go well with our international clients in addition to being hot and uncomfortable in their own right. As a result in the commercial courts we simply stopped wearing them. And the judges themselves agreed and declared that they would not have wigs and gowns in their courts.”

Time to go ‘Dry’

The new name of David Steel’s 4 Essex Court and the move into new premises provoked some soul-searching about chambers’ identity. “In the 1990s the big issue for us was ‘What’s our brand?’” recalls Luke Parsons QC. “Was it us as individuals? Or was it the chambers as a whole? Well the answer is that it is symbiotic – there are two brands – for the individual and collectively – and they feed off each other.”

“There are huge benefits in having people in chambers with the same interests but different levels of experience. Problems move in cycles and if you are dealing with something which is unfamiliar then the chances are that there will be people in chambers who have faced it and will give you the benefit of their advice. For as long as I have been here the atmosphere in chambers has been such that you can go and chat and share questions and experiences with other members – and partly because it is a very successful chambers there isn’t a feeling of defensiveness or that people won’t support each other.”

This level of mutual support became very important as new technology began to change the shape of the work in the shipping field. As Pauline Roberts pointed out, “The wet shipping began to dry up because the new ‘black box’ technology documented exactly what ships had done, for example, during collisions. So there were fewer disputes about the facts and those kinds of cases tend to settle long before they reached court.”

Sir David Steel was at the sharp end of this. “It became necessary to extend our range of expertise when Admiralty work went into decline because of improved standards of navigation. There were fewer ships and improved technology so the number of collisions reduced. In addition litigation became more expensive so the smaller claims tended to be settled.”

The Iran-Iraq War generated a lot of new work but Luke Parsons QC was aware of by how much things were starting to change. “During the 1990s our shipping work expanded into new areas of dry work such as charter parties, bills of lading and so on. We started to take on some of the Lloyds litigation and we were also joined be people doing broader commercial work.”

Amongst those was the aviation group from 5 Bell Yard including Rob Lawson QC – the people who had added to chambers’ accommodation problems. “The break up of my previous chambers was very traumatic because in those days barristers did not move,” he explains. “However, it all turned out very well for me. Charles Haddon-Cave and Geoffrey Kinley were here doing cargo work and passenger claims against airlines so I was happy to be with them and I knew that the clerks here would understand my world.”

So despite the decline in traditional admiralty work Sir Nigel Teare, who took over as Head of Chambers in 1998, felt that 4 Essex Court had a good future ahead of it. “When I became Head of Chambers in succession to David Steel in 1998 our numbers were in the early 20s,” he says. “We were still in an expansionist mode and wanted to develop from our existing
Admiralty work into wider commercial activity. But I was continuing what my predecessors had already started. Growth was achieved by a combination of taking on good pupils and people joining us because they wanted to be part of an expanding and successful shipping set. We were the new force. Other chambers had been ahead of us and 2 Essex Court had been mostly focused on the Admiralty side. But when we were in 4 Essex Court that began to change as we built up a broader-based shipping practice.

Follow the money

Yet despite the optimism there was a feeling that financially chambers was not doing as well as it could. As Luke Parsons QC observes, “Our income in 1999 was £5M and it had been at that level for the previous four years. Basically we were stuck on a plateau.”

In response to this Nigel Teare set up a number of committees including a strategy committee. Amongst its members, by virtue of being the Head of Pupillage, was Luke Parsons QC. His view was that in terms of human resource management 4 Essex was still in the nineteenth century – but that people were open to change.

“We instituted a number of new initiatives including targets for the clerks, appraisals and bonuses,” he says. “We brought in people to train us in how to do appraisals because no-one had done anything like this before. Initially the clerks were very nervous about the appraisal process. But of course appraisal is not an excuse to be critical, it’s an opportunity to improve. So when we had appraisals we could say – ‘Look here are areas you need to improve on. How can we help you?’ It was a supportive environment and we paid for additional training for our staff.”

The introduction of the appraisal system had an almost immediate and dramatic impact on chambers’ income. The target was to increase income over the course of a year by one million pounds. And if the clerks achieved that they would get a 10% bonus on their salary. In fact they increased it by £1.5M. By 2002 income had risen to £8M and it went on growing from there.

Most importantly it provided the financial basis which was to make possible the biggest development in the history of chambers – the move into Quadrant House.

The search for new accommodation

Although the move to 4 Essex Court eased the problems of 2 Essex Court it was quickly apparent that it was not the solution that chambers had been looking for. “To be spread out over four buildings was unsatisfactory,” admits Sir Nigel Teare. So the long search started again for a building which could, at long last, unite chambers.

Help was sought from Middle Temple and the timing was perfect. The Inn had acquired and planned to redevelop what is now the Quadrant House site. The buildings had been neglected for years and were in a very poor state. Moreover the various structures had somehow to be welded together to create an integrated whole. But the potential – looking on to Fleet Street but still firmly in Middle Temple – was enormous.

“We had been looking for a building for quite some time and when the opportunity to acquire the building in Fleet Street came up we were very keen to get it,” says Sir Nigel Teare. “We were in a competitive situation bidding for it and we knew that the rent was going to be much more expensive than what we were used to. And there were complications such as the structures being owned by Middle Temple but the rear access courtyard being owned by Inner Temple so that had to be sorted out.

“But the prospect of Quadrant House came for us at just the right time and we had to go for it. The scale was bigger than we needed initially but history showed that we increasingly required more space. It was an opportunity for us to establish a much bigger presence than we had ever had before. It was worrying on occasions and the refurbishment was a challenge. But it all proved very worthwhile in the end.”
Preparing for the move

The background to the move, however, was critical to its success. In effect the preparations had been going on for the previous five years including the changes to working systems and the incentivisation of the clerks. The rent and rates on Quadrant House were to be £1M per annum so the target was to boost chambers’ income to £10M before the move.

This was obviously a major challenge but then Lionel Persey QC and five of his colleagues from a rival chambers came across to 4 Essex. “It was like the cavalry turning up!” says Luke Parsons QC, “And suddenly the finances started to look viable.”

In fact, Tony Clarke had tried without success to lure across Lionel Persey some years before. But now the timing was perfect. “I was delighted to hear after we had arrived that we were going to be moving into Quadrant House,” says Lionel Persey QC. “Gordon Armstrong the Chambers Director and Senior Clerk at the time was very good at mixing people up and integrating the new arrivals so I was even more delighted when he told me ‘You’ll be the senior man in charge of getting the building right.’ It was a good way of becoming involved in chambers right away.”

In fact, a small team of Luke Parsons, Rob Lawson and Lionel Persey made up the building committee with the responsibility for overseeing the design and reconstruction of the new building.

“I was pleased to accept the challenge because I am interested in architecture and had personally restored two houses so I knew a little about what would be involved,” says Lionel Persey QC. “It required a lot of co-ordination and consultation with the Inn. Fortunately, I already knew well the outstandingly sensible Master of Middle Temple, Stanley Burnton, and it was all handled in a good-humored way.”

Initial designs had been drawn up under the auspices of Middle Temple but the building committee was not especially enthused by them. So chambers hired its own architects to tweak the designs including improving the design for disabled access and shifting the lift shaft. These involved extra costs which were paid for by chambers. “I made a presentation to the benchers of Middle Temple and showed them a model of what they were planning to do and it went down well,” explains Lionel Persey QC. “It was an intrinsically difficult challenge trying to integrate these four buildings each on different levels. But what we have ended up with is perhaps the most impressive chambers architecturally in London.”

A new beginning

Although the move to Quadrant House drew on 4 Essex’s deep roots it represented in some respects a new start. The rent was ‘horrendous’ but when chambers took over the building it was one third empty so there was plenty of scope for growth - and that was clearly a very important factor.

“When we moved in here we had a new name,” explains Luke Parsons QC. “So that gave us the opportunity to organize a whole series of launch parties to introduce ourselves afresh to the shipping solicitors, the P&I clubs, the banks and the insurance companies. It had a big impact on the way we were seen by our clients. We’d gone from the normal Dickensian squalor to this quite amazing building. And, moreover, the whole building was ours. It represented quite a statement about who we are and what we were about.”

The amount of space available meant that first class conference rooms and facilities for clients were at last available.

“Quadrant House crystallized chambers as a more unified, coherent entity which was forward looking and would be responsive to clients and what they needed,” says Luke Parsons QC. ‘New name, new building and above all everyone together at last.’

“We are now one of the two leading sets in shipping across all its aspects and I think that we are also regarded as a proper commercial set with strong practices in a number of areas. This had been the plan and the ambition of chambers for many years. Yet it had never been realised before. The move to Quadrant House drew a line on the past. It enabled it to happen.”