

Member Spotlight: Stephen Wilson QC

Cruise Control - The Journey From Gray's Inn to Paradise



Stephen Wilson QC is a Partner and head of GrahamThompson's Litigation and Dispute Resolution Practice Group in the Turks and Caicos Islands ("TCI").

Stephen has appeared in many of the TCI's headline cases involving disputes in the tourism and hospitality, banking, real estate, insurance and construction/building sectors. He has a broad range of experience with matters in the Admiralty, Shipping and Aviation, Banking and Finance, Corporate and Commercial, Employment and Labour, Insurance, Intellectual Property, and Property and Development sectors.

Stephen's Corporate and Commercial work has included complex corporate and commercial disputes comprising multi-jurisdictional claims, multi-party actions, contract breaches, and insolvencies and liquidations involving local and international parties, shareholder disputes, and corporate reorganizations and restructurings. Stephen is recognised by Chambers and Partners as a Band 1 ranked attorney in the Chambers Global General Business Law – Dispute Resolution sector. He has also been recognised by Chambers Global with their rankings for "Foreign Expertise" and "Expertise Based Abroad".

When Stephen Wilson first saw Tom Cruise star as cock-sure barman Bryan Flanagan in Cocktail, little did he know that one day he'd follow in the Hollywood star's footsteps. But instead of Jamaica, the successful London barrister and Liverpool FC fanatic headed to the Turks and Caicos Islands to flip his cocktail mixers.

Until one fateful evening in a London pub, Liverpool-born Stephen had built a solid career as a barrister. He'd taken the tried and tested path of countless others before him; studying for a law degree at University College London, then a postgraduate Bar Professional Training Course at the prestigious Inns of Court School of Law. After this he took a 12-month pupillage at Strand Chambers to qualify as a practising barrister.

"I had a good career and hadn't really thought much about the future," Stephen recalls. "That was 2000. I'd just landed a big case in the High Court and was on course to make a decent amount of money. One day I was chatting with a friend who was looking to invest in overseas properties and he had just attended an international property investments show at Marble Arch.

"While there he watched a pitch for real estate investors in the Turks and Caicos Islands and on that fateful evening, he made the pitch to me

in our local boozer in Maida Vale where we both lived. Later that night, as the drinks continued to flow in my apartment, we came up with a mad but brilliant idea: we were going to emulate Tom Cruise and Bryan Brown in Cocktail and go to a tropical island, own a bar and fall asleep to the sound of the waves.

"That was a Sunday night. I arrived in TCI on the following Friday. By the following Saturday, we'd put a deposit down on three condos, pre-construction. Later we bought a piece of land upon which we built the first Irish pub on the Islands."

It was soon clear to Stephen, however, that he wanted more than just property investments. He wanted to live on the islands permanently, but to become a resident he needed a regular job. "When I came out here, I was absolutely blown away by the beauty of the place," he says. "We have the world's best beach. It is utterly stunning. Initially, I wasn't necessarily moving out to continue to practice law. I saw property development as a business opportunity. But you can't just turn up here. You need to have a job, a profession and a work permit. So the law was my way in."

Stephen was smitten by the law from an early age. He remembers watching TV shows *Crown Court* and *Rumpole of the Bailey* with his Grandparents, and the idea of the law as a career started to take

shape: "Back then at school subjects like metalwork and woodwork were compulsory.

I realised quickly I was useless with my hands and the only way I thought I was going to make any money was out of my mouth."

He asked his Mum and Dad what good jobs were available for people who could talk a lot and without hesitation they both replied: "A lawyer; speak to your Auntie Sue, she'll help you." Stephen's Auntie Sue was a social worker and worked closely with lawyers. Within weeks she'd helped him get a few days' work experience with a local Liverpool barrister. Stephen loved the job and thought: "Yes, this is great, I'm going to do this for a living."

"I said to my Dad, 'I'm going to be a barrister so I can show that woman!'"

At his school, Gateacre Community Comprehensive, the careers teacher thought otherwise, however. When Stephen told her of his plans to be a barrister, she bluntly said he'd never make the grade: "You do realise what school you got to? There are plenty of jobs at Ford's (referring to the Halewood Ford plant, the local big employer)." But instead of resigning himself to a life on the Ford production line, her words helped drive him to succeed in his chosen career path: "After those pearls of wisdom from the career teacher I said to my Dad, 'I'm going to be a barrister so I can show that woman!'"

And the rest, as they say, is history.

The focus of the economy of the TCI is predominantly on "uber high end tourism" rather than financial services, which is more a specialism on the Cayman Islands and the Bahamas. The main investors on the Turks and Caicos tend to be Canadians from Ontario and Americans from the New York Tri-State area; very wealthy people owning third or fourth homes with the current trend being the building of \$10 million+ villas which can rent for amounts of \$8k-12k per night.

As an attorney in the TCI, Stephen's client focus is largely on litigation, civil and commercial, as well as international arbitration. And just because his practice is on a 17-mile long Caribbean island, it doesn't mean life is dull or predictable.

He says: "Looking at the cases I'm currently working on, I'm assisting solicitors and counsel in London who are seeking to enforce a High Court judgment of over \$300 million against a corporate vehicle in TCI that holds assets in Guernsey. I am also involved in the winding-up of a TCI company that was owned by two Bahamian companies, and was itself a holding company of a Haitian company that owns, amongst other things, the largest privately owned commercial port in Haiti. We had a trial that lasted over 20 days that involved issues of Bahamian law, TCI law and Haitian law, which is based on the French Napoleonic Code." Nothing dull there then.

Stephen estimates that his practice is split roughly 50/50 between domestic and international cases. Local cases include disputes between neighbours, employment disputes and issues involving the hospitality industry. One of the growth areas of his practice in recent years has been around strata titles law: "Many of the hotels here are what's known as condohotels, where a developer builds luxury apartment complexes that are run as hotels. Each apartment is individually owned by somebody and there's been a lot of litigation around an owner's ability to rent his or her unit on a short-term basis, either at all or other than through a designated rental manager. One of the cases that I was involved in went all the way up to the Privy Council in London."

But living on the Turks and Caicos Islands is not all work and no play – indeed, far from it. Shortly after first arriving Stephen got involved in the local football leagues, setting up his own team, Provo-pool F.C., which is a hybrid of Providenciales and Liverpool, his home island and his favourite football team respectively. Along with playing and managing the team, he also trained with the men's national team for three World Cup campaigns and was team manager in the campaign to qualify for Brazil 2014.

"People do talk about getting rock fever and need to get off the rock now and again. But I'm fortunate that my work takes me off regularly".

Elsewhere, Stephen is also a keen supporter and active participant in the TCI Friends of the Art Foundation and even stars in Christmas pantos. He admits you have to keep busy if you're going to stay on a small island for any length of time: "People do talk about getting rock fever and need to get off the rock now and again. But I'm fortunate that my work takes me off regularly. We opened this office in 2012, but the firm is 70 years old, first established in the Bahamas. So I attend partners' meetings in the Bahamas and work on cases there. I also have an apartment in Miami that I regularly visit."

"My proudest achievement is being made a QC. That's the peak of my professional career"

So what about the future? Despite his settled life on a paradise island, Stephen is always looking for new challenges: "My proudest achievement is being made a QC. That's the peak of my professional career. I'm always looking for a challenge to take on, for instance more cases involving international arbitration that could take me anywhere, or becoming the most unlikely E.G.O.T. winner."

But wherever his work takes him, Stephen will always return to the Turks and Caicos Islands, where he'll sip his evening cocktail to the sound of the waves on the most beautiful beach in the world.

Not bad for a kid from Gateacre Community Comprehensive School otherwise destined to work on the Ford production line.

Stephen Wilson QC

IR Global's exclusive Commercial Litigation member in the Turks and Caicos Islands

grahamthompson.com | sw@gtclaw.com | +1 649 339 4130

GrahamThompson ("GT") prides itself on its unique combination of expert legal skills and real-world experience in working out effective solutions to complex problems. With 70 years of continuous history and the first-rate balance between seasoned practitioners and dynamic young lawyers, GT is excellence-driven in every way and, accordingly, well known as a leading Bahamian and TCI law firm.

