

Corporate lawyer John Flynn worked at Dickinson Dees for 30 years before leaving to head up new arrival DWF. He tells PETER JACKSON why

IN the sober and somewhat sedate world of corporate law, John Flynn has long stood out as probably one of the more laid-back and irreverent characters. He has been sporting tie-less open-neck shirts long before that was deemed acceptable. And clearly Flynn, 52, revels in putting a distance between himself and the more stuffed shirt legal image. Only half joking, he tells me: "You can get carried away calling law firms exciting. I find them incredibly dull, believe me."

We meet in the offices of DWF at Great North House on Newcastle's Sandyford Road. The offices are the former HQ of Crutes, with which DWF recently merged to establish its North East presence. Flynn was recruited from Newcastle-based Dickinson-Dees, the North East's biggest law firm, to head up the new office as executive partner. This was generally regarded as being something of a coup on the part of DWF. Flynn may have a slightly free spirit image but he is, and has long been, a serious player in corporate dealmaking. He has more than 30 years of experience in major mergers, acquisitions, corporate reorganisations and joint venture projects. Made a partner with Dickinson Dees in 1986, he advised on the £300m acquisition by Arriva of British Buses and the £513m sale of AAS by Arriva.

Lawyers are now far less buttoned up - literally - than they were only 15 years ago. Flynn, who is tie-less and with a day's growth of beard when we meet, does not stand out from his contemporaries as much as he once did. He has not, however, lost his capacity to surprise and his departure from Dickinson Dees - which he joined as a 22-year-old trainee from law college - for DWF caused more than a few raised eyebrows in the legal world.

He says: "I was 30 years at Dickinson Dees and very proud of the part I played in modernising it. I think it's a strong business but it was just time for me to go and take on a new challenge."

He describes how he was headhunted by DWF around this time last year.

"Dickinson Dees knew DWF were thinking of opening a Newcastle office, so I went along as a spy for Dickinson Dees to find out what they were up to. I met with them and they seemed like a really good bunch of guys, with a plan.

"I was very open with Dickinson Dees and I told them that I was going to see them [DWF] and that I was getting interested."

DWF has offices throughout the UK, employs some 1,400 people, and has clients including Sony and Halfords. It



LAI D BACK John Flynn, executive partner at DWF law firm

was an attractive proposition for Flynn. "This gives me an opportunity to play on a national stage. It's very exciting. It's a very young, positive, forward thinking, energetic organisation," he says. "There are masses of national opportunities that DWF has yet to take."

He has no national responsibilities, but DWF brought him in to help convert some of their bigger clients into annuity clients to present significant and on-going work opportunities. He says that, unlike some other national firms, DWF is not fixated on London or even international work in search of greater profits.

"DWF has a really distinctive culture. In the first partners' meeting I went to, I was taken by how young they all were and how outgoing they all were, and there was an energy in the room. I sat at this partners' conference for four hours and after about three they did do a boring slot on figures...and I was actually slightly relieved then that I could have my traditional 40 winks.

"One of their core values is innovation. They want to be innovative. Everybody says that, but they'll call a meeting to talk about how they can innovate and nobody does. But at DWF, one partner talked

about innovation and then gave two excellent examples of how they are innovating in the insurance business.

"That's how cultures are made. It's not people sitting around saying: 'What should our culture be?'. It's people getting off their backsides and doing things, which then throws the gauntlet down. I've got a senior partner who talks about innovation and innovates, and he's challenging me to match him and that creates a fabulous culture."

Other people came with him from Dickinson Dees, including banking and finance expert Deborah Kirtley, and that is important to him.

"DWF is a meritocracy. I have to perform here. I didn't have to perform at Dicky-Dees, I could rest on my laurels because I'd done a lot of stuff. Here there's a meritocracy and if the meritocracy works, people can do well."

His new firm is ambitious. Three years ago its stated aim was to become a Top 30 UK law firm - by turnover - with plans to increase its revenue to more than £100m.

"You might say: 'Why, and what does that do for you?'. It's a flag. It's a way of defining that you want to grow, and that's because bigger clients will use bigger organisations. Its new stated aim is to be a Top 20 law firm. It

became a Top 30 law firm faster than it set out to achieve."

Flynn sings the praises of DWF's managing partner, 43-year-old Andrew Leatherland, who has driven the firm's recent growth. In the six months to October 2011, the firm posted a 14% increase in revenue, taking the total to more than £45m for the year to date.

Not that, Flynn hastens to add, there's any point in growth for growth's sake, and he recounts one story to emphasise that.

"Andrew Leatherland said to me: 'We are going to grow'. After he told me how big they were and how fast they had grown, I said to him: 'Do you know we grow leeks in the North East. We grow great big leeks and they are massive, but they taste awful'.

"Andrew laughed at that. But he did say, the firm is not just about fast growth. It's about fast, quality growth. It's about looking at the profitability of the firm as well.

"That's not just about lawyers being rich. To attract the best lawyers, you

“I was taken by how young and outgoing they all were and there was an energy in the room

have to be successful at many things and have a firm which is successful at attracting good clients and good work because that's what lawyers want to do. The by-product of that is financial success. Obviously, if you want to attract talent, the talent looks at one of the ingredients for a successful career which is the amount of money you earn. Yes, they want to be part of something which is ambitious and growing and a meritocracy but they want to make some money as well."

So DWF had its attractions, but there were also reasons for him wanting to leave Dickinson Dees. It was no secret that he had been something of a Young Turk in the firm, driving for change but feeling frustrated. Had he lost that fire in his belly?

"Absolutely, it went for a while because I became the Old Turk, which can be faintly ridiculous."

But he doesn't criticise his old firm and pays tribute to what it taught him.

"Some of the things I bring from Dickinson Dees are very good - a commitment to quality, a belief that you have to do things right, that we don't make things up as we go along. When DWF talked to me about helping them build something in Newcastle, we agreed that the first

word in my business plan should be quality. We need quality people pointed at quality clients to do quality work."

DWF's arrival in the North East and Flynn's move are symptomatic of wider changes in the legal profession, with increased consolidation and a drive to create bigger firms with national reach. There has also been the recession, which has accelerated the process of change. This has been particularly evident, as Flynn observes, among law firms which are not doing well.

"A lot of law firms got complacent. There was a lot of fat on them and most of them have shed that fat. But there's a feeling and I think it's probably true, that to get the best work in law you are going to have to be part of a larger organisation and you are going to have to have better connections and better reach. So law firms which occupy an exclusively regional position are going to find it more and more difficult to attract the kind of clients you need to attract to fuel that sort of virtuous circle of bringing in younger people, energising younger people and rewarding younger people as they move through your organisation.

"There's a ceiling in the region. This region seems to suffer more in a

recession than other regions do. It's more heavily dependent on public sector work than other regions are. Strategically, organisations are looking at where the growth is and how do they grow. They can't do that in this region so they need to look outside the region. That is a difficult strategy to execute."

And yet, as he concedes, DWF has come into the region and it will seek to attract talented people from other firms who are perhaps looking for those wider opportunities.

"What I'm looking to do is have conversations with talented young people who want to be part of something successful and to enjoy the fruits of their success as they go forward, rather than sitting waiting to occupy a pair of dead man's shoes."

However, he accepts that there's no denying that times are hard, the market is slow and will be for the next three or four years.

Until the downturn ends there will be few deals.

But he is ambitious for the Newcastle office of DWF and his medium-to-long term objective is for it to be the region's leading law firm.

"We will grow as fast as we can and we will take on young quality people who are prepared to show initiative and who are happy to thrive in a

meritocracy. That's what we are looking for."

Flynn is a fiercely patriotic North Easterner. He was born and bred in Whickham as the son of a factory worker, and even his first holiday didn't stray far from the family home.

"It was so embarrassing. I was 11 or 12 years old, and my mum and dad packed us all on to a train and took us all of 20 miles for a week in a bed and breakfast in Whitley Bay."

At Dickinson Dees he was a key figure behind the Services Challenge, an initiative launched in the late 1990s to encourage North East businesses to do business in the region. Despite its national footprint, he argues that DWF will be a strong regional force.

"DWF envisage their regional offices being built in the region, of the region, for the region. People want to belong to something which serves something identifiable like a regional business community. People take pride from that. If you get yanked down to Birmingham for two weeks to

“You can get carried away calling law firms exciting. I find them incredibly dull, believe me

work for some other organisation you have never heard of before, I don't think there's any pride in that.

He describes how he wrote to one of the regional hospital's NHS trusts after it had awarded some PFI work to rebuild Hexham General Hospital to a London firm.

"At Dickinson Dees we could have done that job standing on our heads. I said in my letter that my kids were both born in Hexham General, and don't you think that's the sort of thing that feeds through into the work that we do? I live in Corbridge, I could drive past it, I could take pride in it, it somehow belongs to me."

He will presumably be able to influence that. Is he pleased to be, at last, captain of a ship?

"Actually, that's a very complicated question because I was captain. I wasn't called captain of the ship down there [Dickinson Dees], but it went where I said, most of the time."

And has he got that fire back in his belly? "Yes, it's rejuvenating. I'm going to spend the back-end of my career building something that's going to be really exciting."

John Flynn being John Flynn, he adds: "It's only lawyers at the end of the day, and just because I can't take it seriously doesn't mean that somebody shouldn't."

QUESTIONNAIRE

What car do you drive? A very old VW Touareg

What's your favourite restaurant? Colombe d'Or in the South of France

Who or what makes you laugh? Other people's laughter

What's your favourite book? Caesar's Lake by Jessie Flynn

What was the last album you bought? The Best of Ian Dury and the Blockheads

What's your ideal job, other than the one you've got? Keeper of the Pearly Gates

If you had a talking parrot, what's the first thing you would teach it to say? If you can't say nothin' nice, don't say nothin' at all

What's your greatest fear? That the world is taken over by accountants ... too late!

What's the best piece of business advice you have ever received? Be careful what you wish for

And the worst? Commercial property prices in Newcastle will never go down

What's your poison? Claret and Rioja Alta

What newspapers do you read, other than The Journal? The Times

How much was your first pay packet and what was it for? £2 for a week's tatty picking

How do you keep fit? Running. A Great North Run entry is the best value purchase you can make. It keeps me motivated and fit all year for less than £1 a week

What's your most irritating habit? Channel surfing, apparently

What's your biggest extravagance? Potatoes Dauphinoise

Which historical or fictional character do you most identify with or admire? Robin Hood (it's the tights!)

Which four famous people would you most like to dine with? Cleopatra, Julius Caesar, Frank Carson, Bob Dylan

How would you like to be remembered? As a loving dad



DINNER GUESTS Bob Dylan and Cleopatra, played here by Elizabeth Taylor