

regionalprofile



Harris Wheeler Lawyers was set up in 1892 by Henry Harris to specialise in conveyancing and company law. Harry Wheeler then joined the firm to complete his articles and was admitted as a solicitor in 1913. He went on to serve as an alderman and mayor and was instrumental in planning both the Newcastle city hall and civic centre, which is now named Wheeler Place. He was also awarded an Order of the British Empire (OBE) in 1961.

The firm has expanded since its inception and now has an office located in Toronto, a town within the city of Lake Macquarie. The Harris family connection has also been maintained at the Toronto office. Partner John Williams is the great grandson of the original founder and the fourth generation of his family to practise law at the firm.

The firm employs more than 30 staff; five partners, three senior associates, six solicitors, two in-house licensed conveyancers, a special counsel and associate and support staff.

The firm's main practice areas are commercial, government and personal services, such as wills and probate, buying and selling property and criminal law.

Matthew Smith, managing partner of Harris Wheeler Lawyers, says the firm is not feeling the ill-effects of the current economic climate, with the workload busier than ever.

"I think that's probably the fact that we're not just a personal services law firm. We've got a broad spread of clients ... We focus on developing strategic relationships with our major clients and we offer a range of value-added services such as staff secondment, news alerts, training seminars, monthly reports, attendance at board meetings and we're developing an internet connective for major clients," he says.

"So we're probably more flexible than the major capital city law firms. We don't have their cost structures and large overheads, yet we still offer a pretty sophisticated level of services."

Smith adds that the firm is involved with a number of significant projects and working in Newcastle does not mean lawyers simply deal with wills and conveyancing.

"[For example] we're the legal service provider for Newcastle airport – we've negotiated all their contracts with the key stakeholders out at the Newcastle airport – which is one of the fastest-growing regional airports in Australia," he says.

"We've worked on major leases with the Department of Defence and secured all the major ground leases for aviation and aerospace tenants out at Newcastle airport such as Boeing, Virgin Blue and Jetstar. We act for major engineering companies and they work nationally and internationally for major mining contracts – so we get to negotiate contracts with Rio Tinto and BHP Billiton."

But it's not all work at Harris Wheeler Lawyers. Last year, as a part of the community project Walk for Water Aid, Smith, in conjunction with client Hunter Water Corporation and other businesspeople, walked the Kokoda Trail in Papua New Guinea. Water Aid is an international charity designed to provide sanitation and health options in third world communities and more than \$50,000 was raised from the event.

Smith says Newcastle, as the largest regional centre in NSW, offers better work/life balance than Sydney. The firm services big clients such as Hunter New England Health, which has a catchment area of 840 000 people and an annual spend of \$1.3 billion, while still offering proximity to beaches, vineyards, Lake Macquarie, Port Stephens and a commute by foot or bicycle.

By Sarah Sharples

About Harris Wheeler Lawyers

Travel by Staff

Frequency: Varies depending on client

Airlines: Singapore Airlines and Aeropelican for Newcastle to Sydney
Destinations: United States, Europe, Asia, Sydney, Victoria and Queensland

Document Management

Courier: TNT

DX: 7814 (Newcastle) and 7632 (Toronto)

Physical storage: A large storage facility on site, which includes secured deeds

Electronic storage: Axiom management system. The firm tries to have a paperless management system including incoming faxes, emails and digital dictation.

Knowledge Management

Technology used: Electronic legal library with CCH, Thomson Reuters, LexisNexis, Austlii and the internet. Staff members are also equipped with Blackberry devices

General Manager: Allen Hattaway has extensive experience in implementing legal practice management systems

Researcher: A number of clerks undertake research

Practice Management

Payroll/Accounting System: BHL Axiom

HR Management: Led by General Manager Allen Hattaway and Financial Controller Doris Cameron, with the support of another staff member

IT System Hardware: Document production software Informs which works with Axiom

Outsourcing Providers

Accounting Services: PDY Maxim, an external firm of accountants locally based

HR / IT Services: Forsythes

about newcastle:

Population: 141, 752

Established: 1804

Location: 162km NNE of Sydney

Major industry: Health care (15.4%)

Main occupation: Professionals (24.1%)

District: Hunter Vally Region

