

## Law

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Fiona Shackleton, “one of the leading family lawyers of all time”, with her client Paul McCartney. Right: Helen Ward

# Rated by their rivals: the celebrity divorce lawyers

From the Steel Magnolia to the tigress who never sleeps, a survey reveals the lawyers their opponents would want on their side, writes **Frances Gibb**

If a top divorce lawyer is embroiled in a marriage breakdown, which of their rivals would they pick to advise them? The secret of “the lawyer’s lawyer” in the world of celebrity divorce is revealed this week in a survey of the top UK family lawyers in *Spear’s* magazine.

Based on interviews with 60 leading lawyers handling high-end cases, the survey comes up with a Top 50 and a Top 10, which include Fiona Shackleton and her longstanding opponent, Helen Ward (Lady Ward by virtue of her marriage to the retired judge Sir Alan Ward). Baroness Shackleton, of the law firm Payne Hicks Beach, acted for Prince Charles in his divorce from Diana, Princess of Wales; Sir Paul McCartney in his split from Heather Mills; for the Duke of York, the Aga Khan and many more.

Ward, of Stewarts Law, has an equally high-profile clientele, including the film director Guy Ritchie, in his divorce from the singer Madonna, and Bernie Ecclestone, the Formula One tycoon, in his divorce from his second wife, Slavia. Other clients include Lord Lloyd-Webber and Countess Spencer.

Yet if their clients are well-known, the lawyers are less so. Discretion is their touchstone: Baroness Shackleton never gives interviews and Ward rarely does. Neither talks about their cases. Their charging rates will be at least £650 an hour — probably more.

What do rivals say about them? Shackleton “is not only in the top ten, but in the top two” and “one of the best family lawyers of her generation”. One respondent calls her “one of the leading family lawyers of all time”. Known as the Steel Magnolia, Shackleton’s

reputation hinges on technical skills and imagination, the survey says. “She has outstanding judgment and flair and cuts to the chase,” another lawyer says.

Ward, in turn, is “the best lawyer in London”, according to Lewis Marks, a leading family QC. She is revered for her “discretion, forensic prowess and the staggering amount of time and energy” she devotes to clients. “A mind like a jewelled watch and a wise and honest heart — a very rare combination,” one lawyer notes. “Once on your case, she is a tigress who never sleeps.”

There has been an explosion in the numbers of family lawyers, from about 50 two decades ago to 500 now. How-

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ever, the focus of *Spear’s*, in line with its market, is on those who undertake the biggest cases, working with “high-network” individuals “from Hollywood A-listers and Arab billionaires to nobility, City nobility and blue-chip entrepreneurs”. It does not look at the hundreds of top-quality lawyers who act daily for “ordinary” individuals.

Who else makes the top ten? In alphabetical order: Catherine Bedford, of Harbottle & Lewis; Sandra Davis, of Mishcon de Reya; Stephen Foster and Emma Hatley, of Stewarts Law; Frances Hughes, of Hughes Fowler Carruthers; William Longrigg, of Charles Russell Speechlys; William Massey, of Farrer & Co; and Diana Parker, of Withers.

Bedford is labelled as a “warm and

engaging Canadian who is not afraid to get tough when necessary” while Davis, a veteran of family law for more than 25 years, is “a fantastic lawyer who does her utmost for clients”.

Foster is praised for leading Stewart Law’s phalanx of family lawyers to the top of the pack and as an “intelligent and a superbly tactical litigator”, while his colleague Hatley has a “no nonsense approach, mixed with charm”.

Hughes is a “fighter” with a reputation for “fierce litigation prowess”, but with a “calm and gentle manner”, while Longrigg is “likeable, calm and considered, direct in manner and easy to do business with”. Massey is “a complete star: astute, incisive, creative and all-round excellent” while Parker is a “highly sophisticated individual who never lets her ego get in the way of a settlement”.

The survey also includes the top most cited family barristers: Deborah Eaton, QC; Michael Glaser (a solicitor turned barrister); Lewis Marks, QC; Lucy Stone, QC, and Alex Verdan, QC.

Lawyers told the survey they were optimistic about Brexit’s impact on London as the divorce capital of the world: 96 per cent believe that it will retain its crown. Reasons for that include the attractiveness of the UK system to the financially weaker party, its location and language. Some warn that a hard Brexit could see an exodus from the City to other financial centres.

Christopher Jackson, the head of the *Spear’s* research unit, said it was clear that “the crème de la crème of the capital’s family law profession...are extremely confident that even in a worst-case scenario Brexit, London’s status as the divorce capital of the world is secure.”