

# Paris Smith on board with Williams Shipping

Law firm Paris Smith and its client Williams Shipping are both stalwarts of Southampton's business community. *The Business Magazine* found out how their relationship developed and how the Williams family has steered the company for 125 years

Colin Williams modestly suggests that the success of his family's marine and shipping business has been due to "a lot of luck". But then, you make your own luck. The family's determination and acumen over five generations is evident as it celebrates its 125th anniversary in 2019.

Williams, a director, and his brother Eric, the chairman, run the business set up by their great grandfather. Eric's two sons and Colin's son are also directors. Colin Williams recalls dashing back from school to his father's office and sitting in on company meetings as a youngster.

"We all genuinely want to be part of the business. My father loved the sea, as do I. Ours is a 24/7 business, so it is constantly discussed at home," he said.

If luck has played a part in the company's success, so has hard work. Conducting research for a book celebrating the company's anniversary Colin Williams was reminded how hard it had been at times.

"I hadn't appreciated how difficult it was for my father," he said. "He was running the business very much on his own for a lot of the time. Nowadays, we have a strong management team who we can share things with. And communication today is quicker and easier. When there was nasty weather in the Solent my father couldn't just pick up the phone to check on his crews. He'd go down to the port and wait to make sure all our boats returned safely. After a severe storm in 1955 smashed up five of our vessels in the harbour we might have lost the business."



Eric and Colin Williams

## Shared outlook

The relationship with Paris Smith spans decades. "Colin recently showed me an old bank statement dating from before World War Two that included a £34 payment to Paris Smith," said Peter Taylor, managing partner at the firm.

"We firmly believe in what Williams Shipping stands for. The family dynamic is wonderful. We are doing increasingly more work with Williams, which we thoroughly enjoy."

Paris Smith provides mainly commercial support to Williams in a team led by partner Crispin Dick. This includes reviewing its customer contracts to assess if they continue to be fit for purpose.

Williams said: "We have many long-standing customers so it's a good discipline to regularly review their contracts. As the business expands and

moves into new areas we expect this type of work for Paris Smith will increase."

The firm also advises Williams on its property leases and negotiates long-term leases for the company. This is another area of legal support that is increasing.

Discussing the company's decision to work with Paris Smith, Williams said: "They are a well known and respected firm with a very long tradition. I've been aware of them since my training as an accountant in the 1960s. We see our relationship developing further in the future."

For Taylor, it's a question of helping clients to achieve success and overcome challenges through a positive engagement with its legal expertise. "We talk regularly with Colin and his team about their goals to make sure what we do adds value for them. We also help open doors in the local business community through our networking," he said.

Taylor highlighted another aspect where both Paris Smith and Williams share the same passion. "The vision for Southampton is a global city of excellence with a marine focus. Williams Shipping is a key element in that vision, given the nature of its business and understanding of the dynamics of the city," he said. "Both our futures are tied to Southampton and the region. It's home for us and always has been."

Taking a long-term view is natural for two businesses with a combined age of 325 years. "We're not just in it for today. We make business decisions based on the impact in the long term," said Taylor. "Like

us, Williams Shipping has a clear set of values and a clear approach to how business should be done. That's why there is such great synergy between the two organisations."

Williams added: "Having a firm of lawyers that understands our business and our culture is so important to us."

## Diversified business

Williams Shipping has four divisions: marine, logistics and cargo, marine lubricants and shipping containers.

Logistics, transport and cargo activity is centred on its site at Millbrook in Southampton, where it operates 20 trucks and 40 trailers. Tugs, barges and boats are based at the Eastern Docks. Williams also has smaller satellite bases at Pembroke Port in Wales and another in Aberdeen. Willbox was started in 1993 when a customer asked whether the company could supply a container for hire. Williams stores and delivers marine lubricants for major oil companies' customers, as well as supplying its own customers along the Solent.

A broad range of clients is drawn from construction, civil engineering, shipping, renewable energy, oil and gas, marine and inland waterways. "We are becoming more of a national business," noted Williams.

Annual turnover of £20 million is divided roughly evenly between the four divisions and average turnover growth is around 6%.

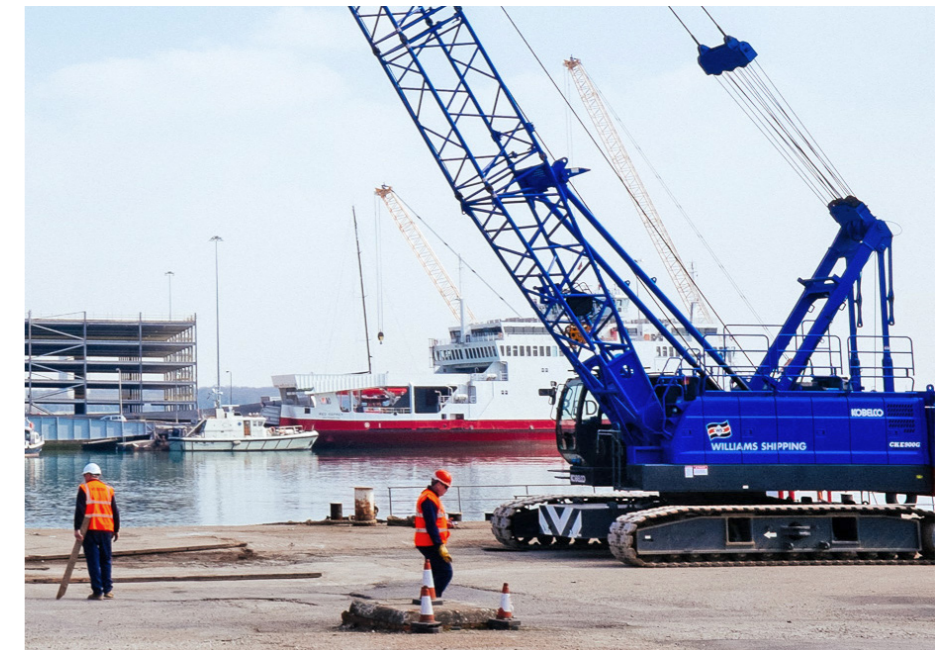
The company has many competitors in each of its four divisions. "But no other company does all the things we do," Williams believes.

Although Williams has a highly loyal 100-strong workforce, recruitment isn't easy in this sector. "Skill shortages are our biggest challenge. You have to offer people training, opportunities, respect and engagement," said Williams. "These are areas we are working very hard on to attract and keep talented people."

Having celebrated Paris Smith's 200th anniversary in 2018, Taylor was happy to offer ideas to Colin Williams on how his company could celebrate its own milestone year. "Colin and I agree that the most important thing is to focus on your people and celebrate with them first. Make them feel valued. After all, we wouldn't have a business without our staff."

## Braced for Brexit

Williams has formed a subsidiary in Dublin in preparation for Brexit. "We also have all the necessary licences



we need to run our transport operations in mainland Europe, which account for around 10% of our haulage business," he said.

"Brexit will create short-term challenges. But our business has been incredibly resourceful for 125 years. Being resourceful is what we do every day," he added.

Taylor observed: "What we are hearing from businesses is that they just want to know the rules of the game after Brexit, especially at ports. For example, the idea of creating freeports could have a significant positive impact on Southampton and the region."

## Buoyant future

Williams says the company relies primarily on organic growth. "The port of Southampton is expanding and we can feed off that. The cruise liner business is growing, with new types of vessels fuelled by gas, so we see lots of opportunities here. Another newer area for us is the energy sector – we transport wind turbine blades from a manufacturing site on the Isle of Wight."

The UK's creaking Victorian infrastructure presents a massive backlog of maintenance work that Williams supports. Three of its barges carrying cranes are currently being used by a construction company on the river Thames for building a new sewerage system.

"There will continue to be a lot of government investment in the coming decades on marine and sea defences to cope with rising sea levels and coastal erosion," said Williams. "When we assess new opportunities we are not looking at what the market is doing now, or next year, but what it will look like in 10 and 20 years' time."

The sixth generation of the Williams family is already showing an interest in the business. "Eric and I are just looking after the company – we are the custodians for future generations," said Williams.

Having a 125-year pedigree adds a goodwill element to the business that is hard to measure. "Goodwill doesn't appear on the balance sheet but creates lots of value. We get a great deal of support from everyone who deals with us. People trust the company and our good name. That's important to us," said Williams.

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