

OFFSHORE

IN TERMS of experience, not many senior lawyers in the offshore world can claim to have the same experience as John Collis.

The Conyers Dill & Pearman director and head of corporate is the subject of our first report in this Offshore Special Report. Under his stewardship, Conyers has built a significant footprint that looks set to encompass the Channel Islands by the year's end.

Elsewhere we look at what the Bribery Bill means for offshore; why the structure of offshore firms could change forever; which political party would best suit the needs of offshore firms; and why Jersey is building a relationship with India.

Another hot topic being discussed in the offshore legal market is why the Channel Islands and Russia make perfect bedfellows. The tricky issue of who really has the

power, fund managers or directors, is also examined.

Meanwhile, the ongoing saga of the EU Commission's draft Directive on Alternative Investment Fund Managers Directive – a piece of legislation that has caused confusion across Europe – is explored.

By contrast, in another report there is a ringing endorsement of a different piece of legislation altogether – the Isle of Man Aircraft Register.

PROFILE

Island hoping



As Conyers sets its sights on a base in the Channel Islands, **Tom Phillips** meets the man driving the expansion strategy, director **John Collis**

This year, Conyers Dill & Pearman is celebrating the 25th anniversary of its Hong Kong launch. It was a baptism of fire and a defining moment in the history of the firm. For director and head of corporate John Collis, 1985 represents the year Conyers matured to take on the world.

"It was one of the most significant challenges for us because of the time zone and communication difficulties," admits Collis. "We took the hardest thing to do first."

Now with 13 offices in the major offshore jurisdictions, Conyers has steadily expanded to become 155-lawyer firm with 45 partners.

All the major offshore jurisdictions except the Channel Islands, that is. But that will change this year. Collis, a straight talker who prefers to remain upfront about his firm's strategy, has been pursuing prospects in the Channel Islands with the kind of tenacity that has seen him rise up the firm's ranks since he joined almost 30 years ago.

Name: John Collis
Firm: Conyers Dill & Pearman
Title: Director and head of corporate
Fee-earners: 189
Lawyers: 155
Partners: 45
Locations: Anguilla, Bermuda, British Virgin Islands, Cayman Islands, Mauritius, Dubai, Hong Kong, London, Moscow, São Paulo, Singapore; Cypriot law offered from Moscow office
1979-81: BA Hons (Jurisprudence), Oxford University, England
1983-present: Bar member in England and Wales and Bermuda and International Bar Association member
Work history: 1982-83: Barrister and associate, Linklaters & Paines, London
1983-87: Barrister and associate, Conyers

John Collis's CV
Education: 1976-79: BCom, McGill University, Canada

After revealing Conyers' desire to open in either Guernsey, Jersey or both via a merger early this year (*The Lawyer*, 18 January), Collis has been making numerous trips to London to hold meetings with interested parties. He hopes to have "something positive" to say in the summer about the firm's entrance into the region.

"They are small islands," he explains. "[The lawyers] all talk so it's better to be open about it. There's no point in merging with something small – we're looking for FTSE500 firms. Many firms and lawyers have contacted us and we've had many meetings in London. We're close to finalising it."

Collis's announcement followed the shock revelation of a merger between Mourant du Feu & Jeune and Ozannes, which in turn was shortly followed by Appleby's poaching a four-partner team from Ozannes to launch in Germany.

But while the Channel Islands remain an integral part of any global offshore firm, Conyers is not a firm that follows the pack. Collis maintains that Conyers has developed its network in contrast to other offshore firms.

"They've achieved federated firms; they haven't joined them up," he says of his rivals. "That'll be the challenge for us if we merge with a Channel Islands' firm – we've always built up offices from scratch."

It is all about the mindset, Collis adds. "Too often offshore firms try to compare themselves with the big London or New York firms, but we go after different work," he argues. "There's a big difference in the way we target business."

Collis admits he is interested in opening in the world's economic centres, such as Tokyo, New York and Luxembourg. Conyers has invested heavily in opening offices where its clients and referral firms are – another distinction, he says.

"We differ from our major competitors in thinking that the offshore battle isn't on the islands but in the cities. We're concentrating on having the support in the islands but I remain convinced that the distribution of work will be won in the cities. The big law firms in London, São Paulo and Moscow want offshore firms on the ground to come up with solutions regarding offshore law."

“We're concentrating on having the support in the islands, but I remain convinced that the distribution of work will be won in the cities”

Channel Islands aside, Collis is content to consolidate Conyers' already large footprint. With the markets picking up for offshore firms, Collis is more than optimistic about the year ahead. He says the firm is even getting back into recruitment again.

"Our strategy is to build on what we have, but I'm convinced the recession is over for offshore firms," he says. "We've seen improvements in the second quarter in Asia and good signs in Europe and Moscow and Dubai. South America is also beginning to come back."

With a clear strategy – "Our objective is to find as many products we can sell as possible," says Collis – Conyers' and its long-serving man at the helm has the strength and experience to challenge all comers. ■