



Country Life, City Practice: An interview with Dennis Stewart

By Naomi Wootton

Since the pandemic forced barristers home and courts online, there are lingering questions as to the essentiality of maintaining a physical 'chambers'. Relatedly, the trend of moving away from Sydney in the broader population has increased, with remote and flexible working offering city-dwellers the choice of a life outside Sydney. Dennis Stewart, who has practised at the criminal bar in Sydney for 26 years, spoke to *Bar News* about his experience of living between the Central Coast and his property in the Hunter Valley while maintaining a full-time criminal practice in Sydney.

Naomi Wootton (NW): *Have you always lived out of Sydney?*

Dennis Stewart (DS): I started out in chambers in 1995, and was living in Sydney at that time. I had chambers in Sydney for about six years, but I soon realised that I wasn't



spending any time in chambers at all. After a few years at the Bar, I had built up relationships with solicitors who supplied a regular stream of work, so it wasn't as important for my practice to maintain physical chambers. Later, I moved to the Central Coast. My wife Dianna and

I found the Central Coast to be a great environment to bring up our young children. It also had many personal benefits, including for mental health. The cost of housing in the Central Coast was and remains significantly less than buying in Sydney. This alone can have a big impact on mental health, as you do not have the financial stress of being heavily indebted with a large mortgage. There is also the lifted burden of chambers fees. We also love the lifestyle — living here we have more space, we're close to the beaches and can sit on the balcony in the afternoons and enjoy being surrounded by water, trees, and birds.

NW: *What about the commute? I know that plays on a lot of minds when contemplating a move to the coast.*

DS: It only takes 1 hour and 10 minutes by train. It is not much more time than people living in the suburbs of Sydney might spend commuting. I get on the train



at Woy Woy station, and go straight to Central and then walk up to the Downing Centre, or whichever court I might be in that day. Not one minute of that time spent on the train is wasted. The train is quite comfortable, compared to suburban trains. I treat the commuting time as time in the office. From the moment I get on, until the moment I pull up at Central, I'm usually working. I have my laptop, personal hotspot for internet and can answer emails and phone calls. In the mornings, I use the train trip as reading and preparation time. If I'm cross-examining witnesses that day, for example, I'll read over their statements and plan the cross-examination. I'll also usually review the transcript of the previous day's proceedings. As for the evenings, I use the time to respond to emails that have come in during the day and attend to other post-court matters. By the time I arrive back at Woy Woy in the evening around 6pm, I have spent an hour attending to a lot of the evening's work. That means I can sit on the balcony with my wife and talk about the day.

NW: *When did you buy the property in the Hunter Valley?*

DS: About 18 years ago, and I have spent time between the Central Coast and the Hunter Valley ever since. I've invested a lot of time and money developing the property into a holiday rental that can be hired

out and used to generate income, called 'Nirvana Vista Estate'. The property in the Hunter has become very important to me. It is not only an investment, but has been a long-time source of interest outside work, as I have spent time and energy working on the house and gardens. The gardens are my passion, and we have drawn from our travel to Italy and France to develop a European garden experience for guests. This has been both personally fulfilling and therapeutic. It is a respite from my usual work, which generally involves the harsher side of life — murders, sexual assaults, and the nastier sides of human nature. I think it is hugely important for barristers to have interests and a 'passion' outside of work, particularly barristers doing criminal or Family Law work. It helps mental health and brings some balance into your life. Creating beautiful landscaped gardens against the backdrop of amazing panoramic views that others can enjoy has been a long term passion for me.

NW: *Do you get to spend much time up in the Hunter?*

DS: I'm there as much as possible, especially in between trials. I will stay in the residence on the property and do court matters via AVL from there: mostly sentences and call overs. When I'm doing a trial, I stay on the Central Coast. It has all become much more common since COVID-19. Since the

pandemic, court proceedings via AVL has become an accepted way to appear in short matters, although not possible for jury trials. This didn't exist at all prior to COVID-19.

NW: *This all sounds idyllic. What are the downsides? Do you miss the collegiality of chambers?*

DS: Chambers of course is an important aspect of life at the Bar, and an important part of any barrister's experience. If you are not in chambers, it is very important to have a network of supportive relationships with other lawyers and barristers so that you can have the benefit of their support and advice. No matter what stage you are at in your career, you will always benefit from talking with other experienced counsel. Whenever I attend court, there is intense interaction with other defence counsel, solicitors, and prosecutors, so I regard that as a valuable part of interaction with the legal community. My experience of life at the Bar is that other counsel are very supportive and willing to give advice and support if you ask for it. I often call other counsel during a trial, after doing my own research, to make sure I am on the right track with some issue. The experience and advice of other counsel is the most valuable resource that any barrister can access, whether you are in chambers or not.

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