Signet honour does still have a nice ring to it

New WS Society chief Robert Pirrie has ambitious plans for the historic organisation, writes JENNIFER VEITCH

MORE than 400 years ago, becoming one of the select few who could supervise the use of the King's Signet, or private seal, must have afforded a distinct career advantage. Fast-forward four centuries, however, and the benefits of a Scottish solicitor joining the Society of Writers to Her Majesty's Signet might seem a little less obvious than when its constitution was first drafted back in 1594.

And as for giving up a coveted partnership in one of Scotland's leading law firms to become chief executive of the WS Society, many lawyers might wonder what Robert Pirrie was thinking. "I didn't necessarily have this role in mind, but one thing has led to another," says Pirrie, who spent more than 20 years as a partner with both Dundas & Wilson and Maclay Murray & Spens, specialising in corporate and commercial law.

Pirrie, who joined the WS Society in 1985, became its first ever chief executive in May last year. He decided to take up the newly created post after becoming increasingly involved in its educational programme, which includes providing the Professional Competence Course (PCC) in association with Glasgow Graduate School of Law.

"I enjoyed legal practice, but I reached a point in my career where I wanted to take on a broader range of challenges," he says. "This is certainly giving me that. My role is to develop and implement strategy rather than simply administer things on behalf of the office bearers. One of the challenges of the society is that it does so many different things, so my days are very varied."

Pirrie's new job is certainly that – as well as the day-to-day operation of the organisation, he is responsible for overseeing events management. The historic Signet Library building at Edinburgh's Parliament Square, designed by Robert Reid, is an increasingly popular venue for events ranging from whisky tastings to weddings – a privilege no longer reserved for members only – and will be one of the sites used during Edinburgh Fashion Week in April.

Pirrie is also tasked with modernising the society and its facilities to boost what he concedes is a "static" membership – it is hovering at around 1,000 solicitors, mostly from the Edinburgh area.

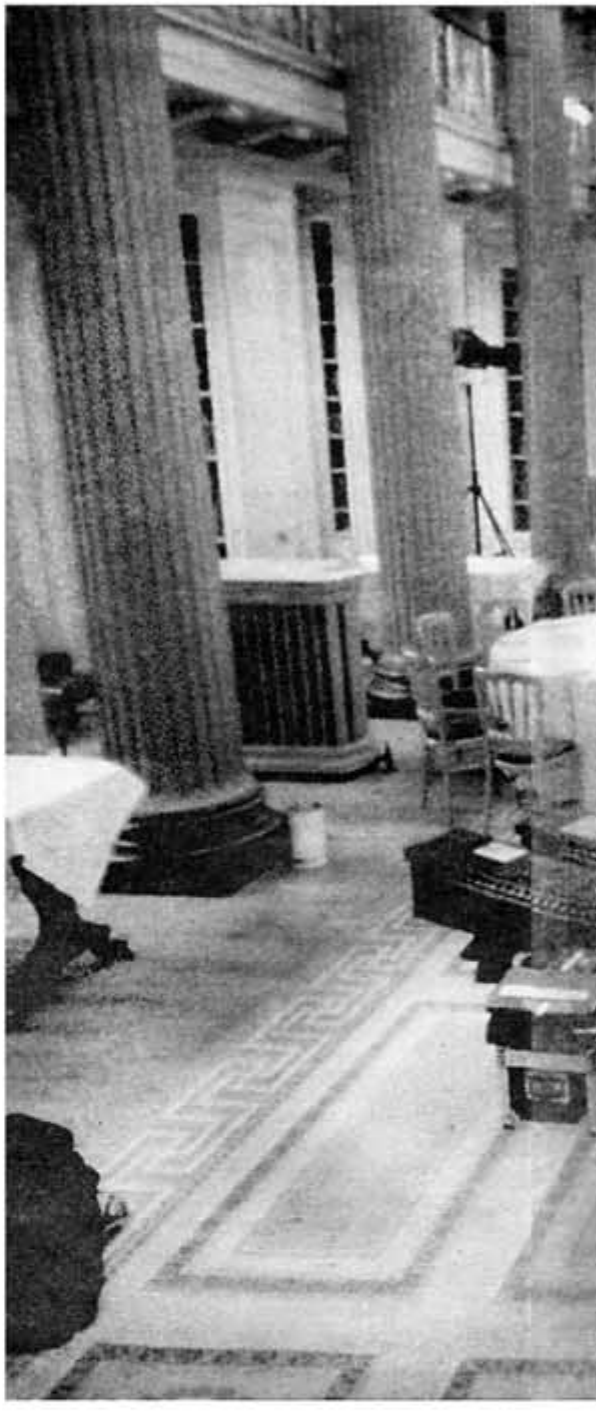
"We have to recognise that the age profile of the membership tends towards the more senior end of the profession," he says, tactfully. "So looking ahead to the future, we need to look at the new generation of lawyers and what their requirements are."

Pirrie accepts the Society needs to offer its prospective members – who must have practised in Scotland for a minimum of three years – more than the chance to add 'WS' to the string of letters after their names.

"Traditionally, I think the WS suffix stood for a mark of quality and prestige in legal services, it is fair to say," he says. "As far as the firms themselves were concerned, they would obviously be entitled to use many of the society's services, if they were a WS firm – accessing the library and research facilities, and more recently our educational programme, which is offered to the whole legal profession, but WS firms and our members are entitled to discounted rates for that."

He adds: "Partly what we are about now is looking for a contemporary means of evidencing quality. What we are trying to do now, if you like, is continue that tradition of helping the profession achieve quality, but to do so in a modern way."

Part of this process involves modernising the library and research facilities, and improving the society's website, to give members faster access to online sources of information. But Pirrie has another weapon in the WS armoury, targeted squarely at younger lawyers. He is spearheading an ambitious new accreditation scheme, which will give the Signet's seal of approval to specialist lawyers, after they pass the society's exams and assessment process.



Robert Pirrie, who spent more than 20 years as a partner with both Dundas & Wilson and Maclay Murray & Spens, in the Signet Library, above and below
Pictures: David Moir/Graeme Robertson

The Signet Accreditation, which is set to launch later this year, is inspired by a similar scheme already running in Australia, and Pirrie says it will build on the society's success in education and training, including its role as the lead provider of the Professional Competence Course, and a range of Continuous Professional Development seminars.

"We are well placed to do it. We feel that education and training of lawyers is something we have developed over the last three years with the introduction of the PCC, along with GGSL," he says.

The national scheme will include a written examination, an assignment, and a performance task, such as a simulated client

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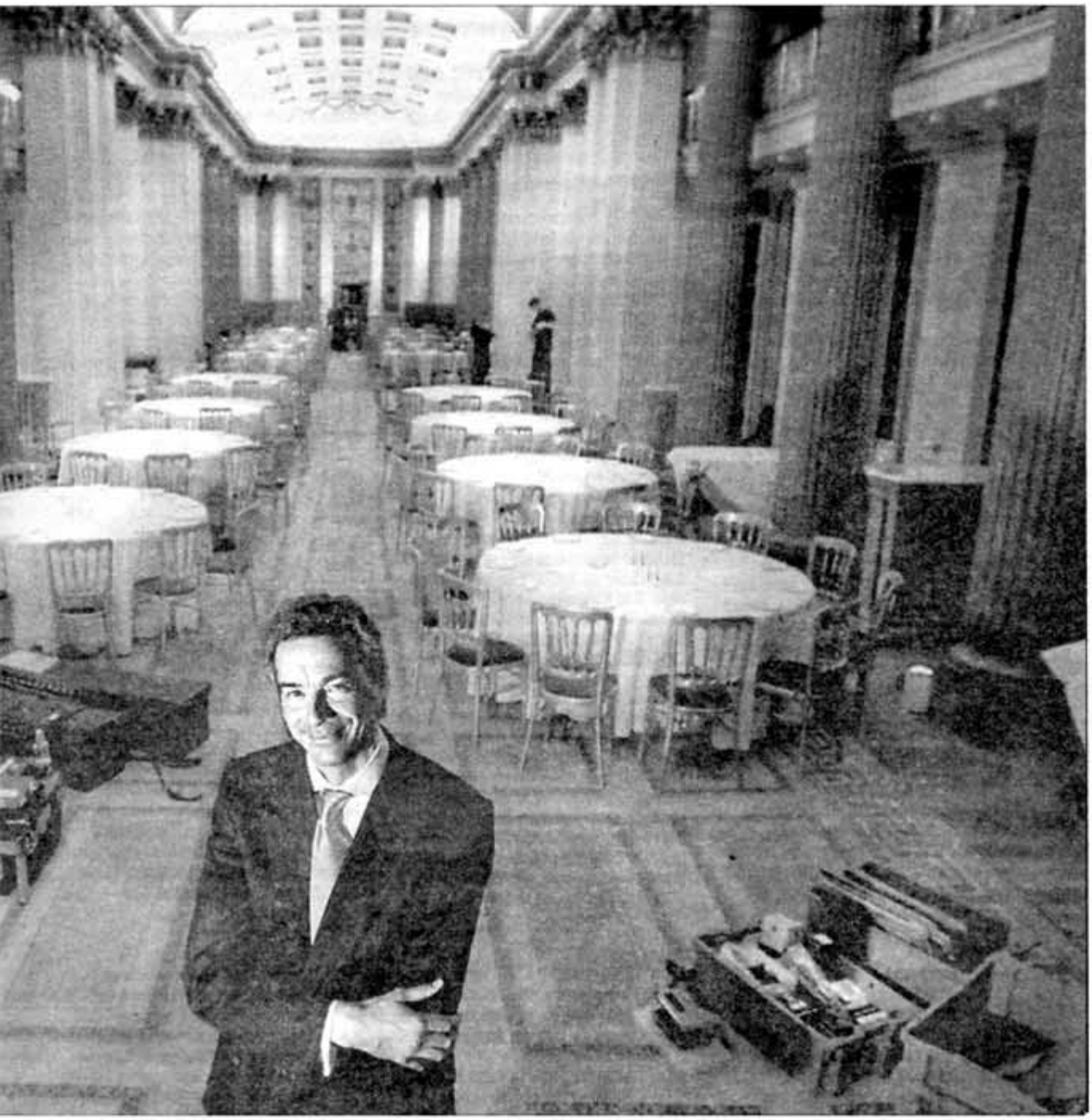

interview. It will be open to solicitors with a minimum of three years' experience, offering younger lawyers the opportunity to work towards certified standards in their chosen specialist area of legal practice.

There might be one potential problem, however: the Law Society already operates a system for accrediting specialists. Pirrie says the crucial difference is the Signet Accreditation scheme will have a more rigorous assessment process, including not only technical knowledge but also "client-focused skills and ethical integrity", while the Law Society's is based largely on peer recognition.

"What we are proposing is based on the principle of assessment and examination and peer recognition," Pirrie says. "The fundamental difference is that we are proposing that the solicitor is assessed by an examination. We are focused on doing what we think is an appropriate scheme. This will not replace the Law Society scheme, and lawyers may wish to choose which route they want to go." While the principal aim of the accreditation scheme is to create incentives and opportunities for younger lawyers, Pirrie recognises its success or failure rests with the support of firms. "It is crucial that firms identify that there is something in this for them," he says. "From the point of view of career development, quality and management of risk, plus employee benefits, we think it is attractive."

Pirrie is already making presentations to interested firms, along with project manager Eliza Letsch, who worked on the equivalent scheme in Australia.

Clients may also benefit from the society's attempt to drive up standards, he adds, not only because the accreditation would make it easier to identify lawyers with specialist advisory skills, but also because it is planned that the accreditation process will not stop after a solicitor has passed the Signet exams.

"The idea is that the scheme will have an afterlife," he says. "The scheme becomes an excellent focus of concentration for discussion. It will be a ready-made forum that can discuss changes in the law, and it is expected they will examine experts of the future."

Funds raised from the accreditations – estimated to cost each individual around £500 for the assessment, with a £250 annual renewal fee – will also be reinvested in the scheme, he says. "The idea is that the scheme will be self-funding and any surplus will be invested in the scheme itself."

If the scheme is successful, lawyers may put the letters SA – standing for "Signet Accredited" – after their names. But they won't have to join the WS Society, though clearly Pirrie wouldn't be displeased if they signed up, especially if they weren't from Edinburgh. "You don't have to be a WS member, and you will not necessarily become a WS member by virtue of being accredited," he says. "But we may offer a membership to accredited specialists at a discounted rate, to encourage people to join."