

processing work can be done at home but this is dependent on deliveries which may not be sustainable in the long term. The cost of subscription databases is also a big factor as it is not possible to keep on adding content or taking on new online resources to meet ever more specific wish lists.

In addition, a project to replace the dated library management system was started in January 2020 and after several delays the new one should be implemented during next year. This will also change the way we operate. The

goal is to streamline manual tasks and develop services to meet these new challenges.

The Advocates Library holds a special place in the history of Scotland, and skilled staff and the wide ranging collections have supported the work of Advocates for centuries. Technology holds the key to the future but access to and the ability to find legal knowledge and information remains the most important consideration for those involved in the justice system.

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Biography

Sara Berry is Head of the Advocates Library in Edinburgh. She is also a member of the LIM Editorial Board. Sara was brought up in Edinburgh and obtained her Postgraduate Diploma in Librarianship at Strathclyde University. She subsequently worked for Hertfordshire Library Service where her role included work with children and a grounding in reference enquiry services. After this she worked in the Information Research department of a London advertising agency located in Fleet Street near St Paul's Cathedral, and then moved to the library of a large London law firm based latterly at Canary Wharf. After several years she moved to another London law firm back in Fleet Street, before moving back to Edinburgh to work at the Advocates Library in 2018. Contact email: sara.berry@advocates.org.uk

The Signet Library

Abstract: In this article James Hamilton, Research Principal at the Society of Writers to HM Signet in Edinburgh, describes the history of the Signet Library as it approaches its 300th anniversary. He writes about some of the changes that have taken place over those three centuries and he also mentions some of the challenges for the library as the nature of the legal profession has altered, not least those presented recently by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Keywords: law libraries; Signet Library; Scotland

INTRODUCTION: ANNIVERSARIES IN 2022

For the Signet Library in Edinburgh, 2022 will mark both the 300th anniversary of its foundation as a collection and the 200th anniversary of the famous 'Palace of Books' on

the Royal Mile which is its home. The library and the building are both the creations of one of the world's oldest legal organisations, the Society of Writers to Her Majesty's Signet (or WS Society for short), and the building also serves as the WS Society's headquarters and as a centre for legal activity for lawyers of all kinds from



Figure 1: A Victorian glass slide of the Signet Library Upper Hall taken by photographer George Washington Wilson in 1867.

across Scotland and beyond. Although for most of its history the building and its library have been privately owned, the Society's tradition of liberal open access for researchers and scholars is as famous as the architecture of the Signet Library's reading rooms, and the Signet

Library has a rich history of involvement in the intellectual life of the country it serves.

THE WS SOCIETY AND ITS ORIGINS

The WS Society takes its origins from a group of lawyers working at the Scottish Royal Court, and although there is no known date for its foundation its activities can be traced back as far as the fourteenth century. The Society was incorporated into Scotland's new College of Justice in King James V's legal reforms of 1532, and with the opening of a new minute book in 1594 the Society took on its recognisable modern form. Shortly after it had acquired its first permanent premises in Writers Court in 1694, the Society was presented with its first book – *Writer to the Signet George Dallas's 1697 A system of stiles, as now practicable within the kingdom of Scotland* (a collection of legal forms and precedents) which would remain an important Scottish legal text until well into the nineteenth century. Perhaps in response to the renaissance in Scottish printing and in legal publishing, the Society took the decision in 1722 to acquire all Scottish legal textbooks and all printed legislation, and 1722 is now considered to mark the library's moment of foundation.



Figure 2: The Signet Library Upper Hall in 1867.



Figure 3: The Signet Library Lower Hall during a Royal visit in 1953.

EXPANSION OF THE LIBRARY

With the Scottish Enlightenment at its height in 1778 the WS Society took the decision to expand the library into a general collection, with the aim of bringing together the best available books to cover all fields of human knowledge. This began a period of immense expansion and growth, and by 1833 the library had grown fifty-fold and occupied brilliant new premises on Edinburgh's Royal Mile. The Signet Library, as it was now known, could boast the presence of the first of a series of famous scholar-librarians, Macvey Napier, the editor of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and the *Edinburgh Review*. His successor was the historian and bibliographer David Laing, under whom the Signet Library became the centre for the great Scottish literary, historical and text publication societies such as the Abbotsford Club and the Wodrow Society.

For most of this period, and indeed for most of the Signet Library's existence, it has sought to serve not just its members' legal needs but their intellectual and reading lives as a whole, and the legal collection was just one amongst several that were maintained to the highest standards. However, the impact of two world wars in the first half of the twentieth century on the WS Society and its Library was profound and prompted a top to bottom

review. The decision was taken in 1958 to reorientate the Signet Library into a first class legal collection for the Society's use, with a supporting world class collection of books and papers relating to Scottish history and affairs. Parts of the existing collection outside these core areas were sold and the proceeds used to restore the building and conserve the retained collections.

RECENT HISTORY

Since 1980 Signet Library services have maintained a consistent form. The Library's prime role is to serve the legal information and research needs of the WS Society's members (who number c. 1000 in a typical year) and WS firms (Scottish law firms with half or more of their partners being members of the WS Society, or firms with whom the Society has enjoyed a long relationship). To do this, it maintains a full collection of current Scottish legal titles and journals, with a strong collection of material relating to the English and Welsh jurisdiction and some representation of jurisdictions in Europe and beyond. Members and firms may borrow material for an official period of two weeks, liberally interpreted, in addition to which the library will deliver information by email or by post. Staff will undertake legal research on behalf of



Figure 4: The Signet Library Lower Hall today.

members and firms and provide reports on the findings. The library is open during weekday office hours during which members can make in-person visits to the reading room. About 50,000 bound volumes of legal material are held in twelve separate rooms or stores, and access is available within the building to Westlaw and LexisNexis services. The library holds a further 40,000 volumes of material relating to the history, culture and geography of Scotland, and offers prearranged access visits to bona fide researchers and academics with recognised institutions. Much early legal material has now crossed the invisible barrier between the current and the historic and this is increasingly recognised by the arrangement of the book stock within the premises.

ADAPTING TO CHANGE

Although the core aims of the service have held steady, the Scottish legal world that the Library serves has not. The combination of the sales and the arrival of a series of exceptional legal librarians meant that the Signet Library was in the perfect place to take advantage of the renaissance in Scottish legal writing and publishing that began late in the 1970s. This *trente glorieuses* saw a burgeoning in Scottish legal texts and journals from a wide range of enthusiastic and committed publishers as the profession refreshed and reformed. Writers to the Signet

played a significant part in this rebirth and the Library adapted to meet it, introducing a computer catalogue and extending its opening hours to meet the demand. Although use of the historic collection dropped off during this period, young lawyers began to rediscover parts of it for modern use, with interest in the Signet Library's vast collection of eighteenth century Court of Session Papers reviving in particular. At the same time, digital resources such as Westlaw and Lexis Nexis were successfully brought in and incorporated into the Library's research workflow.

Other changes in the years following the Millennium were less positive. Many law firms moved into a new business district to the west of the city centre; firm takeovers and mergers meant fewer, larger firms providing their own digital information workflows; online information services climbed in cost as their use became both ubiquitous and essential. With these and other trends, Library footfall went into decline.

NEW CHALLENGES

It was recognised early that these new challenges were existential in nature. Chief Executive of the WS Society Robert Pirrie led a decade of reforms, named 'Project Renaissance', that reimagined the WS Society through the core values of excellence, integrity and permanence,



Figure 5: A scene at the Signet Library “New Enlightenment” showcase of 2019.

with the Signet Library becoming a major centre for legal education and professional development. This has been followed by the ‘New Enlightenment’ project, which seeks to restore the Signet Library as a centre both for legal and cultural life and for debate and discussion, making use of the incredible architectural, artistic and

cultural heritage present within it for the benefit of the wider society of Scotland and beyond.

Key to the New Enlightenment project are efforts to reach new audiences and entering into fruitful collaborations with universities, museums and galleries and other organisations. A new reading room designed around the needs of modern lawyers and scholars alike has opened in the west of the building, and we have launched a summer scholar scheme for legal students giving them opportunities to experience professional legal research and teamwork whilst meeting and learning from leading professionals in the field. The opening of our restaurant, ‘Colonnades’ (in partnership with our venue managers Heritage Portfolio) has restored the Signet Library as the social centre of the Scottish legal world whilst giving the public regular access to the beautiful Lower Hall for the first time in over a century.

We provide work experience for students of librarianship along with volunteering opportunities and the chance to gain experience through our programme of regular exhibitions. A digitization programme is underway to widen access to our most important historical materials.

Challenges remain. The professional impact of the Covid-19 emergency has vastly accelerated the existing trend towards remote working and reliance on digital resources. Although we remained open for business throughout the crisis and managed to port our education programme and other services across to online delivery, demand for legal information services is only now beginning to recover.

THE FUTURE

In amongst the challenges have been achievements. The WS Society became a registered charity in the summer of 2021, and with a new structure and clear objectives both the Society and the Signet Library face the future with confidence.

Biography

James Hamilton is Research Principal at the Society of Writers to HM Signet in Edinburgh. He began his library career with the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea in London at the start of the 1990s and worked in public, academic and research libraries prior to joining the Signet Library in 2012. He has written and presented extensively on the history of the Signet Library and on Edinburgh history more generally.