

184 Years Not Out: a Brief history of the Library of the Law Society of England and Wales

Abstract: In this article Michael Maher, Librarian of the Law Society of England and Wales, examines the history of the extensive library on Chancery Lane, the range of services it provides to help support its members (including their agents i.e. law librarians) and the future plans for the library.

Keywords: law libraries; Law Society of England and Wales

INTRODUCTION

The Law Society of England and Wales is the professional body representing solicitors in England and Wales. It exists to represent, promote and support all solicitors so they can give the best service to their clients.

It works to ensure that nobody is above the law and to protect everyone's right to access to justice. It promotes England and Wales as the jurisdiction of choice and the vital role legal services play in our economy. And it campaigns on legal issues of importance to its members and the general public.

It also works internationally to open up markets to its members and to defend human rights while supporting members with opportunities in the domestic market.

One of the key ways the Law Society supports solicitors is by providing them with a library. The library offers one of the most comprehensive printed collections of law material in England and Wales; onsite essential commercial online services including Lexis, PSL, Westlaw and Justis; a research service that deals with around 10,000 solicitors enquiries each year; and is responsible for managing the Law Society's corporate archive.

THE HISTORY OF THE LIBRARY

In 1823, several prominent attorneys met to call for the formation of 'The London Law Institution' to raise the reputation of the profession by setting standards and ensuring good practice. They produced a prospectus calling for the establishment of a building which would include "... a Hall for daily resort" and a law library. A plot in Chancery Lane, London was purchased and the construction of the Law Society Hall commenced.

London was dropped from the title in 1825 to reflect the fact that the Law Institution had national aspirations. The Institution's Annual General Meeting of 1831 was the first to be held in the Reading Room and the building was

formally opened in May 1832. At this point there were 659 members, compared with the 155,000 we have today.

The Society acquired its first Royal Charter in 1831 as "The Society of Attorneys, Solicitors, Proctors and others not being Barristers", practising in the Courts of Law and Equity of the United Kingdom. By further Royal Charter in 1903 the name of the society was changed to simply "The Law Society".

In 1828 the Law Society's Committee of Management asked for donations to stock the library. Donations recorded in the library's original Donations Register include *The Statutes at Large* from Thomas Metcalf and *The Law List* from original founding member Bryan Holme. The Law Society Hall including the library was opened on 28 June 1831. By 1846 the library comprised of 6,000 volumes compared to around 55,000 volumes today – approximately 20,000 of these are available in the main library itself.

The library was designed by Lewis Vulliamy and completed in 1832. It is 24 ft (7.3 m) high and in 1832 ran the width of the building over the portico, offices and front hall. It was later extended to the North (Common Room end) in 1850 with an 'Inner Library' 45 ft (13.7 m) long by 35 ft (10.7 m) wide.

The shelves and tables are made of oak. Two circular staircases lead up to the gallery which has cast-iron railings mirroring the railings in the Reading Room downstairs.

The room is dominated by massive cast-iron pillars and pilasters clad in red scagliola. The capitals in the library are Corinthian in design with bronze acanthus leaves while the pilaster capitals are decorated with honeysuckle blossom alternating with palmettes.

Mr Henry Dobson was employed as the first librarian, one of only eleven people to hold the role, including three Chairs of the British and Irish Association of Law Librarians (BIALL). Some of the more unusual facts about the library are: (1) for many years there were two library porters standing one at each end of the room whose duty it was to fetch books for members as required;

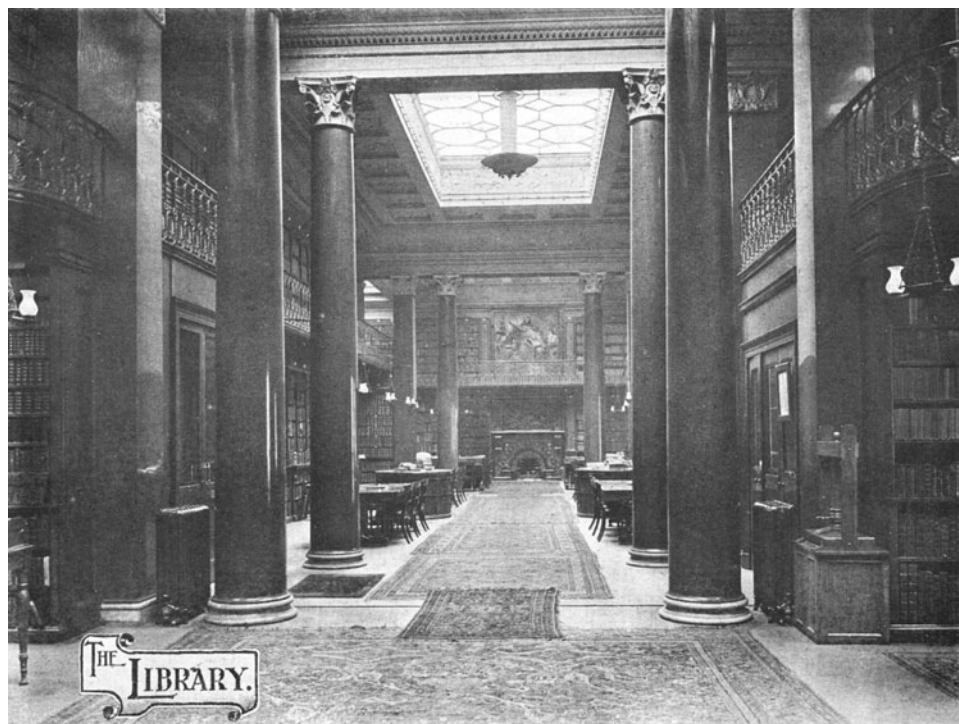


Figure 1: Law library circa 1904.

(2) one of the porters first duties each morning was to light the coal fires in the two fireplaces located at either end of the library (so much for health and safety!); (3) as befits a library that is now almost 200 years old it has a hidden door, located behind bay unit 19, leading to.... well, nobody is quite sure.

THE SERVICES

The library supports solicitors in five key ways:

(1). The Collection

The collection, both printed and online commercial services, is there for members to use. It aims to reflect all members' information needs, and so aims to cater to a wide range of users; from trainees to partners, top 100 to sole practitioners, those who are retired, returning to work, or rushing off to court.

The library holds material on England and Wales with small collections covering other British jurisdictions such as the Channel Islands, Scotland and Northern Ireland. As well as having a large collection of current practitioner textbooks the library also keeps superseded textbooks, many going back to the early nineteenth century. The library stock is reference only to ensure that material is always available.

The collection has developed and grown considerably since those first donations in 1828 and in today's library the printed material is split across 25 nine-shelf bay units of current practitioner text books and looseleaves, plus a further 218 bay units of other material including case law,

a complete set of local acts, public general acts and statutory instruments, private and personal acts including the full text of legislation that is only summarised in *Statutes at Large*. Also, Hansard from 1803, Standing Committee reports from the 1967/8 parliamentary session and parliamentary papers on microfiche from 1801. There are also forms and precedents, journals and a collection of the Law Society's own publications and documentation. In total this adds up to about 1.5 miles of material.

But this main library only holds 45% of the collection. The rest is spread out across various storage areas around the Law Society including alcoves in the Common Room, stores in the basement and the gallery of the Reading Room, even several basement cells in the nearby Law Society president's residence. In fact the library's collection is so large that a lot of the older, occasionally used, material is stored in a disused salt mine in Cheshire. A courier service is available to move requested items from the salt mine.

As well as the books, the library offers microfiche readers, photocopiers, wi-fi and 11 public access computers providing access to the internet, MS Office, as well as commercial online services such as Lexis, PSL, Westlaw UK and Justis. Two of these computers are set up for visually impaired members. In 2015 over 8,000 members visited the library.

(2). Enquiry Service

As well as the physical library collection other services are provided that can be used remotely by solicitors and their staff. One of the major ones is a fully staffed library enquiry



Figure 2: Law library in a salt mine!

line. It is open Monday to Friday from 9am to 5pm via telephone or by email (020 7320 5946 or library@lawsociety.org.uk). The library answers about 10,000 member enquiries each year. These cover a wide range of types of enquiry; from point-in-time legislation, commentary on points of law, precedents, case law, parliamentary material, articles, even genealogy, and a wide range of sector areas – from administrative law to wills and probate.

Enquiries come in from members working in all types of legal environments – small practices, big law firms (84% of the top 100 used the library in 2015), in-house, government, and from people looking to return to the profession. Also, from many different geographical locations; in 2015 the library dealt with enquiries from members located not only across the UK, but also Russia, Australia, Japan, Canada, Singapore, Israel and many other countries. The majority of enquiries come in by email or by telephone and so it does not matter where the member is based, they can use their research service.

For the vast majority of research carried out by the Law Society library there is no charge. Charges only apply if research takes longer than 30 minutes and the requester is notified well in advance if that is likely to happen.



Figure 3: Enquiries by type.

(3). Lawdocs

The library can supply copies, subject to copyright restrictions, on virtually the whole of the printed collection through its heavily used Lawdocs library document delivery service. This deals with around 1,000 requests each year for copies of legal information. Providing it is within copyright, the majority of the collection can be emailed straight to the requester’s mailbox. But if required, they can still be posted, dx’d, faxed or collected. The service is often used when documents are required for current judicial proceedings. Delivery time is normally within three hours but can be carried out in 45 minutes if the request is urgent.

As with the enquiry service, Lawdocs service is open 9am–5pm, Monday to Friday. Email contact details are: lawdocs@lawsociety.org.uk

As the library is fully compliant with the Copyright Licensing Agency (CLA) agreement requirements, there is a copyright fee for using the service.

(4). Library Knowledge Base

The library’s knowledge base is available to use via the Law Society’s web page (<http://www.lawsociety.org.uk>). It contains records of all the printed collection housed across the different library sites but is much more than just a catalogue. It also offers a Commencement Index relating to commencements of statutes; an English Cases Index providing references to cases which have been published in the English national newspapers and selected law reports (with links to BAILII transcripts where available); and a database called ‘Queries and Enquiries’ providing answers to some of the enquiries the Law Society librarians have previously been asked.

(5). Corporate Archive

The library is also responsible for preserving and protecting Law Society items of unique historical value. These include published material, TLS/SRA responses and consultations, parliamentary briefs, research reports and all Council, Board and policy-making Committee documentation produced by both the Law Society and the Solicitors Regulation Authority (SRA). In effect it is the preservation of the Law Society’s corporate memory and includes both modern and older material, providing a unique insight into policy-making procedures.

As well as having minutes of Council and committee meetings dating all the way back to the Law Society’s inception in 1825, the corporate archive also has many unique and unusual items including a complete set of *The Law Lists* dating back to 1775, the *Book of Memory* listing every solicitor and articled clerk who died whilst serving in the armed forces in World War Two, *Richard’s Roll* (c.1200 to 1906), Samuel Freeman’s 1775 slavery letter (if you like *Twelve Years a Slave* look this up on the Library Knowledge Base), and all manner of ephemera including 17th century maps of London, judicial cartoons

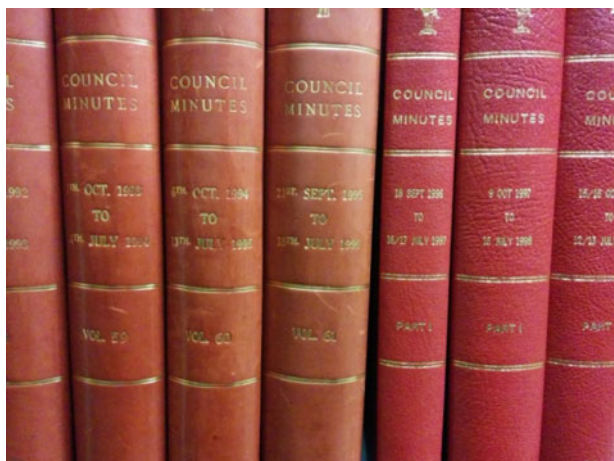


Figure 4: Council Minutes.

and even a Law Society medallion presented to solicitors who fought in the Boer War campaign.

THE FUTURE

Anybody who has visited the library will know it is a room very much befitting the splendour of early 19th century design. It is a magnet for venue hire and over the last couple of years has been used by BBC News, The One Show, MasterChef: the Professionals, and has even had a bridal fayre held in it. However, for the present and the immediate future, the emphasis for the library is very much on excellent membership engagement and making the best use of technology to both promote its services and make them as readily available to members as possible.

Michael Maher was interviewed about the library services in July 2015 as part of Law Society Gazette's Spotlight series. There will be a series of articles about the library appearing in local law societies' newsletters during 2016 and Michael will be visiting various local law societies during the year to talk to members about the services the library provides them, and to listen to any recommendations they may have on how these can be best developed. Michael will also be talking at Law Society events including the Women Lawyers Division's Returner courses and the Lawyers With Disabilities

course. The library has also increased its popular tour slots from four per year to six for 2016.

The clear message from a survey across the membership in January 2015 showed that those members who used the library rated it very highly (93% scored it at very good or excellent) and those who didn't use it tended not to because they were not aware the library offered the services it does or thought they had to visit the library in person. This year's engagement activities are aimed at making members aware of what they can get from the library.

Technology-wise, the library has started, or is about to embark on, several exciting technical developments. In 2014 it set up its own Twitter account; followers have grown steadily month-by-month and are now approaching 2,000. Twitter has been a great medium to show some of the corporate archive items the library has, for instance a recent illustration by the caricaturist Robert Dighton called *A Lawyer and His Agent*, satirising the legal profession, was tweet of the day in The Times' *In Times*. A digitisation project plan is in the process of being written to look at making electronically available some of the corporate archive. As noted earlier, this is not just Council or Committee meeting minutes but a wealth of other material that has legal and historical interest. The library is also expanding its on-line offering to better reflect members' needs, recently adding Lexis PSL to its collection. Finally, there are also thoughts about making some video guides about the services.

CONCLUSION

If anybody wants to use the library or has any questions or comments about the above then please contact:

Library research service
 Telephone: 020 7320 5946 Email: library@lawsociety.org.uk
 @LSlawlibrary
www.lawsociety.org.uk/library

- Extensive printed legal collection
- Online legal resources
- Corporate archive

Telephone, email or visit us Monday to Friday, 9:00–17:00

Biography

Michael Maher is librarian of the Law Society of England and Wales. He is a former Chair of BIALL, former Hon Treasurer of BIALL, and former conference organiser. He has written and spoken at numerous conferences about a variety of law library related topics.