

Supporting the Barrister Profession: The Law Library at The Bar of Ireland

Abstract: This article by Nuala Byrne describes how the Library and Information Service of The Bar of Ireland, The Law Library, developed to support the profession of barrister from 2004 to the present day. It highlights key priorities addressed in the earlier years and how the service has developed since to deliver a modern, networked, knowledge-based library and information service, to barristers who are members of The Bar of Ireland.

Keywords: barristers; legal profession; bar librarianship; law libraries; Ireland

THE BAR OF IRELAND, THE LAW LIBRARY

The Council of the Bar of Ireland is the accredited representative body of the independent referral Bar in Ireland, which consists of members of The Law Library and has a current membership of approximately 2,150 practising barristers.¹ The Bar of Ireland is long established, and its members have acquired a reputation amongst solicitors, clients and members of the public for providing representation and advices of the highest professional standards. The principles that barristers are independent, owe an overriding duty to the proper administration of justice and that the interests of their clients are defended fearlessly in accordance with ethical duties are at the heart of the independent referral Bar.

THE LAW LIBRARY: HISTORY AND EARLY BEGINNINGS

The history of The Law Library and the profession of barrister in Ireland are deeply entwined. The emergence of the Law Library took place gradually over several years during the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century. Without established chambers or consultation rooms barristers congregated in the Round Hall of the Four Courts plying their trade, meeting with counsel, clients and witnesses, and making themselves generally available.

This was not sustainable, however, and in February 1816 at a meeting of the Irish Bar The Law Library Society was established with a view to providing a subscription-based lending library of legal texts to practising barristers. This meeting was to lead to the development of The Law Library as a distinctive feature of the Irish Bar whereby members of the Bar practised not from chambers but from a common library to which they subscribed.²

Tradition has it that The Law Library evolved from a bookseller who set up on the quays outside the Four Courts and loaned books to lawyers, before moving into a smaller room within the building. The accuracy of this story cannot be confirmed but we do know that when it was established The Law Library Society came complete

with subscribers, a managing committee and a librarian, Valentine Delany, who on 24th February 1816, was directed to 'redeem his miscellaneous books now in pawn with so much of the amount of the debts received as will be necessary for that purpose'.³

In her article⁴, Jennefer Aston provides a good overview of the development of the library service, including its librarians, from its early days in 1816 until 1996. Reading that now shows how some things in The Law Library have not changed. It was a noisy place, space was an issue and providing relevant content was a priority, although frequently challenging. The first steps to put in place systems and procedures were taken and the forward thinking use of technology to index and access caselaw was a key development.

A DECADE OF DEVELOPMENT 2004–2014

I joined The Law Library as librarian in January 2004. It was an exciting time in libraries, with rapid technological development and innovative thinking around how to apply the technology in library settings. The internet had become established and Web 2.0 developments were on the horizon. New ways of communicating with patrons and providing access to information were expanding daily. The role of librarians within the library was changing. We were teachers, communicators, experts on content as well as partners in the research process. It wasn't enough to have gradual, incremental changes particularly if the culture of the library was rigid and tied to traditional and bureaucratic norms.

The Law Library had so much to offer and so much potential. It had a wonderful history of serving its members, an amazing print collection and knowledgeable and enthusiastic staff. It was innovative in its application of technology, the JILL (Judgment Information for The Law Library) database of indexed and full text Irish caselaw was one example of this innovative approach. It was, however, not quite reaching its full potential as the leading law library for the profession of barrister. The Council of The Bar of Ireland, and the Director of The Bar of Ireland, Jerry Carroll, were very supportive and focused on delivering more.



Figure 1: The Four Courts, Dublin with the River Liffey in the foreground © Bar of Ireland Digital Archive.

KEY PRIORITIES

There were four key areas that needed attention - the IT infrastructure, library space, organisational structure and behavioural change. The first thing I did was to

draw up a strategic plan for the library service in order to deliver a vision for the future of the library. It was accompanied by an operational plan and a new staff structure.

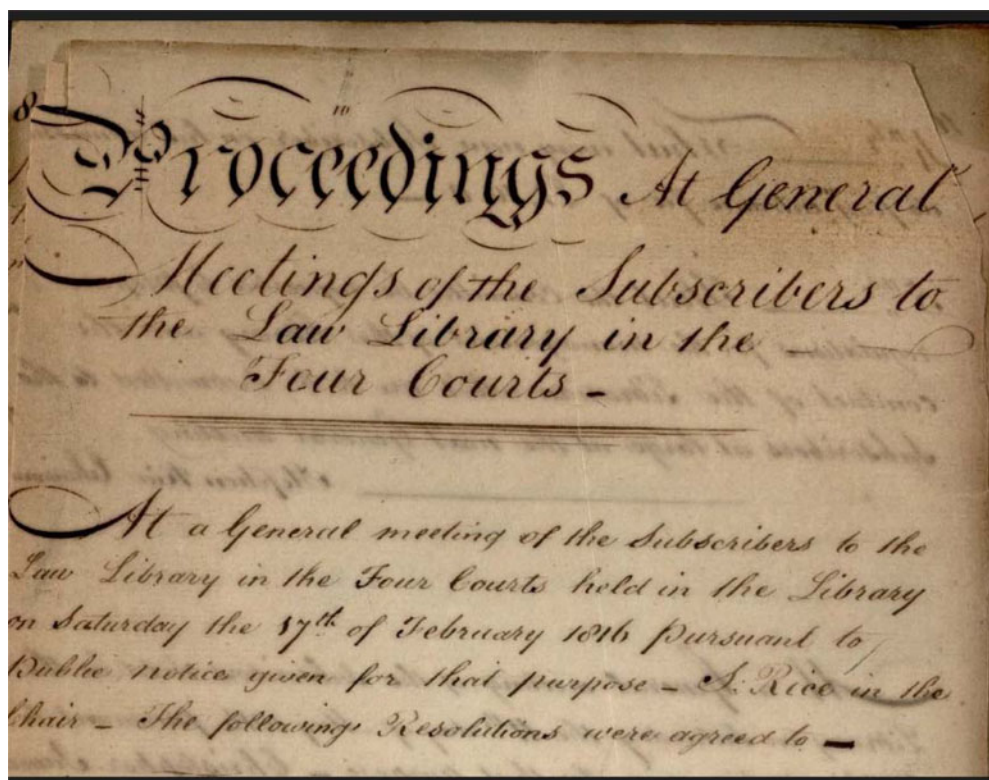


Figure 2: The Minutes of the first meeting of The Law Library Society on 17th February 1816. © Bar of Ireland Digital Archive.



Figure 3: The new Law Library which opened in 1896. Irish Architectural Archive, Curran Collection & © Bar of Ireland Digital Archive.

Library IT

As a quick win and to demonstrate to both members and staff how the library could deliver more, the IT infrastructure was prioritised. There was fibre cabling in place which was excellent; however, the network switches and routers needed an upgrade, or replacement, as did the public access PCs and staff PCs. The Library Management System (SirsiDynix) needed upgrading too. It was migrated onto the then up-to-date version of its software. With reliable and robust hardware and software in

place, the subscribed databases were made accessible via the Internet. They had been delivered by CD-ROM using SCSI technology, even outdated then. These changes made an immediate impact to service delivery and opened the door to the further changes needed.

Library Space

In 2004 there were three law library premises where the physical library service was delivered to members. The first was in the Four Courts, part of the Four Courts complex, Inns Quay, Dublin. It is part of the well-recognised James Gandon building on the banks of the River Liffey in Dublin. The second is in the Distillery Building on Church Street, so named as it was the old Irish Distillers building, close to the Four Courts. This was newly built and opened in 1998. The third was in Washington Street in Cork City. Since then, a fourth location was added in 2010. This location is part of the iconic Criminal Courts of Justice (CCJ) building on Parkgate Street in Dublin.

All three original spaces were developed and upgraded to provide bright, accessible spaces conducive to members' needs at the time. The space in the CCJ was developed as a green field space following best practice in 2010. This space is currently being renovated to deliver a workspace more conducive to members' needs, post pandemic. It will be followed by renovations to the other library spaces as part of a broader organisation strategy for property. The library is part of this strategy group.

Organisational Structure and Behavioural Change

To achieve the library goals and objectives, it was clear a new organisational structure was needed. To embrace the



Figure 4: The Criminal Courts of Justice, Parkgate Street, Dublin.

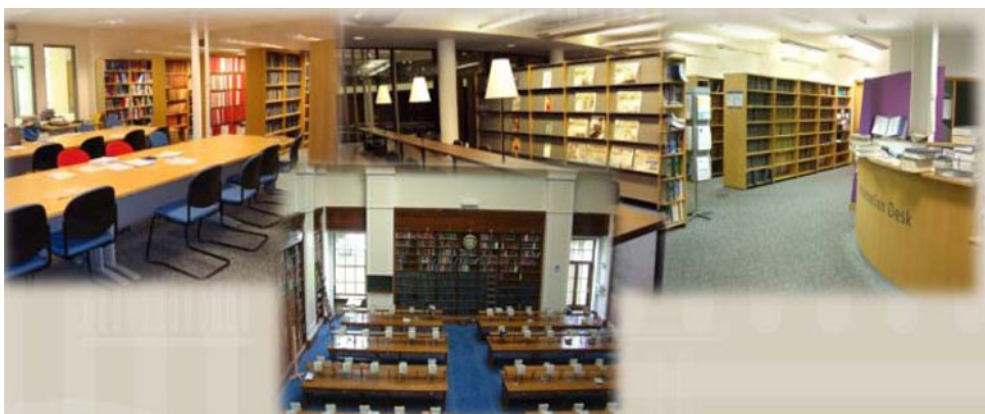


Figure 5: Library Spaces in our various locations © Bar of Ireland Digital Archive.

changes brought about by the new organisational structure a different perspective on priorities and service delivery was needed. This took longer and required help. I engaged the help and assistance of Dr Alan MacDougall, a mentor and friend. Alan had extensive experience in libraries nationally and internationally and had researched and written on many aspects of library development including performance measurement and quality in libraries.⁵ The result of the planning and consultation with members, staff and management was a structure that was fit for purpose

to deliver on the future plans and recognised and empowered the excellent people working in The Law Library. Skills gaps were filled through recruitment and regular planning meetings became part of the workflow.

DEVELOPMENT OF BARRISTER'S DESKTOP

The library was a vibrant place to work, lots of developments taking place with constant change and innovation,



Figure 6: Barrister's Desktop: a collage of images.



Figure 7: Barristers in silhouette.

certainly an exciting and challenging work environment. Not only that but the very close link to our membership and their work in the justice system was very rewarding and often immediate. Reading a news report of a recent case for which the information you provided influenced the outcome provides a certain validation that increases job satisfaction.

The development of ICT in the library during this time was a key strategy and still is today. At the time membership numbers were increasing, there was pressure on space across our buildings, while at the same time our membership was increasingly dispersed. While print resources for court work were still important, more and more of our resources were available online. Collegiality and other core values of the profession were being questioned and how to preserve and improve those values was the challenge in an increasingly complex, networked environment. Our information desks and the service provided to members in person was one of our key strengths. How to transpose that service into the digital domain and provide a communication hub for barristers was investigated using the opportunities provided by the then developing Web 2.0 technology. In his article, John Duffy gives a good account of our development and implementation of the first iteration of 'Barrister's Desktop' including the uncertainty around its acceptance.⁶

Today, Barrister's Desktop has proved to be an unmitigated success. It has undergone many upgrades, developments and enhancements. It remains, however, a well-recognised, internal brand that fulfils its original purpose of being our information service in the digital world, a knowledge hub that provides connectivity and communication for our members.

INTO THE NEXT DECADE, 2015 ONWARDS

Two key developments impacted on the barrister's profession and The Bar of Ireland during this period. The first was the passing into legislation of the Legal Services Regulation Act 2015. This legislation was considered to be a major disrupter to the profession. For the first time in the history of The Bar of Ireland, the profession was regulated by an independent body. The legislation provided for the setting up of the Legal Services Regulatory Authority whose stated role is "to maintain and improve standards in legal services and ensure value for money in the interest of consumers."⁷

The second, although a local and internal development, was the appointment in November 2014 of a new Director of The Bar of Ireland, Ciara Murphy, now CEO of The Bar

of Ireland. Being mindful of the developments in the external environment, Ciara's focus was to change radically the membership association, variously known as 'The Law Library'; 'The Bar of Ireland'; 'The Bar Council' into the professional, strong and agile entity it is today: The Bar of Ireland.

One of the visible manifestations of the myriad changes taking place in the wider organisation was the development of a strategic plan for The Bar of Ireland. This development lent strength to our vision and mission and provided context to our goals and objectives. It allowed greater cohesion between the library service and the other departments and sections that make up The Bar of Ireland. It was a slow build and didn't happen overnight, however, as the benefits to all were recognised, the momentum increased, trust developed and most projects and plans now have multi-departmental input.

From 2015 onwards, the library was able to focus deeply on each aspect of its service, embrace the continuing opportunities presented by technology and develop to meet the changing needs of our members. The year 2015 was also the year our library service won the prestigious Lexis Library Award for Best Legal Information Service in the non-commercial sector. This was huge validation for our team and there were great celebrations at the BIALL 2015 Conference in Brighton.

A DEEP DIVE INTO OUR LIBRARY SERVICE

The year 2018 provided the opportunity for us to take a 'deeper dive' into all aspects of our service and identify key strategic projects to develop the initiatives. We were developing our next three year strategic plan for the organisation and we wanted to answer questions such as: how do we define a modern library service; what services do we want to provide to members; what do we want to keep, what do we want to change; what are the opportunities and what are the challenges? All members of staff contributed to the initiative and we engaged a facilitator to help us with the process. At the end we had a clear vision and road map for the future with several key projects identified for implementation.

In tandem with looking at our library service in depth, we also worked to develop a Communications Plan for the Library and Information Service. We knew our members valued our service; their feedback and our internal management information and statistics showed this. Developing the plan helped us segment our members to deliver targeted services when they were needed, where they were needed and in the most appropriate way for that member at that time. It helped clarify our role to our members and the services available to them. It also worked to help us listen to what members really wanted and to communicate clearly what we were doing to meet their needs.

Returning to our deep dive into our library service, we developed four themes or strands to pursue further. These were chosen from many suggestions put forward by the full group. People were then allocated to one of

the four strands to develop the thoughts and concepts further. People were almost naturally chosen for a particular theme based on their interests and preferences.

Theme I: Library as knowledge manager and creator of content

We already had Barrister's Desktop as our platform. Members were used to using it and identified it with our library service. Our physical desks were known for the knowledge and expertise provided by our library staff in a face-to-face context, we wanted to create a similar user experience for our members in the online space. Internally created content from different locations was pulled together into one place that was searchable, accessible and visible. This was to have a high impact on our service delivery. Focus group interviews and surveys of our members showed that they were time-poor, sought relevant information only when needed and were frequently under pressure. They avoided signing up for push notifications fearing they would be overwhelmed by information. They trusted the library and indicated they would engage with information curated and collated by our service.

Theme II: Reaching our customers

This was all about knowing, understanding, listening to and reaching our members. The discussions and suggestions resulting from this theme touched on all aspects of our service. For example, it influenced Theme I above as to what content we should create and how it might be used for members' benefit. This developed into further focus group discussions with our members. 'Reaching our Customers' also led to a number of outreach initiatives with other libraries, dedicated services for our members on Circuit and away from Dublin. It confirmed the importance of using all channels of communication to deliver our service and our message. It also influenced how we designed our online services in a way that is accessible to our members.

Theme III: Digital developments

This theme is everything library related and its potential scope is huge. As we know, the future is digital. As a result, we initially concentrated on high impact projects that did not warrant enterprise-wide engagement and investment. Some of the immediate outcomes, such as our Library Chat service or harnessing mobile phone technology for service delivery have proved very popular and enhanced our service offering. Although this strand concentrated on smaller scale initiatives, the thinking expanded beyond that and the seeds that were planted then have grown to deliver such initiatives as single sign-on and federated searching.

Theme IV: Space as a service

This strand was about creating a workspace for the modern, networked, knowledge based 21st Century barrister. We researched developments in library space nationally and internationally. We visited recently

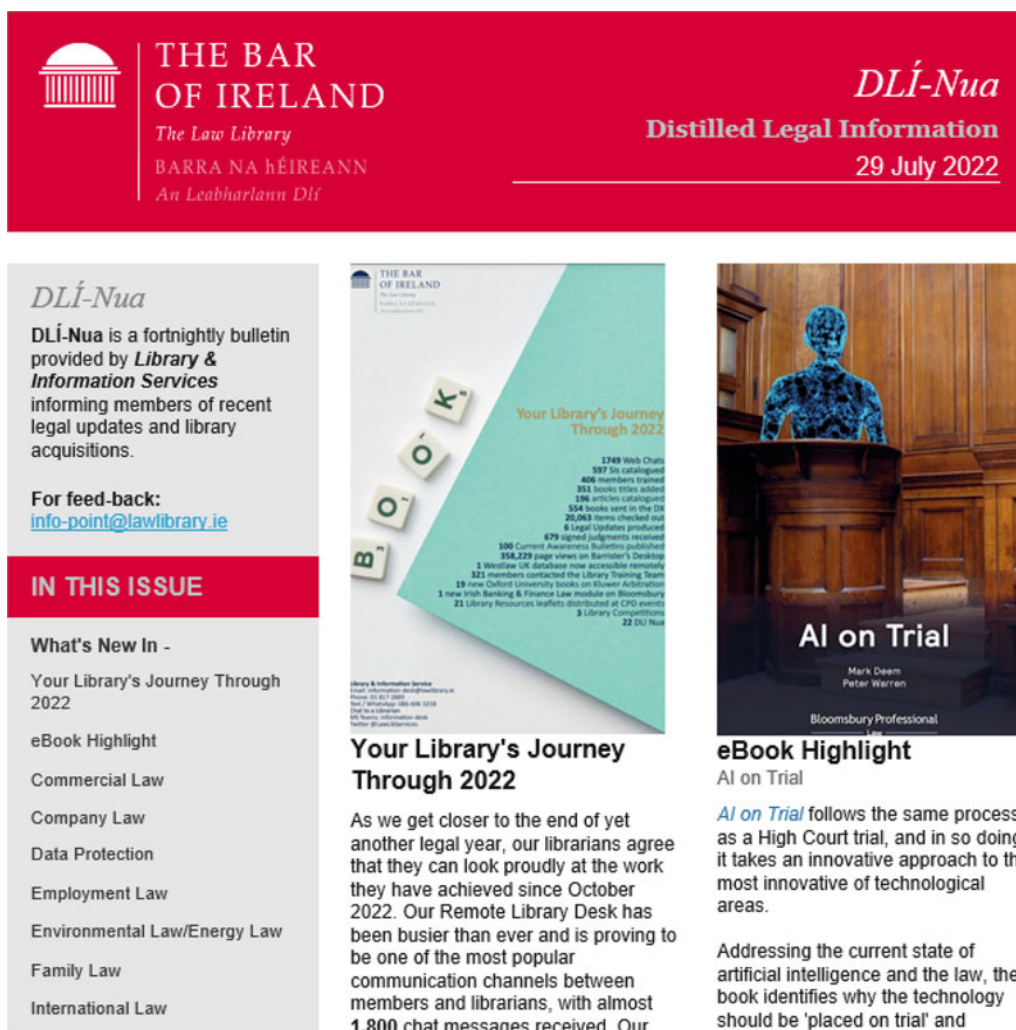


Figure 8: Bi-weekly library current awareness e-zine created by library staff, hosted on Barrister's Desktop.

renovated library spaces as well as newly developed library buildings and developments. Although developed for a student body, the specialist nature of The Royal College of Surgeons (RCSI) was a particularly engaging development with similar needs and demands on space to our own member environment. We presented our ideas to the Senior Management Team and to Council. We showed the possibilities a modern working space could provide across all our properties. We even demonstrated the advantages of relocating some services to alternative locations. We obtained funding to renovate our space in the Criminal Courts of Justice. This was a pilot to showcase the possibilities with a view to implementation elsewhere. We engaged with architects, designers and furniture and equipment suppliers. The project had been fully approved and work started in March 2020.

COVID-19

Then, the Covid-19 pandemic struck. We went into total lockdown and projects, such as our *Space as a Service*, were put on-hold. During this period there were both positive and negative affects on the service. Projects were

cancelled or postponed and the uncertainty and concern that Covid-19 brought was unsettling. It affected both our members and our staff.

Due to the investment in, and the development of, our online, digital services, the library was able to pivot overnight and provide all services online. This included access to content, research requests, queries, email, scanning and more. Some of our buildings have 24/7 access and members could take the physical items themselves by using the self-issue equipment in place. All our services remained open for the duration.

Our information skills librarians were inundated with requests for training and we introduced a completely remote information desk that has remained post-pandemic due to its success and popularity. We are reaching more of our members than the physical information desks alone.

TOWARDS THE FUTURE - 2022 AND ONWARDS

Covid-19 was a disrupter, it moved our service forward at least three years beyond where we expected to be today. Working remotely and online is accepted as normal. Skills



Figure 9: Connecting with our members - a library winter fair to showcase our services.

to survive and thrive in the digital environment are recognised as a life skill. Expectations for service delivery have grown everywhere, not least in The Law Library.

Projects to deliver on our strategic goals and objectives have been reinstated. Most have been adjusted to meet the expectations and new ways of working post-pandemic. Work to renovate the space in the Criminal Courts of Justice is happening during August 2022 with more projects following.

Barristers Desktop and our content creation that harnesses the expertise of our library staff has matured into

the knowledge hub we wanted. Developing Barrister’s Desktop, however, is an ongoing work in progress. We are constantly monitoring and evaluating it to ensure it meets members needs now and in the future.

FINAL WORDS

The Law Library of The Bar of Ireland has existed as an entity since 1816. While over time it may have had different names, it has survived because it has remained relevant to the barristers using its services. Remaining



Figure 10: Working from home – our hybrid library service.



Figure 11: Blog hosted on Barrister's Desktop to update our members on progress.

relevant means not standing still, it means constantly monitoring, evaluating and changing. Some changes are incremental while others are not. Some happen overnight. Looking out for and anticipating the next disrupter or the next 'big thing' is essential.

I haven't mentioned artificial intelligence (AI) and the effects it is having and will continue to have on libraries now and in the future. AI is already affecting our everyday lives. It is certainly part of the information landscape. It

will allow us to do things we never thought possible and deliver services that are still in the realms of science fiction.

Until that future has manifested itself, we, as librarians, information providers and curators, must constantly move forward by recognising opportunities, embracing the possibilities of technology, bringing people along on the journey and remaining relevant by listening to what our users want and telling them what we can do.

Footnotes

¹ The Bar of Ireland website: <https://www.lawlibrary.ie/about/> accessed 4 July 2022.

² History of The Law Library: <https://www.lawlibrary.ie/about/history/> accessed 4 July 2022

³ Ibid.

⁴ Jennefer Aston, 'From Law Library Society to Law Library: the First 180 Years, 1816–1996' (2011) 11(3) *Legal Information Management* 168.

⁵ Alan MacDougall, 'Performance Assessment: Today's Confusion, Tomorrow's Solution' (1991) 17(4) *IFLA Journal* 371.

⁶ John Duffy, 'When Free and Easy Isn't an Option: Intranet 2.0 at The Bar Council of Ireland Law Library', (2010) 10(4) *Legal Information Management* 265.

⁷ Legal Services Regulatory Authority <www.lsr.ie> accessed 7 July 2022.

Biography

Nuala Byrne is Director of Library and Information Services at The Bar of Ireland, The Law Library. Nuala was appointed to this post in January 2004. Prior to her joining The Law Library, Nuala was Librarian in the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions. She was the first appointment to this post and set up the library service for that Office. Prior to that she was the Business Librarian in Dublin City University. Nuala began her library career in the library of the Educational Research Centre in what was then St Patrick's College, Drumcondra, Dublin, now a college of Dublin City University. Nuala is a non-practising barrister and took her call to The Bar of Ireland in 2013.