

Five Decades of Law Librarianship and BIALL

Abstract: In this combined article, five authors provide a brief summary of the activities of the British and Irish Association of Law Librarians (BIALL) and the developments in law librarianship over the past 50 years, each writing about a different decade. Barbara Tearle (writing about the 1970s), Christine Miskin (the 1980s), Michael Maher (1990s), Fiona Fogden (2000s) and Narinder Toor (2010s) each bring their own experiences and memories to their writing and complete a half century of reflections to coincide with BIALL's 50th anniversary in 2019.

Keywords: law librarianship; BIALL

The First Decade: the 1970s

My first memory of BIALL goes back to pre-BIALL when, with regret, I turned down the suggestion from my employers that I attend the second Harrogate Workshop in April 1969 because I had a small child whom I did not wish to leave.

The second memory is the meeting held in the basement in the old IALS building in Russell Square in September 1969. This was the first AGM, the Association having been founded at that second Harrogate Workshop. It was crowded; it was hot; and issues of the Association's name and its independence or affiliation with another organisation were vehemently debated. It attracted people with all levels of qualifications and at least one solicitor in charge of a provincial law society library. A strong sense emerged that to satisfy all these interests would require an independent association. And BIALL was set up free of ties to existing organisations.

During the following year, the constitution was re-drafted and administrative procedures drawn up. Members were recruited (including law publishers); a journal *The Law Librarian* was started (with help from Butterworths and Allan Appleby of Sweet & Maxwell); and a conference organised. Many of us were encouraged by our employers to take part in BIALL. Unfortunately some members were not backed in this way and one had to withdraw from committee attendance.

In the second year, a committee was set up to work on what today would be called an action plan. At the time, few services were tailored to the needs of law libraries and librarians so that BIALL had an almost blank canvas on which to work. The *Report on Co-operation* described the law library scene, and set out what was needed and *achievable*. Its central aim was to provide law

librarians with the tools of their trade. A wider aim, although not explicitly stated, was to be a voice in the library and legal communities.

Committees were set up in 1971 to implement the recommendations of the *Report* and other initiatives of the Executive Committee. They were the vehicles for BIALL's work, then and now. By 1980, in addition to the journal and annual conference, BIALL's activities included a duplicates' exchange scheme, memoranda to decision-makers on matters concerning law libraries, three books, training courses, a meeting with medical librarians and budding contact with overseas associations.

Each of us who were there will have our own preference for the most significant achievement. Mine is the publications. The first was a *Bibliography of EC law*, aimed to provide a checklist of sources to coincide with joining the Common Market in 1972. The *Directory of Law Libraries* in 1976 helped to develop the network of mutual assistance. For me, the highpoint was the *Manual of Law Librarianship*. Here was the authoritative reference source that we needed. The production of these books in such a short space of time is particularly impressive because the massive amount of work was done in the pre-computer age: all work was typewritten and all communications by letter, telephone or meetings.

Looking with hindsight at BIALL's activities in the 1970s, I wonder how they were accomplished as so much was initiated simultaneously. The answer, of course, is through sheer hard work on the part of a high proportion of the membership. The names of Wallace Broom and Betty Moys stand out as officers and committee chairs throughout the decade. Muriel Anderson, Mary Blake, Don Daintree, John Jeffries,

Robert Logan, Charlotte Lutyens, Edward Miller, Don Raistrick, Paul Richardson, David Shaw, Willi Steiner and Derek Way all served terms as officers or committee chairs. They were aided by fifty or more BIALL members as committee members, local representatives and conference organisers, many of them doubling up on several roles. You could say that nothing changes - that's how it is today. The significance is that so many people, who did not know each other, instantly recognised the advantages of the new organisation and wanted to take part.

The growth of overseas contacts was probably due to circumstances rather than a plan on BIALL's part. Similar national law library associations were emerging in the Netherlands, Germany, Australia, Canada, South Africa and New Zealand. Several BIALL members belonged to AALL and IALL. Our 'big cousin' AALL took notice of BIALL and sent delegates to conferences.

The legacy of 1970s' BIALL can still be seen today. It set standards of inclusivity, participation, communication, networking and hard work that remain BIALL's hallmark.

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The 80s: the Effect of the Growth in Law Firm Librarianship, IT and Legal Publishing on BIALL

In the 1970s London law firms realised just how useful law librarians could be and there was a huge growth in their number during the 1980s. The first co-operative venture began in the mid-70s when we produced a Union List of Holdings and from that grew the City Law Librarians Group. By 1986 there were at least 60 firms in London employing over 150 professional law librarians. Provincial law firms were generally smaller but by the same date firms in Leeds, Birmingham, Manchester, Norwich and Bristol were employing law librarians¹.

This had a considerable effect on the membership of BIALL. In 1969 membership stood at 47 personal and institutional members only one of whom was from a law firm library, by 1999 the total membership was 720 of whom 344 worked in law firms² (As a comparison, in 2019 the total membership figure has decreased a little and stands at 634 members, including approximately 120 working in the academic sector and 250 from law firms).

A key milestone for BIALL was the establishment in 1984/85 of the BIALL/PCL Course entitled English Law for Law Librarians. It was designed specifically for law librarians who did not have a formal qualification in law and was run by lecturers in the Faculty of Law of the Polytechnic. The first course had 26 participants, was a great success and is still running today³.

Huge strides were taken in the development of IT, mainly in publishing, but also in its use within law libraries. The first Conference devoted only to IT took place in 1985 and on this occasion Professor David Thomas

(op cit) presented a paper on 'The "Paperless Law Library" in the United States' which was somewhat ahead of its time⁴.

The Association received considerable support from the publishers during the 1980s including sponsorship of the annual conference and bursaries for British and Irish law librarians to go to overseas conferences. Traditional book publishing was dominated by Butterworths and Sweet & Maxwell, but smaller publishers such as Professional Books, Lloyds of London Press, and Tolley's thrived. The end of the decade heralded the use of CD-ROMS and 'electronic mail' by legal publishers and law firms.

A very early entrant in the database field was POLIS (Parliamentary Online Information Service) which became operational in the House of Commons in 1980.

LEXIS had first been introduced in the UK in 1979. It had a fairly disastrous start with the huge purpose built terminals of the time frequently failing to work⁵. The first demonstration the author attended, probably in 1980, involved searches on the concept of 'reservation of title', which was of great importance at the time. It produced only cases on Indian reservations!⁶

In 1979 EUROLEX, a database run by the European Law Centre was launched. The director was Norman Nunn-Price, an early computer visionary. Following its take-over by Lexis in 1985, he went on to establish Context Legal Systems, owners of JUSTIS, later Justis Publishing Limited, a very successful independent company for many years, which has just been taken over by vLex.