

The Archive of the Society of Legal Scholars: a Case Study; a brief note

Abstract: In this short article Professor Fiona Cownie provides a brief note to accompany Elizabeth Dawson's guide to the archival sources at the Institute of Advanced Legal Studies, London.

Keywords: archives; societies; legal history; women and the law

In 2009, the Society of Legal Scholars celebrated its centenary. As part of the celebrations which took place during that year, Professor Ray Cocks and I agreed to write the history of the Society. We co-authored a monograph, published that year, entitled *A Great and Noble Occupation!: The History of the Society of Legal Scholars*. (The title is derived from a remark made by Professor Goudy, the first President of the Society, in his Introductory Address to the Society in 1909.)

When working together on the book, Ray Cocks and I decided to split the research and writing between us; Ray covered the first fifty years and I did the second fifty. Only one previous article had been published on the history of the Society, in the early 1980s, when Professor PH Pettit looked at its first seventy five years. We were thus thrown back on the archive and other documentary evidence, such as the Society's Journal, which became our primary sources.

Professor Ray Cocks is a well-known legal historian, but my specialism is legal education. My expertise was relevant to this project, as the objects of the Society include 'the furtherance of legal education', but nevertheless I was a complete novice as far as the use of archival material was concerned. I was therefore extremely pleased, not to say relieved, when I met Elizabeth Dawson, then Archivist at the Institute of Advanced Legal Studies, and discovered how very helpful and knowledgeable she was. I was quickly introduced to the etiquette of handling the documents, taking notes and so on. I also found Elizabeth's knowledge of the content of the archive very valuable in helping me to consider aspects of the Society which might be interesting to examine.

In terms of the exploration of gender with which this conference was concerned, the archive, which at first sight might have seemed rather unpromising from that point of view, turned out to be surprisingly interesting. The archive itself contains fairly complete records of the membership and formal proceedings of the Society, as well as a range of ephemera, including some relating to the society's Annual Conferences. From these sources, we were able to trace the history of women's exclusion from membership of the Society, the times at which individual women tried to gain membership, the debates over their admission and their eventual acceptance as full members of the Society (in 1950). We were also able to track their participation in conferences, and in the life of the Society generally (noting, for instance, that the first female President of the Society, Professor Margaret Brazier, did not hold office until 1997).

One of the pieces of information that came to light as we read the documents in the archive was that the first female professor of Law in the U.K. appeared to have been appointed as late as the 1970s. This discovery has subsequently led on to a new research project which has the objective of uncovering the legal biography of that first pioneer (Claire Palley, who was appointed to a Chair at Queen's University Belfast in 1970). Thus the archive has stimulated more research than we first expected, and we have every confidence that it will go on to reveal further information, both as the archive itself grows, and as more researchers are stimulated, by events such as this conference, to use it.

Biography

Fiona Cownie is Professor of Law at Keele University. From 2003 she held the Hugh Bevan Chair of Law at the University of Hull. She was appointed to a Chair in Law at Keele in 2006, and became Pro Vice Chancellor (Education and Student Experience) in September 2013. Fiona Cownie's research interests centre on legal education and the legal system. Her work covers all areas of legal education.