

# Raising the Bar: the Work of the Inns of Court Libraries

**Abstract:** This article has been written by Harpreet K. Dhillon, with contributions from colleagues at Gray's Inn Library, Inner Temple Library, Middle Temple Library and Lincoln's Inn's Library. During the course of the article, Harpreet looks at the way the four of Inns of Court libraries support barristers, though will use the term members interchangeably throughout. The Inns have their own histories, and the libraries function in their own unique ways, so the focus of this article are those key services provided by all the libraries and their relevance to the continuing work of Inn members. The article has been written using anecdotal evidence and contributions from all the library teams, concluding that the Inn libraries play a crucial and ongoing role in supporting the work of barristers, a role that evolves and will continue to do so alongside the legal profession's demands.

**Keywords:** barristers; legal profession; Inns of Court; law libraries; legal training; Covid-19; lockdown

## INTRODUCTION

The core of the work done by the Inn libraries is to support legal professionals throughout their careers, right from aspiring barristers to successful practitioners.

They provide support in the shape of resources and spaces, through library teams who possess a wealth of experience and knowledge between them, and through strategies committed to shaping services that are relevant and in line with the demands of the legal landscape.

The Inn libraries are a membership privilege, a private space for Inn members, something that is a part of the parcel when one joins an Inn, and the libraries exist not just for the barristers, but also the students they used to be and the Benchers they might become.

## THE INNS OF COURT

The Inns have a long and illustrious history, too long and illustrious for an in-depth look here, but worth a small detour to get an idea of their evolving role in the legal world. If one is to look out of the tour bus down the timeline of English law, a snap-worthy monument of note is the 1327 return of Edward III's court from York to Westminster, bringing with it lawyers in need of accommodation.

Before this point, the curation and management of the law had already moved from the clergy to the judges, creating an environment ripe for aspiring lawyers. Spaces that once belonged to the likes of the Knights Templar were now open to new tenants and the lawyers and students were moving into townhouses/hostels, starting to build communities that would slowly evolve into the *Inns of Court*.

The Inns of Court would one day become staple establishments in the study of the law, but for a time they were also considered a third university, emulating the likes of Oxford and Cambridge, turning out well-rounded young men, who along with the law also studied other gentlemanly pursuits.

The fourteenth century would see the Inns creating crucial cogs in the educational machinery of the study of law. Eminent members of the Inns imparted wisdom on legal topics in the role of *Readers*, and students took part in mock trials known as *Moots*, figures and functions that are still a part of the fabric of legal teaching. Even the *call to the bar* comes from the fourteenth century positioning of where junior and senior students sat and stood on either side of a bench, or the bar, during their moots.

The sixteenth century was a thriving time. The Inns flourished as cultural hubs. Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* was performed for the first time in Middle Temple Hall, and *Comedy of Errors* in Gray's Inn. It was also the age of exploration and the Inns had in their midst eminent members such as Sir Walter Raleigh and visitors such as Sir Francis Drake, who is said to have gifted the hatch of the *Golden Hind* to Middle Temple.

Members of these Inns might not have all left with the intention to practise law, and indeed the numbers of those who did go on to practise were quite low, but they certainly would have left with the privilege of having attended such fashionable institutions of high standing.

The Inns saw a lot of change from the seventeenth century onwards. Where the previous century was an era of excitement, exploration and expansion, the seventeenth century would witness some decline of the Inns' activities.

It was in the middle of the nineteenth century that the Inns revived their role as central to the education of

future legal practitioners by scrutinising the worth of their own activities and devising a more formalised system of learning. These changes would lay the foundations of the modern Inns of today, purpose-built for the practitioners of tomorrow. The traditional collegiate culture would remain, but now it would be more important to play a central role in supporting the education and work of legal professionals.

Today, the Inns continue to play a two-fold role; as a place where legal professionals can network, and new entrants into the profession can acquire the skills and resources needed to understand and shape the law.

## THE LIBRARIES

The Inns have had some form of library spaces as far back as the thirteenth century. These early libraries moved around the Inns as collections grew because of donations, or perhaps even shrunk because of book theft.

With growing collections and the expanding role of the Inns, purpose-built libraries at every Inn were of course inevitable, especially with eminent members bequeathing donations that demanded spaces and persons to contain and care for them.

The first real Inn libraries, as we find them today, were the ones built post re-positioning the Inns as places central to the learning of the law. These would be Gray's Holker Library built in 1929, Inner Temple Library built in 1827, Lincoln's Inn Library built in 1845, and Middle Temple Library built in 1861.

Just as the Inns constructed halls and cultivated gardens for their members to congregate in, these libraries were another privilege of belonging to an Inn of Court. Unfortunately, three of the original libraries were destroyed during the Blitz, Lincoln's Inn remaining intact and thriving even now.

Between them all, lost, surviving and new, their architecture speaks volumes about the seriousness with which their role in the working lives of their members is treated. The Inn libraries are committed and invest deeply in enriching the experience of Inn members. Never was this truer than during the Covid lockdowns.

## THE WORST OF TIMES

In the past, the Inns of Court have seen little in the way of remote working.

Collegiate culture is an inextricable thread sewn into the fabric of the Inns. Legal London even now is composed of institutions and professionals working in close quarters, Chambers and Inns a stone's throw from each other.

The Inn libraries are hubs of continual activity, clerks, barristers, students, and chambers librarians moving through them daily. They come for resources, for events, and for training. There are people who walk in through the doors as soon as they open. There are people dawdling at ten-past-closing time.

These are active workspaces and especially important for sole practitioners who are without chambers and the resources that can come with chambers. For the sole practitioner, the Inn library is both office *and* library.

The lockdowns removed these privileges afforded to Inn members, especially those who used the libraries regularly. Gone was the freedom to browse, to borrow books overnight, photocopy and scan, to carry out researches that rely a dedicated space and diverse collections.

Locked down, the members only had one mode of connection with the libraries and the false impression that everything is available online.

## THE BEST OF SERVICES

The Inn libraries generally work in collaboration with each other, whilst also operating individually. During the lockdowns the libraries came together quickly, setting up procedures and rotas on how to combine resources in order to support all Inn members. Key to supporting barristers at this time was a service that is in daily use, but became the centre of operations.

The Inn libraries each run a dedicated distance service. It is of most benefit to those practitioners outside of London who cannot visit the Inns in person, but also heavily used by members closer to home. It is invaluable to barristers short on time and long on requirements.

During the lockdowns it was the only way for barristers to interact with library collections. The Inn libraries devised systems relying on dedicated staff to carry out scanning on-site. Those scans were edited and supplied to barristers by remote-working staff. Items not available at one Inn library would be scanned from the collection of another and in this way all members had access to all collections.

The heavy use of this service highlighted the value of the collections and individual specialisms of each library. Very little material could *not* be provided thanks to the scope of these collections. Most gratifyingly, the worth of the hard copy materials became much more evident. Almost half of the requests fulfilled during lockdowns depended on scanning physical items, because – and this is going to be hard to believe – not *everything* is online.

It was of little surprise that print materials were so handy and in such high demand. The Inn library teams witness daily the amount of print items being photocopied, scanned and consulted. One hopes that members might have also realised that the existence of online access is not equal to availability of material and their Inn libraries have a reach that extends beyond chambers and online resources.

The Inn libraries opted not to charge for the cost of scanning and providing documents to members during this time. It was clear there would be a knock-on effect of closed chambers and courts on Inn members and this free service was another way the Inn libraries could

support their members and ensure that access to collections remained available.

## DIVERSITY OF MATERIAL

In addition to core titles, each of the libraries has dedicated specialist collections, devoted to specific areas of the law; Lincoln's Inn and Inner Temple share the responsibility for collecting Commonwealth jurisdictions, Middle Temple specialises in the law of the United States and the European Union and Gray's Inn specialises in International Law. Lincoln's Inn also has a specialist collection of United Kingdom Parliamentary papers.

The libraries also provide online resources with access to case law, legislation and commentary through staple databases such as Westlaw and Lexis, and more specialist ones like LLMC or PLI+. Most online resources provided by the libraries are available on-site only, but there are continued efforts made towards expanding the scope of online offerings to include remotely available resources, such as *Bloomsbury Professional Online* and *Lexis PSL*, which barristers can use through login credentials provided by the libraries.

The Inn libraries have an impressive offering of materials, both print and online, but one part of the collections that make the libraries especially crucial in supporting the work of barristers is superseded material. Databases like Westlaw are good at providing material for point in time research, but it is older material that helps to contextualise the application of the law through commentary.

Diversity of material is incredibly important. Online resources can only stretch so far. They do not offer the

same scope as print collections when it comes to historical research. They do not always meet the needs of library users. It is a common occurrence that barristers or clerks will come to the library looking for material that is outside a chambers subscription or not available online at all.

*The nature of litigation means that the information needs of barristers are unpredictable. A case concerning a multi-million pound commercial contract may hinge on an arcane and ancient precedent. A property dispute may involve rights and responsibilities laid down in local legislation or even by custom. Companies and individuals structure their financial affairs across multiple jurisdictions to take advantage of favourable tax regimes. All these are examples of the need for core reference libraries beyond the scope of a single set of Chambers.*

*Dunstan Speight, Librarian at Lincoln's Inn.*

## POINTING IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION

Much work goes into curating resources, starting with selection of relevant materials and ending with making those materials accessible within the libraries through cataloguing, classification, and signage. There is also a continued effort to remain mindful of how members engage with library spaces and how they approach the finding of materials.

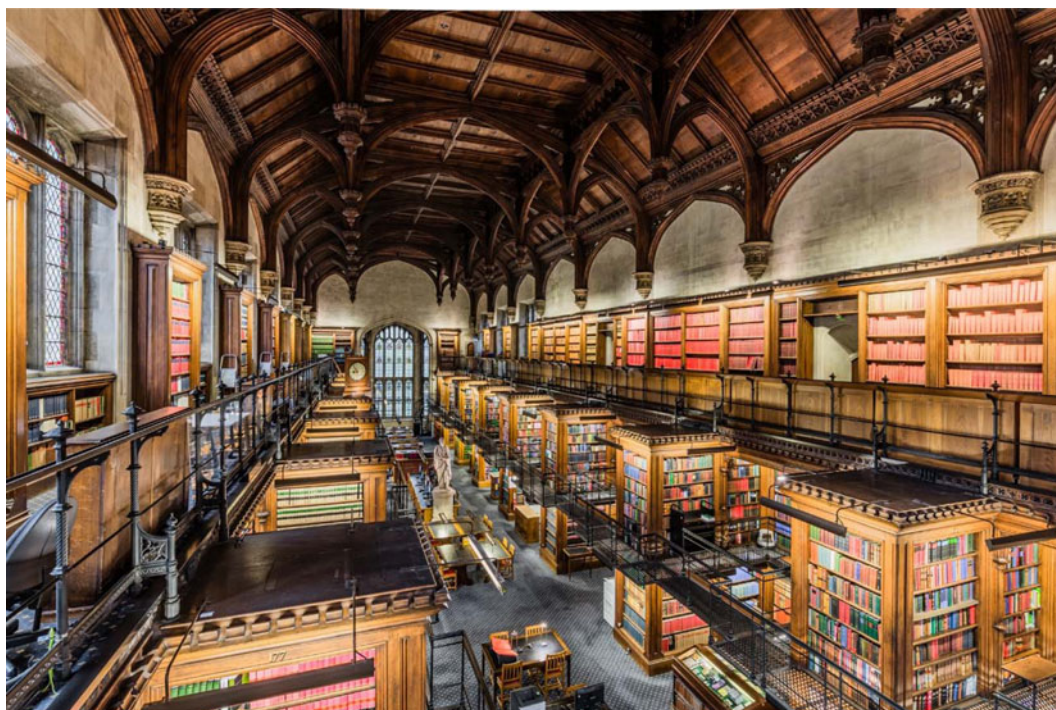


Figure 1: Lincoln's Inn Library.

No two members engage with collections in the same way. Some are adept at searching the catalogue and navigating the library using classification schemes, whilst others feel comfortable using printed guidance or personal direction.

However members choose to engage, library staff ensure there are plenty of access points to the information required, whether through personal or printed guidance. It is the role of library staff to provide the best guidance possible, which barristers can apply using their professional judgement.

The complexity of their inquiries also provide a good lesson for the Inn libraries to fine-tune services to member needs and to both better understand how best to use the resources on offer and also explore what else is out there.

*What makes working at an Inn of Court library so interesting is the wide range of topics, and broad date ranges that our legal enquiries cover, ranging from medieval foreshore rights; the eighteenth-century law of corpse disposal; and even why journals on HeinOnline are not available full-text for all years. The libraries of the Inns of Court are unique institutions in their attempt to cover the full range of common law in its many jurisdictions. The advent of online resources has not made that effort redundant, but has broadened the scope. With those additional resources to hand, we have made even more resources available to barristers, pupils, students and clerks.*

*Renaë Satterley, Librarian of Middle Temple.*

## EDUCATION AND EMPOWERMENT

As both curators and mediators of resources, the Inn libraries have teams that are well equipped to use their knowledge to create finely-tuned training programmes. These vary in focus and benefit members across the board, from those studying the law to those who have been practising for years but may wish to sharpen their skills. The Inn libraries also work with each other to provide legal research training for students on the Inns of Court College of Advocacy (ICCA) Bar Course.

Each of the Inn libraries also work with their Education departments to create qualifying sessions for students, focusing on supporting the legal knowledge and skills required by the profession. Qualifying sessions in the last year have covered key topics such as *Legal Knowledge, Justice and the Rule of Law, Advocacy Skills, and Preparation for Pupillage*. The descriptions and learning outcomes of these sessions are submitted to the Bar Standards Board in advance to ensure certain standards and criteria are met.

The pandemic obviously had an impact on the provision of training, which was previously carried out on-site. In response to lockdown, training sessions quickly moved to an online format using platforms like Zoom. Though the Inns are once again open for business, training is now provided both in person and online, the Inns recognising that hybrid events may be the new normal for a while.

The Inn libraries also provide one-to-one training sessions on legal research, allowing trainers to focus on individual needs. This is especially helpful for those practitioners returning to work or looking into using resources with which they lack familiarity.



Figure 2: Middle Temple.

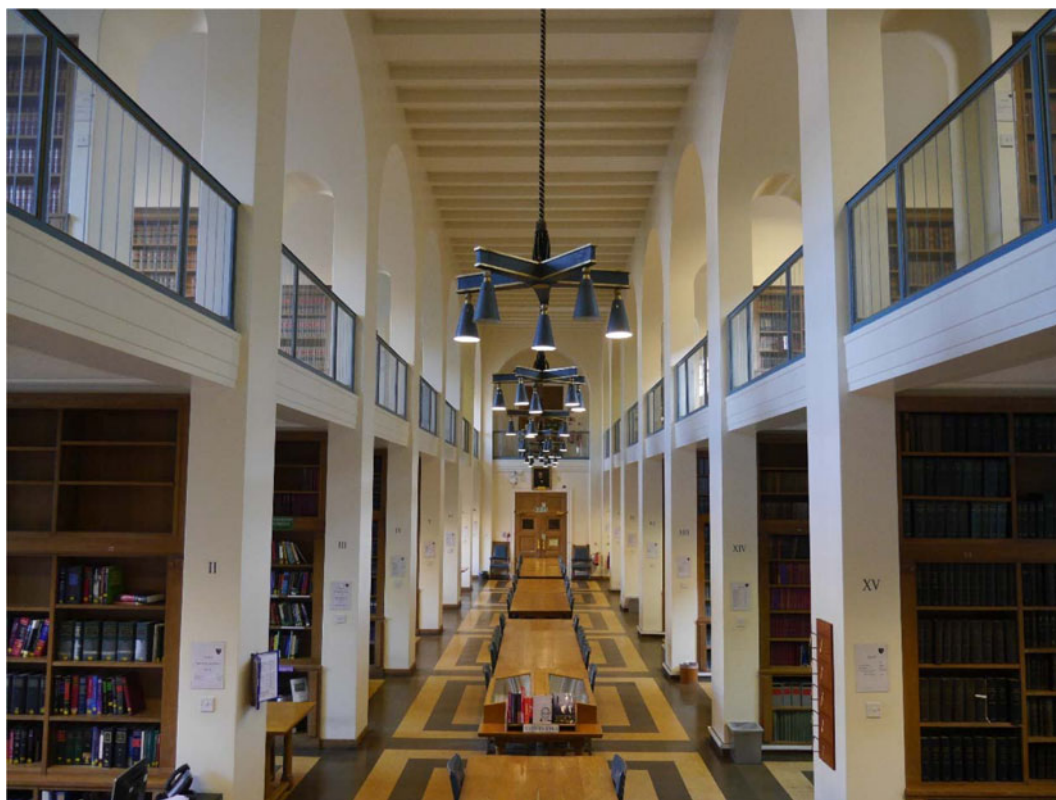


Figure 3: Gray's Inn Library.

Training provision is central to the work of the Inns and their libraries as they allow new professionals to hit the ground running, whilst offering the stalwarts a chance to keep up with new and evolving access to materials.

*At Gray's Inn Library, our training offerings includes qualifying sessions in practical research, classes for students new to legal materials, and bookable 1:1 sessions tailored to address individual members' research and support needs. Library teaching, grounded in pedagogical theory and informed by extensive library experience supporting barristers' research, forms an important part of the service we offer to our members.*

*Guy Mitchell, Librarian of Gray's Inn.*

## INNER SPACES

The Inn libraries are incredibly beautiful, each one with its own character and charm. Visitors often refer to them as proper libraries seeing them as a realisation of their conception of how a library should appear. However, behind these seemingly quiet and serious spaces is the excited machinery of change that powers them forward.

They offer both materials and guidance that evolves and expands alongside the needs of the legal professional. They also offer places to study and work. For

practitioners without chambers, the libraries are crucial to their work, giving them both an office and a communal space to network.

Both Lincoln's Inn and Inner Temple have recently finished major construction projects to modernise the Inns, providing spacious lecture theatres and advocacy suites, continuing to invest in the Inns as spaces of education. These re-configurations of space also bring new life to the way the libraries carry out their training and support new professionals.

*Libraries continually change and even following a three year redevelopment plan the Inner Temple Library will not be enjoying an evolutionary pause! As user needs change, our libraries will develop too. What's next? Acoustic furniture, meeting booths, new acquisition models, and increased library loans. Probably. All of these things help us towards our aim of becoming a 'hub' at the heart of the Inn.*

*Rob Hodgson, Librarian of Inner Temple.*

## IN CONCLUSION

Like most libraries, the Inn libraries have to think about the future and issues such as rising cost of resources and diminishing growth space. Databases are expensive and are often developed in ways which make them less useful



Figure 4: Inner Temple Library.

to serious researchers (“Yes let’s make everything more like Google!”).

The Inn libraries collect materials that span across years and the shelves only have finite space. Unless that space is expanding, there is a constant battle between what is essential and what is disposable. Offsite storage is an option, but that does not come without its own set of problems and price tag.

Technological advancement ensures change within the legal profession and a by-product of this will of course be raised expectations in regards to what the

Inn libraries offer and how. So far these old institutions have done well keeping up with changing demands, going from loanable books to loanable iPads, from small rooms to lecture theatres, and that evolution will undoubtedly continue.

One can still rest assured though, that despite technological evolution, twenty years from now a barrister will come into one of the Inn libraries and request a superseded print edition of a core text to delve into the legal landscape of 2022, and will be guided to its location.

*Unless, by then, everything is online.*

## Resources

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## Biography

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