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The BIALL Conference 1970 to 2019

Abstract: In this article, the authors, Catherine Bowl, John Furlong and Caroline Mosley look at the direction the Association's Annual Conference has taken over the past 50 years since the first Conference in Liverpool in 1970. The emphasis is on the mid-1990s to the present day, during which period the authors served as Chairs of BIALL's Conference Committee¹.

Keywords: conferences; law librarianship; BIALL

INTRODUCTION

The first BIALL Conference, organised by Derek Way, was held at Liverpool University in September 1970. *“Thirty five delegates attended the first conference, the conference package which included all meals and two nights’ accommodation was £10.00 and the conference made a £25.00 profit”*² The Conference was held on the university campus and accommodation was in the halls of residence.

The Liverpool Conference was not the first gathering of law librarians, however, as two workshops were held in Harrogate in 1968 and 1969. This is where the seeds were sown both for the Association and the 1970 Conference.

EVOLVEMENT OF THE CONFERENCE

The mid to late 1990s saw a lot of change with regards to the organisation of the Conference and venues. In 1994, the Conference moved from halls of residence to hotels. However, the biggest change was the one of timing, when in 1999 the Conference moved from September to June. This had a wider impact as it required the BIALL year to also change so that the AGM could be held at Conference. A Professional Conference Organiser (PCO) replaced the local organising committee in 2000. The Exhibition now forms a major part of the Conference and the importance of sponsorship has increased. Conferences have been held in all corners of the UK and Ireland. The

composition of the delegates has changed over the years and the themes of the Conference have kept pace with changes in our profession and technology. Today's Conferences are held mostly during the week and run for three days, whereas, the first Conferences were held mostly at weekends. The 1970 Conference was held over three days. By the mid-1990s it was extended to four days but in 2004 reverted to three. However, some aspects have remained the same. For example, the cost to BIALL members has always included access to the speaker programme, accommodation and meals.

LOCATION³

The Conference has been committed to moving to different locations around the jurisdictions of the Association. Indeed, when choosing suitable locations within Great Britain, the Conference Committee (the 'Committee') has tried to work a geographical option of north one year and south the next. It may not always have worked out, particularly as the Conference grew and the requirements for the Plenary and Parallel sessions and the Exhibition became quite specific. The cross jurisdictional element of the Association has had many benefits and one of these is that the Conference over the years has been held on six occasions on the island of Ireland – three times in Dublin; twice in Belfast and once in Cork. Apart from the travel issues for delegates (travel by air to a conference was apparently seen by some employers as an extravagance), there were other logistical issues in travelling to Ireland - North and South - including longer distances and extra costs for exhibitors. And of course, travelling to Ireland meant dealing with invoices in euro and with a different VAT regime.⁴ Who knows what challenges Brexit will bring in the future!

SPONSORSHIP

Sponsorship has always been crucial to the financial stability of the Conference. The Conference planning cycle usually begins directly after the preceding Conference. As early as possible, the Committee tries to negotiate and secure substantial major sponsorship to clarify the approach to the costing of the next Conference and the setting of the delegate rates. During John Furlong's time, the Committee devised a sponsorship model whereby the financial value was accorded a platinum, gold, silver or bronze status aligned with the overall Conference. This moved the Conference away from sponsorship of individual events or programme elements. It was also felt that it gave the sponsors more of a relationship with Conference as a whole. Nothing stands still of course, and in order to attract sponsorship and adapt to changes in the sponsorship market, there has been a change to this arrangement in recent years as sponsors are linked to individual events.

The September/October meetings between the Committee Chair and potential main sponsors were always a leap into the unknown – particularly with the

Table 1: BIALL Conferences: surpluses and deficits between 2004 and 2018

Edinburgh 2004	(£17,173)
Harrogate 2005	£19,239
Brighton 2006	£10,286
Sheffield 2007	£21,923
Dublin 2008	£22,271
Manchester 2009	£28,397
Brighton 2010	£10,959
Newcastle 2011	(£13,261)
Belfast 2012	£11,359
Glasgow 2013	£11,474
Harrogate 2014	£29,153
Brighton 2015	£36,822
Dublin 2016	(£47,073)
Manchester 2017	(£11,047)
Birmingham 2018	(£7,103) circa

regular economic downturns over the years and the constant turbulence - supplier amalgamations and restructurings - within the marketplace. John Furlong is of the view that the negotiation of substantial sponsorship, which enables the event to be economically viable, is one of the most important but overlooked tasks undertaken by the Committee.

COSTING THE CONFERENCE – SURPLUSES AND DEFICITS

Over the years, the Committee opted for bigger non-academic venues, the use of hotel accommodation and occasional adventurous dinner venues and entertainment. Delegates raised their expectations of what they could expect for their money. This required the Committee year on year to balance substantial and sometimes elaborate Conference packages with the best possible cost. The Committee plans to be revenue neutral but for some years and for a variety of reasons, the Conference has generated a surplus or a deficit. The above table sets out the total Conference surpluses (£201,883) and deficits (£95,627) since 2004. Overall, the Conference has contributed a total surplus of £106,256 to the Association's finances since 2005.

COMPOSITION OF DELEGATES

"The 1970s delegates included law librarians from England, Ireland and Scotland and an overseas dimension was provided by a delegate from the Australian High Commission in London. Delegates came from professional bodies, government departments, universities and law publishers".⁵ Academic law librarians comprised almost half of the delegates at the 1970 Conference at which there were no law firm librarians. However, law firms started

Table 2: Snapshot of composition of delegates.⁶

	1970	2002	2005	2010	2018
Academic	17 (48.5%)	56 (20%)	57 (13.84%)	49 (13.24%)	47 (17.67%)
Professional bodies	7 (20%)	21 (7.6%)	27 (6.55%)	20 (5.40%)	21 (7.89%)
National and public libraries	1 (2.8%)	2 (.7%)	5 (1.21%)	1 (0.27%)	0
Government departments	3 (8.5%)	13 (4.7%)	17 (4.12%)	18 (4.86%)	13 (4.88%)
Law Firms	0 (0%)	134 (48.5%)	143 (34.71%)	115 (31.10%)	85 (31.95%)
Commercial organisations	1 (2.8%)	9 (3%)	12 (2.91%)	16 (4.33%)	7 (2.64%)
Publishers and booksellers/ Exhibitors	5 (14.2%)	24 (8.6%)	140 (33.99%)	146 (39.45%)	90 (33.84%)
Others	1 (2.8%)	17 (6%)	11 (2.67%)	5 (1.35%)	3 (1.13%)
Total delegates	35	276	412	271	266

employing librarians from the mid-1970s. Influenced by the implementation of Financial Services Act 1986, the sector expanded considerably in the mid-1980s and by 2002 provided almost 50% of attendees.

By the mid-noughties, BIALl's Conferences attracted just over 400 delegates. In recent years, the global financial crisis and the decline of specialist subject librarians within the academic sector have seen a significant drop in overall attendance. In addition, competition from other specialist conferences specifically aimed at the law firm sector has had an impact on the attendance numbers of these members. These factors have resulted in recent Conference attendance being under 300 delegates (including exhibitors).

ACCOMMODATION: FROM STUDENT HALLS TO HOTELS

The 1994 Conference in Birmingham was the first to be held away from an academic institution, in the Grand Hotel in the city centre, and to provide only hotel accommodation. This was to test the waters as the membership was increasingly requesting a move away from university accommodation. The main contributing factor was the quality of the accommodation but there was also a need to accommodate the growing numbers of attendees and exhibitors. The feedback for the move to hotel accommodation was positive but the planning cycle of the Conference was such that university accommodation had already been booked for 1995 and 1996. Hotel accommodation was permanently introduced from the 1997 Newcastle Conference. The move of the Conference from September to June in 1999 rang the death knell for academic venues as Conference was now being held in term time.⁷

The growth in delegate numbers and the expansion of the Exhibition meant that it was increasingly difficult to find suitable conference venues. Over time, a requirements checklist has developed. Venues need to have a

large enough space for the Plenary sessions, small spaces for the Parallel sessions as well as having suitable space and facilities for the Exhibition (ideally, near to the Plenary session space.) Many have a single large space which could host the Conference or the Exhibition but not both. While the larger conference centres could provide suitable spaces, often the costs put them beyond the means of the Association. There is a need to have adequate suitable hotel accommodation within easy reach of the main venue. Thought also has to be given to the accessibility of the location, as well as ensuring that Conferences are held around our constituent jurisdictions. This narrows the number of suitable locations.

The conference venues themselves effectively moved from academic to external venues from 1997. The first time that Conference was held in a purpose-built conference venue was at the Royal Concert Hall, Glasgow in 1999. On several occasions, the Conference and accommodation has been hosted within the same hotel, and that can certainly make the early morning starts somewhat easier!

FROM LOCAL CONFERENCE ORGANISER TO PROFESSIONAL CONFERENCE ORGANISER

From 1992, Conferences were organised by a Council sub-committee convened by the Chair of the Association and including the Treasurer and Local Conference Organisers (LCO) and co-opted members as required. Prior to that there were more ad-hoc arrangements with Officers and an LCO taking responsibility with varying degrees. Although the role of LCO had been formalised in the mid-1980s to try and give some continuity, it often fell back to a year by year appointment. The role was onerous. While the Chair was responsible for organising the programme, the LCO dealt with everything else. This included booking venues and accommodation, sorting catering and entertainment, arranging trip options and dealing with exhibitors. On top of this, the LCO had to

handle all the administration such as bookings and room allocation, as well as running the Conference itself. Perhaps the turnover was not so surprising.⁸

The set-up of the Conference team meant that there was a frequent change of personnel and the wheel was frequently reinvented as knowledge and expertise was lost. As the BIALL history relates, throughout the 1980s there were frequent discussions on the increasing complexity of organising the Conference. The need for a team of people rather than an individual, and for some degree of continuity was raised.

The Committee was finally formally instituted in October 1996. The members were again the BIALL Chair, Treasurer and LCO with the addition of the Vice-Chair, Conference Co-ordinator, Exhibition Co-ordinator and Administrator and co-options as required. All members were to serve for three years. The Administrator took on the booking of delegates' places, which released the LCO from a major task. The new committee continued to adapt to changing circumstances within the Association and the conference and roles and responsibilities changed - the role of Conference Co-ordinator and Chair had become one by 1998. The involvement of a Professional Conference Organiser (PCO) in 2000 eventually made the role of LCO obsolete.⁹

Today's Committee is comprised of the Committee Chair, Programme and Exhibition Co-ordinators, Conference Finance Officer, Communications and Technology Officer, PCO (Sovereign Conference) representative and ex-officio members, the BIALL President, President Elect and Honorary Treasurer.

INTRODUCTION TO A PCO

Despite the institution of the Committee, the increasing size of the Conference had made the organisation and financial and administrative demands more complex. The members were all volunteers with full time jobs and finding suitable locations, venues and hotels was time consuming. In 1999, the then Committee chair, Caroline Mosley, investigated whether professional conference organisers would be able to help, initially, in the venue search. A meeting was set up with a local business - Sovereign Conference - to discuss what they could offer BIALL. In the handover to the next Chair, it was suggested that the involvement of a professional team would be worth considering. Sovereign were engaged to undertake the delegate registrations at the Bristol 2000 Conference as the venue had already been booked by BIALL.¹⁰ They came on board as PCO from the Cork Conference in 2001.

THE PROGRAMME

The Chair of BIALL had responsibility for the programme during their year of office. They would work with the LCO on the organisation of the Conference dinners, entertainment and the visits. Once again, the increasing

size of the Conference, meant that this dominated a Chair's year of office. The introduction of the Committee saw the increasing involvement of the Conference team in many of these aspects.

John Furlong recalls that during his time both as a member (from 1990) and with the Committee (from 2001 in various guises) that the Conference "moved from being quite academic in tone and approach to being more related to law firms. This change in balance is probably reflected to some extent in the programme content over the years. In my early years as an attendee, we had meetings of Special Interest Groups – SIGs - to accommodate niche or specialist areas of concern. To some extent, these meetings then transformed into the Parallel Sessions element of current Conferences. The 'Lightning Talks' of recent years are another attempt to cater for as many niche areas as possible."

FORMAT AND LENGTH

Questions about the September timing of the Conference go back to 1978 and increased throughout the 1980s and 1990s. The growing numbers of law firms in the membership also played a large part in this, with September being peak induction times for new trainees. David Hart, Vice-Chair of the Committee during the early noughties, recalls that "the move from a 3 term academic year to a 2 semester academic year in many universities (generally associated with an earlier start date at the end of summer) finally brought about change". Discussions were held as to alternative dates and June was viewed as the best compromise date. A proposal to move the Conference to June was passed at the 1997 AGM to come into effect from 1999. As a result, there was only a nine month turnaround between the 1998 and 1999 Conferences and the Committee found itself planning four Conferences at one time as opposed to the usual three

CHANGE OF TIMING TO FOUR DAYS TO THREE AND THURSDAY TO SATURDAY

The move from four days to three in 2004 was partly driven by the choice of venue, the Edinburgh International Conference Centre ('EICC'). David Hart noted at the time¹¹ "A fire at the proposed 2004 Conference venue in Jersey necessitated a rapid change of plan... if we are to use the EICC, and aspire to provide a high quality Conference without raising the delegate fee beyond the reach of the majority of BIALL members, we need to identify ways of trimming costs. One way would be to alter the structure of the Conference from the present one part-day/two full days/one part-day format to one which covered three full days. At the EICC for instance this would reduce the cost of room hire by several thousand pounds. Apart from the financial aspect, the Conference programme as presently structured offers only one and a half hours of papers on the Friday, and many delegates already leave on the Sunday so

they can be back at work on the Monday morning... The traditional format has served BIALL well for many years but it is perhaps due for a change, to reflect the relative ease of modern transport links (including the greater use of domestic air travel) and the ever-increasing demands on the time of our members.'

The Proposal was initially agreed for a trial period and remains the current format.

From 2004 the three day Conferences were held from Friday to Sunday. With regard to the current Thursday to Saturday format, the 2006/2007 Annual Report noted¹²: "There was a general consensus that the move from September to June was a popular one, however views on the timing of the conference in terms of the move away from Friday – Monday to a Thursday – Saturday format were equally split. Those in favour of running it over a weekend felt that less time was spent out of the office, and those with larger teams were able to send more people by staggering attendance on the Friday and Monday. Those in favour of running the conference on weekdays felt it was more conducive to those who had family commitments. Finishing on a Saturday afternoon as opposed to a Sunday was very popular indeed. The current format of Thursday – Saturday is for a three year trial period. As we book venues up to three years in advance it would be problematic to make any more changes until 2009."

DINNERS AND CHARITY RAFFLE

Conference days include a full speaker programme, time for visits to the Exhibition and opportunities for networking. The evenings provide the social dimension. One of the highlights of the Conference is the President's Reception followed by the Annual Dinner. Since about 2000, the formal Annual Dinner has benefited from platinum sponsorship enabling the evening to be quite a grand occasion. It is usually held either in the ballroom of the conference hotel or at a local place of interest, such as the Kelvingrove Museum, Glasgow and Dublin's Mansion House. In recent years, the Annual Dinner has incorporated the BIALL and other awards and the Charity Raffle. BIALL's support of charities based in the host location has raised over £10,000 for local charities.¹³

In contrast to the Annual Dinner, the other evening is less formal and often comprises a buffet meal rather than a sit-down meal followed by entertainment such as a quiz or pub games.

TRIPS, VISITS AND EXCURSIONS

When Conference was held over four days, from Friday through to Monday, the programme included trips on the Sunday afternoon.

Originally, the Sunday afternoon trips were library orientated but became more an opportunity to see local sights.¹⁴ Members felt the excursions to be an important part of Conference, providing a good opportunity to

socialise and a chance to see more of the host location. The Conference Committee frequently questioned whether the associated costs, especially having expensive venues empty for half a day, could be justified. There was also the question of whether they were appropriate for a professional conference. The 2003 Cardiff Conference was the last to include such trips as part of the Conference programme as this was the last four day Conference.

EXHIBITION THEN AND NOW

Publishers and suppliers had been involved in the Conference from the start. Five publishers attended the first Conference in 1970. As time went on, space was provided for them to display books, but this was often little more than a few tables in a lobby. The 1994 Birmingham conference formalised the Exhibition as a part of the Conference. P&O Exhibition Teamwork were brought in to provide professional exhibition stands and plan the space. The size of the Exhibition expanded as new exhibitors were brought on board. From 1996, the role of Exhibition Coordinator was formally introduced and Conference forward planning began to incorporate the needs of the Exhibition. The forward booking of venues lead to a few problems at the start as the Exhibition spaces were not always large enough for the number of businesses wanting to exhibit. Additional or alternative space had to be hired. The increase in online products added the requirement for telephone connections and electrical points, which could be problematic in some venues.

When the Exhibition space was located away from the main Conference space, the exhibitors flagged the lack of visitors. The Committee considered a number of solutions to encourage delegates to visit the Exhibition, including the exhibitors' lunch and relocating coffee and tea breaks to the Exhibition space. One of the most enduring and well-loved ideas has been the Passport Game. This was to encourage delegates to visit every stand and have a conversation with the exhibitor. They would be rewarded with a 'flag'. The lure of a prize encouraged participation! This has since been joined by a range of exhibitors' prize draws which are hotly contested.

IMPACT OF WORLD EVENTS

The Committee endeavours to plan for the unforeseen – with a contingency amount included in our costings and in latter years, the taking out of insurance cover for the potential cancellation of a Conference due to 'events'. The 'events' we did not foresee have fortunately been few and far between. The most significant was the funeral of Diana, Princess of Wales, during the Newcastle Conference in 1997. David Hart, the programme co-ordinator, arranged for the morning sessions to be suspended so that delegates could watch and reflect on the proceedings on TV. John Furlong recalls that "the bouquets from

the Conference dinner on that Saturday night being added to the floral memorial in Newcastle Town Hall.’

Sheffield in 2007 brought disruption in the form of torrential rain. At least one speaker was unable to make it due to flooded roads and it became very much an indoor weekend!!

The Manchester Bombing took place the Saturday before bookings opened for the 1996 Belfast Conference. There was little that could be done to counter this and unfortunately there was a notable drop in delegate numbers.

SOME RECOLLECTIONS OF THE ANNUAL CONFERENCE

John Furlong recalls “One constant throughout all my years of involvement – and following pretty much the same flow each year – was the activity on the day before the Conference opened. This included working with Sovereign to set up the various areas within the Conference venue; checking arrangements for catering; dealing with early arrivals and last minute hitches in accommodation or whatever. It also included assisting Exhibitors with their set up. I don’t recall any one year where this aspect went without a hitch – deliveries of material for Exhibition stands failed to materialise; exhibitors had extra requirements for their stands; where do we dispose of waste materials? It was and is an activity which at times is frenetic and is often overlooked as it is unseen by delegates. In later years, this activity was increased by the demands of running the Pre Conference seminar on the same afternoon – although this did give a small advantage of being able to pre-register attendees for the main Conference. A memorable aspect of these pre Conference afternoons was the assembly of delegate packs – or as we called it ‘bag stuffing’. In fact, this

activity was my first work for the Association, when in 1990 as a new delegate at the Dublin Conference I was persuaded by then Chair Liz Nash to ‘stuff bags’! Over the years came a reduction in the amount of materials to be assembled as environmental and economic issues played on potential advertisers and sponsors. In addition, the old hands perfected a production line approach which reduced the time and energy required. It was always a slightly unusual chore to explain to bemused new members of the Conference team!!”

CONCLUSION

Who knows how the Conference will change in the coming years. Two points which came out of the Birmingham 2018 Conference post mortem meeting were proposals for more exhibitor involvement in the speaker programme and the possible use of student accommodation which has become better appointed as cost is such an important factor. There may also be a trend towards a slightly smaller Exhibition due to exhibitor mergers and fewer new suppliers entering the legal information market. If future Conferences feature smaller Exhibitions and we return to student accommodation, the Conference will have come full circle!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Footnotes

¹ Other Chairs of the Conference Committee during this time were Michael Maher, Susan Scorey, David Wills, Roger Cook, Elaine Cameron, Gillian Watt and Julie Christmas.

² The authors are indebted to Barbara Tearle’s article on the early years of the Conference. Tearle, Barbara (2002) The Way We Were: Liverpool 1970: Continuity and Change. *Legal Information Management* 2(3), 17–21.

³ A full list of locations through the years for the BIALL Annual Conference is available on the BIALL website.

⁴ As Ireland has a different VAT system and UK based delegates were unable to reclaim the Irish VAT, in 2016 BIALL paid delegates’ VAT to help make the Dublin Conference more affordable.

⁵ Tearle op. cit.

⁶ The table in Barbara Tearle’s article compared the composition of delegates at the 1970 and 2002 Conferences. This table has been updated to include the composition of delegates at the 2005, 2010 and 2018 Conferences to reflect the changes in the composition of attendees over the past 50 years. Tearle op. cit.

⁷ Ideally the Committee prefers to offer delegates a choice of hotels, including a budget option. However, if one hotel can accommodate the Exhibition, speaker programme and has sufficient bedrooms there is a potential to save costs as buying power is strengthened and use of one hotel creates better networking opportunities.

⁸ Robert Logan holds the record for being LCO three times. Blake, Mary “A History of the British and Irish Association of Law Librarians 1969–1999”, [Warwick]: BIALL, 2000, p. 67.

⁹ Sovereign Conference has acted as PCO since 2001.

¹⁰ The Thistle Grand Hotel, as it was then.

¹¹ Proposal for Council to restructure the format of the Annual Study Conference, December 2002.

¹² Conference Committee's 2006/07 Annual Report, with thanks to David Hart.

¹³ Prizes are donated by our sponsors and exhibitors.

¹⁴ For example, Cadbury's World (1994). Portsmouth Harbour and the Mary Rose (1998).

Biographies

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John Furlong is a solicitor by profession and has worked in senior positions in two of Ireland's leading law firms. He was the first Irish person to chair the British & Irish Association of Law Librarians and was active on the Association's Conference Committee for many years. John continues to act as visiting lecturer in legal research and European legal research at the Law School of the Law Society of Ireland.

Caroline Mosley is Chambers' Librarian at No5 Barristers' Chambers and a freelance library consultant, having previously held senior positions in several large regional law firms. She was Chair of the Conference Committee from 1998 to 1999 and previously served as Exhibition and then Conference Co-ordinator. Caroline has been Chair of the LIM Editorial Board and a member of the Publications Committee as Newsletter Editor from 2015–2018.

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The BIALL Irish Group

Abstract: In the article, Jennefer Aston reflects on the involvement in BIALL of law librarians from Ireland. She writes about the development of the BIALL Irish Group, some of the challenges that Irish law librarians have faced, notes how the legal sector in Ireland grew in the 1980s and 1990s and describes the collaboration and the activities of law librarians in Ireland. She also invites former Chair of the Association, John Furlong, and current President, Renate ní Uigín, to give some thoughts too.

Keywords: law librarianship; BIALL; Northern Ireland; Ireland

INTRODUCTION

The 'I' in BIALL underlines the fact that Irish librarians were among the founding members in BIALL. Colm Gavan Duffy of the Law Society of Ireland was one of the five members of the first executive committee elected from 1969–70.¹ Margot Chubb of Trinity College Library was Adviser to the Committee on Automation and Union Catalogues and, of course, Muriel Anderson of the

IALS (Institute of Advanced Legal Studies), Chair of the Association in 1988, was from Belfast.

BIALL IRISH GROUP

So although Irish members had been involved in BIALL right from the start of the Association, it was much, much later before BIALL members met in