

# The Law Society Library: a Personal View by the (still fairly new) Librarian

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## Introduction

Since I moved on from Herbert Smith to take up the post of Librarian and Head of Information Services at the Law Society in April 2001, colleagues have often asked me about the differences in working environment. Having had time to settle in (yes, it can take that long!) I think it is time to write a few words about this new experience and about the services which we offer to solicitors and to law firm librarians.

The Law Society of England and Wales is of course a unique organisation and if there were degrees of uniqueness it would be “very unique”. To start with, it fulfills a number of quite diverse and demanding roles. This includes: representing the solicitors’ profession to the world at large; setting, promoting and enforcing professional standards, handling complaints against solicitors from the public; providing relevant services to solicitors and other stakeholders; making a prominent contribution to law reform.

As a result of this, the variety of specialities and skills to be found within the organisation is formidable. It ranges from people whose job it is to make your visit to Chancery Lane as comfortable and rewarding as possible at one end of the spectrum, to people with the forensic skills to intervene when things go very wrong in a solicitors practice at the other end. I have found that the Society definitely encourages managers to get involved in broader management activities, which go well beyond one’s own immediate responsibilities. I was invited practically within a few days of starting, to take part in the Society’s ambitious plans to renew its use of IT in providing services to members and stakeholders (Programme Engineer). I have also been a member of a panel which evaluates jobs across the Society. Naturally this variety makes the work more rewarding, but it means there is also a steep learning curve in getting a sufficient understanding of what goes on in all those specialised areas.

## The Library at Chancery Lane

The building in Chancery Lane poses a few problems for the new starter. It includes some truly amazing spaces,

such as the strangely named Reading Room (an elegant, galleried space where members can meet people and enjoy some refreshments) and the Library itself. There are interesting architectural features all over the building (the newly refurbished gents toilets is perhaps the most recent example). At the same time the premises also contains a baffling network of winding corridors, staircases and anonymous looking offices. In my first weeks I was often unsure whether the door I was trying would open onto the impressive Common Room, the Chief Executive’s office or perhaps just a broom cupboard. Since the Library enjoys the use of various storage spaces in far flung parts of the building I have since had to become much more familiar with the geography, despite my own poor sense of direction.

## Library services

The scope of my present job is obviously very different from that of a law firm librarian. Our main potential clients are the c. 90,000 solicitors of England and Wales in addition to the information professionals who work for them. It is clear that not all our potential users do in fact use our services, but we do receive nearly 4,000 enquiries per month. Our challenge is to be sensitive to the changing needs of our client base but without being able to develop the close working relationship which a law firm librarian can develop with the partners of his firm.

The members of my enquiry team have to be able to interpret the requests they receive without the benefit of a good background knowledge of the enquirer’s practice area and his personal quirks. Consequently we place a strong emphasis on in-house training, which is geared to delivering an excellent and consistent level of response in the context of the range of enquiries we commonly receive and the electronic and printed resources we have at our disposal. We use an automated call distribution system to route incoming calls and we do our best to be flexible in staffing the telephone lines, such that we have more librarians (usually three) available at the busier periods.

## Chris Holland

Since the end of October we have been operating our Document Delivery Service under the new CLA transactional licence. It would be fair to say that my team spend more time addressing copyright issues in terms of what we can and cannot supply than would be the case in a law firm operating within the CLA licence for law firms. The numerous exclusions make the decisions more complicated. However we do now have the flexibility to accept document delivery requests by email or by telephone, without the necessity for a copyright declaration form to be signed by the user.

### Promotion of the Library

Marketing our services to our potential user base has to be a major concern because of the need to extend awareness of the full range of our services among a very large, diverse and diffused group of people. During 2003 we have experimented with an advertising campaign in the *Gazette* and other professional journals in an effort to reach solicitors in all areas of practice, whether they work for magic circle firms or for small high street practices. While marketing is often on the agenda for law firm librarians also, it is usually in the context of a more precisely defined user group, which is easier to reach. We commissioned a market research firm with experience of working with the Law Society to carry out a detailed survey of our customer base. The results of that survey have proved very useful to us in planning change and in directing our marketing activities. I would emphasise that I would be pleased to receive any informal feedback you may have about our services as and when you wish to express it.

Aside from the contrasting nature of our relationship with our library-users there are also some areas of responsibility which are entirely new to me and where I have had a steep learning curve. Apart from the Library, "Library and Information Services" also includes our Practice Advice Service. This is essentially a small team of qualified and experienced solicitors whose core task is to assist practitioners with specific questions about practice and procedure and practical points arising from Law Society policy. The service operates mainly via a telephone helpline and the team aim to give friendly on the spot assistance. It goes without saying that the Practice Advice team does not provide substantive legal advice. Also they do not deal with professional conduct issues, as there is a separate Law Society Ethics helpline which addresses enquires in that area.

It is usually the case that we receive high volumes of enquiries about areas where legal practice and procedure have been subject to rapid and sometimes confusing changes. Typical example would be conditional fee agree-

ments and conveyancing procedures (especially in the wake of the recent Land Registration Act). However the team are happy to field enquiries arising from any area of practice. If you are an information professional working with solicitors you may wish to draw your colleagues' attention to the existence of this useful service.

You might think that after years of reporting to solicitors as bosses this is a case of the boot being on the other foot! It is certainly a novel and rewarding experience to have a service which is operated by a team of solicitors as part of my area of responsibility. There are definitely synergies between the Practice Advice Service and the Library (after all they are both providing time-sensitive legal information services to a similar audience). On the other hand the differences in training do lead to varying approaches and ways of thinking across the Group, which make my job of managing it more interesting.

The Library's fascinating collection of historical and archive material is also a new area of responsibility for me. This includes for example early editions of texts, historical manuscripts, accounts of trials, as well as a great deal of material which is very specific to the Law Society, such as our royal charters and our collection of early photographs of past presidents of the Society. Fortunately I have the benefit of the expertise of colleagues who are far more knowledgeable with regard to historical material. This collection is little known at the moment and we are keen to make it more available to people with a serious interest.

All in all my first couple of years in this job have been a very rewarding and busy period. I have every hope that we will be able to produce further developments in our services which will keep them relevant for our users. I am confident that I have a highly effective team in place who will make those developments possible. The strength and professionalism of my team has been a vital factor in helping me to settle into my role at the Law Society. To mention one planned development: we have been working closely with our own IT people and with Fretwell Downing on a project to make the Library's catalogue freely available via the internet. The database includes a great deal of value-added information as well as being a comprehensive guide to our holdings. There is every prospect that we will be able to achieve this at an early point in 2004. More information on this project to follow in due course!

### Contact

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