

Henry Button

Abstract: Kate Faulkner introduces a collection of material left to the Squire Law Library by veteran historian, Henry Button. Her article discusses the sorting through of this small collection of books, pamphlets and correspondence that was gathered during his research. It looks at how Button's interests developed to include the first female lawyers and the longest-serving legal professionals. It concludes with some information about Henry Button himself and provides a list of the books that were part of the collection.

Keywords: law firms; legal profession; archives; biography

INTRODUCTION

In 2005 two boxes of material were donated to the Squire Law Library at the University of Cambridge by Mr Henry Button. Button described himself as a retired civil servant, but he was also the 1962 Brain of Britain¹, an honorary archivist at Christ's College and a Cambridge City tour guide. He spent many years researching the history of companies and co-wrote *The Guinness Book of the Business World*² in 1976. From this he developed an interest in the history of law firms because he had noticed that, at a time when lawyers could not advertise, they would use their longevity as a sign of their integrity and stability. He wrote in 1982,

“Firms and companies in various walks of life, such as banks, breweries and insurance companies, frequently draw attention to their age in their advertisements and on their buildings. Age is no doubt regarded as a guarantee of the quality of the firm's products, or as a sign of integrity and financial stability.

Law firms, in this country at least, are debarred by professional etiquette from advertising. Unlike, say, auctioneers and estate agents, they cannot therefore proclaim the age of their business in order to assure prospective clients of its trustworthiness and solidity. Just occasionally the veil is lifted, as when a firm of solicitors celebrates a notable landmark in its history”³.

HISTORIES OF LAW FIRMS

Button started writing to firms of which he had heard or seen mentioned in newspapers, to ask about the history of their firm, and he used the replies to write a series of six articles for the *Law Society Gazette*, between 1982 and 1992. The two boxes given to us contained books, pamphlets and brochures from these firms, plus his correspondence and proofs of his articles.

Button wrote his first article after reading about the firm RW Tweedie, based in Lincoln's Inn Fields, celebrating its 250th anniversary. In this piece he discussed many different firms and concluded that Thomson, Snell and Passmore were the oldest firm as it could trace its history back to 1570. Interestingly, this firm is in Tonbridge, Kent rather than the legal capital of London. After his first article, others wrote to him and the *Law Society Gazette* with details of their firms – one even challenged Thomson, Snell and Passmore's crown. However, it proved difficult to determine the facts when going back centuries as firms merged, changed name and partnerships fragmented. Tracing a firm's family tree can be time consuming and difficult, although the need for law firms to date and keep legal documents helps tremendously! In order to engage in establishing a winner there needed to be an agreement on what counts as being 'involved' in the law, as often the first few generations were 'writers' or scribes.

Firms continued to write in, including some from abroad. It appears to be quite common for law firms to be able to trace their beginnings back to the 18th century. Button also collected the histories of some of the various law societies across the country, particularly Bristol's formed in 1770⁴. Firms then began to vie to prove that they may not be the oldest but that they had the longest stretch with one family at the helm. Several of the firms were also linked historically as brothers and sons broke away to form their own firm in another part of the country or abroad.

Button singled out Judy Slinn's history of Linklaters & Paines, 1987⁵, as the first published book on the history of a law firm that was available to the general public. This was, of course, before our current era of self-publishing and on-demand printing. Previously, Button had to rely on pamphlets produced by firms, usually to mark their centenary. Now basic information can always be found on a firm's website.

Button was of the generation who used (and kept and filed) carbon copies of letters – as a result one can see both sides of the conversations. However, carbon copies



Figure 1: A sample of the books and pamphlets from the collection

are flimsy and need preserving correctly so that they don't deteriorate. I had not realised until looking through this material that paperclips went rusty so often and so quickly!

Button would send a proof of what he was going to say to his contact at the relevant firm, even if it was only one sentence, and would patiently wait for a reply before sending the completed article on to the *Law Society Gazette*. When conversing with his contacts he would often divulge facts he thought they would find interesting or reveal pieces of personal information in passing. He mentioned that his brother-in-law was headmaster at Hull Grammar School, although none of my other research has yet turned up a sister.

Dealing with boxes of mixed material is complicated and one of the characteristics that divides librarians from archivists. I was charged with the job of sorting and triaging the boxes' contents. Whether to keep the collection together and how to make it accessible had to be considered. As I am half-indexer/half-librarian I found the longer I spent on it the more deeply I indexed. "I'll just index that paper and then I'll tell the boss I'm finished". I'll just organise the folders into alphabetical order, then I'm done." "Oh, I might as well compile an alphabetical

index cross-referencing all the firms mentioned in the articles with the contents of the boxes" "I'll just"

EXAMPLES OF THE COLLECTION

In the Allen and Overy folder it is clear that Mr Button wrote to them after he read a snippet in *The Times City Diary* section that the firm was producing a cookbook⁶. The managing partner responded with a brochure that includes some information on the history of the firm.

In the Fearon & Co folder there are several letters between Button and Mr Timothy P Fearon. Mr Fearon first contacted Button through the Law Society in January 1992 having read his article of that month. He was enquiring whether Button knew of any firms that could show a direct lineal descent to the current partner. He sent a copy of a flow chart drawn up by a scrivener showing the practice had passed from father to son since 1825.

In the Irish folder there is some correspondence between Henry CP Barry and Button. It appears that a friend of Button's had seen a letter that Barry had put in the *Irish Law Society Gazette* claiming that his firm was the oldest sole practitioner firm in the same town

(Cashel) in Ireland and the friend mentioned or sent it to Button⁷. So Button wrote to Mr Barry asking him for more information and Barry sent a letter and a photocopy of his grandfather's deed of apprenticeship from 1883. Barry also asks for advice in his letter about researching into his family history further.

In the Batchelors folder (a London law firm based in Outer Temple) it is clear from the letters that Button wrote three times because he received no reply from his first two letters in April and June 1989. There is a copy of the second letter which I think is quite cheeky (there were also quite a few corrected typos which I can't help but think may have been indicative of his agitation):

"I am puzzled and perplexed. Please let me explain why.

In recent years I have written to scores of law firms both in this country and abroad asking for such information as was readily available about their history. Sometimes I received a list of past partners, sometimes I received a book, until the appearance of Judy Slinn's history of Linklaters & Paines such books were, of course, privately published and not available to the general public.

Until now I have always received a reply of some kind to my enquiries which is why I am puzzled at not receiving a reply to the letter that I sent to you, at the suggestion of my old colleague William Hughes, back in April. I enclose a copy of the letter for ease of reference. Has there been a breakdown in the postal service, or illness in the firm? Or was my old friend mistaken in thinking that yours was an old firm? Whatever the reason, I hope that this letter at least will arrive safely and that I may soon have the pleasure of hearing from you.

Yours Sincerely,
Henry G. Button

P.S. A slight correction. Some years ago, when I had written to several old law firms in New York, one of them did not reply. But the others all did."

Eventually a reply was received in July 1989 apologising that the earlier letters had not been seen; indeed the writer was not even sure whether they were received or not. A short history of the firm was sent together with a list of partners dating back to 1680 in Greenwich. There was correspondence again in 1991 when Button sent the proof of the section on Batchelors for his next article. The responder had the sense to make only minor corrections and reply promptly.

In the Australia folder there is some correspondence between Button and the firm Clayton Utz in 1985. There is some dispute (or "conflict of evidence" as they delicately put it) over whether Clayton or Allen, Allen and Hemsley (based in New South Wales) are the oldest practising firm in Australia. Mr Brown sends through

some excerpts and promises to forward the firm's full history when it is completed but we don't seem to have it here. Mr Brown makes the point that they can be traced back to the first native Australian to be admitted as a solicitor in New South Wales in 1833 but acknowledges that Allen, Allen and Hemsley seem to date back to 1822. There must be some missing correspondence as there is a letter from Mr Brown approving the paragraph that Button plans to include in his next article and there is also a photocopy from a book stamped Clayton Utz library which is about the first women lawyers in Australia and an envelope from Australia post marked 9.3.90 - five years after their first letter.

WOMEN LAWYERS

Whilst researching law firms' longevity Button became diverted by the question of the first women lawyers in the Commonwealth. He seems to have learnt of Clara Brett Martin when he was in Canada visiting his nephew, and a building was opened in her name. She was Canada's first female lawyer in 1897. He then began to research and collect material on other women lawyers in the Commonwealth so we have a box file of material on that. There probably isn't anything that is not now widely known but it is still wonderful to see how Button's research developed.

Button claimed that Martin was the first female lawyer in the Commonwealth, although New Zealand was only two months behind with Ethel Rebecca Benjamin. Other countries followed suit but according to Button it was not until 1926 that Helena Earley was



Figure 2: Clara Brett Martin



Figure 3: Cambridge Evening News, Front Page, 13th February 2002

admitted as a solicitor in Ireland. Carol (Carrie) Morrison (from Girton College, Cambridge) was the first woman to be admitted as a solicitor in England in 1922. Although G.M. Bebb (From Oxford) had been challenging the Law Society's non-admittance of women since 1912. In his article Button quotes from the resulting case *Bebb v Law Society* [1914] 1 Ch 286. Also in 1922 five women were called to the Bar in England. The United States were earlier with Arabella Mansfield being the first to be admitted to a state bar in 1869 although Ada Kepley was the first to graduate from a law school in 1870.

LONG SERVICE

Reading his articles it becomes apparent that Button was also keen to collect information on the longest-serving

professionals. There are some references to solicitors practising aged over 100 years, such as John Stallard and William George. Anna Amphlett is noted for having been practising for over 65 years and for being the longest serving notary in England and Wales (accurate in 1992—this may have changed).

MORE ABOUT HENRY BUTTON

Henry Button was born in Manchester in 1913 or 1914. His father was a Methodist minister and his mother was a teacher. He had two brothers, but unfortunately one died in the Second World War. Henry claimed his brother Frank was even more of a “nit-picker” and once wrote in to *The Times* letter writing page to disagree with one of Henry's letters⁸. Button attended Christ's College, Cambridge in the

1930s to study languages, married fellow Cambridge student Peggy Heslop, and had two daughters Patricia and Susan (now Lady Garden, a liberal democrat peer).

He worked for the Board of Trade and then the Ministry of Food, Fisheries and Agriculture. In 1974, two years after his wife died, he retired and moved back to Cambridge. He was regularly mentioned in the local press as 'veteran local historian' or 'man of letters' and was well-regarded for his "encyclopaedic knowledge". Apparently he had over 1,000 letters published in newspapers with the *Cambridge Evening News* and *The Times* being his favourites. He said that the bottom right-hand corner of *The Times* letters page was a coveted space for eccentrics. He did not hold the record for the most letters published in *The Times* as that was David Green. Not surprisingly they corresponded with each other sending congratulations whenever one had a letter published.

One of his many roles during his retirement was secretary of the Tercentenarians club. This club has only about 10 members and to be a member you have to have run your family business for over 300 years⁹. He was also secretary of the Old Members' Club for his college and he reviewed books on business histories for the journal of the Business Archives Society.

Button was very interested in "firsts" and was friendly with Norris McWhirter the co-founder of the *Guinness Book of Records*. According to press reports Button had a complete set of the volumes in his flat which was stuffed with books, mainly dictionaries and reference works. When asked why he wrote letters to newspapers he said "I do it for the enlightenment of mankind." (*Cambridge Evening News* 24/4/95). He obviously had an excellent memory and a voracious appetite for knowledge. But, most importantly he told one of the journalists (but not

a direct quote) that "The secret of all knowledge is to know where to look things up."¹⁰ – a perfect quote for a journal read by librarians.

Button donated material to other libraries and institutions near the end of his life. The Oliver Prior Society has his material relating to his interest in languages. His Master of Letters thesis (a forerunner to the PhD) was on the troubadours of Provence and Germany, which apparently took him 40 years to complete. I can only imagine the material he could have amassed over the years and what other topics piqued his interest.

We are not aware if any other library has a similar collection of material on the history of law firms so we wanted to make it known that we have this material at the Squire. Although only a small collection of 30 books and pamphlets and a box of folders, over 150 firms are mentioned. Most of the facts made it into his articles but it is entertaining looking at the centenary brochures produced by the firms which are now amusing because of the Eighties hairstyles and huge telephones and computers. If someone was researching firms they would be most likely to go to the Law Society after contacting the firm itself but hopefully they will come across Henry Button's articles in the *Law Society Gazette*.

Some Old Law Firms [1982] LSG 792 (23rd June)
 More Old Law Firms [1983] LSG 1270, 1272 (18th May)
 Yet More Old Law Firms [1984] LSG 748–9 (14th March)
 Still More Old Law Firms [1986] LSG 708–11 (5th March)
 Old Law Firms Again [1989] LSG 30–33 (11th January)
 Old Law Firms Yet Again [1992] LSG 25–6 (8th January)
 The first women lawyers [1990] *Irish Gazette* 256–258 (September)

Footnotes

¹ A nationwide general knowledge contest on BBC Radio 4 in which contestants participate from all parts of the UK. Before 1967 it was a slot within the show *What do you Know?*

² Button, H.G. and Lampert, A. 1976. *Guinness Book of the Business World*, Guinness Superlatives Ltd, 090042432X (out of print).

³ Button, Henry *Some Old Law Firms* [1982] LSG 792 (23rd June 1982).

⁴ *The Bristol Law Society: The first two hundred years 1770–1970* (1970).

⁵ Slinn, Judy 1987. *The First One Hundred and Fifty Years*, Longman.

⁶ According to *The Times City Diary*, 20th August 1990, Allen and Overy produced a cookbook to raise money for Save the Children.

⁷ The friend was William Hughes, an old colleague of Button's from the Board of Trade who had come across Batchelors when he was Chairman of the Tooting Youth Project.

⁸ This was to disagree with Button's letter about the earliest use of a brand name in a play *Cambridge Evening News* 30th June 1997.

⁹ Button mentions the club in his letters but this *Daily Telegraph* article gives a nice explanation *They're 300 years old and still in business*, *Daily Telegraph*, 1st January 2013 <http://tinyurl.com/befzyrt>

¹⁰ *Cambridge Evening News*, 30th June 1997.

Bibliography

Books and pamphlets in the collection (in alphabetical order of the relevant law firm):

Ashurst Morris Crisp: *A Radical Firm* by Judy Slinn (1997) c1982).

Birmingham Law Library: Historical notes on the contents of the law library (1972) pamphlet
Some Reminiscences of **Blakes** (Canada) by Alan Graydon QC (1970) pamphlet.
Booth & Co. (Leeds) 1775–1975 (c1975) pamphlet.
Long Shadows Cast Before: Nine lives in Ulster 1625–1977 C.E.B. **Brett**.
“Two Eighteenth-Century Provincial Attorneys : Matthew Brett and Jack **Brett**” offprint from
Brehons, Serjeants and Attorneys: Studies in the history of the Irish Legal Profession Daire Hogan and W.N. Osborough (ed)
The **Bristol Law Society:** The first two hundred years 1770–1970 (1970) pamphlet.
Crawford, Bayley & Co. 1830–1964 (Bombay) (1964) pamphlet.
Daynes Chittock (Norwich) 1979 manuscript, c1980s brochure.
Ellis, Wood, Bickersteth & Hazel 1883–1983 by Joan Reid (c1984).
Frere Cholmeley 1750–1980 (1981)
A History of **Freshfields** by Judy Slinn (1984)
A History of **Grays** York 1695–1988 by William Cobb (1989)
Number One: A History of the Firm **Gregory, Rowcliffe & Co** 1784–1984 by Patrick Davis (1984).
Hathorn Cameron & Co. (South Africa) (1973) pamphlet
A Firm of Families 1782–1982: being a short history of the present firm of **Houghton Craven and
Dicksons** by D.A.S. Houghton (c1982).
Jackson Russell (Auckland): A Scrap Book History by J.H. Rose (1983).
Linklaters & Paines: The First One Hundred and Fifty Years by Judy Slinn (1987).
Lister & Lister 1884–1984 (South Africa) Centenary Dinner Programme (1984) pamphlet.
McKenna & Co 1882–1982 (c1982) pamphlet.
Parker and Parker: 125 Years of Legal Service (Australia) (1993).
Rathbones (Liverpool) 2 pamphlets.
Shepstone & Wylie: Centenary 1892–1992 (South Africa) (c1982) pamphlet.
Slaughter and May: A Century in the City by Laurie Dennett (1989).
Slaughter and May: A Short History by Laurie Dennett (1989).
Stone King & Wardle: 200 Years (Bath) (c1985) pamphlet.
Taylor & Humbert 1782–1982: A Short History by David Drummond (1982)
The First Four Hundred: A History of the Firm of **Thomson, Snell and Passmore** (Kent) by Margaret Blatcher (c1970)
pamphlet.
A.F. & R.W. Tweedie: Some Notes on the Firm’s History (1964) pamphlet
The First Hundred Years: A History of **Wansbroughs** 1882–1982 by R.J. Archer (c1982)
The History of **Wilde Sapte** by A.G. Salmon (1985).
Withers Crossman Block (c1988) brochure.
Woodroffes 1877–1977 (c1977) brochure.

Biography

Kate Faulkner is a chartered librarian who has worked in public, academic and law libraries. She trained at Lincoln’s Inn and then worked at the law firm Baker & McKenzie as Serials Librarian. She ran the BIALL Duplicates Exchange Scheme from 2001–2007. She has indexed 37 historical volumes for the Honourable Society of Inner Temple Archives and helps out with the Library’s award-winning Current Awareness blog. She currently combines freelance indexing work with a part-time role at the Squire Law Library.