



THE SOCIETY OF ADVOCATES IN ABERDEEN  
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**Talk for CILIPS North East**  
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The origins of the Society can be traced back to the 16<sup>th</sup> Century and have been authorized by Royal Charters in 1774, 1799 and 1862. A fire unfortunately took place in the office of the Commissary Clerk of Aberdeenshire at Aberdeen around 1721 and the documents and books which would doubtless have disclosed the date of the formation of the Society were destroyed.

The Society's membership is drawn from lawyers of all age groups involved in the whole spectrum of legal business in the Aberdeen area. Indeed when the Society began, membership was essential if one wished to practise law in the area, whereas now that power has moved to the Law Society of Scotland. Its members are, by tradition, entitled to use the designation "Advocate in Aberdeen". We do have a document, signed by King James sixth in 1588, in which Patrick Cheyne, is described as 'advocate in Aberdeen'. The document is a pardon for Mr Cheyne's part in a manslaughter which happened during a fight with two other persons, a fight which had taken place in 1570, the year of his admission to the Society, and which does not seem to have disqualified him from membership. It is believed that we acquired the title of "Advocate in Aberdeen" from King James sixth in gratitude for an unsecured loan which was never repaid. It causes confusion nowadays since the creation of the Faculty of Advocates, which is better known. Their members have "called to the Bar" so can represent cases in higher courts such as Court of Session, whereas our members are mostly normal solicitors who can only represent their clients in the lower Sheriff Court, but would need to instruct an Advocate if their case went further. Of course all of this is further confused since the introduction of Solicitor Advocates, who are in effect in between the two! Funnily enough I used to work in the library at Faculty and when I announced I was coming here several of the members came up to me to ensure I knew "they're not real advocates up there".

The Society's Library was founded in 1787, and housed at first in the old Record Office in the Castlegate. You can see some of the books from the collection back then in the Committee Room, diagonally across from here if you haven't been in already. In 1820 the Record Office was found to be suffering from damp, and the Society was given the use of a room in the Courthouse.

The first purpose-built Hall, with a fine Library on the first floor, was constructed at the corner of Back Wynd and Union Street, where Espionage nightclub is now. It was designed by John Smith, opened in 1820 and became known locally as the Queen's Building. It was put up for sale in 1870 when the Society decided to move to a position nearer the recently reconstructed Sheriff Court. This site in Concert Court was

purchased, and this building, designed by James Matthews, became the headquarters of the Society. Some of the fittings, such as the fireplaces, were brought from Back Wynd to Concert Court.

[Slide] The Dining Hall on the ground floor, now Court 6, was apparently “the scene of brilliant gatherings”, while back then the Library retained its studious calm. [Slide] The basement of the building housed a resident caretaker and his family (one of who’s offspring is the caretaker today), along with capacious wine and beer cellars. It is interesting to reflect that the costs of erecting both Halls were entirely met by the funds of the Society augmented by donations from a membership of less than one hundred and fifty.

Today we have 366 members, so what does membership give a solicitor? [Slide] I always think the most important thing is the networking facilities and chance to meet and talk to their peers. At one of our monthly Library Lunches I witnessed a business card being passed to a member who had recently been made redundant with the instruction to “call me”. Current benefits of Society membership include: use of the library, various social events throughout the year, a program of training events (CPD – Continuing Professional Development), and representation through the Society’s lobbying activities for the greater benefit of the interests of the profession locally and nationally. Many of the current members are also part of our, now closed, annuity fund – so ensuring their widows will receive regular payments from us once they have gone. The end of this fund will cause our biggest challenge in the future, we currently have 101 members who must stay members until they pass away in order for any widow they may leave to benefit from their annual payments. Once they have all gone, and now that the need to be a member to practice law in the city has ended, we will have to find other ways of maintaining membership numbers.

Since 1983 the ground floor and basement of the Society’s current building has been leased to the Scottish Court Service for use as a court room [Slide] and ancillary accommodation and we keep ourselves to this floor where we have the library, a Committee Room, a storage room and of course, the heart of the Society - my office. [Slide] The rent we gather ensures we can keep members annual subscriptions down at an acceptable level – as the Society is completely self funded. [Slide] At Doors Open Days we often get comments about it not being fair that public money provides the Society with such a lovely building which no one else gets to enjoy, but this is not the case at all – and I am always quick to correct them that there is no public money here! This is especially untrue nowadays as the library is now being actively advertised as a venue [Slide]. You probably cannot read this room hire sheet but copies are available at the back or on our website. [Slide] In the last 2 years we’ve had 5 weddings, an album launch, book signing, birthday parties, board meetings, corporate dinners, drinks receptions and even a film crew! The latter were from the local college and made a film called Stories Never Die based on Charles Dickens, its lovely if you want to check Youtube. It’s quite often that one event leads to one or two more bookings but I also take any networking opportunities I see to spread the word. [Slide] Accordingly I am a member of the Scottish PA Network and the Society recently joined the Aberdeen & Grampian Chamber of Commerce. To raise the profile of our library I have also continued my membership of the Scottish Law Librarians’ Group and the British and Irish Association of Law Librarians. Three years ago I joined the

Website Committee for BIALL and in the summer I took over as Chair of that committee. I also spoke at their annual conference in 2013, my talk was entitled Working Outside The Box - as I have strayed from the path of librarianship somewhat with all this event management etc.

That brings me to my position here, as the Executive Secretary and Librarian of the Society of Advocates in Aberdeen. If that's not pompous enough for you I can also claim to be the first professional Librarian the Society has ever had. I was asked to write a report once I'd settled in of my plans for the library. Suggestion 1 was get a website, which they allowed me to choose what went on it and I do the ongoing photography and updating of it. Suggestion 2 was to catalogue our collection, and thanks to some work experience students this year this is now fully searchable on our website. One of the most exciting finds during this was a book over 400 years old which we believe to be worth quite a figure, as we're all librarians here I've laid it out at the back for you to have a look at, along with a few other items of interest hopefully.

As I just said I rarely do any "librarian" type things with the majority of the post involving the administration of the Society. I maintain the accounts, am in charge of purchasing (...wine mainly..), I administer the annuity fund, communicate with our members, [Slide] arrange and host events, take care of the building (or at least find workmen and point at things for them to do), try to promote the Society to prospective members and the use of the library to anyone who may wish to hire it for a function, look after the library and deal with enquiries it receives – and anything else I may be asked to do! Some of the enquiries are actually family history research, either wanting to know if their ancestor was a member or if we have a portrait of a certain ex President. In "the good old days" it was normal for Presidents to have a portrait painted and gift it to the Society. So we have quite a collection now, more recently this changed to photographs – sad but easier to store! I've also laid out the folder of Presidential photos, if you'd like to see how facial growth fashions have changed over the years have a flick through!

I also set up a Will Search mailing list, I'm not sure if you know but there is no central database of wills in Scotland so if you die and your family do not know where your will is they have to do, or get a solicitor to do quite extensive searches to try and find it. I have an email distribution list which covers all member firms which deal with executries and if someone is looking for a will I can email round and get them all to check for it. This idea has proved very popular, I emailed out 3 requests today, and the Royal Faculty of Procurators in Glasgow have set up a similar service for their local area.

Although I am a Librarian by trade a lot of skills are transferable, and I grew up in a hotel so am quite at ease choosing wines and menus. Occasionally there are things I have to deal with which are out of my comfort zone – such as a few years ago when we embarked on a project to clean the library walls and ceiling. Unfortunately we could not afford to tackle the ceiling – you can see the sample panel which was done almost 20 years ago when there was the offer of a lottery grant. I believe it took 2 men 3 weeks and cost about £6,000. We hope to tackle this in the future once the recession is over by enlisting sponsorship of individual panels by our member firms. However we did go ahead with replacement of the window sills and the cleaning of the walls,

which had been similarly blackened by years of pipe smoking, open fires and oil lighting. I was most uncomfortable trying to co-ordinate scaffolding hire, closure of the court downstairs so we wouldn't disturb them, and the actual workmen to do the work. However the plan came together and the work was done, not without hitches but I think you can see how well it ended. Cleaning did turn into re painting but a stencil of the original pattern was taken and the gold leaf spots were kept intact which gave the correct placement. I still reel from the thought of the lengthy conversations I was involved in over the shades of pink that should be used. We were trying to match the original but as none of us were here in 1870 to have seen it before it became caked in black gunge, there was some debate!

Although my role has a lot of autonomy I do answer to a Management Committee. This is made up of 11 members at the moment. They meet regularly and make decisions on important issues – most of the action points from these meetings start off “Maria Robertson to...”. Ultimately in charge are the office bearers, from Junior Vice President to Senior Vice President to our President, each of which is a year long position. This is quite different to any job I had worked in previously as it means my “boss” changes each November. In 2011 for the first time in over 400 years we elected the first ever lady President, which was an exciting jump into the current century! Up until the 1960s the Society was entirely made up of men, although now both genders are much more evenly represented.

We do try and move with the times, when I started here almost 8 years ago we did not even have a website [Slide] – now we even have a Facebook page, a private members' group and a LinkedIn group! We are all agreed that we need to engage our members, especially trying to attract the younger newer solicitors into the Society. I am certainly quite dedicated to encouraging the younger members to get involved, after all – my job depends on the continued existence of the Society of Advocates in Aberdeen!

Now, I always think the real thing is better than a picture so please have a wander across the hall to the Committee Room and my office. Just let me know if you have any questions.