

## O P I N I O N

## Membership of the Inn

My wife tells me that she is amazed how far I have made it at the Bar given my apparently limited understanding of the English language and in particular my inability to understand the concept of, or use, the word 'No'. This time, when asked by Master Malcolm Pill to write 'just 1500 words on changes in life in the Inn between the time that you were a student and the present', how could I possibly say 'No'? – particularly when he indicated that my 'Circuit experience and perspective would be a valuable input'.

I read for the Bar in 1988. I had no background in the law, my mother was a teacher and my father owned a shop in Coventry that sold and repaired domestic appliances where I had a Saturday job (I sometimes wonder if I had remained working there whether my call-out rate would now be greater than that of the publicly funded criminal silk!). I was a little daunted by the prospect of the 24 or so dinners that I had to eat, but, as there was no option other than to get on with it, that is what I did ... and I loved it all: the toasting, the ceremony, the bladder control (once seated in hall it was forbidden to leave until the end of the meal), the challenges, even the food.

The best night to dine, as far as I was concerned, was 'Challenge Night' on a Thursday, under the watchful eyes, as I remember, of the likes of Tudor Owen and Jean McCreath. We sang, we danced, we challenged and I even played the piano. I still remember the night that I was invited to join the Benchers' table. Master (Mr Justice) Brian Bush was deputising as Master Treasurer and I sat next to a Bencher who introduced himself with a cheery 'Hello, I'm Lenny' (Master (Mr Justice) Hoffmann, as he then was). My initial apprehension was quickly dispelled, and I had a fabulous evening amongst some of the top lawyers in the country at that time.

Then I moved to Birmingham in 1990, and the world of Gray's Inn was largely lost to me until I was invited to the New Silks' Dinner in 2011 and made a Bencher in 2014, having been elected Leader of the Midland Circuit. Now I am more involved with the Inn, but it is not as

it was. Much has changed, and much had passed me by. Some of that is no doubt my fault for not staying in touch, but some of the blame must lie with the Inn for not making as much of an effort with those of us on Circuit as might be the case. It is something I have raised when attending Pension, and I know that the issue of more regular Circuit visits is being considered.

But back to my assigned topic, changes between then and now. The route to qualifying today is markedly different from in 1988. No longer is there the need to read for the Bar in London, as it is now possible to qualify across the country with one of the 12 BPTC providers. The requirement to eat numerous dinners has been whittled down to attending 12 'qualifying sessions'. There is an Introductory Weekend – including a dinner and two lunches held at the Inn – which all new student members must attend and which provides three of the necessary qualifying sessions. There is then an Education Weekend, which includes another dinner and two lunches at the Inn. The remaining qualifying sessions may involve dining at the Inn but may not and some are held on Circuit. All of this is admirable, and I am sure that our students, most of whom now finish university with levels of debt that make my eyes water, are grateful for the attempts to keep the costs down while providing them with a tremendous, not to mention highly relevant, start to what will hopefully be stellar careers at the Bar.

I cannot help, though, but feel a little wistful for what we had in my day and which I fear may have been lost. As a result of spending so much time dining in Gray's Inn I developed a deep affection, if not love, for the Inn. The fact that I rarely came back did not dim that love over the years. I fear though that the students of today will not develop such a love of the Inn if they do not spend as much time here as I and my contemporaries did. For those who study out on Circuit, the prospect of coming to dine other than on the occasion of the two weekends I have mentioned and on Call Night is, I suspect, slim. Why would they? But they should. I worry that the young barristers of today will miss out on something that those of earlier generations had.

I can do no better in trying to explain what that is than to quote Keith Lawrey, who was asked one evening what was the purpose of the dining customs. As he put it: 'I answered with mention of the importance of members of a profession – paid to oppose each other – meeting socially and regularly, of the value to those who will earn their living by fast thinking and talking, of practising before their peers, of the envy of

other professional societies whose members never visit headquarters and meet few of their fellows and of the contribution to the richness of society by maintaining the threads of traditional activity handed down the centuries.'

I agree. If we lose the traditions, then what are we? If our students do not come to love the Inn because their exposure to it is minimal, will the Inn wither and die? Will members of the Bar feel such affection for the Inn that they will continue to return? If they do not, what will the purpose of the Inn be other than to help educate and provide funds to the exceptional and those needing financial assistance. Where, though, will those funds come from? Who will give money to the Inn if they have no feelings of affection for or of belonging to it? There is a move afoot to wrestle the education of student Barristers away from the commercial enterprises that currently charge huge sums and to give it back to the Inns of Court.

This is to be encouraged but I doubt that that will entail an increase in the number of dinners that will have to be eaten or time actually spent in the Inn! It is said by those who are not fans of dining that it did not really train students for a life at the Bar. There may be something in that, but it did me no harm, nor very many of those who came before or after me. In fact I think it did me some good. Rather than knock dining, as many have done, it is my opinion that it should really be viewed as but one part of the training, not the be all and end all, but certainly not without merit.

It has also been said that the Inn has little relevance to the many of us who went to the Circuits after qualifying. But that comes back to the very point I am raising. At least those of us who ate our many dinners at the Inn have something to remember, however far flung our practices may have turned out to be. If we did not start with that base, then why would we feel any affection for the Inn? Or will whatever affection there may initially be fade rapidly, given the shallow foundations of only a couple of weekends spent in the Inn?

A similar problem can be seen on Circuit, where on some the traditions of Circuit Messes has waned. The Northern and North Eastern Circuits seem to have kept the traditions of regular Circuit Messes alive in a way that others have not always managed. On my own Circuit, the number of dinners and messes had dwindled over the years. During my term as Midland Circuit Leader I tried my best to increase them, which was well received and led to an increase in membership of the Circuit. While we

had lost our way for a few years, it did not take much to kick start the collegiality and camaraderie of the Circuit again.

I hope that the change in the requirements for dining will not lead to a collapse in the numbers attending the Inn or who remember fondly their time here. I am about to move to London in November as I prepare for my year as Chair of the Bar and will be resident in the Inn for some 14 months. I hope to dine regularly and play a part that has been to an extent out of my grasp while I plied my trade as a practitioner on the Midland Circuit. I hope too that my fears for the future of the Inn are unfounded, but I think that there is an immense challenge for all who love the Inn to ensure that future generations of members of the Bar still think of the Inn as their home, wherever their practices take them. There is still in my opinion a lot to be said for ‘striving mightily but eating and drinking as friends’.

Before finishing I should like to point out that this article is a personal view. I should also like to make clear that, while I am a big fan of tradition, I would not want anybody to think that as Chair of the Bar for 2019 I am simply going to hanker after ‘the good old days’. There is much to be done and much forward thinking has to take place. Many of the challenges that the Inn faces are similar to those faced by the Bar as a whole, and I shall be doing my best to ensure that the Bar thrives during my year at the helm.

*Master Richard Atkins*

‘I have found that people who attack traditions of this harmless kind [dining at the Inns] belong to either of two categories. They may be incapable of seeing the charm of traditions – then they lack a human quality, like being unmusical or colour-blind – or they are prepared to sacrifice traditions in order to stand out as radical for political or other reasons.’

*Ulf Holmback*, Swedish advokat and Barrister of Gray’s Inn,  
from *Graya* No 83 (1979)