



THE SOCIETY OF ADVOCATES IN ABERDEEN

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Talk for RGU students **Thursday 9th March 2016**

Good morning and thank you for having me along to speak to you today. My name is Maria Robertson and I am the Executive Secretary and Librarian to the Society of Advocates in Aberdeen (if ever there was a mouthful!). I am an RGU graduate, having completed the BA (Hons) in 1998, back when you could do a full degree in Librarianship. From there I took a maternity leave job as a Children's Librarian before falling into Law Librarianship in 1999 – where I have remained ever since!

There are many places you can practice law librarianship [SLIDE] – in a law firm, law school of a university, various companies, or for the government. I myself have worked at the Faculty of Advocates as a Library Assistant, McGrigor Donald law firm (now Pinsent Masons) as an Information Officer, back to the Faculty as Reader Services Librarian, and then to my current position.

Our role can cover a wealth of different tasks just as in any library [SLIDE]; from research and other traditional skills to current awareness, user training and strategic planning. Previous knowledge of the law is not essential – but if you stay a few years it's amazing what you pick up! I remember doing an enquiry for a trainee Advocate once and she used an English law term so I politely suggested the Scottish equivalent, she was amazed a member of library staff was correcting her law knowledge – but grateful as she then found what she needed.

As with any library job there are challenges such as keeping your users within copyright laws, working alone, tight budgets but of course there is also that of dealing with lawyer demands. If they have a client who they are trying to keep out of jail, or save from having to pay a massive fine they can get desperate and forget their manners – and of course each Partner in a law firm is more important than anyone else, so if you have 20 all needing something at the same time...yikes! Conversely you do tend to only have to deal with solicitors – that is, professional grown ups usually in nice suits. [SLIDE] There are no children in law libraries [SLIDE CLICK] and none of the "greater unwashed" you have to deal with in Public Libraries. I still flinch at the thought of the old woman who came and asked, in a loud voice, at the enquiry desk in Alloa Public Library – "how do I get rid of thrush?".

Lawyers tend to be quite appreciative of help and acknowledge the source – my maiden name is in the front of a building contracts book – now there's a claim to fame! Other rewards include usually decent salaries as lawyers respect other professions and law firms tend to be reasonably well off. I didn't become a Librarian expecting to be terribly well paid but I can't say I have any complaints on that score.

It can be a very rewarding experience and usually lawyers are quite keen to encourage Continuing Professional Development, indeed they have to do a number of hours CPD a year so why would they object to paying for you to go to that course?! Especially as ours usually tend to be quite a bit cheaper than theirs. There are also professional achievements to be sought, not just promotion but perhaps a book contract, or becoming a CILIP Fellow. [SLIDE] CILIP has a Commercial, Legal & Scientific Information Group (CLSIG) which supports their members in these sectors.

We also have our own dedicated professional organisations – BIALL, the British and Irish Association of Law Librarians. I've been a member of that for a number of years and have been to many of their annual conferences where you can network and learn about a variety of issues. One year I even presented a seminar on Working Outside The Box to about 60 of my peers – including 2 bosses from previous roles! I also joined their Web Committee, and somehow became the Chair – in control of the whole website, which was an amazing experience. My main accomplishment was changing the majority of their meetings to online, which – although convenient and cost effective - unfortunately negated my reason for joining which was the expenses paid trips to London for meetings!

The Scottish Law Librarians Group is another option, and I have leaflets about membership here for you. Much cheaper – and with more local events, this is a lovely group to be part of, always ready to help each other and share our experiences. They even have a student discount if you want to get involved now, and meet some key people. Talking of which, I mentioned to the Library Services Manager at the Supreme Courts of Scotland that I was coming to speak to you and she is willing to arrange tours if any of you will be in Edinburgh, I can pass on your details to her. I have some business cards here for if you'd like to contact me about anything, or come and see my library so you can use the details on there to get in touch.

The SLLG have asked me to tell you about a new student project on offer, which would increase the understanding of our sector if you are interested. [SLIDE]

- This will be a place on the SLLG Committee for up to 12 months.
- It could be suitable as part of an MSc dissertation, but this isn't essential.
- The committee role will include assessing the SLLG online communications for Scots law librarians (how and why we support each other), and helping organise and promote group events.
- You will gain access to all SLLG events, be able to network with the membership and freely talk to the committee.
- You will also gain skills in organisational thinking and administration of a professional group as well as being able to mention the SLLG role on your CV.

Any interested student should note the majority of committee meetings take place in Edinburgh around every 6 weeks in evenings (although the committee are in contact online more frequently). Notes of interest or further questions are to be directed to Alison Wainwright (convenor@sllg.org.uk).

Should any of you feel you'd like to give a talk to the SLLG discussing your experience of being a (modern) Librarianship student, then the committee would be thrilled to hear from you as well.

So that's some of the theory of Law Librarianship but now I'd like to talk to you a bit more about my own role and how I got there – use myself as a case study as it were. There are many different career paths and many ways to get into law librarianship, and no proven “best method”. Some do a law degree and then don't want to be a lawyer so do a postgrad in library studies and head for the library instead of court. Some did something totally different and found themselves there somehow. There is no wrong or right route.

I had decided I wanted to be a Librarian during my Standard Grade exams so I did the degree. As I said my first job from graduating was totally different from the rest of my career - as Children's Librarian, for Clackmannanshire covering someone's maternity cover. [SLIDE] It was actually a management role and probably a bit much for someone fresh out of university but the Head Librarian had his mind set on an external candidate, and as not many people fancied moving to Alloa short term I was the only external applicant! Hurrah for parents a commutable distance away meaning I didn't need to stress about renting and lease terms. It was an amazing experience, looked great on my CV and showed me various aspects of real working life, in a public library. The job included arranging puppet shows, being Santa's elf, reading Teletubbies to nursery kids, arranging project support materials for schools, book acquisitions, manning the enquiry desk and general management position duties.

When the contract ended I was out of work for a few weeks before getting offered 2 jobs on the same day, both in Edinburgh. Quite a nice problem to have it must be said.

Option 1 – Teenage fiction Librarian at George Watson's private school.

Option 2 – Reader Services Library Assistant at Advocates Library (private law library).

Option 1 had a much bigger salary and looked like I would get to read my beloved Terry Pratchett all day but option 2 won through as I could see the chances for progression further down the line – and the thought of working for grown-ups was quite appealing after 10 months of pop up books. And so, I got into Law Librarianship. [SLIDE CLICK]

The Advocates Library was a fascinating place to work, open 24 hours a day, 364 days a year and always in use by the self-employed Advocates it belonged to. I was part of a team of 16 library staff and Readers Services ran the enquiry desk in the main library and were at the beck and call of the members. It could be anything from “this stapler won't work” to “I need an updated version of this legislation, and to know which sections are in force”. There was a lot of reshelving of books, including taking the trolley round the courts to find books that were finished with and abandoned there. I also had to go through newspapers looking for articles for our current awareness database, and of course there was loose leaf updating.

It was a gorgeous old building, lots of dark wood and portraits of men in wigs. Somehow though when I was told about a new library being built, with big windows, black leather sofas, Madonna headsets for the phones and flat screen computers (yes I'm showing my age here!) it all sounded most appealing. I applied for the roll as Librarian for the Edinburgh office of McGrigor Donald, [SLIDE CLICK] this time there were 2 applicants interviewed – and what got me the job? Apparently I showed

enthusiasm and excitement about the plans for the new building, mirroring the feelings of the head Librarian who was in charge of interviews. You really just never know what the priorities of someone interviewing you may be.

This job was also most satisfying. I was heavily involved in the move from a cupboard in the old office to the shiny new library, along with the centralising of all library stock instead of each solicitor having their favourite books in their rooms – this caused some shelving issues! As did the realisation as the move was underway that suddenly everyone was submitting big maps and plans to me to store and index. Previously these had been in the bottom of cupboards in their offices but now we were going open plan and “paper free” they wanted rid of them so I had to research and purchase map storage solutions. Once we were moved I was again involved in enquiries and current awareness, plus indexing Know How. A lot of company searches were involved which I had not done before either so it was quite a learning curve.

18 months later my previous line manager was being promoted to in charge of the whole library at the Faculty of Advocates, and her role as Reader Services Librarian was to be advertised (so a little bird told me!). I didn't have the management experience requested in the job description but I always believe “if you don't ask you won't get” so I applied anyway. After a scary interview including a presentation, I was offered the job on the condition that I agreed to go on a Management course. [SLIDE CLICK]

It was strange coming back to a department, in charge, after some time away. Luckily the Library Assistants took it fairly well and we got on with looking after the Advocates. I was now in charge of a team of 4 full time and 6 part time assistants as well as monograph acquisitions, and being part of the management team of the library. The To Do list never seemed to decrease but it was a wonderful job, probably the best role a Law Librarian could hope to have in Scotland, it was certainly my dream job.

However, my husband and I then realised we missed Aberdeen and wanted to move back and I was lucky enough to hear about the job at the Society. [SLIDE CLICK] At first I was frustrated not to be using my degree as much, this job is much more about administration of members records and the finances, maintenance of our Listed Building, and arranging events than traditional Librarian tasks such as classification and research enquiries. As I mentioned earlier I did a talk on Working Outside The Box at a BIALL conference, as that is very much what I do. No two days are the same and I often have to deal with totally new tasks or situations; over the years though I have shaped the job to be something I enjoy. I grew up in hotels and my parents bought their own Restaurant with Rooms when I was 10 so I'm used to events and dealing with catering. [SLIDE] The library has become a “hidden gem” of a venue in the city with external hire bookings for weddings, afternoon tea parties, drinks receptions, seminars, dinner and we've even had a few gigs.

At the weekend one of my members did a review on our Facebook page saying “Since Maria Robertson became employed here the Society of Advocates has improved massively in terms of organisation and socially. It's a fabulous venue.” That was after sitting next to me at one of our Library Lunches when I made sure she didn't go

hungry or thirsty so it may have been her happy belly speaking! Still, nice to be complimented!

To tell you a little more about the Society of Advocates [SLIDE] – its origins can be traced back to the 16th Century. The 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”. Our library was founded in 1787 and is currently housed on the first floor of a building James Matthews designed purposely for us in 1890. Now we rent out the ground floor and basement to the adjoining Sheriff Court, another interesting aspect of my job as you hear the jingle of handcuffs...

Staff wise there is myself, a caretaker, and a few part timers to cover my annual leave. We are governed by a Management Committee and my boss – the President, changes every November. This is another strange aspect of my job as every year I have to get used to working for a new person and all their habits – although as they are usually full time solicitors in their own offices it does not affect the day to day running too much. 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.

I am 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 one 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 two was to catalogue our collection, and 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 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, 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 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, we even found two wills in the past fortnight, and the Royal Faculty of Procurators in Glasgow have set up a similar service for their local area after hearing about ours.

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. These had been 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. 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!

We do try and move with the times, when I started here 10 years ago we did not even have a website – [SLIDE] now we have a Facebook page, a private members' group, Twitter 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!

When you start out on your career path it's impossible to know where it may lead you. I would like to wish you good luck with your journey, and I hope you are as lucky as I am and find somewhere to work that doesn't have you living for the weekend. Life is too short to do a job you don't enjoy. Law Librarianship has certainly been my happy place and I hope you consider it as an option too.

Hopefully that's enough contact methods up on the screen, I also have my business cards here, but I'm happy to take any questions you may have now....?