

South London Law Society celebrates its rich history here Geoffrey Grant, founding member and President of the Society in 1971 and Hon. Secretary or Joint Hon. Secretary from 1964-1968 and 1972-1980. Now a consultant with Grant Saw of Greenwich, where he was senior partner for many years discusses how it all began.



Local law societies had existed for many years, starting with Bristol Law Society in 1770 and as time went by, most major cities and towns, each with a strongly centralised legal profession, acquired its own local law society.

But not London. In 1825, what we now know as The Law Society was formed in London but its interests were national, not local. By the 1950's its governing body (the Council) was largely made up of members elected to represent constituencies around the country, the constituencies being based on local law society areas - but again, not in London. It became Law Society policy to extend constituency representation to London and to encourage the formation of local law societies throughout the area.

The Central & South Middlesex Law Society was formed in 1959 and their Hon. Secretary, the very committed and energetic Will Gillham, was asked by the Law Society to assist in getting a similar society established in South London. In November 1960 he wrote to all solicitors in the ten Metropolitan Boroughs south of the Thames (Battersea, Bermondsey, Camberwell, Deptford, Greenwich, Lambeth, Lewisham, Southwark, Wandsworth, Woolwich). Those who showed interest in serving on a sponsoring committee were called together, we drew up a set of Rules and held the inaugural meeting of the South London Law Society on 25th April 1961. Edric H. Philcox was elected as the first President, L.J. (Jack) Robinson and A.J. Rowden Vice-Presidents, Anthony Delin Hon. Secretary and L.G. ("Jake") Moody Hon. Treasurer.

At this point I have to say that most of the early records of the Society were destroyed in the early 1980's by a fire at the offices of the then Hon. Secretary, so most of what I write in this article is based on my far from infallible memory. However I believe that those who attended the inaugural meeting and thus became founder members of the Society included the elected officers referred to above and also Patrick Browne, Andrew Gray, Dennis Hughes, Harold Kenwright, John Norton, Christopher and Peter Turner, Sandra Tyas (later District Judge Sandra Andrews) and myself. (Apologies for names omitted). The yearly subscription was set at two guineas (£2.10).

The following year, having achieved the requisite number of members, the Society was officially recognised by the Law Society, and we had a representative on the Law Society's Council, first Anthony Delin and then, for many years, Rob Marshall.

The London Government Act of 1963 did away with the old Metropolitan Boroughs and gave us instead fewer, larger, London Boroughs; but the boundaries were in some cases changed, and we were told by the Law Society to sort things out with our neighbouring local societies. So those of us who were Hon Secretaries in 1964 found ourselves haggling with our neighbours and passing pieces of territory from one to another, rather like Wellington and Metternich at the Congress of Vienna. I recall ceding North Woolwich (Silvertown) to the West Essex Law Society, but I don't think I got anything from them in exchange. What was the profession like in 1961? As to numbers, there were about 30,000 practicing solicitors in the country, as against some 115,000 today. About 10,000 were in the London area - but only 250 of these were practicing in South London. Most of us worked in small High Street firms, more often than not over a Bank, and partnerships of more than three or four members were rare.

We usually found ourselves dealing with other South London firms much more than with solicitors outside the area in conveyancing, litigation and divorce but scattered as we were, with no centre to the Society's area, one usually did not know the solicitor on the other side. He (or, sometimes, she, but not all that often) was just a name on the letterhead. One of the early achievements of our Society was to hold social functions at which, for the first time, solicitors in South London got to know each other and were able to discover that Mr X, who had seemed so un-cooperative over the terms of that new lease, was actually quite a nice guy when you got to know him! This certainly oiled the wheels of practice.

Informal social events were held at various venues, including Dulwich & Sydenham Hill Golf Club (through the good offices of Reg Miller of Bennett Welch & Co, a former President of the golf club) and the George Inn at Southwark. The first major social function, however, was a Buffet Dinner and Dance at Law Society's Hall in March 1962. Our President sent out a circular letter inviting attendance, in which he said, "The evening is to be very informal, so Dinner Jackets are suggested". One cannot help but wonder what mode of dress might have been suggested if the evening was to have been only moderately informal. The issues with which the profession locally was concerned included, then as now, the inadequacies of Legal Aid. The importance of Civil Legal Aid to the South London practitioner at that time was tremendous. Divorce by consent and the special procedure had not arrived - the facts of each case, whether defended or not, had to be proved at a full hearing with Counsel before a Judge in the High Court, and most of our clients needed Legal Aid for the purpose. And the Rent Acts were in full force and effect.

Housing shortages meant that landlords needing desperately to recover possession of their homes fought it out in the County Court with tenants who had nowhere else to go. Judges had to try to make fair decisions where fairness could not be achieved and it all had to be covered by Legal Aid. And negligence claims could not be conducted on a "no win no fee" basis, most of these required Legal Aid also. But rates of remuneration were poor and the procedure for getting paid was cumbersome and slow.

In 1961, scale fees were charged in conveyancing transactions. It was not improper to charge less (or more) - but a solicitor who acquired a reputation for habitually charging less than scale could be guilty of professional misconduct by attracting business unfairly. The philosophy was that clients should be free to choose their solicitor solely on the basis of his reputed skill and knowledge. Price should not be an influencing factor, nor

should the extent to which the solicitor proclaimed his own excellence. Not only was advertising banned, any form of attracting attention was improper, including having too large a sign or nameplate outside the office. An illuminated sign was unthinkable. For those who may feel nostalgic about the attractions of scale fees, I would remind them that the scales only covered transactions up to £20,000 in value the property, that is, not the fee! Crime has, of course, always been a source of work for solicitors in South London. Mention of the ban on advertising reminds me of one criminal law specialist whose offices were at the back of the local police-station. He had his firm's name sign-written in gold leaf on his office windows, including one at the back of the office. I saw this once when visiting him, it was not visible from the street, and I was puzzled by it - until sometime later I was interviewing a client in the cells at the police-station. From the cell window, you could not see much, but you got an excellent view of the solicitor's sign-written window.

As always, we as a profession were much misunderstood and misrepresented by the press and by politicians. One of the Society's early activities was to get to know our local MPs. There were some 15 Parliamentary constituencies within our area, but we held social gatherings, at each of which just three or four MP's were guests. Over drinks and light refreshments, we discussed the issues which were causing friction and we were able to achieve, I believe, a greater measure of understanding. It will be noted that I have made no mention of continuing legal education as an activity of the Society. In the early 1960's the flow of new legislation was a trickle compared with today, CPD had not been invented, and the two Universities which we are now fortunate enough to have within our boundaries did not then exist (at least not in their present form). The profession locally tended to rely on the Law Society's Gazette and the Law Society's School of Law (shortly to merge with Gibson & Weldon to become the College of Law) to keep them up to date. However, if we had no University in South London with whom our Society could establish a useful and friendly relationship, we did have the Greater London Council, in County Hall on the river front in Lambeth.

One of our members, Frank Abbott, had held high office in the GLC and it just so happened that he was our President in 1975 when the Law Society celebrated its 150th anniversary. London was full of invited legal dignitaries from all over the world and thanks to Frank Abbott we were able to host a reception at County Hall, attended by overseas judges, eminent politicians, even Lord Denning really punching above our weight on that occasion.

Another pleasing result of the friendly relations with County Hall was that, not once but twice, the Chief Solicitor to the GLC has provided us with our President, John Fitzpatrick in 1981, (which is not a period that I am supposed to be covering in this article) and Harold F.W.Wilson in 1976. To avoid confusion with the Prime Minister of the day, Harold was known in South London Law Society circles as the right Harold Wilson!

The Society has had its share of members distinguished in other fields, including John D. Fraser, MP for Norwood for many years and a Government Minister during the 1970s. Possibly the most intriguing name however is that of Roy Fuller, who was solicitor to the Woolwich Equitable Building Society - but was also an outstanding poet and was Oxford Professor of Poetry from 1968 to 1973.

How many other local law societies can claim to have produced a professor of poetry, I wonder?

Geoffrey Grant, President South London Law Society 1971