

A Working Holiday in London

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In 1991 I went to London on a working holiday, and was fortunate enough to have the opportunity to work in two law libraries.

My first job in London was with IBM in their Legal Department, and fifty per cent of my duties were to attend to the Legal Department's library, while the other fifty per cent were administrative. IBM's legal library was modest in size, and Ashurst Morris Crisp (AMC) was one of our main interlibrary loan contacts. AMC have an extensive law library collection and upon request, would fax us all sorts of information at no charge. When my six month contract terminated with IBM, I took the 'pro-active' approach and asked the Senior Reference Librarian at AMC, with whom I regularly dealt, if there was the opportunity for me to work in their library over the July/August summer break. Within the week I was offered temporary work to fill in for librarians away on holiday.

Ashurst Morris Crisp is one of London's larger law firms, with overseas offices in Belgium, Paris and Tokyo. The London firm is located in East London, near the Liverpool tube station. The borough was going through a complete transformation from a less salubrious area to a very attractive central business district. A lot of other larger law firms such as Allen & Overy have also established their offices in the new glass skyscrapers in this area, which has been designed and developed with consideration for its environmental and social impact. Blocks of office buildings look into central courtyards landscaped with greenery. Cafes and restaurants surround the central courtyards, which double up as open theatres during the lunch hours to publicise and promote anything from dance companies to the latest model super-sports car.

AMC London has one hundred partners alone, and the 100 names can be seen in the tiniest pitch on the firm's letterhead paper. The firm's area of work included: company and commercial, property and planning, litigation, tax and banking. The library collection is essentially English law, with a few texts and the *Official Journal* on European Community law.

AMC is located on three floors. The top floor is the penthouse where the boardrooms are located, and where the partners are served a hot lunch every day. The library is centrally located on the middle floor, and is staffed by four full-time librarians. We worked different shifts so that the library was constantly staffed between the hours of 8.00 am - 6.00 pm. The library is well laid out, with work desks and reading desks located along the window side. Many practitioners used to spend their lunch hour reading the newspaper and taking in the views of London.

The four librarian positions were divided up as follows: 1) the head librarian or senior reference librarian, 2) her assistant, 3) general reference and technical librarian, and 4) a librarian completing her studies; plus there always seemed to be students floating in and out to help with the more mundane tasks such as looseleaf filing. The major responsibilities of the head librarian and her assistant were to handle all queries, to collate material for solicitors' files, and to edit the *News Review* and *Library Bulletin*. These tasks were then delegated, where applicable, to the other librarians.

Our duties therefore included the handling of practitioner queries, and the responsibility of maintaining files on various matters being dealt with by the different sections. This entailed the gathering of information from the daily newspapers, and articles from relevant business, financial and law journals. After time, I found that the Australian and New Zealand practitioners started requesting that I be responsible for their files, obviously preferring the antipodean touch.

The library produced a monthly *Library Bulletin* and *News Review* that were circulated to London law firms and legal sections in commercial enterprise. The *News Review*, like its namesake, was a collation of newspaper articles covering areas such as banking, property and local goings on in London. The *Library Bulletin* contained information on new law, library acquisitions, cases and press releases. Consequently, practitioners from other law firms and legal departments would ring us up requesting further information, and/or copies of particular items - as I had done from IBM. This generated a lot of work, and at the time I left the firm was still not charging for this service, but was aware that the time had come to recuperate costs.

Just as the time had come to start charging for the above service, the time had also come for the firm to change from a card system to a computerised catalogue. Suprisingly, in England, a lot of systems, such as the banks and libraries, have not yet been automated. At the time I left Ashurst Morris Crisp, they were introducing technology to the library, and recently one of the librarians with whom I regularly correspond stated that I would no longer recognize the library as they now all have computers!

The work was very demanding, but it was very stimulating servicing the needs of over two hundred practitioners. Initially my duties included the more technical tasks such as looseleaf filing and shelving books, but after a few weeks I was allowed to attend to telephone queries. As you can imagine with such a large number of practitioners, the 'phones were ringing hot all day long. Practitioners' demands were met *tout de suite*, and there were always half-a-dozen or so couriers with push bikes in hand hovering at the base of the building ready to deliver and/or collect.

I was also sent on many errands around London gathering information. Such is the goodwill between librarians, all private law firm libraries had an unwritten interlibrary loan agreement. I visited many of the old libraries which typically tended to be dark,

with heavy wooden bookcases lining the walls. Unlike the age of the libraries, the librarians were all very 'high-tech', linked to firm offices all around the world, and actively involved in the dynamic interchange of global information.

I thoroughly enjoyed my time with Ashurst Morris Crisp, and would have no hesitation in recommending such a working holiday for any young aspiring librarian.

