

Birmingham and The Hague: a Report on International Conferences

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The 25th annual meeting of the British and Irish Association of Law Libraries was held in Birmingham, 9-12 September 1994. The 13th meeting of the International Association of Law Libraries was held in The Hague, 26-29 September 1994. Butterworths very kindly paid for me to attend the BIALL meeting, and I was then able to extend my stay and attend the IALL meeting a fortnight later.

BIALL

The 1994 BIALL meeting, "Silver Celebrations in the Second City", was the second time a meeting had been held in Birmingham, the first occasion having been in 1972. The major changes were that this was the first BIALL meeting to be held in a hotel rather than in university facilities, and that there were some 280 participants as against 50 at the earlier meeting. Birmingham is the second largest city in England (after London), hence the title of the meeting. It is a large industrial city, but a great deal of work has been done in the centre making it very attractive. The conference hotel was directly opposite the Cathedral, which boasts beautiful Burne-Jones windows, and is set in a lovely park.

I arrived direct from Australia at 6.20 am on Friday, 9 September, to be met by Kevin Cassidy, UK Sales Director for Butterworths. After a brief stop at Butterworths headquarters in London, we drove to Birmingham, to begin a solid weekend of conferencing. In retrospect, however, it may well have been a better idea to arrive a day earlier, as my faculties on the Friday after the flight were not as sharp as they might have been.

The Conference proper (at least for me) began at 3.30 on Friday with a New Delegates' Tea. This was an opportunity for all first time attendees to meet each other and senior members of BIALL. It was an informal gathering over tea and cakes which contrasted rather strongly with the traditional Australian opening of an evening cocktail party. I enjoyed the occasion, and am sure others did as well. At the American Association of Law Libraries' meeting an even greater amount of effort is put into welcoming first time delegates, and it is perhaps time that the ALLG consider doing something similar to make newer members feel at home.

The opening address was presented by a Judge resident in Birmingham, who spoke very entertainingly about the involvement of Birmingham in English legal history, including an account of some of its legal characters

This was followed by the Members' Forum which Jacqui mentioned in her article about the BIALL meeting in Edinburgh (*ALLG Newsletter* 113 (Dec 1992), 180). There, Jacqui queried the value of such a gathering and whether it was worth continuing. Two years on, it still occurs. I found it very valuable, as it gave members a chance to raise various issues with the Committee and speak to their ideas. Whilst I agree that this could be done at the AGM, this would have been very difficult at this meeting, as the AGM was very heavily taken up with discussions about the new BIALL constitution which left little time for anything else. The Members' Forum is also a more informal gathering than an AGM, and I think that this helps the flow of ideas and contributions. One of the issues which was raised was the timing of the meeting. The BIALL meetings have always run from lunchtime Friday to lunchtime Monday. This seemed strange to me when I read the programme but, after attending and hearing the members' comments, I can understand the reasons. Partly it is to do with cost, and partly with length of absence from work. The arguments seemed to hold good as it was decided to keep the same format for the next meeting. During the Members' Forum, the overseas delegates were each officially welcomed by name, and invited to address the meeting. I think I said something, but as I hadn't slept for almost two days, I can't be sure what it was. I do remember conveying greetings and best wishes from the ALLG.

After the dinner on Friday evening, there was a reception by Dillons, a large chain of English booksellers. Their home in Birmingham is in a lovely old building, where the large law section is housed on the second floor reached via a spiral staircase which made me feel quite at home.

On Saturday morning there was a four hour session devoted to information technology. The papers were interesting, especially a paper on CD-ROM networking in the academic library. Unfortunately the paper which I, and I suspect most delegates were waiting for, and which had been advertised in the preliminary programme, "The statute law database" from a speaker from the Lord Chancellor's Department, was not listed on the official programme. We were, therefore, unable to learn of the progress of this project which has so reduced the value of *Statutes in Force*, as only new legislation rather than amended legislation is now being added to the series. The local delegates were not surprised, although disappointed at the programme change.

After lunch there was time left for Special Interest Group meetings. As I did not belong to any of them, I took the time to visit the beautiful Warwick Castle nearby.

The Sunday morning sessions began at 9 00 and were less well attended than those on the previous day. This was not surprising, as the BIALL Annual Dinner had been held the night before at the Birmingham Botanical Gardens. This had been a great success, and the occasion of a memorable incident. Before the dinner, as everyone was putting on their finery, the Hotel's fire alarm sounded. At first I simply assumed it was a false alarm, and stayed in my room. Then I began to have my suspicions and opened the door to find a member of staff directing all guests to the fire escape. I can assure you that "EXIT" signs are very useful in an emergency in a nineteenth century hotel, where the corridors are rather like a rabbit warren. Outside we waited for 10 or 15 minutes in various states of undress. The most sensible were those who had arranged to meet early in the Bar and who were able to walk from the Bar to the street, drinks still in hand. At least two overseas delegates walked out while we were still waiting, having assumed the whole time that it was simply a false alarm. The Dinner itself was a great success, and very well organised, except that more people than expected stayed right to the end, with the result that an extra bus had to be summoned to ferry the delegates to their hotels.

Back to the Sunday morning papers. The session was entitled "Discrimination and the law", and included papers on women, race, sexual orientation and discrimination in librarianship. It was an interesting and rather unusual mix of papers which was relevant to all of us. The papers were all well prepared, and provided an interesting mix of law and librarianship which is a feature of the BIALL meeting. Sunday afternoon was devoted to excursions. I thought about a visit to the Cadbury's factory but decided in the end to visit Castle Bromwich Hall Gardens, where we were shown around gardens dating back to the sixteenth century, which are gradually being restored to their former glory by a dedicated band of volunteers.

At 5 30 on the Sunday, the BIALL AGM was held. This was quite a formal occasion as a new constitution and rules were being voted on, and a certain amount of legalism crept into the proceedings. The Chair, Lynn Quiney, the Librarian at the Law Society, handled the meeting in exemplary fashion and all motions were carried by the required majority. Despite the formality, it did make me think that perhaps the time has come for the ALLG to adopt a rather more formal constitution than our present document. The current situation, where everyone is a member of the ALLG by virtue of their membership of the local group or their subscription to the *Australian Law Librarian*, seems unsuitable. I found it quite difficult to explain the nature of our group to members of BIALL, CALL and AALL to whom I spoke. Personally, I would prefer to see membership of the national group bringing with it an automatic subscription to the journal, and money being passed on to local groups according to the number of members, but this is something which will have to be addressed at a later date.

On Monday, the morning started with two forums, one on marketing and one on moving libraries. Delegates formed groups and discussed the issues and then presented their ideas to the larger group at the end. The theory was excellent and it was a good quiet way to begin the day after another big dinner the night before, but I'm not sure that it was the most successful session of the weekend. This was followed by four papers on the topic of "Quality" covering TQM, performance indicators and other related issues. There was a very entertaining paper from a past-President of the Law Society, and another from a marketing consultant.

The weekend closed with a lunch in the hotel restaurant, and everyone made their way to the station to head for home.

Impressions

The BIALL meeting is very different from one of our conferences for a number of reasons. It is a much smaller gathering and this has the effect of allowing everyone to feel part of the law library family. It is held every year, and it is interesting to watch people catch up with colleagues whom they last saw at the previous meeting. It is very much a conference where everyone does everything together. Although there were two conference hotels, the feeling throughout the meeting was one of togetherness. There were discussions at the AGM about holding a future meeting in London. Despite the number of law librarians there, such a meeting has never been held. The feeling seems to be against it largely because it is thought that members would not pay to stay in a hotel or even in university accommodation if they lived in London and thus the collegiate atmosphere of the conference would be removed. Another surprising aspect is the way the conference is organised. Where we employ professional conference organisers (and with the size of our meeting, I am not suggesting this should stop), the British meeting was organised totally by a Committee headed by Michael Maher, a Birmingham law firm librarian, who did a tremendous job. The full residential cost of the conference was £289.05 which covered three nights' accommodation, all papers and all meals. The non-residential cost was £237.35, so it seems that the prices are heavily weighted to encourage everyone's staying at the one location, which does help the family atmosphere. The provisional profit for the Conference was £11,446.34 which is a very healthy figure. I realise there are special aspects in that hotels in English provincial cities are prepared to do very attractive deals to ensure a fully booked weekend, and that this is probably not the case in Australia, especially given the distances to be travelled in many cases, but it does seem to me that a purely law conference run in a similar way in Australia, possibly starting on a small scale and increasing later, could well be a success. The organising committee had managed to gain a great deal of sponsorship, mainly from law firms, and this helped defray the costs greatly.

One of the arguments against a separate law conference in Australia is always the size of the Trade Exhibition which could be attracted. At the BIALL meeting, there were some 20 exhibitors representing publishers, binders, furniture suppliers and others. The main omission was from large computer system suppliers, but this was the only absence which I noticed.

Library Visits

After the BIALL meeting I visited the Supreme Court and Lincoln's Inn. In both cases the librarians, Sally Phillips and Guy Holborn, took a lot of time to show me round and make me feel at home. Since then, I have had to contact Sally a number of times for help with English material, and thankfully she has been in touch with me and I have been able to return the favour. The Supreme Court Library was similar to the Supreme Court in Melbourne in many ways: an old building groaning under the weight of its collections, with corridors being used as storage areas all through the building. Even one of the toilets had been used for storage and was, in fact, full of books. It was very reassuring to find similar problems to my own.

I also took the time to visit Don Raistrick at the Lord Chancellor's Department. From here all British court libraries are co-ordinated and a service provided to the small number of staff actually within the building. This was all about to change, as the Court Services were being separated from the other branches of the Department, and a move to a new building was about to take place.

I visited the Law Commission Library and had a very thorough tour of their collections. I also looked through Wildy's, the legal booksellers, Hammick's in the Strand, also legal booksellers with a range of material which made me wish we had such shops in Australia. Maybe they exist interstate, but not in Melbourne. Finally, I visited a law firm library near Lloyd's with a smallish but very specialised collection.

IALL

After a week's holiday, I travelled to The Hague, to attend the International Association of Law Libraries' meeting on international and commercial arbitration. This meeting was held at the Hague Academy of International Law at the Peace Palace. This was a much smaller meeting than the BIALL meeting, numbering some 80 delegates, drawn largely from Germany, USA, and Austria. There were no delegates from England or France, and I was the only representative from Australia.

The meeting began with a tour of the Peace Palace, which was built with a donation from the American philanthropist, Andrew Carnegie, early this century. Carnegie donated huge sums all over the world to build libraries, and it is not therefore surprising that the Peace Palace Library is one of the major collections of international law in the world. The papers on the first day were devoted to legal publishing and librarianship in the Netherlands, which was of only marginal interest. The second day, however, was devoted to papers on international arbitration, including addresses from such high-powered speakers as the Secretary-General of the Permanent Court of Arbitration and a member of the Iran-US Claims Tribunal which has so far disposed of 3879 cases. After lunch there followed visits to either the TMC Asser Instituut or the Hague Conference on Private International Law, and then a tour of the Dutch Parliament which was in session. The third day's papers related specifically to international commercial arbitration with contributions from ICSID and ICC amongst others. The fourth day consisted of a full day's excursion, starting with a trip to Slot Loevestein, where Hugo de Groot (Grotius) was imprisoned, and ending with a canal trip looking at windmills.

Conclusions

Attendance at conferences such as these is a very valuable experience, and I would like to thank Butterworths once again for providing the grant to pay for the trip. I enjoyed meeting a whole new group of law librarians in an informal atmosphere at the BIALL meeting, where we could all discuss issues of common interest. One of the main advantages is the friendships which are made and the professional contacts. As I have said, the people I met have all been very helpful, including one librarian from Northern Ireland who took the time to send me lists of Northern Ireland legislation which I hope will help solve some delivery problems we are currently experiencing.

I am sure that future recipients of this award will find it equally rewarding, and Butterworths are to be congratulated for their efforts in fostering this sharing of experiences amongst law librarians.
