

# The Women Readers' Room

By Louise Byrne

On 17 August 2007 Frederick Jordan Chambers held a 'wake' to drink to the demise of the Women Readers' Room after 35 years. At the time of its inception, female barristers were experiencing discrimination in their search for professional accommodation. That difficulty having been dramatically reduced, the Women Lawyers Association decided to terminate the lease and celebrate its irrelevance.

One of those who attended the wake, who herself had found it difficult to secure chambers as a young barrister and who was one of those instrumental in the notion of a dedicated women readers' room back in the 1970s, was Mary Gaudron QC.

The approach to Frederick Jordan Chambers by the Women Lawyers' Association began with a simple letter from Miss Jennifer Blackman, barrister and then vice president, who wrote to the secretary, Frederick Jordan Chambers, 233 Macquarie Street, Sydney, as follows:

26<sup>th</sup> September 1972

Dear Sir,

The Women Lawyers Association is presently considering acquiring a room to be used by newly admitted barristers with a preference for women.

Accordingly, we would be interested to hear of any chambers which your group may have available now or in the near future, the terms of sale and occupation and length of occupation, etc.

We look forward to hearing from you as soon as convenient.

...

Yours sincerely,  
Jenny Blackman

Following further exchange of letters between J H Blackman and the good gentlemen of Frederick Jordan Chambers the arrangement was formalised with the grant of a licence by the FJC Co-operative of a small room on the 5<sup>th</sup> floor of 233 Macquarie Street for a period of four and a half years starting from 15 December 1972.

The initial rental was \$95 per month, clerks fees \$50 per month during the time of occupation and the occupant was to be approved by the members of FJC. The licence provided for a renewal after the initial period on no less favourable terms.

The arrangement continued when FJC moved to its present location at 53 Martin Place in 1993.

However in 1977 the trustees of the room were somewhat optimistic about the long term need for a dedicated women readers' room when they wrote in the following terms to Lionel Robberds QC, secretary:

17<sup>th</sup> June 1977

Dear Lionel,

Thank you for your letter of 15<sup>th</sup> June. We do propose to renew the licence held by us for a further three and a half years, taking it to the end of 1980. We feel that it would perhaps be best not to look any further ahead at this stage because by that time there may be no necessity for such a set of chambers which would, no doubt, delight everyone.

.....

Yours sincerely,  
Janet Coombs  
Jennifer Blackman  
Priscilla Flemming

In 1988 the room was moved from the 5<sup>th</sup> floor to the 1<sup>st</sup> floor of 233 Macquarie Street and the secretary, David Lloyd (now Justice David Lloyd of the Land and Environment Court), informed the women trustees by letter of the new arrangements adding:

13<sup>th</sup> June 1988

Dear Janet

.....

The board will formally have to resolve to provide a direct telephone line to the room, but since you are being asked to move from a room in which there is already such a telephone line I do not envisage the board requiring either your association or the new occupant of the room to pay the necessary connection fee.

Yours faithfully  
David H Lloyd  
Secretary

This reflects the generally benevolent attitude that the board and members of Frederick Jordan Chambers displayed over the 35 years towards the Women Lawyers' Association and the trustees who tirelessly administered the occupation of the room. The records show that on many occasions the board was prepared to waive any shortfall that sometimes arose due to gaps between occupants or other misadventure of particular occupants such that rent could not be met. Unlike today, where to support a female reader or readers on the floor is the done thing and is looked on favourably by leaders of the Bar, until recently Frederick Jordan Chambers was alone in such support.

The women who started their careers at the Bar in the Women Readers' Room at Frederick Jordan Chambers include justices Bell and Fullerton now on the Supreme Court Bench, Judge Ann Ainslie-Wallace of the District Court, justices Robbie Flohm and Jan Stevenson of the Family Court, and Judge Pat O'Shane, magistrate.

In November 1984 a young solicitor by the name of Virginia Bell wrote to Robberds QC, secretary, Frederick Jordan Chambers Co-operative, as follows:

26<sup>th</sup> November 1984

Dear Mr Robberds,

I am a solicitor currently employed by Redfern Legal Centre Limited. I intend seeking admission to the bar on 20<sup>th</sup> December next. I hope to commence practice as a barrister in February, 1985.

.....

I have been in practice as a solicitor for seven years. I have had a wide variety of experience in that time, I have handled civil claims, family law, tenancy and criminal matters. I have had extensive advocacy experience in Courts of Petty Sessions. I have also done some appearance work in the District and Supreme Courts; Petty

Sessions appeals, Criminal Injuries compensation applications and bail applications. I have instructed counsel in both criminal and civil matters in all jurisdictions.

.....  
 Yours sincerely,  
 Virginia Bell

Justice Virginia Bell, with reference to the 'wake' now writes:

I was truly sorry to miss the wake for the Women Readers' Room.

While I was far from being a pioneering woman barrister, it remained that the thought of making the move from practice as a solicitor to the Bar had a somewhat forbidding aspect to it, in part, because of the sense that it was a male preserve. The existence of the Women Readers' Room was significant in my decision to make the shift. Not only did it offer the prospect of a place to start but also and equally importantly was the impact that it had had over the years on the composition of Frederick Jordan Chambers. This was a set of chambers with more than a token number of women members and that, too, was encouraging.

It is good to see that we have outlived the need for it but the foresight and work of Janet Coombs, Jenny Blackman and Priscilla Flemming in setting up and supporting the Women Readers' Room is something for which I am very grateful. By the time I was the occupant, Gay O'Connor was committee member in chambers with prime responsibility for the room and for making newcomers feel welcome. Other former incumbents who contributed to the collegiate atmosphere included Ann Ainslie-Wallace, Robbie Flohm, Jan Stevenson, Sharron Norton and Liz Fullerton.

Judge Ann Ainslie-Wallace was unable to attend the 'wake' and sent a note of apology commenting:

I hope it is a great party because I know I (and probably a few others) would never have had a chance of getting a room anywhere else in 1978. It also gave me a wonderful introduction to the crazy world of Frederick Jordan Chambers and I think that had I not had a go in the Women Lawyers' Room I would not have had a career at the Bar.



Left to right: Ann Ainslie-Wallace, Graham Barr, Murray Aldridge and Geoff Graham, mid-year.

In similar vein, Justice Elizabeth Fullerton, who was also not able to attend the 'wake' as the night clashed with a Supreme Court conference, wrote: 'I was a very grateful incumbent of the room without a view in 1984.'



Christmas party 1986: Liz Fullerton, Wilma Long and John Nield.

A significant number of women barristers, some of whose names appear above, have worked tirelessly in the routine administration of the room and in providing support for the women readers in their first year at the Bar. However of recent years when the room has been located on the second floor of Frederick Jordan Chambers at 53 Martin Place, it would be remiss not to mention the support provided by the two male barristers, Martin Gorrick and Chris O'Donnell whose rooms are immediately adjacent to the readers' room. The good gentlemen of Frederick Jordan Chambers are a pretty good bunch after all.