



clerkroom

Pupil Stories

Introduction

At Clerksroom, we believe that when delivering professional training, we should be surpassing standards, not simply meeting the minimum requirement set by the regulator.

Our main focus is on promoting the overarching principles of; flexibility, accessibility, affordability and high standards. We believe that our attitude towards recruitment creates an accessible learning environment, which allows pupils to progress into successful self-employed practitioners; and our process specifically aims to remove barriers to entry for those who are currently under-represented at the Bar.

We value individuals who have taken a different approach in their legal career and those applicants who have gathered a variety of experience outside of the traditional 'norms'. In applying these values, we believe we have increased opportunities, specifically in relation to social mobility, diversity and overall inclusion at the Bar. This in turn is helping to create a Bar that better reflects, and can meet the changing needs of, the society it serves. This makes the Bar more sustainable and competitive for the long term.

Several of our recent pupils have had some form of reduction in pupillage based on their previous experience. We have found that there is a direct correlation between pupillage candidates who have been given a pupillage reduction and pupillage candidates who are: from under-represented groups; have come to the Bar later in life; have taken untraditional routes; have had difficult personal circumstances or have had a lack of financial support.

A waiver from the BSB demonstrates that the candidate has obtained significant relevant knowledge and experience, by coupling this fact with our attitude towards inclusivity we are implementing our policies of equality, diversity and inclusion on a practical level.

Other pupils have had interesting routes to becoming a barrister and we are delighted to share with you some of their stories.



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Owen's story:

My path into pupillage is an unconventional one, firstly, I spent my early years in the care system and although I was adopted as a child, the likelihood of someone from my background going onto academic and professional success is slim with less than 2% of those who have spent time in care going onto obtain an undergraduate degree.

Having been adopted, I ultimately went on to do a law degree at the University of Sussex graduating in 2011, followed by the then BPTC at City, University of London graduating and then being called to the Bar in 2012. I was fortunate to obtain a Sir Jules Thorn scholarship from the Honourable Society of the Middle Temple during my BPTC year, one of the highest scholarships available from the Inn.

I was not successful in obtaining pupillage immediately, therefore, I started working as a paralegal before teaching myself New York law and passing the New York Bar and being admitted as a New York Attorney in 2016. I then qualified as a Solicitor via the QLTS route in 2018 and obtained higher rights in July 2020.

Finally, in late 2020, as a result of my extensive experience as a solicitor including as a higher court advocate, I obtained an exemption from the BSB from the non-practising period of pupillage and a reduction in the practising period of pupillage to 3 months which I undertook during the period November 2020 to February 2021.

It was at this stage I was offered a place by Clerksroom as a pupil, and I am most grateful that Clerksroom recognised and still continues to value the experience that older pupils can bring to Chambers including those on less conventional paths to the Bar.

My Pupillage occurred during the Covid 19 pandemic, and this meant that I did not have what may be considered a traditional pupillage experience, but Chambers was extremely supportive of me during this time, my Pupil supervisor Tahir Ashraf, welcomed me into chambers and ensured that I was involved in many different aspects of their work.

Ultimately, during the course of my practising period of pupillage I undertook work covering a number of different areas including insolvency proceedings, company and commercial disputes and financial services related litigation, as well as advising on post-Brexit recognition and enforcement of a judgement from England and Wales in the EU. I also had the opportunity to undertake work in family law both private and public children law proceedings, which is an area of work that I have continued to develop alongside my commercial and financial services practice which is the principal area of work I undertake.

Working with my supervisor was extremely rewarding and I was pushed to work to the highest standards; this was achieved through frequent contact and feedback from my pupil supervisor. This meant that at the end of my pupillage, my supervisor was able to sign off my pupillage with confidence in my ability to practice at the Bar.

Since completing pupillage, I have utilised the flexibility that a practice at the Bar affords to obtain a master's specialising in management from Harvard University and also, be appointed as a Magistrate in the Family Courts, which compliments my work in this area at the Bar.



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Joanne's long and winding road to the self-employed practising Bar:

In between her law degree and the BVC, Joanne worked as a Crown Court Caseworker in a law firm. In 2008, after completing the academic components required to become a barrister, Joanne started working as a County Court Advocate. During this time and until 2012, she continued to apply unsuccessfully for pupillage. As a result of the recession and its financial impacts, there were very few pupillages on offer.

Due to ill-health and the arrival of her children in 2013 and 2016, Joanne was unable to commit to the rigid pupillage requirements. As well as managing her own health problems, Joanne also had to manage some health complications of her children.

Despite this, Joanne continued working in the legal profession; although due to a combination of maternity leave and health issues, there were periods where she worked part-time.

In 2019, Joanne submitted an application to the BSB for a reduction in the pupillage requirement, referencing her work within the legal industry and outlining the experience she had gained outside of the usual pupillage structure. Joanne could demonstrate she had several of the competencies she would have otherwise acquired during a 12-month pupillage and she had references from judges and solicitors alike. The BSB approved the application and reduced Joanne's pupillage by 7 months, with a 3:2 month split in the non-practising and practising portions. The application for a reduction also granted Joanne permission to commence pupillage outside of the 5-year restriction.

The lack of pupillages and personal circumstances had led Joanne to believe she would not be able to achieve her ambition of becoming a practising barrister. Without applying for a reduction, Joanne would have been prohibited from entering the profession. By the BSB granting her application, it was an endorsement of the experience she had received over many years she had worked in the legal industry – despite the personal and professional hurdles she had faced over the years.

Joanne contacted Clerksroom in 2020 after realising that Clerksroom's ethos would be the perfect fit for her personal circumstances. She felt she was greatly assisted by the management team when she had to apply for an extension of her reduction to enable her to be able to accept her offer of pupillage with Clerksroom, which she commenced in November 2020.

Joanne explained that she had a modest upbringing and when she embarked on her legal career, she had no connections to the legal profession. When applying for pupillage Joanne found that most pupillage providers overlooked her prior experience and connections with solicitors and other members of the legal profession; however, Clerksroom correctly identified it as an asset.

Jo completed her pupillage in April 2021 and has already built a very successful practice using a combination of her previous clients and contacts, new clients and contacts from her time with Clerksroom and Clerksroom Direct. She often acts as a mentor for pupils or other junior barristers, which she sees as giving back.



Joanna Phillipson

Barrister

Some words from Jo about her experience:

As soon as I was introduced to the team at Clerksroom, I had nothing but support from every member of staff. My pupil supervisor was extremely experienced, knowledgeable and always treated me as an equal. I was never pressure into attendances that would put me in personal difficulty and more than reasonable adjustments were made to accommodate for my circumstances. There is definitely an emphasis at Clerksroom on having a work-life balance that you want, which is put into practice early on.

As well as the breadth of experience and knowledge offered, and still openly offered, from my pupil supervisor, I was introduced to lots of other people at Clerksroom who were able to support me and expose me to the type of hearings I would face on my feet. From regulatory compliance to admin support and social media specialists; Clerksroom have a lot to offer anyone joining. We had regular training sessions online, talks, and introductions to other online resources to help us focus on how we wished to build our practice. I was also given the freedom to choose which areas I wanted to practice in and have never been pushed in any particular direction to suit anyone other than myself.

Alongside that, there were opportunities to meet other members of Clerksroom undertaking pupillage at the same time. As we were in the midst of the pandemic, these were largely through online platforms, however, it has enabled us to make firm friends that we have stayed connected with and can call upon whenever the need has arisen. As Clerksroom have recruited people from varying backgrounds, they brought with them such a wealth of knowledge that we were also able to run training sessions from within our group of pupils. It was also great to have lots of familiar faces on the pupillage courses that we attended through the Inns.

Following on from the non-practising part of my pupillage, I was busy straight away. Due to my prior experience, I was able to undertake fast track trial work straight away and other hearings with complexity. I have also continued to take every opportunity to join my pupil supervisor and other members of chambers on their hearings when I have found myself to have a clear day and have always been welcomed. This has enabled me to meet solicitors and other members of the profession as well as being exposed to more complex matters to assist with professional development.

I can't say that there is anything that I would have done differently during or after my pupillage. I have a great work-life balance and have just enjoyed almost the whole summer off with my children. I continue to have excellent professional support from my colleagues and the staff at Clerksroom because everyone is approachable. The only thing that would have made the pupillage better would have been to have more physical attendances in Court, however, because of the pandemic a lot of it was online, which in itself had so many benefits. It is nice to now be getting back to the in person hearings I was more used to, though.



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Teri Howell' story:

Having left home in my teens, formal education wasn't something that was ever discussed or seen as an option for me. I had attended one of the worst schools in Britain at the time, so making it to GCSEs was celebrated! After a few years working full time, I thought about furthering my education. I spent one year studying three fast track a-levels whilst working full time and secured a place at Nottingham Trent University. I worked full time nights in a medium secure psychiatric hospital during my undergraduate degree and spent a year on placement in a law firm doing credit hire claims through the University's 'sandwich course' before returning to complete my final year.

The experience gained during my placement year secured me a paralegal role in London which meant a big move for me. I had secured a place on the LPC at Nottingham Trent but deferred it initially as I was gaining so much experience as a paralegal and felt that if I secured a training contract I would be able to return to complete the LPC. However, after several rounds of unsuccessful training contract applications, I started looking at other options available to me. I explored the CILEX route and felt that it suited me better as it meant I could continue working as I progressed to qualification.

I qualified as a Fellow of CILEX in 2015 and spent a number of years in practice developing my skills in the large loss and catastrophic area of personal injury. I always enjoyed being in court, especially in the Royal Courts of Justice and decided to apply to the BSB to cross qualify to the Bar as a transferring lawyer.

The BSB granted my application and due to the level of experience I had gained, I also secured a reduction pupillage of the non-practicing period for 3 months and practicing period for 3 months. I was fortunate enough to secure pupillage through Clerksroom and I was pleased to learn when speaking to them, that they genuinely understand the value that my previous experience brings to the profession.

My pupillage started in August 2021 during the pandemic so most hearings were still remote. This made it easier to attend hearings with my pupil supervisor, Azeem Ali, as he was based in Manchester and I live in Cardiff. Fortunately, my pupil supervisor was very busy and I was able to experience different types of hearings such as fast track trials, stage 3 hearings and application hearings. He would provide me with the papers in advance so I could read into them and prepare my own notes. We would then cross reference and discuss the hearing and anything that arose at those hearings that I may not have considered.

During my practicing period, I was fortunate enough to be busy from the very beginning. I picked up infant approval hearings, small claims and application hearings. I also assisted on a large commercial case with two other barristers in chambers preparing disclosure and witness statements.

My pupil supervisor was always at hand to answer any questions and go through any issues that may have arisen in my cases. We would discuss cases daily and he also set mock hearings for me to practice in advance. Additional support took the form of video meetings with other pupils for training sessions on a variety of useful topics; I delivered one of these myself. I also found that everyone in chambers was willing to assist and provide support.



Teri Howell

Barrister

Given my background in personal injury, I found the transition into that work very easy. Having the background knowledge of a subject area gave me time to focus on my advocacy and I've certainly learnt a few new skills having participated in a number of hearings and seen different advocacy skills. I am keen to develop my practice and have been expanding into commercial work which is readily available through chambers. As junior practitioners, we are fortunate to have a preferences option section of our website where you can indicate different areas of work you would like to expand into and try out.

The only change that I would make is making the career change sooner. My first year has gone by incredibly quickly which is a true reflection of enjoying what I do. I have complete control of my calendar and I have full flexibility with childcare and other family commitments.



David Carey

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David Carey's journey:

David completed the Bar course later in life, after having worked as a consultant doctor, an expert witness, an educational supervisor, an examiner for the Royal College of Physicians of England and as a medical panellist on the Medical Practitioner's Tribunal Service (MPTS) which made determinations as to a doctor's fitness to practice.

David was, as he put it, closer to 60 than 16 and he was concerned that chambers would either appreciate his life experience or run a mile as he could not be easily 'moulded'.

David's discussions and interactions with members of the Bar generally had led him to believe, despite his impressive CV, that pupillage providers would not be accepting of his route to the Bar and he would not be successful in the application process. David realised he was very much a "Marmite" candidate.

By a chance introduction with a Clerksroom pupil, David learned about BSB waivers which he was informed may be suitable for him, given his background. Had it not been for this chance encounter, David would not have known anything about waivers.

As an expert David was regularly in conference and he was often in court during his quasi-judicial role as an MPTS panellist; repeatedly hearing evidence from witnesses and submissions from barristers. As a consultant he had scrutinised large bundles of documents, paying keen attention to detail for the relevant and helpful documents, before he moved on to analyse the individual case, identify the issues and formulate a management plan before discussing the options with the patient.

David gathered as much information as he could to provide to the BSB, including feedback and references from a variety of organisations.



David Carey

Barrister

The application was submitted in March 2020, just before the Covid-19 pandemic hit and David became overwhelmed with his workload as a doctor. The BSB also became exceptionally busy due to the pandemic and it was not until October 2020 that David found out that his pupillage had been reduced by around 20%.

In November 2020, after reaching out to Clerksroom and discussing his background and life experience, David began his pupillage with Clerksroom. It was as a direct result of this waiver that David was able to obtain pupillage; at Clerksroom his life experience was instantly valued, his age completely disregarded and he received the right support to begin his career at the Bar.

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Some words from David about his experience:

During 2020/21 I was fortunate enough to experience a hitherto untested form of pupillage, The Paranoid Pandemic Pupillage (PPP)! This initially involved familiarising yourself with a case and then travelling large distances to Courts and being told you could not attend the hearing. Thankfully, my non practising period was short (due to my waiver from the BSB) and my pupil supervisor was flexible enough to spend hours speaking with me on the telephone or at his home. He was keen for me to get a 'feel' for the courts but this was not really possible and so we improvised whereby we'd have a zoom meeting in which he was the Judge and I presented say an Infant Approval or similar. We would then analyse my performance. I also listened-in to his hearings (with the court's permission) when they were remote (telephone/video) and we discussed those after their conclusion.

For my practising period I was 'flying solo'. I would chat with my pupil supervisor about general matters and about specific elements of hearings I was to attend. To be honest, because all of my early hearings were



David Carey

Barrister

remote I probably over-prepared, but because I wasn't travelling had the time to do so. I got into a rhythm of: receive instructions, talk to instructing solicitors, talk with client, attend hearing, precisely note the court's determination, then speak with client and instructing solicitors and send an attendance note the same day. This I did religiously. Sometimes the instructing solicitors were surprised that I contacted them or even sent an attendance note, because the cases were fairly straightforward RTA/PI cases. However, I think in general it put me in good stead with law firms and on two occasions I was asked for specifically my name – so I must have been doing something right. As time progressed, I spoke less with my pupil supervisor and we simply touched base. Although, I did seek advice from other colleagues in Clerksroom who were very helpful.

Over time I became more familiar with talking with my opponent and spotting the odd trick up their sleeve. I also became quite relaxed with the Judges (although always cautious and not too familiar). I made short notes on both in case I encountered them again. My results were, it seemed good, with outcomes that pleased both client and instructing solicitors and I wondered why I was having such a good run and not losing cases. On reflection I realised that although 'winning a case' is important it is not always the result of great counsel. I realised that sometimes there were almost 'hopeless' cases where the instructing solicitor did not expect you to win, just do your best with a client who would probably give a poor account of themselves (if they turned-up at all) and a paucity of supporting evidence. On the other hand, some cases were there to win and only an ill-prepared fool could lose them. Although it was rare, I was surprised to see a minority of my opponents very ill-prepared, which not only meant they could not present their case but also that they got on the wrong side of the judge. However, I soon learnt that being ill-prepared may not be due to any fault of counsel and that many of my colleagues (and myself) were sometimes dealt a rather poor hand from their instructing solicitors in terms of instructions and a paucity of relevant supporting documentation, all in a bundle that was nothing short of chaotic and might arrive a day or less before the hearing. As my practising period came to a close in my PPP I actually attended a court in person, which was refreshing but slightly odd, since for me I wasn't returning to a normality that I was familiar with. Maybe with advanced technology, holograms, etc. my PPP will have put me in good stead for yet another 'new normal'!

Tips

1. Be polite – to everyone (especially if they are impolite to you).
2. Prepare – even if there's little to prepare.
3. Have a system of approaching your cases from brief to conclusion.
4. 'Help' your instructing solicitor as much as you can – remember they can always use someone else.
5. If you're given a bundle that is late and nothing but a dog's dinner see it as a challenge. No-one said it would be easy. Anyone can fly an aircraft when it's perfectly maintained and full of fuel on a sunny day. It's when you have to fly one with an engine gone, in atrocious weather with barely enough fuel to get to your diversion, that you start to earn your money.



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Matthew Peak's bar story:

My route to the bar has been somewhat unorthodox. Although it is not unusual for mature persons to transfer to the bar, through various qualification routes, it is my professional background before the bar which is unusual.

For roughly 20 years I was professional yacht crew, mainly aboard super yachts (a super yacht is a yacht which is larger than 50 metres in length, in other words a ship designed as an ultra-luxury vehicle). Of this I was lucky enough to serve 10 years as captain. People always ask why the change to the bar and express surprise at changing from what is often perceived as an exotic glamorous profession to a more mundane humdrum role of a lawyer. The answer to this is not always easy to formulate, but essentially I wanted (or even needed) a career ashore. I was not enticed by what most ex-yacht captain's do, which is become a shore-based yacht manager. To me this would be all of the boring bits of running at yacht - the tedious admin - without the more stimulating parts (travel, operational seamanship and crew management). So, I happened on the idea of training to be a lawyer; this would have the intellectual stimulation which in some ways I missed at sea, coupled with the requirement to deal with people, an element of yachting I always enjoyed. It didn't have the exciting element of travel that yachting offers, but then I also craved a home life and more stability, so the balance for me seemed to fit.

I then embarked on the fairly daunting task of studying part-time whilst at the same time performing the very demanding role as captain. I took a number of breaks, but concluded my bar course, with LLM conversion (master's degree) in 2021, awarded the grade of distinction. Looking back I do not know how I managed to juggle these demands and to complete this relatively successfully.

As most people reading this will know, the critical part of becoming a barrister is the pupillage. Much coveted, with many a less driven bar graduate veering off and choosing a different career path. I was determined not to let this stop me after all of the money and effort I had put in. I applied to many of the established redbrick sets that practice maritime law but didn't even get an interview. To my delight Clerksroom offered me this opportunity, managing director Stephen Ward could obviously see how my combination of skills and background would compliment a career at the bar in his chambers.

Clerksroom have what was once a very novel approach to operation. All barristers work from home and the clerks are the only members to routinely frequent communal office space. How this would work during pupillage was a bit of puzzlement to me. However, at this time the situation was very different for all chambers. The pandemic. So even if I had been at a more conventional set, it is likely, as my first six started in January 2021 during the 3rd lockdown, that it would have been approached in the same manner. This was to interact entirely online, including all hearings.

The relationship between pupil and supervisor is obviously a critical one and I was fortunate that my pupil supervisor and I built a close productive relationship. We would meet several times a week to discuss the work



Matthew Peak

Barrister

he set me, he provided detailed feedback on what I submitted to him. He was a thorough careful mentor, ensuring that he tested my abilities in all of the key competences. This concluded at the end of my practising period with a mock hearing where he acted as the judge, again followed with detailed analytical feedback. This was all fantastically useful and gave me the confidence to start practicing on my own.

During my pupillage, Clerksroom started a pupillage support group which met regularly to introduce us to each other and answer questions and give general support. This was invaluable access to the experiences of the other pupils and an opportunity to share knowledge. This also in part started addressing the largest set back I found of the Clerksroom model, there is no natural environment to fraternise with colleagues. As the pandemic restrictions slowly ebbed away the clerks have started organising social events and I think if this continues this will be of great assistance in this respect.