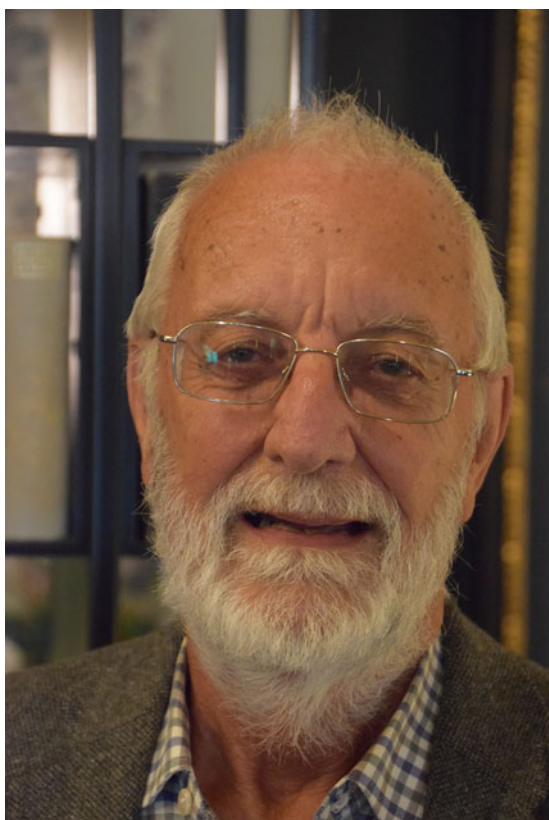


THE INTERVIEW

The Interview: Peter Clinch

Abstract: Peter Clinch, the former Law Librarian at Cardiff University, is a multiple award winner and prolific writer on all things to do with legal information research. Here he talks to LIM about how he initially worked as a town planner, his long career in law librarianship, and his views on the challenges now facing the profession.

Keywords: information professionals; leadership; law librarians



There are few people who have worked in the legal information sector that have left quite the impression that Peter Clinch has. During his long career he was responsible for a number of new initiatives, wrote a stack of books and won his fair share of awards. Yet Peter, who retired from his post as Law Librarian at Cardiff University in 2010, never actually set out to be a law librarian in the first place.

“I became a law librarian by a rather circuitous route and on the way learnt skills and gained knowledge which I was able to apply later in my career,” Peter says. “I graduated from the University of Keele in 1968 with a BA (Hons) in Law and Geography, the only student at Keele to ever read that combination as timetabling became too

difficult. The subjects appeared to naturally lead to a career in town planning. I went to University College, London in 1968 and in 1970 was awarded an MPhil in town planning.”

This led to a position as an Assistant Area Planning Officer with Sheffield City Corporation, where Peter spent some time assisting in the planning of a city extension at Mosborough and assessing planning applications sent in by members of the public for submission to the City Planning Committee for a decision. But after three years of this work, during which time he qualified as a chartered town planner, he decided this was not for him after all.

“I had met my future wife at Keele and while I trained and worked as a town planner she trained as a library and information officer at Sheffield University, and was then employed in library and information units and an editorial section of private and public bodies based in Sheffield. In my town planning work I had noticed that there was no library or information service within the authority either to organise information scattered across many offices, or actively acquire information about the latest developments and thinking outside the Corporation and bring it to the attention of officers and councillors.

“This lack of library and information support within local authorities was then starting to be recognised nationally,” Peter adds. “Two authorities were leading the way: the Greater London Council (GLC) and Cheshire County Council, which had both set up research and intelligence units. I applied to the University of Sheffield and was fortunate to be in the first cohort of a new MA (Information Science) course specially designed for students with a social science background.”

On graduation in 1974 Peter was appointed a Research Officer in the Department of Administration of South Yorkshire County Council – “nicknamed the Socialist Republic of South Yorkshire,” he tells us – based in Barnsley.

“The metropolitan county council had been created as part of the reorganisation of local government in 1974 and I joined at the same time as my boss, the Information and Liaison Officer, and together we set up a small library and information service for the officers and



Peter turned to librarianship after an early career as a town planner

councillors of the authority scattered across the new county of South Yorkshire,” Peter says. “This was a most valuable time for me because I learnt to be a Jack of all trades, ordering publications; obtaining material on inter-library loan; running a newspaper clippings library and compiling a daily news bulletin of summaries of press items relevant to local government; and receiving and answering research questions.”

One memorable question came from the Emergency Planning Unit who were drawing up plans for the County’s response to all sorts of emergencies, especially river floods, Peter remembers. “Could I find as much material as possible on the impact of the floods in East Anglia in 1953 caused by a North Sea storm surge? Remember, this was well before electronic information services. The press articles and investigative reports of the time highlighted many matters which the Unit had not thought of. One which particularly impressed them was the need to plan for the clearance of the bodies of large numbers of farm animals and wildlife, and the prevention of disease.”

LAW MAN

With little prospect of career progression in that post, though, Peter moved across the Pennines to Preston. “I joined Preston Polytechnic in 1978 as Business Studies and Law Librarian,” he says. “My law degree got me the job as previous holders of the post were from business

backgrounds and the law school was very unhappy with the way the library was organised – an alphabetical sequence of statutes, law reports and periodicals all mixed together! – and run. I remained there until 1992 and in those 14 years was able to develop my teaching skills through the help of one particular law lecturer, Mike Ogle, a former school teacher, with whom I developed one of the first undergraduate integrated legal research skills training courses in the UK.”

Peter, now well-known as an author, also took his first steps in publishing around this time, to start with in business studies through the support of the librarian Allan Foster and his connections with Headland Press, and then through Peter Clark and other law lecturers with connections to the recently founded Blackstone Press (*Using a Law Library* was first published by Blackstone in 1992).

Then there was his PhD. “Preston [later Lancashire] Polytechnic housed the Preston Incorporated Law Society collection of 18th, 19th and 20th century law reports,” he says. “I became fascinated with the reasons put forward by the original compilers in the preface to each volume – the English Reports and Revised Reports reprint the cases but not the compilers’ reasons for the publication. I developed this into a research proposal which I made to the University of Sheffield, to look at the effectiveness of law reports as a medium for the dissemination of information. I was generously supported by the Polytechnic which awarded me up to half a day a

week leave, when duties permitted, to carry out the research part-time. Six years later I was very pleased and relieved to be awarded a PhD.”

Preston also had a widely recognised department to train students in audio-visual work and after attending a short course in video design Peter jointly scripted, with Mike Ogle, a videotape training package: *Using Halsbury's Laws. Lawyers' Skills Workshop*, which was published in 1994, after he had left Preston.

CARDIFF CALLS

Peter says that during the period 1991 / 1992 he found himself assessing what it was that really gave him career satisfaction. “I had applied for some management posts and been turned down,” he remembers. “So, I thought, maybe I'm not the right person for this. And I decided, right, let's just go to a bigger library.

“In 1992 I attended an interview for the post of Information Specialist (Law) at Cardiff University,” Peter adds. “I met one other candidate on that day: Cathie Cope (later Jackson). I obtained the post I had applied for and Cathie was appointed to set up and run a vocational training library within the Law School to serve postgraduate students. The Law School wanted to expand its course portfolio to include vocational training and had made an application to run the Law Society's new Legal Practice Course (LPC). A few years later the Law School received approval to run the Bar Vocational Course (BVC).

“The years Cathie and I worked together were so valuable and rewarding for we were able to bounce ideas off one another and develop new ways of teaching legal research skills. She oversaw the introduction of information literacy training across the university and also the publication of the *Handbook for Information Literacy Training* in 2005, which received national and international recognition. I had a hand in compiling the first edition.”

His past was never quite forgotten, though, and during his time at Cardiff he also made use of his background in local government. “When setting problems for students and course participants to research I have sometimes selected topics from my days in local government which I knew they would not have come across in law courses before, such as planning and public health,” he says.

Peter's work on the information skills training programmes for LLB, LPC and BVC students was acknowledged nationally in a number of ways. He was commissioned to write the *National Centre for Legal Education Guidance Note on Teaching Legal Research*,¹ he acted as adviser on law libraries and legal research skills training to the General Council of the Bar from 1996 to 2005; while he also received invitations to deliver papers on law materials and legal research skills training to conferences organised by the General Council of the Bar; the Association of Law Teachers (ALT); the Society of

Public Teachers of Law (SPTL) and most impressively, of course, BIALL.

On top of all this he was appointed researcher to the Lord Chancellor's Department and the SPTL in their study of Law Libraries and Legal Education in the United Kingdom (1994–1995): “This included devising and administering a national survey of law libraries and successfully reporting the results, all to very tight deadlines,” Peter tells us. The SPTL standards were published under the title *A Library for the Modern Law School* in 1995 and revised in 2009.²

Peter also ran the annual SPTL / BIALL Academic Law Library Survey from 1996 to 1999 and 2003 to 2010. “Lillian Stevenson, Law Librarian at University College Wales Aberystwyth Library had run a survey for a number of years in the 1980s and early 1990s focusing on university and polytechnic expenditure on law materials,” Peter says. “The national survey I had carried out for the Lord Chancellor's Department and SPTL had been much broader in scope and Lillian kindly agreed to my conducting a broader survey each year for the SPTL and BIALL.”

Added to this, he also provided consultancy services to more than a dozen individual universities, including two abroad, on topics such as the creation of new law libraries, appraising existing law libraries and reporting on possible improvements to content and services, and advising on law library / law school relations.

He also devised and ran courses on legal research skills and finding and understanding legal information for Aslib (1999–2005) and CILIP (2006–2011), and in-house courses for Citizens Advice Bureau, London (February 2007); Welsh Assembly Government library staff (March 2008); Holborn College, Greenwich (July 2008); Greenwich School of Management (February 2011). Also, a half-day course: Lexis, Westlaw or Google? Improving your internet legal research skills, was devised and delivered to staff at a number of Land Registry sites across England. The course was accredited by the Solicitors Regulation Authority.

One of the projects Peter is particularly well known for is FLAG (Foreign Law Guide),³ and between 2000 and 2002 he was seconded from Cardiff University to the Institute of Advanced Legal Studies as FLAG Project Manager. “The brief was to design and develop an internet database of the holdings of foreign, international and comparative law in UK national and university libraries; devise standardised descriptions for collections; liaise with representatives of all institutions involved in the project; manage the project budget; and report to and brief the Project Management Committee. I was fortunate to work with Jules Winterton as my manager and Steven Whittle who provided technical expertise.

“The technical knowledge I gained on the FLAG project enabled me to design, manage and launch the Cardiff Index to Legal Abbreviations,” Peter adds. “Jules and Steven also assisted me with the development of the FLARE (Foreign Law Research) Index to Treaties.⁴

The Cardiff Index to Legal Abbreviations⁵ is actually the piece of work Peter is most proud of. He describes it as “a simple tool to assist both novice law students as well as seasoned lawyers and law librarians. It was relatively easy to design for I was greatly helped by my experience with the FLAG database. The original data came from the huge card index I had created as part of my PhD, containing details of all the law reports I could trace that had been published in England and Wales; ever!”

TEAM PLAYER

It’s interesting how often Peter mentions others he has worked with over the years, and it’s clear that he very much enjoyed working with like-minded people. “I always enjoyed working with enthusiastic people, focused, like I have been, on developing and running innovative services benefiting users, be they students, law school staff or my fellow law librarians. In short, teamwork which made a difference.”

Yet while he was always a team player, there is no getting away from the fact that Peter contributed much to the profession himself, and this is reflected in the long list of prestigious awards and accolades he picked up during his career. These include the Wallace Breem Memorial Award 2002 (for the FLAG database “in recognition of the excellent quality of this internet research aid

and unique information source”); the same award again in 2004, for the Cardiff Index to Legal Abbreviations, the citation for which was “an outstanding contribution to the world of legal information”; Wildy / BIALL Law Librarian of the Year 2006, as well as being awarded Life Membership of BIALL in 2010. On top of this, he also received an award in 2011 from the Association of Law Teachers for his “outstanding contribution to legal education”.

Peter is also very well known for the books on legal research he has written, as well as over 55 journal articles, quite a few of them for LIM, and he often brought to the writing process his varied experience to help make his work as accessible as possible. “When designing each publication I used my experience as a geographer and planner to try to assist readers visually with charts and diagrams, rather than merely providing masses of text,” Peter says. “Also, I tried to use a common structure within each chapter of *Using a Law Library* to make finding the description of the source or technique easier.”

As well as the much admired *Using a law library: a student’s guide to legal research skills*, mentioned above, Peter’s other popular books include *Legal information: what it is and where to find it* (1995); *Teaching legal research* (2006) – with Marianne Barber, Cathie Jackson and Nicola Wakefield – while he has also contributed chapters to many other works (see box out on page 142 for a more detailed list).



Pictured at this year’s BIALL Conference catching up with John Sinkins, the chairman of Wildy & Sons; one of the many publishers Peter has worked with

It's obvious from the titles above, among other things, that Peter is an acknowledged expert when it comes to legal research, so it was interesting to find out what he considered to be the key skills required for someone in the legal information field.

"Asking the right questions and probing to best understand what the enquirer is really seeking," Peter says. "I was trained in the skill of the 'legal reference interview' to ask: 'what, when, why, where' and then consider how you are going to find the answer – if there is one. We used to have litigants in person occasionally visit the university library in Cardiff, and some were entirely baffled that answers were not always readily available because of the complexity and range of legal sources as well as the challenge of understanding the legal terminology."

As well as asking the right questions, Peter also says that a good legal researcher needs "a thorough knowledge of the contents of the sources of legal information, both paper and electronic, and how they can be accessed effectively".

Of course, many of these sources have evolved or changed fundamentally over time and Peter witnessed a great deal of technical advancement over the course of his own career. The biggest of these changes, he says, was the introduction of electronic law databases to the UK in the early 1980s. "Up until then research had been entirely paper-based. But these new databases were very primitive. I remember using an acoustic coupler to access Lexis, a cable ran from the coupler to a very early stand-alone PC. We were told to use Lexis before noon and not in the afternoon or evening as we would be competing with US users for limited telephone line availability and searches would likely fail!

"Use was restricted to me and Law School staff who, apart from a handful, either did not use the database or asked me to undertake the searches. No students were allowed to access it. If it sounds like the Stone Age it was – but we were excited by it!"

Change is once more in the air these days, particularly with the emergence of AI, and Peter sees how we deal with this as one of the main challenges facing the profession at this time. "We need to use our skills and knowledge to counter any view that with AI anyone can do legal research and get it right," he says. "This is a responsibility for trainers in educational institutions and law firms / chambers.

"The real change with AI is that back in the '80s, '90s, 2000s, you went to a machine, put in your request and it would churn out something. But it was based on the actual words and documents in there. And it felt like a simple interrogation of a database. My fear with AI is that there's somebody in the middle, and it's the AI, which is doing a lot of selecting and mashing. And what comes out at the end could be inaccurate, it could be of no authority, and that is the big fear."

But on the whole, Peter is optimistic about the future for information professionals working in the legal sector. "I think the future will be good, so long as law librarians and information professionals focus on adding value to student training and ensuring enquirers receive

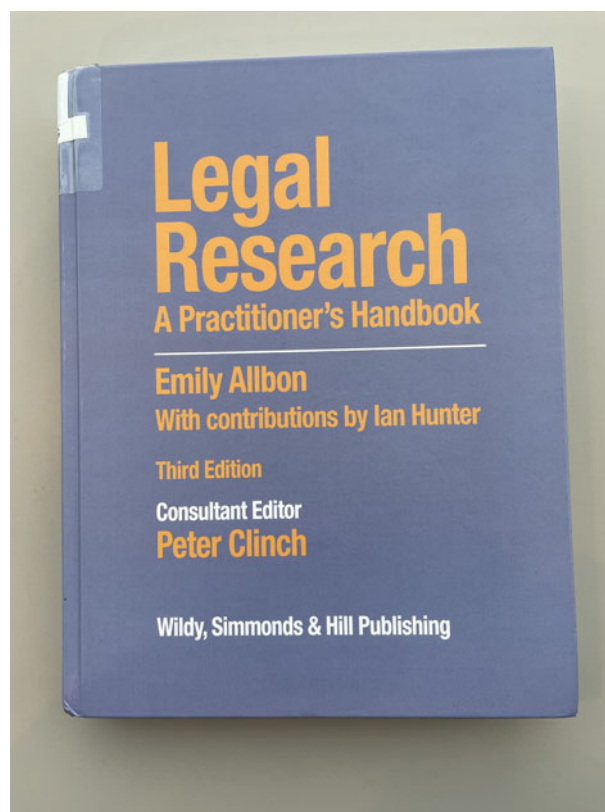
authoritative information and knowledge relevant to their enquiry," he says.

KEEPING BUSY

Following his retirement Peter moved to a village in north Lancashire, but it now seems he's busier than ever, having been involved in researching and writing articles for the village magazine while he's also written an illustrated guide to the historic buildings in the village. He's also a committee member of the village horticultural society – he is a keen gardener – and has even dabbled in a spot of amateur dramatics.

Peter has also spent some time volunteering with North Lancashire Citizens Advice training as a first-line face-to-face interviewer. "My legal reference interview skills were put to excellent use dealing with a wide range of issues such as benefit queries, debt problems, housing defects, homelessness, family break-up, employment issues and redundancy," he says.

And talking of advice, he has some to give to those who are now building a career in the legal information field. "My career has been a series of valuable interactions with a wide range of colleagues," he says. "If an opportunity arises take it. You may not know exactly where it is going to lead but it might open doors to both the development of useful services and greater personal fulfilment."



Peter has been involved in many publications, including this must-have volume

Publications

Using a law library: a student's guide to legal research skills. Blackstone Press, 1992. Republished as an Indian reprint by Universal Book Traders, 1995. UK only: 2nd edition, OUP, 2001 – with contributions from David Hart

Legal information: what it is and where to find it. Aslib, 1995, 2nd edition, Taylor & Francis, 2000

'England and Wales'. Chapter jointly written with Heather Thrift and Derek Way. In Winterton, J., & Moys, E., (eds). *Information Sources in Law*. 2nd ed. Bowker Saur, 1997

Teaching legal research. National Centre for Legal Education, 1999, 2nd edition, UK Centre for Legal Education, 2006 – with Marianne Barber, Cathie Jackson & Nicola Wakefield

Legal research – techniques and tips. In Worley, L., (ed). *BIALL Handbook of Legal Information Management*. Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2006. Revised version in 2nd edition, Spells, S., (ed), Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2012

'Law'. 'Government'. Two chapters In Lester, R., (ed). *The New Walford: guide to reference resources. Volume 2: Social Sciences*. Facet Publishing, London, 2008

Legal research: a practitioner's handbook. With contributions by James Mullan. Wildy, Simmonds & Hill, 2010. 2nd edition, 2013 with Jon Beaumont and 3rd edition, 2019 with Emily Allbon and Ian Hunter

Endnotes

¹ National Centre for Legal Education Guidance Note on Teaching Legal Research (1999, 2nd edition, 2006) Available at <www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/teaching-legal-research> Accessed 1 September 2024

² Available at <www.legalscholars.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/SLS-Library-for-a-Modern-Law-School-Statement-2009.pdf> Accessed 1 September 2024

³ <<https://libguides.ials.sas.ac.uk/az/foreign-law-guide>> Accessed 1 September 2024

⁴ <<https://libguides.ials.sas.ac.uk/az/flare-index-to-treaties>> Accessed 1 September 2024

⁵ <www.legalabbrevs.cardiff.ac.uk/> Accessed 1 September 2024