

THE INTERVIEW

Claire Mazer – President of BIALL

Abstract: President for 2024/25, Claire Mazer, talks to LIM about her career as an academic law librarian, the challenges facing both BIALL and the profession, and how she's enjoying her time at the head of the organisation

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Claire Mazer, BIALL President 2024/25

It might come as a surprise to some, but until 2024 BIALL had not had a President from the academic side of the profession for nearly 10 years – Marianne Barber was the last one in 2014/15. But now Claire Mazer has redressed the balance somewhat, the Academic Liaison Librarian at Brunel University of London taking on the role at the BIALL Conference in Leeds back in June.

Not that Claire sees this as some kind of mission to give academic law librarians more of a voice, because for Claire BIALL is very much a collective endeavour, and she uses a lovely turn of phrase when she describes how the people who run the organisation work together, saying they're like a "shoal of fish", everybody generally swimming in the same direction as they strive to move the association forward.

Where Claire differs from many of the 'fish' in that shoal, perhaps, is that she knew from a very early age

that she wanted to be a librarian. "I'm actually one of those strange people who knew as a child that I wanted to be a librarian," Claire says. "There are not many of us. I once met a priest who said to me, 'I knew I wanted to be a vicar since the age of six'. And I said, 'I knew I wanted to be a librarian since the age of nine'. So I couldn't quite beat him on that one."

"My parents really encouraged me and my brother in our education, and my dad in particular took us to lots of places," Claire adds. "And when I was about 12 we went to Loughborough University, and I was just standing there, and I remember the bright orange carpet on the stairs, and I was thinking: 'I'll end up here one day'. And I did. That's where I did my library degree. It's so weird."

But while Claire felt the pull of a career in libraries from an early age, it was during her time at Loughborough that working on the law side of it started to emerge as a possibility. "We did our first and second year, and then it got to our final year, and it was time to decide which options you wanted to take as a final year student," Claire remembers. "For me, and a whole bunch of other students, I think we all wanted to go for children's books, probably because we thought it was the easy option. But of course, children's books and children's librarianship was oversubscribed. So, I ended up taking a legal issues option."

"Actually, I was fascinated by copyright and all the things that governed librarianship, and it was quite an old fashioned degree, so it was a good choice," Claire adds. "I also read a lot of Charles Dickens when I was young. And he loved the law, and my favourite book is *Bleak House*, and of course, that's all to do with chancery. And I love all that. So that's how I ended up getting into law, and I just found I really loved the subject."

EARLY OPPORTUNITY

Claire actually studied German alongside Library Studies at Loughborough, but on graduation she was "Very lucky," she says. "Six weeks after I graduated from Loughborough, I was employed by BPP law school. Now, that was not quite the elephant it's become today. I was there in the early growth stages of it, the mid '90s."

It was, she reflects, a fantastic opportunity. "I was 21 years old, just graduated and hired by BPP law school as

their librarian. And it was this vast empty floor, and I was hired to create a library. The CEO at the time was quite insistent that he wanted a young librarian to grow with the library and grow with the organisation."

Claire worked at BPP for seven years, and then moved to Brunel University (now Brunel University of London), in Uxbridge, west London, back in 2002. She's still there, and she's still enjoying the work, and especially the interaction with the students. "I've always worked with students, both at BPP and certainly at Brunel University of London," she says. "Working with students, seeing that light bulb moment when they get something, when they find something, it's very rewarding."

"Also, I think the liaison with the staff that I've had the privilege to work with, the lawyers, whether practising or non-practising," Claire adds. "Also, all the really very, very talented people that I've had the privilege of working with over the years. It's just really nice to have met different people, and to work with different people."

Of course, over 20 years in the same place of work is quite unusual these days – although coincidentally enough Claire's predecessor as President, Julie Christmas, has also been with the same employer since 2002 – but it does give her a real perspective on how things have changed during that time.

"I remember there was a whole to-do about the library website," Claire says. "And it was a real shift, and I think anyone would say this. The real shift from printed resources. We had so many of them, and we still do as an academic library, but we've really had to pare them down to make space for study spaces and things like that in the library. Just using the space flexibly as well. Not many of us had the expertise in website management and editing and things like that that we do now, and it was a big change."

New technology has also meant more challenges in academic libraries, as students can be tempted to use the shortcuts it can offer. "There's been a real shift in terms of technology potentially doing the work for us," Claire says. "And saying to students: 'Don't trust what you see on Google, you have got to critically evaluate it'. And now that same conversation is happening with AI. That shift to referencing and avoiding plagiarism, many academic law librarians will tell you that this comprises a huge part of their job now, and it certainly does with mine."

When it comes to the academic side of the profession there has also been a dilution of the role, in a sense, over recent years, with law librarians having to take on a number of other subject areas. "I've always looked after law, all my career," Claire says. "And obviously, law was my sole thing at BPP law school. But here at Brunel, I've also looked after economics and finance, and I've looked after English literature, but I don't do that anymore. Politics and history, still look after that. Criminology, still look after that. Policing, still look after that. It's very, very common to have more than one subject area."

"But law dominates my time here, which I'm quite happy about," Claire adds. "But with it being a pervasive subject, you will also see it creeping into criminology, although that is more theoretical, and that's really taking off at Brunel. And then policing, so students who are Metropolitan Police officers, as we're one of the stakeholders that has the contract to train up Met Police officers. So again, stuff I do with them, law does creep into that."

CONFERENCE CALL

One great thing to come out of Claire's time at Brunel is that on starting the job she also joined BIALL, but largely because of budget constraints at work she did not attend her first BIALL Conference until Dublin in 2016. She enjoyed the experience very much, though, and this led to more of an involvement with the association.

"It was wonderful, I really enjoyed the conference, and when I came back I emailed the ABC [Awards and Bursaries Committee] chair, who at that time was Katrina Gambold [then Lancaster] to say, 'thanks so much'. Because I had a bursary to go, as there was no way Brunel would have been able to foot the bill for the entire conference cost, but they did pay for my travel. So, I went back and said, 'thanks for the bursary, I'm happy to volunteer to help with BIALL'."

After a little while Claire was asked to be a part of the ABC, and she stayed on that for some years, becoming its Vice Chair and then Chair, before assisting then President Catherine Bowl with the awards at the Wyboston Lakes Conference in 2022, and then taking a year out from BIALL work. "Then Catherine contacted me and asked if I would consider taking on the role of President Elect."

This is actually the way most Presidents have been 'elected' in recent times, for BIALL is a wonderful network of professionals who tend to know who is right for the role, and Claire certainly has no regrets about accepting the position. "I'm doing something new and investing time in the professional side of things, which is great," she says.

Claire was not aware that she was the first President from the academic side for a while, but she is pleased to be able to redress the balance a little. "I think, originally, BIALL was actually set up as an organisation for academic librarians," she says. "Then obviously colleagues from law firms and government organisations have joined the association. And I think it's important to have representatives from academic spheres; from law firms; government librarians. Representation, really, from all the different sectors."

And it's meeting people from these various arms of the profession that Claire is particularly enjoying. "I think it is that connection for me," she says. "It is that breaking out from your day job and doing something different and liaising with different people. For instance, recently I

visited Julie Christmas at work and just seeing what the inside of a law firm office looks like, I really enjoyed that.”

But while Claire is enjoying her time as President there are certain challenges that need to be overcome, not the least of which is finding a new publisher for this journal (CUP is to cease working with LIM at the end of 2025), and that is towards the top of Claire’s to do list.

Another issue is getting people to volunteer for roles within BIALL. “Attracting volunteers is a problem,” Claire says. “I do think that, since the pandemic, people have shut down a bit. They’re not as outward facing as perhaps they once were. They’re thinking about other

things, prioritising family, work, health. I can understand that. But just how we attract new people, I haven’t quite figured that out yet.”

Claire firmly believes that while volunteers are definitely good for BIALL – vital, in fact – it’s not a one-way street, and there is much that an individual can also take from volunteering. “I do think there’s so much to be gained from volunteering,” she says. “Meeting different people, and being part of that family, you never know when somebody might be able to help you, or you might be able to help them. And it’s just learning new things. It’s such a good organisation to be part of to learn new things.”



Helping to find a new publisher for this fine publication is one of Claire’s priorities as President

On top of all that there is also that little bit of extra experience you can use to bolster your CV. "Something I've seen a real shift with at Brunel is that it doesn't feel like it's enough now to simply do your job," Claire says. "You need added extras. So, for example, when I first joined, the academics, they did their thing. They delivered their lectures, but they were very quiet about it. Then it became a big razzmatazz where you had to shout about it, and you had to say: 'Dr so and so has published an article on blah'. And then this crept in to professional services. So, librarians as well, what are you doing apart from your job? It was no longer enough to just do your librarian thing."

It's not just attracting volunteers within BIALL that's an issue, though, there's also the challenge of enticing people into the profession. "Recruitment to the profession; that's something that Julie Christmas took on and something we started to look at last year," Claire says. "And I think everyone's scratching their heads a bit. It's very interesting, because when I speak to students here and they learn that there's maybe not the number of librarians there were, or not the attraction to the profession, the good students are talking about that. They're sad, because they say: 'Well, I learned so much from the library staff and from your team'. They think it's a really valuable thing to do, and a valuable job to have."

"I think we are beginning to see some young blood coming in, but not enough," Claire adds. "But I do think that that is a challenge, really, for us. And also, it's very sad to see that library schools are closing down."

There is also the fact that while fewer people are joining the profession, some are also leaving it. "I think we've got colleagues who are set to retire, or we've got colleagues who are leaving the profession to go to something else for whatever reason," Claire says. "And we don't want them to disappear into the sunset with their knowledge."

While the two issues outlined above are long term problems, in the shorter term Claire sees her role as carrying on the good work, in many respects. "Really, I just want to continue to steer the ship as best I can," she says. "And also to make sure we have a really good conference like we did this year [2024]. So, Birmingham is 2025, and that's shaping up already. As Diane [Miller, President 2022/23] always used to say, it's about chipping away at things, the things that have already been set in motion."

GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

Of course, BIALL is not the only organisation representing legal information professionals and part of the President's duties is to liaise with sister organisations across the world. "I enjoy the international connections," Claire says. "I think they're very valuable. It means we're a wide family, but I think those connections are also really useful. I was very lucky to be invited to the International Delegate's dinner at Conference and I had

the pleasure of meeting the AALL (American Association of Law Libraries) President, Cornell Winston, and also, Laurie Atkinson, who's the Australian association (ALLA) President. I also went over to Chicago to the AALL Conference. And that was a big achievement for me personally, for health-related reasons. I have family in the US, so it was great to tie those two things in together and be well enough basically to fly that distance. It was an amazing experience."

Over recent years BIALL has worked closely with CALL (Canadian Association of Law Libraries) and ALLA on various things, and that's continuing. "There was the Canadian citation guide that I published to the list, and there were videos about that that I posted," Claire says. "Also, the Australians are interested in a new edition of Moys. So we're seeing what the appetite is. And I put a post out to the sister associations, just to say, 'Look, what do you think? What's your experience? Do you have any suggestions?'"

Sticking with the international theme, Claire has also been involved in BIALL's law librarian training schemes (see LIM Winter 2023), which have helped people in Africa keen to make a career in the profession. "This year I did Nigeria," Claire says of the courses, which are delivered online. "And I have never done anything like that in my life before. It was wonderful to address these colleagues in various Nigerian states and to work with them and to deliver presentations to them. I hope I can continue with that, because I found it so fascinating."

New connections like these are important to Claire, and it's connections between people that she sees as the main advantage of belonging to an organisation like BIALL. "If you've got a problem, or if you need to sort something out, or you don't know how to do something, you can reach out to a group of people and there will be someone there who can support you," she says.

Claire also believes that it is much easier to reach out for support than it once was. "My experience now is that people are very, very friendly and very generous with their time and with their expertise. I think possibly we've become friendlier. I do think that the profession has become more open, and we're actually getting a lot better at saying, 'come and talk to me'. It's not necessarily that the door is open, but there is the online presence: this is me, this is how you email me, this is how you say my name, this is how you can get in touch with me."

Of course, where these connections are at their strongest is at the BIALL Conference, and yet it's a sad fact that many BIALL members do not attend the event. Claire believes the reason why quite a few members don't go, especially for those in the academic sector, is simple enough. "Money, that's what I'm going to say from an academic side. From a law firm side, I'm guessing it's 'we've got space for one person or two persons to go. You guys go this year and you two go next year,' you take turns in going. But I think from the academia side, it's money, and to address that, I would say, let's push the bursaries. Because we've had some years where we didn't



Claire believes Conference is a fine opportunity to meet people and learn from them. Here LIM Co-Editor Jas Breslin (right) talks to BIALL member Katy Snell in Leeds

see people apply for those bursaries. And it's like, look, we're here, we've got money. Apply for a bursary."

ARTIFICIAL HORIZONS

If you do go to the Conference – and you really should – then don't be surprised to hear a great deal about AI, for

whatever legal information sector you work in, this is the hot topic; and academia is no exception. "At academic level, certainly here, initially, I think there was a lot of fear and a lot of academics said, 'we can tell if you've used ChatGPT, don't use it'. But I don't think that's good enough. It's quite interesting, I've got colleagues on my team who were involved in a cross-party working group across the university on AI, and Brunel's response to it. So it's been interesting to integrate that, which is about working with AI and saying, 'look, if you use it, you need to provide a statement, a declaration in your work that you've used AI and also you need to check, check, check and check again. Check what you've provided, because otherwise you're going to get done for plagiarism.

"I think we had the same conversations when we went to using online resources, and would these be valuable? Would they be useful? Would they be trustworthy? And then we got over that. And then there was the concern about students using Google all the time when that came out. And again, it's about working with these tools and adapting around them.

"My point is, it's an evolving thing," Claire adds. "I think we're at the very, very beginnings of it and it'll be interesting to see how it develops further. I hope it doesn't replace our role. I don't think it will. I think we've been here hundreds of years, librarians – I feel like I've been here hundreds of years! But we've always adapted. I think whether we're using online resources, whether we're using Google, whether students are using Cite This For Me and getting it all completely wrong, we still have this role of being able to go in and say, 'no, we need to do it this way'."

With the above in mind, Claire is optimistic that the profession has a future. And as to what BIALL might look like in that future: "I want to see an association that's relevant and still useful," she says. "The association needs to stay ahead of the curve and be aware of trends. I think, as long as we do that as an association, I think we've got a future."