



Becoming A Barrister

Harriet Di Francesco,
Tenant (Pupillage 2018/19)

What was your route to becoming a barrister?

I became a barrister because I wanted to do something intellectually challenging and varied. I like working for myself and having the ability to structure my own personal and professional routine. I wanted a varied practice with the prospect of regular international work. The construction industry by its very nature is both progressive and international.

After university I wanted to continue academic study but also travel. I decided to join the two. I went to Bologna, Italy, where I started a two-year MA in International Relations at Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies concentrating in economics and specialising in international law. I undertook the second year in Washington, DC, where I lived for a year after graduating, working various jobs and travelling. I returned to London and completed the GDL after which I moved to Paris for a six-month internship at the International Court of Arbitration. I returned to London and completed the BPTC. I worked as a construction intern at an American law firm and an arbitration paralegal at a London law firm. I applied for pupillage before and during the BPTC and was offered pupillage at Keating Chambers during my second year of applying. Before starting pupillage, I travelled for three months to Australia and Thailand where I learned to dive and completed the PADI Divemaster course.

“I wanted a varied practice with the prospect of regular international work. The construction industry by its very nature is both progressive and international.”

What is your typical week as a junior tenant?

I work 40-50 hours a week and I spend most of my week in chambers. On average I currently have one hearing every two weeks. My understanding is that this is above average for junior juniors such as myself at commercial. Sets that have a

more mixed practice (i.e. include some public law practice) tend to have more hearings.

Although I specialise in construction my work is very mixed. I may have 5-10 instructions at any given time however I will be actively working on 1-3. I prioritise according to deadlines. At present I have a number of statements of case (particulars of claim, defences, etc) which I am drafting in my own right. Preparation for hearings will take priority as and when the hearings arise. As I get more experience, I learn how long things take me and therefore how long I will need to put aside for a piece of work or for preparation.

At the moment I am instructed as a junior on three ongoing disputes: one arbitration and two procurement challenges. My responsibilities vary depending on the workstreams but so far have included drafting lists of issues and preparing evidence schedules in advance of trial. In general, about 70% of my time is spent doing work in my own right.

I work with a broad range of clients from individuals (Mr and Mrs Bloggs) to companies ranging from sole traders to large corporations. Most of my client contact is over the phone or by email. Generally, I will have some direct contact with the client as there tends to be some issue of fact requiring clarification. I have met clients in person where possible. In some cases, the client will attend the hearing either as a witness or simply to observe.

“I wish I had known about the invaluable support network that awaited me. Barristers, solicitors, clerks and chambers’ staff are always on board to offer support.”

I have regular contact with my instructing solicitors. It is very important to keep solicitors updated on the progress of your work. They will often assist with clarifying the factual aspects of the case as well as legal strategy. I deal primarily with associates but have also dealt with partners and trainees.

Trials are the most exciting part of my work. In particular, cases allocated to the small claims track where “anything goes” as the rules of evidence generally do not apply. It is a great opportunity to practise advocacy and witness handling.

What are the best and worst aspects of becoming a barrister?

The best aspect is the professional independence and freedom to develop your own style. The worst aspect is having to give up part of your social life to achieve the best result. Ultimately, the rewards outweigh the costs.

The most unforgettable moment of my career so far was getting my tenancy decision. My older brother waited in anticipation outside chambers with a pint of

(either consolatory or celebratory) beer. When I emerged with my thumbs up, he duly downed the (celebratory) beer with tears of joy.

What is your advice for aspiring barristers?

Do not give up. Be yourself. Do as many as you can because the experience builds confidence which is what most sets are looking for.

I wish I had known about the invaluable support network that awaited me. Barristers, solicitors, clerks and chambers' staff are always on board to offer support. Studying is a lonely process and it is easy to think you are on your own and lose sight of your goals.

Harriet Di Francesco was called to the Bar in 2018 and became a tenant at Keating Chambers following successful completion of her pupillage. She is developing a busy practice specialising in construction, engineering, procurement and international arbitration.

Since accepting her offer of tenancy, Harriet has appeared regularly as an advocate in County Court hearings both at an interlocutory stage and at trial, and has accepted instructions both as sole and junior counsel. Most recently, she successfully defended a major telecommunications provider in relation to a claim for engineer call out fees.

Harriet has experience in a range of dispute resolution including litigation, adjudication, international arbitration and ADR, and with many major standard form contracts including the JCT, NEC and MF/1 standard forms.