



JOHN STEEL

Q&A

John Steel has practised at Keating Chambers since September 2020, having successfully completed his pupillage in Chambers. He undertook his pupillage having been granted the Michael Hodge Scholarship from the Inner Temple to complete the BPTC. He was called to the Bar in 2018.

Since becoming a tenant in Chambers, John has acted as sole counsel, in both the High Court (TCC) and County Court, as well as undertaking led work. Reflecting the core areas of Chambers' work, John's focus is on construction and engineering disputes, energy and infrastructure projects and procurement proceedings.

What attracted you to Keating?

I attended pupillage events at which barristers from Keating discussed their practice. There was a discussion around some of the international work that Chambers' is involved in. This sparked my interest in Keating.

Which case are you most proud of and why?

One memorable case involved acting for a responding party to an adjudication in an energy dispute. We had an excellent team of instructing solicitors, who assembled experts to address different elements of the claim: questions of engineering, delay and quantum. I particularly enjoyed the detail of the underlying technology.

You read History at university, what attracted you to the Bar?

I had focused on modern French political history, particularly the colonial history in Algeria, as an undergraduate, spending a year in Aix-en-Provence. This led me to do a Masters in public international law and international relations. The course was led by a barrister specialising in international law. I found I was drawn to the elements of the course which focused on legal analysis.

What are some of the realities and rewards of being a barrister specialising in the work of the TCC?

The work is fast-paced and complex. Clients often need advice at short notice or require assistance to either bring or respond to a claim at short notice. This is true of both disputes in construction and procurement law.

A particular reward is working as part of a wider legal team. Big cases require a number of barristers to work together alongside a team of solicitors. This is the most enjoyable part of the job.

What are the most important lessons you've learnt at the Bar so far?

- See everything from the perspective of the Tribunal. On a practical level, this helps focus on relevant points.
- Simplify matters wherever possible. It is allied to the first point: a submission is much more attractive if readily understandable.
- Ask questions, even if they risk revealing misunderstandings. They can sometimes reveal points of weakness in a case, or at the very least help you serve the case better.
- Look after your well-being. Keeping up other interests, even when busy, is important. It also allows healthy perspective.

In your opinion, what is the secret to writing a successful pupillage application?

Approaching pupillage applications as a form of written advocacy is likely to improve them. It is best looked at as an opportunity to look to persuade the reader that you have real potential in their chambers.

Which career would you have chosen had the Bar not come calling?

A foreign correspondent. I remember Alastair Leithead (also from Tyneside) from the BBC coming to give a talk at school about his time reporting from Afghanistan. I found that compelling. Jeremy Bowen is something of a hero. I'm reading his book on the Middle East at the moment.

What law would you introduce if you could?

I would have two:

1. Prison reform, especially the treatment of young people in the criminal justice system. Starting with rules around obligations to disclose past offences to prospective employers, as barring young people from the jobs market is an own-goal if we are serious about reducing reoffending.
2. Introduce public assemblies to decide on how we want to remember history in public spaces.

Tell us something we might not know about you

I am a keen cross country skier, and have completed the Vasaloppet ultramarathon in Sweden, the Engadin Ski Marathon in Switzerland and am due to do the Birkebeinerrennet in Norway in 2024.

