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The Advocates Library

Abstract: This article by Andrea Longson, the Senior Librarian, outlines the history of both the Advocates Library and the Faculty of Advocates. It describes the collections and services offered by the library.
Keywords: law libraries; legal profession; Scotland

History of the Faculty and its Library

The Advocates Library was founded in 1689 by Sir George Mackenzie, known as "bloody" Mackenzie for his zealous pursuit of covenanters. The library is widely regarded as the finest working law library in the UK and is unique in that it is both the private library of the Faculty of Advocates, the governing body of the advocates' branch of the legal profession in Scotland, and serves as the national law library for Scotland, having the privilege of claiming all legal deposit law material via the National Library of Scotland.



Andrea Longson

The Faculty of Advocates as an institution dates back to the foundation of the College of Justice, the supreme courts in Scotland, in 1532, although individual advocates were probably working in the courts before then. The Faculty is a democratic body run by office bearers, including the Dean, the Vice-Dean, the Treasurer and the Keeper of the Library, who are elected by a vote of the whole membership. The library has evolved at the very heart of the Faculty and is still the working base for the 470 advocates currently practising.

Over the centuries the Faculty's membership has included a number of celebrated figures, including the great writers Sir Walter Scott, Robert Louis Stevenson and James Boswell, while Henry Brougham and, much more recently, James Mackay, went on to become Lord Chancellor of Great Britain.

First building

The library's first home was in a rented house in Parliament Close, Edinburgh, but the inadequacies of that accommodation were highlighted by a fire in 1700, which engulfed most of the Close and would have consumed the contents of the library, but for the heroic efforts of James Stevenson, the Keeper of the day. Some of the library's older books still bear the marks of that fire. The library's next home was in the Laigh Hall (Figure 1), under Parliament Hall, recently refurbished and brought back into full use for the library. It remained there for more than 100 years and, after a brief sojourn in what is now the Signet Library, moved to its present site, still in Parliament House, in 1833.

A major turning point in the library's history came in 1709, when it was accorded legal deposit status, giving the keeper the right to claim a copy of every book published in the British Isles. Over the years, the library became recognised as the natural home for all legal, literary and scholarly materials and, under a series of distinguished keepers, such as Thomas Ruddiman, David Hume and Adam Ferguson, developed into one of Europe's finest. By the 1850s it had in effect become Scotland's National Library and Thomas Carlyle described it as "incomparably the best of all the libraries we have in Scotland."

Gift to establish the National Library of Scotland

By the early 20th century it was becoming increasingly difficult for a small privately funded body, such as the Faculty of Advocates, to support such an extensive collection and, in 1925, the Faculty made a gift to the nation of 750,000 non-legal books, pamphlets, maps and sheet music to establish the National Library of Scotland.

The Faculty retains the privilege of claiming all law materials and makes its stock available to members of the public through the National Library of Scotland. Enquiries about using the library's law materials should be addressed to the National Library of Scotland by email on enquiries@nls.uk.

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Figure 1: Laigh Hall



Figure 2: Corridor

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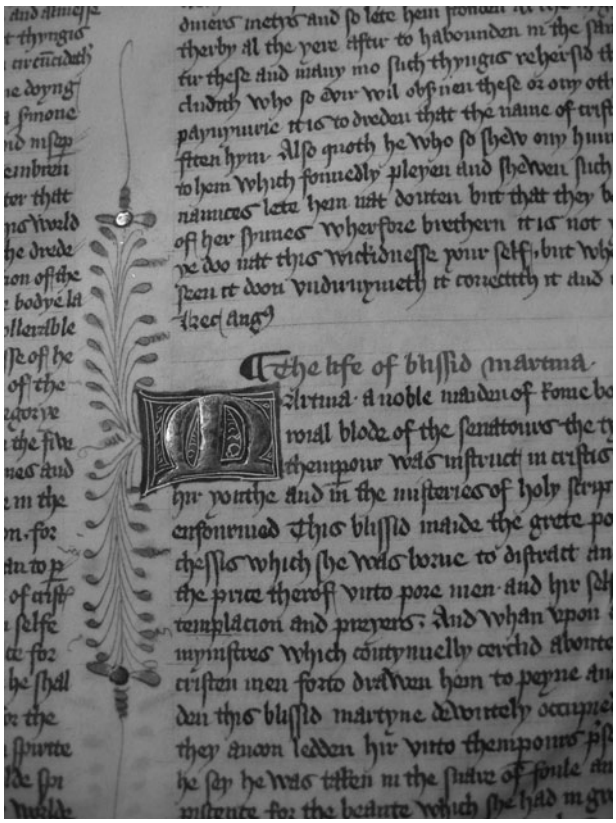


Figure 3: Legenda Aurea

Members of Faculty enjoy an unrivalled resource, with access in print and electronic format to the Advocates Library 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, and the quality and range of the library allows advocates to appear in court fully prepared to argue the most complex legal case.

Apart from the main library just off Parliament Hall, collections are maintained in the House of Lords and at the High Courts in Edinburgh and Glasgow. The Faculty also owns the books in the library and the study at Sir Walter's Scott's former home at Abbotsford, and these are currently being catalogued by the library's rare books specialist.

A number of important works have already been identified, in particular the *Legenda Aurea* (Golden Legend), a lavishly illustrated manuscript dating back to about 1450 and described by one expert as the most significant find of a medieval manuscript for 70 years.

Library staff

The Keeper of the Library, a senior Advocate, assisted by a group of curators, makes policy decisions and provides advice to the library staff on user needs. The library currently has a staff of 17, most of whom are qualified legal information professionals. The staff are divided into four functional departments; Reader Services, Bibliographic Services, Periodicals and Court Papers, managed by myself as Senior Librarian and supported by two administrative staff. The library has used the Ex Libris Voyager Library Management system for cataloguing and acquisitions functions since 1999.

The current book stock of the library, estimated at well over 150,000 volumes, is catalogued to the highest standards. Most of the library's catalogue is online, though some older materials are still to be added. As with any library, especially in an older building, it is a constant challenge to find appropriate space for books. We are fortunate to have two stores in another building nearby, where lesser used materials are kept. With the legal deposit materials swelling our holdings, the library adds about 3,000 new books to the catalogue each year and holds over 1,200 journal titles and 750 looseleaf titles which all have to be updated. Aren't you all jealous of that little job!

As Senior Librarian, my role includes participation in a management liaison group, which contributes to organisation wide initiatives and projects, including the development of human resources policies, health and safety and business continuity. Our continuing close links with the National Library of Scotland also add variety and complexity to the role, making it the most interesting place to work.

Enquiries about the Advocates Library can be made by email at inqdesk@advocates.org.uk. For further information about the Faculty of Advocates please see our website at www.advocates.org.uk.

Also, do feel free to contact me directly:
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Biography

Andrea has been Senior Librarian at the Advocates Library since 2002, and has worked in the Advocates Library for over 15 years. She recently completed an MBA.

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