

Littleton Chambers

The facts

Location: Inner Temple, London
Number of QCs/ Juniors: 12/39 (9 women)
Applications: 120+
Olpas: Summer season
Pupils per year: 2
Seats: 3x4 months
Pupillage award: £40,000 (can draw down sum for BVC)

In 2008 both pupils gained tenancy, as did all three contenders last year and both from the year before that.

Employment, commercial litigation and professional negligence specialist Littleton Chambers is not unique in its desire to be an efficient, modern business, but the strength of its determination is distinctive.

Because they're worth it

Back in the early 90s, Littleton was one of the first sets to appoint a CEO from outside the profession, and in 2007 the retiring incumbent was replaced by Gerard Hickie, formerly of L'Oreal, possessed of an MBA, an engineering background and exactly the sort of dispassionate take on the provision of legal services that chambers felt it needed. Littering conversation with terms that might give some old-school clerks a nasty turn, he told us: 'I want to increase the value of the business for shareholders, by which I mean barristers,' and 'we want to build market share.' Hickie's commercial acumen is clearly taking Littleton places. The last 18 months have brought a new IT system, three new clerks and a revamped marketing effort, including a new identity and website. The aim is 'to grow by 20-25% in the medium term.'

Littleton already has well-regarded core expertise in employment and commercial litigation, and this is backed up by expertise in sports law, professional negligence and arbitration/mediation. In 2008 members won a groundbreaking Court of Appeal case involving trade unions unlawfully discriminating against female members and provided counsel in relation to Dwain Chambers' challenge to his ban under British Olympic Association rules. However, perceiving 'the set was in some ways a sleeping giant,' management's aim is now to 'maintain our pre-eminence in employment and reputation for punching above our weight in commercial litigation,' while expanding to roughly 60 barristers.

The human side of the law

The pupillage recruitment process is more than a little concerned with finding candidates with the right people skills as well as intellectual abilities. Around 20% of applicants are invited to a first interview that assesses 'basic advocacy skills and the ability to summarise facts and make judgments' in a 'testing but not overly bullish' way. Great academics and pronounced intellect certainly help, but for the dozen or so who reach the second round (an assessed mini-pupillage), it's just as important to show an assured bedside manner. The candidates are set a written assessment – 'there's plenty of time to go to the library' – which is discussed at the end of the week with a barrister. A further one or two rounds of interviews face the seven or so who make it beyond mini-pupillage.

Pupillage itself is 'very much about commercial litigation and employment,' with pupils shuttling around three supervisors for four months each. 'I had one [specialist] from each area and a mixed practitioner,' a pupil recalled. The two core areas appeal for different reasons. Of commercial litigation, one barrister told us: 'It is less statute driven and there's more fundamental law. You're dealing with business people who are detached from the issues.'

Chambers UK rankings

Employment • Professional Negligence

By comparison, employment law centres on people and workplaces, so it's all about personal relationships breaking down. 'There are more human emotions: often it's people who loathe their boss or the company saying, 'You didn't promote me because I'm black or a woman.' And employers are just as prone to emotional responses: 'Often the boss will in turn loathe being accused of being racist, sexist or discriminatory.' In short, employment practice is 'a complex interrelation of personal and professional legal issues; it's very exciting.'

Regardless of their area, supervisors tend to be good at 'giving pupils experience of work within their reach.' Our sources had found 'the first few months were more relaxed; you work 8.30am until 6pm' and 'your work is closely assessed, much more so than later in the year.' Rather than taking on their supervisor's work in parallel, pupils cut their teeth on 'a series of set tasks – things like advices and pleadings – from a collection that members contribute to when they have an appropriate case.' After four months of 'going to court and EAT tribunals with juniors, you get to know the work you'll be doing come the second six.'

The set 'regards advocacy experience as very important,' so second-six pupils are off to court once or twice a week, handling 'winding-up petitions in the Companies Court, paperwork for solicitors and small employment cases.' Littleton's reach means regular trips to Stratford and Croydon are on the cards, with occasional jaunts out to 'Reading, Bury St Edmunds and places like that.' Said one source: 'You learn first and foremost how long it takes to prepare for even the smallest case at this stage.' By its nature, employment law is more conducive to early advocacy experience than commercial litigation, but as a junior it's possible to get substantial commercial instructions. For example, one baby junior we spoke to was looking forward to 'a professional negligence construction case that's slated for a 20-day trial.'

Blah, blah, blah

The set's aim is 'to be constructive in feedback and to sort out problems.' Said one pupil: 'I was frankly amazed at how seriously they take it. I thought it would be, 'Well done, blah, blah, blah' but my supervisor had taken detailed notes on what I'd done and talked me through them.' At the end of each seat detailed feedback is given

at a meeting attended by 'your old supervisor, your new supervisor, the CEO and the head of the pupillage committee.' Small wonder, pupils told us: 'These meetings are invaluable; they takes the terror out of the process but you also feel you're getting advice for your career, not just pupillage.' As well as the appraisals, there are four 'increasingly difficult' assessed advocacy exercises over the year. Pupils duke it out over an 'anonymised real case: you get bundles and instructions and advocate in front of a member who is sitting as a judge.' While 'competition kicks in,' it's still 'very pleasant natured' and there's oral feedback afterwards. A written report then goes to the tenancy committee, along with feedback from instructing solicitors and the results of three written assessments, set from January onwards. These are 'scrutinised by an independent member of chambers' who makes a report. The last weeks before the tenancy decision will also see 'court work scaled back' and pupils' supervisors 'push you to get exposure to more members of chambers,' so as to make the bid for tenancy more complete. Both of the 2008 pupils were successful.

Littleton resides in Kings Bench Walk in impressive premises that manage to combine the traditional architecture of the Inn with a 1990s extension at the rear. Definitely 'not a ripped denim sort of place,' members are well dressed. 'We work incredibly hard,' said one, 'but the culture is a mutually supportive one.' Littleton tenants are 'very familiar faces' in the nearby Pegasus Bar, and in the summer they can often be found entertaining clients on one of chambers' three roof terraces. Juniors and clerks' nights out, and even the occasional organised juniors' event, also keep things interesting. Pupils naturally find it hard to forget their status in chambers, but when they join in the post-work drinks 'it's like going out with your friends.'

And finally...

Pupils and members told us they were proud of the 'openness, approachability and sense of humour' they feel characterise the set. In part it reflects Littleton's 'collegiate cultural values,' but equally it is indicative of the heavy employment law caseload.