

# The Law Society

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The Law Society has been welcoming people into its Grade II\* listed building at 113 Chancery Lane since 1831. The society is the professional body for solicitors in England and Wales and its vision is to promote, protect and support solicitors, the rule of law and justice in England and Wales.

The Law Society's motto is 'We preserve the laws and legal rights' for all. This is something the Law Society actions daily. It leads the campaign in terms of access to free legal advice, being the first administrators of Legal Aid following the Rushcliffe Committee report of 1945, the fight for justice for everyone and it leads in diversifying the profession with its Diversity Access Scheme which actively encourages those from less advantaged backgrounds to take up a career as a solicitor via a unique scholarship programme.

In 1823 Bryan Holme gathered together a group of prominent solicitors in Serle's coffee house and issued a prospectus to source subscribers to buy shares to enable the building of a large room or hall with a library of law and other subjects and a dining-club and offices. This was devised to promote and improve the reputation of the solicitor profession, through sharing knowledge and improving education. The issuing of shares succeeded, some £25,000 was raised and a site acquired for a Hall in Chancery Lane.

In the archive is held a catalogue of the 'valuable building material' that was sold when this original site was cleared. This included two 'spacious dwelling' houses, warehouses and outbuildings that all jostled for space in Chancery Lane.

The Law Society was founded on 2 June 1825 at Serles. It was originally called The Society of Attorneys, Solicitors, Proctors and others not being Barristers, practising in the Courts of Law and Equity of the United Kingdom. The name being made rather more succinct to that of The Law Society in 1903. Initially there was 292 members.



*Chancery Lane Entrance*



*The Library - 1904*

Lewis Vulliamy, a pupil of Sir Robert Smirke the architect of the British Museum, won the architectural competition to build the Hall. The influence of Sir Robert can be seen in the portico entrance to the Hall with its echoes of the frontage of the British Museum. You need to view the building from the other side of the street to see how it was originally envisioned, an imposing statement building underlining the importance of the solicitor profession. Lewis Vulliamy's travels around Greece, Italy and Asia Minor between 1818–1822 can also be seen echoed in the designs of the interior of the building.

Lewis was in some respects the odd one out in his family coming from a long line of renowned clockmakers; his brother Benjamin was the King's clockmaker by Royal Appointment in 1773 and the Hall has six of Benjamin's clocks located around its rooms. Benjamin's grandson, George, was also an architect and he designed, among other things, the pedestal and sphinxes for Cleopatra's needle and the camel-sided benches to be found along the Embankment.

The first Annual General Meeting of The Law Society was held in the Reading Room in 1831 and the building formally opened in 1832. The Law Society Hall continued to expand when other properties became available next to the site, to help accommodate its growing membership and staff, and there are six distinct phases in its building history from 1831-1901. These include designs and work by such esteemed architects as Charles Holden, recognised as one of the greatest architects of his generation, and Philip Charles Hardwick, who was involved in the design of St Bartholomew's Hospital and the Bank of England.

A striking feature of this building is in its architecture, both its exterior and its interiors. This can be found in its Library for members, the Common Room and Reading Room (as described on the next page).

The Hall is also unique as it has a restaurant and bar located within. Six Clerks is a reminder of the original Six Clerks' Office that was in this location between 1622 to 1778. Here the officers of the Court of Chancery would once gather.





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## Additional notes

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### Additional notes

#### **The Library**

A library was included in the building proposals from its conception and the Royal Charter, granted to the Law Society in 1845 specifically mentions a librarian. A core reason for this was to further establish the solicitor as a recognised profession and improve education and standards.

The library is one of the most atmospheric rooms in the building, complete with comfy chairs, old fireplaces and beautiful architecture. Its marble columns are a particularly interesting feature as they are not actually marble but imitation marble, using a technique called Scagliola. This is thought to have originated in the 17th century and contributes to the Grade 2\* listed status of the library. The historical surroundings should not disguise the fact that the library holds one of the most comprehensive and up to date legal collections for practitioners in the UK with some 34,000 titles. Members of The Law Society can gain access to this resource in person and advice from the expert legal librarians. They can also access resources via the website which also shows a video of the beautiful library.

#### **Law Society library | The Law Society**

The Hall has two other architecturally outstanding rooms; the Common Room and the Reading Room.

The Common Room is decorated with stained glass bearing armorial bearings which were originally displayed at the Hall of Serjeant's Inn which was built in 1678 and the glass was given to The Law Society in 1926. It also has mahogany panelling, a freeze by the renowned Conrad Dressler and a peacock-tiled fireplace. The Reading Room is a quiet space to be used by members with tables and chairs for reading, studying and meetings but is no less architecturally impressive. Portraits of past Presidents of the Society hang around this spacious room, alongside the first secretary of the Law Society Robert Maugham, the grandfather of W. Somerset Maugham.

A war memorial on marble tablets by Gilbert Bayes is displayed around the room, recording on vellum, the names of those solicitors and articled clerks who lost their lives in the First World War. The plate collection of The Law Society glints in the light and at the rear of the room a bronze statue of Athene guards 'The Book of Memory', a book of remembrance which pays tribute to those solicitors and articled clerks who lost their lives in the Second World War.

The fireplace frieze is also by Gilbert Bayes, best known for his work on the Queen of Time clock located above the Selfridges store main entrance.

Another highlight of the building is the golden lions that stare impassively out as passers-by in Chancery Lane, seemingly forming a cordon of protection around the front of the building. These were commissioned in 1903. However, there are conflicting stories as to whether these lions are the commissioned lions, replicas of those carved by Alfred Stevens for the railings that surrounded the British Museum, or some of the original sculptures removed from the British Museum in 1895 and given to The Law Society. Only the lions know.