
First Six:

My first six months began with an informal introduction to the members of chambers who oversee the advocacy programme, as well as the chambers administrator (generous portions of cake and tea were also provided). Whilst the remainder of the first six months were not always as easy going, the welcoming and friendly attitude towards pupils has remained unchanged.

Whilst the majority of time during my first six was spent with my supervisor at the time (Carmelite divides each six into two three month periods with different supervisors), time spent doing research, or preparation can be done in the dedicated pupils room. The pupils room is a useful place to ask questions, discuss cases and spend time with the other pupils, as well as having its own equipment and resources.

Carmelite takes care in assigning pupils to supervisors with varying styles and areas of practice, in order to give each pupil a wider range of experience, and greater exposure to styles of advocacy as well as the chance to meet other members of chambers. All supervisors have very busy Crown Court practices and every pupil will find themselves in court with their supervisor on an almost daily basis. During my first six I observed a number of complex and serious Crown Court trials, including a multi-handed murder trial, and was given a two day noting brief in relation to the Brookes/Coulson phone-hacking trial. Other pupils were given the chance to work on equally interesting cases.

Whilst the atmosphere is friendly and relaxed within chambers, first six pupils should expect to find themselves undertaking work for their supervisors and other members of chambers, the work is challenging but feedback is always given and I felt that the diversity of work undertaken and observed gave me a good grounding prior to "getting on my feet" in my second six.

The first six months of pupillage at Carmelite is split into two three month periods, each with a different supervisor. The obvious benefit from this is that pupils get to see different practices and advocacy styles. All of Carmelite's supervisors are senior members of chambers with extremely busy Crown Court practices. Accordingly pupils should expect to be with their supervisors in court most days watching trials, sentences and administrative hearings. The remainder of the time may, depending on your supervisor at the time, be spent drafting advices, defence statements, grounds of appeal or other documents. The workload can be high at times but pupils are given guidance when stuck and feedback on the finished article.

In addition pupils can expect occasionally to carry out legal research for other members of chambers, often on complex or novel points of law, or if extremely lucky, obtain a noting brief (paid work taking notes in a large trial). As second six looms pupils inevitably start to feel apprehensive but a few weeks spent observing the working pupils shortly beforehand usually helps. All pupils in chambers have the benefit of a dedicated 'Pupils Room' where they can have their own desk space and access to legal resources. The atmosphere is relaxed and pupils can, and do, discuss cases and problems with each other in spare moments.

My own first six was split between following two very different characters with very different personalities and practices. Watching how senior tenants deal with negotiation and preparation is as interesting as how they address a judge in court. I was fortunate enough to obtain a noting brief in a large kidnap trial in

Croydon Crown Court and since then have observed cases involving fraud, firearms, torture and drugs. The diversity of work has allowed me to meet a great many members of chambers and provided a solid foundation to work upon in my second six.

Advocacy Training:

The advocacy training programme is undoubtedly one of the best things about pupillage at Carmelite. Group sessions, which take place roughly every fortnight, provide an invaluable opportunity to get feedback not only from the trainers themselves but also from your fellow pupils.

In the first six months the focus is very much on getting you ready for life on your feet in the magistrates court. To this end, the sessions are generally run by relatively junior tenants who still have a working knowledge of the rough and tumble world of summary justice. Unlike some of the advocacy classes on the BPTC, the training in chambers has a very practical feel. Each session is sure to contain some quirk of law or procedure that might otherwise have tripped you up in your first few weeks.

Just before you get on your feet you will also have some crucial role-play sessions with third-six pupils featuring various nightmare magistrates court scenarios. This pragmatic approach means that by the time Carmelite pupils enter the second six they are noticeably better prepared (and less prone to make embarrassing gaffes) than those from many other chambers.

After a merciful breather during the first month on your feet, the sessions resume in the second six with an increased focus on specific advocacy skills such as cross-examination, examination-in-chief and closing speeches. Some of these sessions are taken by more senior members of chambers, giving you the chance to access advice from practitioners with a real depth and breadth of experience.

In the closing weeks of your pupillage you will be provided with a complete crown court brief. The final sessions then cover the various stages this brief will pass through, from PCMH through to sentence. This not only hones your advocacy skills, but also familiarises you with common legal and procedural issues that may arise.

There will inevitably be weeks when you have a particularly tricky case the next day or a difficult advice to produce for your supervisor, and the last thing you want to do is prepare a bad character application for advocacy. However, you will invariably take a useful nugget of knowledge or feedback away from every session, and the course ultimately provides a robust backbone to your 12-month pupillage which will help you stand tall when you finally get on your feet in the crown court.

One of the notable features of Carmelite pupillage is the advocacy programme. Taught on a weekly basis by chambers' junior tenants it is a structured course that lasts throughout your pupillage.

As the name suggests the course is primarily focused on improving advocacy skills and building on lessons learnt at bar school and on the Inns advocacy courses. As such the sessions at first involve preparing and delivering routine advocacy assignments such as bail applications and pleas in mitigation. However, this isn't just a repeat of things you might have done previously as the input of the junior tenants ensures that the focus of the sessions is very much on the practicality of making such applications in the magistrates' court, and the aim is to reproduce as far as possible the conditions you'll encounter when you start on your feet (right up to seeing the papers only a short time before the exercise!).

As you progress through your pupillage the assignments become more varied and diverse as they seek to cover the more situations that a pupil will encounter. This includes sessions on the making of more technical legal applications (hearsay or bad character for example), more complicated sentencing exercises where dangerous offenders are involved, before finally leading up to witness handling to coincide with the time you start running your own trials.

Aside from improving advocacy the course also seeks to familiarise pupils with the basics of magistrates' court proceedings so that when you start on your feet you aren't just dropped in at the deep end. Helpfully this is, where possible, tied into the advocacy assignments which helps you build up a very practical knowledge of court procedure from the start. Moreover, each assignment is based on a recent case that a member of chambers has been instructed in, and which has often been selected specifically because it raises a particularly noteworthy point of law or practice that is designed to raise a discussion point.

This approach is then reinforced with more formal sessions focused on procedure or law. These take the form either of pupil presentations on specific topics (such as legal aid, disclosure and dealing with case management), general discussion sessions, and talks from court staff and instructing solicitors to help you better understand where you fit in and what is required of you.

Overall the course is extremely well thought out, and because it's designed and run by those not too far removed from pupillage themselves it's highly relevant and about as good preparation as you can get for the real thing!

The first day on your feet...

The first day on your feet is a long anticipated date, approached with excitement and impatience, tempered with the fear of making mistakes.

All the pupil supervisors are very alive to the impending shift in workload, and try to release the pupils for a fortnight to follow practising pupils and junior tenants in the Magistrates' Court. Papers are received the night before, and for the first couple of evenings junior tenants came up to the Pupils' Room to answer any questions, address any concerns and assuage any lingering insecurities.

My first court appearance was a first appearance for a man charged with production of cannabis and possession of heroin. The client was friendly, but distracted, and the papers were not forthcoming, the CPS having only produced one set of defence papers for two defendants. The prosecutor was brisk and efficient but friendly, and quickly indicated that he would offer no evidence on the production charge. The client pleaded to the second charge, and I delivered my first mitigation to a bench containing, among others, my Criminal Litigation tutor from the BVC.

The inevitable nerves are subsumed by the adrenaline, rushing around between the court, the client and the CPS. The basics are already in place, and there is always a former pupil or patient pupil supervisor on the other end of the phone, to talk over points with; from practical questions such as how to verify a bail address on a Saturday morning when the Prosecution Liaison Officer can't, to nuances of evidential law. The workload is varied, covering first appearances, committals and sentences over the first week, as well as the occasional, rather more lucrative, noting brief. Before there is time to reflect, the second week is under way...

Second six - an overview:

Once on your feet at Carmelite, you can expect to be in court every day. During second six, you will be expected to undertake all types of Magistrates' and Youth Court hearings, in particular trials. As you progress, you will be asked to cover simple Crown Court hearings and eventually move on to trials in the Crown Court. Thankfully, the Pupil's Room, shared by all pupils (first and second six), provides a safe environment to bounce ideas off people in the same situation and ask those "silly" questions which you do not want to trouble your pupil master with. Second six at Carmelite is gruelling at times but overall, gives you excellent, intensive training for life at the criminal Bar.