

The First Women

The first women admitted to the Inn, in January 1920, were Marjorie Powell and Gwyneth Thomson (née Bebb). This was the result of 50 years campaigning by women to enter the legal profession, finally made possible by the passing of the *Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act* in 1919.

Before the Act was passed, every application by women to be admitted to the profession, was rejected.

Previously, in 1873, the Council of Legal Education received a petition, signed by 92 women, 'asking that they be at liberty to attend the Lectures of the Professors' held at Lincoln's Inn which had been opened to 'any Gentleman, not a Member of an Inn of Court...on payment of a sum of Five Guineas.'

The petition was refused.

Pictured (clockwise from top left): Enid Rosser, Mercy Ashworth, Dame Janet Smith DBE, Narita Bahra KC, Mithan Tata





Women on the Margins

During the second half of the 19th century, agitation by feminist campaigners led to increased access to higher education for women. This coincided with a number of unsuccessful applications made by women to access the legal profession.

In 1878, the University of London was the first university to open its degrees to women and, in 1888, Eliza Orme became the first woman in England to obtain a law degree.

Cornelia Sorabji (pictured left) was the first woman to sit the Bachelor of Civil Laws exams at Oxford in 1892, although the university would not let women graduate until 1920. She then worked as a pupil for a firm of solicitors in Lincoln's Inn Fields and was permitted to study in Lincoln's Inn Library.

It was not until 1922 that she was awarded her degree and was admitted to the Inn. She was Called to the Bar on 13 June 1923.

Image credit: Somerville College

Opposition to Women Lawyers

In 1913 and 1917, motions proposing the admission of women to the legal profession were debated at the Annual General Meetings of the Bar Council and on both occasions, they were overwhelmingly defeated.

It was repeatedly said in the years before 1919 that women were too 'emotional', 'illogical', and 'prone to gossip' to make good lawyers. There were also concerns that members of the 'fair sex' would use their feminine wiles to obtain an unfair advantage over members of a male jury and judiciary and that male barristers would be so overcome with chivalry they would not be able to press their case fully against a female barrister.

By 1919, however, in light of women's contribution to the war effort, it became more difficult to maintain the objections to women's entry to the legal profession.

Among those to support the opening of the profession to women was Lord Stanley Buckmaster, a Bencher of Lincoln's Inn, an MP, and Lord Chancellor (1915–1916). In 1913, he acted as counsel for Gwyneth Bebb (as she then was, pictured right) in the Court of Appeal. He was her bondsman upon her application to the Inn, which was denied in November 1918, despite the Benchers acknowledging that 'she appeared to be in all respects of unexceptionable ability, character, education and experience'.



Image credit: The Sphere | 16 October 1920

FASHION HINTS FOR THE COMING LADY BARRISTER.



What will she wear?

In the years before and after the passing of the Act there were many discussions about what women barristers would wear and serious concerns expressed that the admission of women to the profession would 'lead to the abolition of the wig'. In letters to the Editor of The Times it was suggested that 'the masculine wig, grotesque and undignified as it will appear upon a female head, should be replaced by the graceful, coif alternatively, that 'women barristers ought to wear a distinctive, and probably dark-coloured, head-dress, in approximately the form of a biretta, a turban or a toque.'

It was eventually decided that women would wear the same wig as men, but policing of women's attire continued such as women being prohibited from wearing trousers. When Helena Normanton and Rose Heilbron took silk in 1949, it was widely reported that the decision regarding what they would wear was made by the King, with alterations 'carried out so as to disturb as little as possible the age old traditional design for the occasion.'

It was not until 1995 that women were allowed to wear trousers in court.



Slow progress at the Bar

The first women to be Called to the Bar at Lincoln's Inn, on 26 January 1923, were Mithan Tata and Mercy Ashworth.

Despite this momentous occasion, the opposition to women lawyers did not fade away quickly. Although the Inns of Court could no longer refuse to admit women, there was no requirement for chambers to accept women as tenants nor for solicitors to instruct women barristers.

In the 19 years between 1920 and the outbreak of the Second World War, the Inn admitted only 78 women. Among those Called in that period were Enid Rosser (née Locket, pictured left), who in 1928 was the first woman to be instructed in a murder trial.

As Enid Rosser's memoirs reveal, attitudes had not changed much for women barristers after the passing of the Act: 'It was in 1927 a far from rosy outlook for women at the Bar. We were not only regarded somewhat as figures of fun all dressed up in our wigs and gowns. Solicitors regarded us with horror and it was a courageous solicitor who gave us a brief.'

Memoirs of Enid Rosser Locket (unpublished), The Women's Library collection at the London School of Economics Library, London

Image credit: Daily Mirror, 24 April 1928, report on the first day of the 1928 murder trial Enid Rosser was instructed in. During the rest of the trial, to avoid the press photographers waiting outside chambers, she found a way in and out through the basement.



Taking Silk

Patricia Galloway Coles was the first woman of Lincoln's Inn to be made a QC in 1974. Even though 25 years had elapsed since the first women in England and Wales took silk, Patricia was only the seventh woman QC in England and Wales and between 1949 and 2019, fewer than 500 women took silk.

In 1986, for the first time, two Lincoln's Inn women, Janet Smith and Mary Arden, took silk at the same time. In 2019, women were still in the minority with only 30 out of 108, or 28%, of new QCs appointed were women. But progress was being made. Among those appointed in 2019 was Lincoln's Inn's Narita Bahra, the 445th woman silk who said of her appointment, 'I never thought that I — an Asian woman from a state school — would be taking silk.'

Image credit: The Times, Wednesday April 9 1986: 'Five women barristers were sworn in as Queen's Counsel by the Lord Chancellor at the House of Lords yesterday.'

From left: Anita Mary Ryan, Mary Howarth Arden, Janet Hilary Smith, Rosalyn Higgins and Barbara Jean Lyon Mills

Positions of Power

Although women were first admitted as members in 1920, it was not until April 1986 that they began to have a say in how the Inn was run, when Mary MacMurray was elected the first woman Bencher.

She was joined by Elizabeth Appleby in December 1986 and in 2009, Elizabeth went on to become our first woman Treasurer.

In 2012 Janet Smith (pictured left) became the Inn's second woman Treasurer, having been only the fourth woman appointed to the Court of Appeal in 2002.

Training as a barrister has long been seen as a bridge to a political career and in 1979 Margaret Thatcher, who was called to the Bar by Lincoln's Inn in 1954, was elected the UK's first woman Prime Minister.

In 2010, Yasmin Qureshi (pictured left) was one of the first Muslim women to be elected to Parliament (alongside Shabana Mahmood and Rushanara Ali), having been Called to the Bar by the Inn in 1985.



Image credit: The Rt Hon Dame Janet Smith DBE by Richard Stone (original on display in the Great Hall, Lincoln's Inn)



Image: Yasmin Qureshi, Labour MP for Bolton South East since 6 May 2010

The Firsts Continue

Lincoln's Inn was traditionally associated with the Chancery Bar, an area of practice where women have been and remain underrepresented, although progress is being made.

When Lady Arden was appointed to the High Court in 1993, she was the first woman appointed to the Chancery Division. A company law specialist herself, she describes this area of law as 'a male dominated field.' It would take until 2021 for Lincoln's Inn Bencher Karen Shuman to be appointed the first woman Chief Chancery Master.

In 2000 Lady Arden was elevated to the Court of Appeal, where she was joined two years later by Janet Smith, although she did not take up her seat until 2005 as she was chairing the Shipman Inquiry. On 1 October 2018, she became the third woman appointed to the Supreme Court and later that month made history sitting alongside Brenda Hale and Jill Black, when they formed the first female majority in the Supreme Court or its predecessor the House of Lords.



Image: Still from the swearing-in ceremony of Lady Arden and Lord Kitchin as Justices of The Supreme Court, 1 October 2018



The next 100 years

100 years on since the first women were Called to the Bar, the Inn recognises the continuing challenges confronted by women at the Bar. Problems around retention and promotion to senior positions continue to affect the profession, as well as the challenges faced by women from ethnic minority groups, disadvantaged backgrounds, and those with disabilities.

Lincoln's Inn is committed in supporting its women members to fulfil their ambitions and achieve their full potential. We are doing this through action led by our Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion Committee. This includes EDI-focused collaborations with third party organisations, identifying gaps in resources within the profession that the Inn can fulfil, and setting an example by building a respectful and supportive environment that permeates every activity of the Inn.

The next 100 years

In December 2021, the Inns launched The Inns of Court Alliance for Women (ICAW) to coincide with the 100th anniversary of the first woman to be Called to the Bar, Ivy Williams. The Alliance exists to encourage and support women throughout their careers, and to increase retention and diversity within the legal profession.

It is doing this by providing a safe forum where issues facing women in law can be discussed to help foster a culture of mutual support, whilst also taking an intersectional approach to talks and events to ensure the voices of women facing inequality are heard.

Through the continued hard work of the Inns, the Bar Council, chambers, and other organisations such as Spark21, we will achieve ever greater gender equality at the Bar.

