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My life as a pupil

By Matthew Sellwood



Matthew Sellwood started pupillage at Devereux on 1st October 2014 and became a tenant in October 2015. He initially had a career outside the Bar during which he spent a number of years working for charitable organisations and served on the executive board of a local council as an elected politician. He then retrained as a barrister. In this note he shares his experience about life as a pupil at Devereux.



There is no doubt that the pupillage programme is challenging. With six written assessments, two advocacy assessments and numerous pieces of work for members of chambers other than your pupil supervisors, you truly are put through your paces during the year. However, Chambers also realises

that you are a work in progress and everyone wants to help you fulfil your potential. After all, Chambers has just made a significant investment in your success.

My first three months were spent with a supervisor who specialises in employment law. This involved a lot of shadowing at employment tribunals and the Employment Appeal Tribunal, as well as drafting advices and comparing my results to those sent out by my supervisor. Devereux makes sure that its pupils see work at the junior as well as the senior end, so I really got to learn about the kind of work that I would be doing if I became a tenant. Those first three months were largely spent trying to get as many mistakes out of the way as possible, at least before the assessment schedule started in December!

The second three months of my first six were spent with a personal injury supervisor. This involved a lot of travelling to conferences, attending settlement meetings and going to county courts.

During this time the assessment schedule really kicked in and other members of Chambers began to ask me for assistance with their cases. It got hectic but was tremendously exciting at the same time.

For example one week in that three months included attendance at the county court, research for a Supreme Court case, drafting a Particulars of Claim in a low-value 'slip and trip case' and attendance at a Joint Settlement Meeting, worth hundreds of thousands of pounds, near the top of one of London's most iconic buildings.

My supervisors ensured that during my assessment week I had a day available to focus solely on my assessments, but in order to do a good job I still needed to put in time over the weekend. I can genuinely say, however, that in contrast to some of my fellow pupils at other sets, any other occasions on which I was expected to work late or into the weekend were few and far between. Chambers wants to see your best, not simply measure how many hours you can sit at a desk.

When my second six arrived, a few cases were placed in my diary, but the clerks were very careful to ensure that my assessments and pupillage work took priority. This was particularly necessary during the two advocacy assessments for which I had only a couple of days to prepare and which were heard before a practising Employment Judge and High Court judge respectively. After those experiences, I am expecting that very few encounters in the first few years of tenancy are likely to faze me, which makes them valuable in their own way!

My third three months were spent in an insurance and professional negligence context and admittedly the pressure begins to build as the tenancy decision nears. It is impossible to entirely avoid a sense of stress at this time, but members at Devereux take the sensible approach of making tenancy decisions early and then treating one immediately as a colleague as soon as a tenancy offer is accepted.

What is more, the objective approach taken by Devereux to the assessments means that by the time the tenancy decision is near, any pupil should have a clear idea of how they are doing and whether they are likely to be taken on. With a near perfect retention record over the last few years, it seems that the pupillage interview committee are doing a good job in selecting candidates able to succeed as tenants.

Overall, pupillage at Devereux was a tough and at times stressful year which nevertheless taught me an astonishing amount. There is simply no substitute for working alongside dedicated professionals who are among the best at what they do, and receiving their feedback about how to improve.

If you're interested in any of the areas of law in which we practise and think you have the intellectual, advocacy and interpersonal skills to thrive at the Bar, I'd urge you to consider applying.



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