

Pupillage at St. Mary's

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Now that I have almost completed my pupillage, I have written an article about my pupillage experience at St. Mary's. I will share some of my journey, a 'day-in-the-life' and some tips for when you apply for pupillage yourself!

My journey to pupillage

I did not consider becoming a barrister until I was told about the role of a barrister during my international foundation course. Only after this, did I start to pursue a career at the Bar. I am from the Netherlands, the Hague (coincidentally), and did my entire education in Dutch before going on to study in Nottingham, at NTU.

After hearing about being a barrister, I went on to study Law and Criminology, and then the BTC. I was heavily involved with extracurriculars at university, such as mooting, negotiation, mentoring and pro bono legal experience.

It was during the BTC that I firmly decided to pursue a career at the Family Bar. After having done mini pupillages at different chambers, visiting pupillage fairs, and speaking to barristers practicing in different areas, I was able to better envisage what life at the Family Bar would be like, and make an informed decision on which areas I could not see myself practice in.

I applied for pupillage during the BTC, which is not something I necessarily recommend; as applying for pupillage is incredible tough, and doing so during Bar exams can reflect on your final results if you don't do this carefully! I was very happy that after the pupillage process at St Mary's, which consists of two interviews, I was offered pupillage in May 2024.

My pupillage experience

Pupillage is challenging, and personally, having no background in family law did not make this easier. However, pupillage is set up in such a way that after you complete it, you are ready to manage and conduct your own successful practice; and although I did not have a background in family law, I now certainly feel confident in being able to manage my own practice successfully.

Pupillage at St Mary's is structured in such a way that it develops and encourages your knowledge and skills basis very early on. You are allocated three different supervisors, being with each one for 4 months. Because you have different supervisors, you are exposed to a wide array of different work, their advocacy styles and the unique way in which they each manage their practice. This also allows you to progress your abilities in conducting written work in different areas (such as FDR notes in financial remedies, or skeleton arguments in complex care proceedings) and be exposed to developing your knowledge in each area of family law in a unique way.

Having had three supervisors is especially helpful once starting on your feet, as it allows you to adopt or amend elements you pick up from their practice or style, which you can then incorporate into your own practice as you go along. St Mary's offers a staggered start once in second six, closely

monitoring you as you build up your days in court, ensuring that if you are unsure about anything or feel overwhelmed at any stage, you are supported and positively encouraged. The way in which you learn and want to manage your practice is considered, which was especially helpful to me, as I have ADHD. Your supervisors also expect you to have sensible working hours and have open discussions with you about wellbeing and mental health. Especially at the Family Bar, this is incredibly important.

I also felt very supported, and besides my pupil buddy who I could always contact if I had any questions or queries, other members in Chambers would also make active efforts to ensure I felt comfortable and welcome, which really does illustrate how they are committed to ensuring you succeed.

My day-in-the-life as a pupil

Every day in both first and second six looked different.

In first six, I was observing my supervisor or other members in chambers in court every day. This meant that I was exposed to various different styles of advocacy, areas of family law, and different ways of preparation. Besides this, I was often in chambers drafting written work ranging from position statements, attendance notes, skeleton arguments, preparing case law updates, letters of advice, court orders and towards the end of my first six, I was preparing cases as if they were my own. This helped prepare me for second six and gave me the opportunity to feel what it would be like to have my own practice to manage. I also did some advocacy exercises in chambers, attended networking events, conferences and went to pupillage fairs and university events to help other aspiring barristers.

In my second six, I was given the opportunity to slowly build up my case load, starting with 2 cases a week, and then built up as and when I was ready, which was discussed with my supervisor as I went along. On the days where I did not have my own cases, I was shadowing either my supervisor or other members in chambers. I was also asked what kind of work or hearing I wished to see more of, which was useful before I started to cross-examine or had cases which involved more nuanced

This was incredibly helpful, and ensured I felt prepared and confident, and could spend more time on each case. As soon as I built-up my case load, I noted that this staggered start had been extremely beneficial, as I developed my confidence faster, and my knowledge in much more detail. I was exposed to a wide range of different cases and all areas of family law and was able to contact my supervisor or anyone in chambers if I needed any help or advice. I noticed that I started to develop my style of advocacy, both written and orally, as well as how I prepared my cases and managed any administrative tasks such as attendance notes. I thoroughly enjoyed my second six and was surprised how far I had come since I started pupillage, this was probably because of imposter syndrome. However, I was reminded by different members in chambers and my co-pupils that this never really goes away, and that this often is just a sign that you really care about doing a good job! This was some very helpful advice I received.

Top tips for those applying for pupillage at St Mary's

1. Start early with brainstorming answers to the written application. I created a word document which I could edit as I went along, so that by the time pupillage season came around, I was ahead in cultivating answers.

2. Show your personality in your application! This sounds very vague, and I personally found this quite difficult, although I was recommended by others to do so myself. I found a way to do so was going into more detail about my hobbies and interests, and not being afraid to give an “expected” answer to some of the questions. If you have any interesting life experiences, quirky hobbies, or enjoy a certain genre of music, books or art, put this in your application! There is a section on the pupillage gateway for hobbies and interests, and this should certainly not be skipped or underestimated.
3. Go into detail with what you learnt at mini pupillages or any other legal work experience. What type of hearing did you observe? Any niche areas of law? What did you learn from the (written or oral) advocacy of the person you observed?
4. Before my interviews I researched family law to update my “awareness” of any ongoing legal developments, interesting new guidance or notable recently reported cases.
5. Talk to yourself before your interview. My housemate at the time must have thought I was a bit weird, but it certainly worked for me. I would ask a question and then record myself answering it and even observe my body language in the mirror. I would then listen back to the recording and improve my answers as I went along.
6. Reach out to your university or Inn of Court for support! This is often overlooked, but incredibly useful. My Inn (Middle Temple) organised a lot of webinars supporting aspiring barristers that helped me both with my written applications and my interviews, as well as a ‘link scheme’ which gave me the opportunity to have a mentor as whilst I sought pupillage. My university also had an employability team who were able to organise a mock interview and give some additional support.
7. Take breaks and be kind to yourself. Trying to obtain pupillage is a gruelling process, and can be very tough on your mental health, especially your confidence. Make sure you get enough rest whilst applying and remember that rejections are part of the process.

Best of luck!



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