

1. My Lords, the Bar is always delighted to join your Lordships on an occasion such as this, upon the opening of important new courts that will provide a valuable resource for the public benefit, as well as a comfortable and suitable home for the distinguished judges and district judges who will sit here, and also for the administrative staff, on whose work we all depend, who will keep the ship not just afloat but, we hope, in full sail for years to come.
2. Those of us who practise in the Chancery Division of the High Court were saddened 3 years ago to see these excellent, purpose-built courts fall out of day-to-day use. (We do recall some words of judicial dissent at the time: expressed in a becomingly restrained way of course, and swiftly stilled by the then Chancellor.) But the dissent only reflected the high quality of the accommodation offered here. Subject to one matter, which I shall mention in a moment, the Thomas More courts proved themselves from the outset to be admirably suited to trials and other hearings in almost all civil cases. They are spacious, cool, comfortable, and well-designed for judges, advocates, litigants, witnesses, and the public and press alike. They will, I believe, serve the requirements of the Central London Civil Justice Centre admirably.
3. The one qualification that I mentioned relates to the lift system. I recall that the main lifts in the building went through a prolonged phase of repeatedly breaking down, and sometimes 2 out of the 3 would be out of operation. This was at about the same time that Lord Woolf was publishing his recommendations for civil litigation reforms. It was observed by court users that the lifts appeared to have embraced wholeheartedly Lord Woolf's principles – not so much encouraging early resolution of disputes as actually preventing the parties from reaching the doors of the court. Happily, the problems seem to have been overcome.

4. Our pleasure in joining the celebration today is by no means diminished by the fact that the courts are not new courts but old courts, or by the fact that, on the authority of Schedule 9 to the Crime and Courts Act 2013, the building is properly to be called a “hearing centre” rather than a court. I am told that humour already abounds with regard to the special needs of Judges in a hearing centre; and some have observed that a Hearing Centre should never be confused with a Listening Centre. It is an old joke, never better told than that by Sir John Falstaff in his encounter with Henry IV’s Lord Chief Justice. The dishonourable knight is accosted by the Chief for his failure to answer a summons in connection with the Gad’s Hill robbery. Falstaff affects not to hear him. “I think you are fallen into the disease of deafness”, says the Chief “for you hear not what I say to you”. “Very well, my Lord, very well”, replies Sir John: “Rather, and’t please you, it is the disease of not listening, the malady of not marking, that I am troubled withal”.
  
5. It is of course - as it always is - the Lord Chief Justice who prevails in the end, and his put down of Falstaff in a later scene is one that could be pressed into service in every court in the land on an almost daily basis: “Sir John, Sir John, I am well acquainted with your manner of wrenching the true cause the false way.”
  
6. The nomenclature of the 2013 Act notwithstanding, the substance of the matter is that the Central London County Court, formerly of Park Crescent, Marylebone, is being relocated and re-established here in the RCJ, in association with the Mayor’s and City of London Court, and will be able to perform an even more important function in London, as a court working side by side with the High Court.
  
7. It is worth reflecting briefly on the journey on which the Central London County Court has come and how its jurisdiction has developed, before considering how it is now equipped to surpass itself in its new home.

8. My own practice as a junior in the late '80s and early '90s took me regularly to Bloomsbury & Marylebone County Court, in Park Crescent. There were oddities about the building even then. One half of the building only connected with the other half through one of the main courtrooms on the ground floor. An unusual thoroughfare. HH Judge Quentin Edwards QC used to sit in that court, often dealing with the possession list, which in those days involved evidence being given orally in open court, in 30 or 40 separate cases in a morning. Judge Edwards was an absolute stickler for proper respect being shown for the taking of the oath. Those urgently en route to the other half of the building were not always on the same wavelength as the Judge. After many interruptions, the local rule of "no talking or walking during the oath" became established. But it was a very congenial, if slightly old-fashioned place.
  
9. In about 1991, the Crown Court at Wood Green was reopened and was used in part as a trial centre for longer trials taken from the London county courts. This was something of an eye opener for a young civil practitioner, used to attending such elegantly located courts as Bloomsbury, Westminster, Clerkenwell, West London and the Mayor's and City Court. Wood Green felt distinctly edgy. The building was full of Police. People milling around looked unfriendly. Carrying the Green Book rather than Archbold was not exactly a badge of honour. On the other hand, one did feel grateful to be grappling with the Rent Acts rather than running a cut-throat defence in a wounding.
  
10. Rather notoriously, in 1993, the Westminster County Court was evicted from St Martin's Lane, when someone forgot to comply with the statutory formalities for renewing its business tenancy. History does not relate what the resident judge, who was not known for his equanimity and forbearance, said to the civil servant who failed to serve the counternotice in time. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the civil servant in question was later promoted. Westminster County Court was missed for many reasons, not least the sign

on the ground floor entrance, which directed the public upstairs to the courts and straight ahead for “service and executions”.

11. As a result of that mischance, Bloomsbury and Westminster county courts were merged, and known as the Central London County Court. By 1994, the decision had been made to refurbish the Park Crescent Court building and establish it (instead of Wood Green) as a London civil trial centre, as well as a county court with its local jurisdiction. The Central London civil trial centre opened in October 1994. This time, for greater convenience, the two halves of the building connected at second floor level, and through the Court Office.
  
12. The Chancery List that had up to that time been operating at the Mayor’s and City Court was brought to Central London and run from there, and there has been a specialist chancery list ever since.
  
13. As a matter of record, the resident judges there from 1994 were, in order: Judge Sir Frank White, Judge Butter, Judge Collins and most recently Judge David Mitchell. As of last week, Judge Dight is the new resident judge of this Centre.
  
14. Now, almost 20 years on, the Central London Civil Justice Centre and Mayor’s and City Court, to give it its correct title, has moved to this new home. Without question, this provides great benefits and opportunities. There are probably more than I know, but these seem to be the main ones (in no particular order)
  
15. First, all the staff of the Court (including 8 new members) will be housed on two floors of a single building, in the same building as all the judges, where previously they were spread over 8 floors of different buildings. At a stroke, this will shorten the time needed for communal coffee breaks, to the delight of the Ministry of Justice. The building is purpose-built as a court building

and will facilitate strong administrative support and good communication between the judges and the staff.

16. Second, all the judges will be in the same building. This should result in a strong esprit de corps, in place of the division between the Circuit Judges' building and the District Judges' separate building in Park Crescent.
17. Third, there is greater opportunity for flexible management of cases in the High Court and in this Court. Transfers between those courts and altered hearing arrangements should inconvenience no one and be able to be effected without delay. Lord Justice Briggs' Chancery Modernisation Review has emphasised the importance of flexibility in case management and trial arrangements, to try to ensure that the most appropriate judge tries the case at the earliest possible time. Subject to the adequacy of resources, the prospects of that happening must be considerably enhanced now that London's civil justice centre is right here. The specialist judges who sit here are also section 9 Judges in the High Court, and deputy judges of the High Court can, in principle, sit here.
18. Fourth, the location of the Court, in the heart of legal London, means that connections between the judges and the Bar will be enhanced. I refer not to the proximity of the Seven Stars in Carey Street (although that congenial establishment is an additional resource in case of need), but to the fact that Counsel and their clerks (and solicitors) can hand deliver documents and bundles in the way that they have done for years in the High Court, and attend on the Court urgently when required. Hopefully, it will encourage the Bar and solicitors to provide the same high standard of support that the vast majority habitually do in the High Court and Court of Appeal.
19. Fifth, and of great importance, there are excellent facilities for the voluntary sector in the ground floor of the building. For the first time, the Personal Support Unit, the RCJ Advice Bureau and volunteers who provide free advocacy support will be able to operate together in a suite of rooms newly

created under David Thompson's supervision. We are all familiar with the increasing demands on the third sector and the importance of the work that is done by them to support the efficient operation of the courts today, when resources are short. Many of us present today walked in glorious weather on Monday evening to raise money for the cause. I am delighted that the Chancery Bar Litigant in Person Support Scheme, which has been universally praised by the Chancery Judges of the High Court, will be extended with effect from 1<sup>st</sup> June to applications heard by the Specialist Chancery Judges here, on applications days. Volunteers under the QB duty advocate scheme are to be cross-deployed, on a pilot basis, to help in this court too. The resources of the RCJ Advice Bureau, present downstairs, will facilitate references to the Bar Pro Bono Unit in the normal way.

20. It is usually the case with changes that appear to be wholly beneficial, that some disadvantage can be found. There may, for all I know, be someone who will miss the blue-green lino of Park Crescent, or the fine cuisine offered by that Court's kitchens. I feel more confident on another point. For those who like to shop, the exchange of Marylebone High Street for the Strand may not appear as an obvious enhancement in the tone or range of the retail offer. This may be so. Little consolation can be offered in this regard. There is, however, an unrivalled variety of sandwich shops and cafes nearby, and some fine new stone benches-cum-tank traps on which to sit outside the courts. If as a result of the move productivity increases and credit card balances fall, everyone will be happier in the end.

21. On behalf of the whole of the Bar, we wish the new Central London Civil Justice Centre well in its new home.

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