

In his excellent book, "Early London County Courts, A brief account of their history and buildings", which is erudite and entertaining in equal measure, one of our distinguished former colleagues, His Honour Anthony Bradbury wrote about the opening days of the predecessor to the central London County Court in 1847:

"The minutes book recording prosaic details of the first 1856 claims issued at the court has survived...

On 13th of April 1847 claims 1 to 157 were disposed of, the book recording names of plaintiff and defendant, the particulars and amount of the claim, the defence if any, and the recipient of the judgement and the amount.

"The very first claim for "work done, 7/6d" is marked "struck out", perhaps the most common order ever made in the County Court...

other early particulars of claim were for: – masons work and labour: repairing boots: bad money: hire a bath: tuition: medical attendances: washing."

Some things have changed and some things have not. There is still a high incidence of claims being struck out but I have yet to come across a claim for repair of boots or hire of a bath, but I am willing to be surprised.

In the 1890s it was suggested by the Law Society that a county court be created to serve the needs of the ordinary citizens of London Central London and I am told that there was discussion of it being set within the precincts of the Royal Courts of Justice. It has taken 125 years for that dream to be realised. Who said that it takes a long time to bring the judiciary round to the implementation of new proposals, however eminently sensible?

It puts me in mind of that old joke, a favourite of the director of the RCJ:

- how many judges does it take to change a light bulb?

- Answer: change?

After more than a century we have finally arrived here and I would like to thank all of those who have helped us along the way and all of those who I hope will help us in the future. Where such a substantial project as this has been brought to a successful conclusion it is invidious to identify

individuals to thank. In any event it has truly been a team effort involving many people including members of the senior judiciary (including the Presiders) my own colleagues, both judicial and administrative at Central London, HMCTS colleagues at the RCJ and in Petty France, members of the voluntary organisations who provide invaluable assistance to litigants in person, the Ministry of Justice, the contractors and many many others.

Tim Fancourt, in his address to the Lord Chief Justice and the other members of the court this afternoon identified most of the benefits that such a move will provide and I will not recite them again. The staff of the new court and my judicial colleagues are already benefiting from the very considerably improved surroundings in which they now work.

However, the intended changes to the court associated with the move are not only those which can be seen with the naked eye. We will build on the achievements of the past but we intend to use the move as an opportunity to introduce a step change in the way that civil justice below the level of the High Court is delivered in London. I want to pay tribute to my predecessors as resident judge. My three immediate predecessors are here this afternoon. The fourth, Sir Frank White, the first resident judge of Central London set a formidable challenge for those who were to follow him. Sadly he passed away relatively recently but I'm happy to be able to see that his wife, Lady White, is here today.

In planning this party a deliberate decision was made not only to use it as an opportunity to thank those who have been instrumental in bringing us this far but also to celebrate with the court users of the future the opportunity that this move will provide for them and for us. We have therefore invited a number of the current generation of court users and representatives of the next generation. Among you are a number of the practitioners whom we see regularly at Central London but also we have with us a number of pupils, solicitors trainees and students because it is for their prospective clients that the systems of the new court are being designed and by them that the success of that design will be judged in due course. I want them to play their part in making sure that the central London County Court is a success by telling us as often as is appropriate, openly and without trepidation, what it is that we do well and what they consider we do not do as well as we ought. Insofar as it is without our power my colleagues on the bench and from HMCTS will do all that we can to meet the challenges with which they present us.

Today does not mark the end of the journey but the beginning. I am a great optimist and believe that we can deliver the change which we have promised, but we all have to be patient and I would ask you to bear with us as we develop. I have irritated my colleagues over the last months by repeating a saying of dubious origin:

“It will be alright in the end:

if it isn't alright then it isn't the end”.

Ladies and gentlemen I would like you to raise your glasses in a toast to central London.

HHJ Marc Dight
Senior Chancery Circuit Judge
22 May 2014