

# Law

**Intellectual challenge, a constantly changing environment and the opportunity to effect change are just some of the characteristics of the roles available within the UK legal sector. Opportunities are many and varied; you could be supporting a vulnerable child, advising a government minister or managing a newsworthy commercial deal.**

## Solicitors

**T**he majority (65%) of the UK's 166,451 practising solicitors work in private practice law firms; these vary enormously in size and specialisation. There tends to be a division between firms that serve the needs of commerce and those that deal with clients with personal legal dilemmas. The remaining solicitors work outside private practice partnerships in a whole variety of different businesses and organisations.

### Getting in and entry points

A new system for qualification as a solicitor began in September 2021. The aim of this new system is to open up access to the profession and reduce the costs of qualification. In the new system you will need to:

- Hold a degree (or equivalent) – law or non-law.
- Pass two sets of centralised exams – the Solicitors Qualifying Exam (SQE) 1 and 2.
- Complete 24 months of qualifying work experience (QWE).

Employers and legal education providers and others are just beginning to integrate these changes into their academic, recruitment and training programmes. You are advised to keep up-to-date with developments by visiting the Solicitors Regulation Authority website and asking law firms



for their latest updates.

Careful research into whether this option is the right career for you is vital. Wherever your final destination you are likely to be investing many hours and considerable dedication to further study and additional qualifications after leaving Oxford. Historically there have been approximately 5,500 training contracts available each year; roughly 90% are offered by private

practice law firms. The remaining positions are to be found in the Government Legal Department, local government, legal departments in industry (known as 'in-house' and the Crown Prosecution Service). This landscape may change with the increased flexibility on QWE afforded by the new qualification route. Short periods of paid work experience, known as vacation schemes, are available at law firms during the Christmas, Easter and Summer holidays, as well as opportunities to attend open days. Increasingly, free to access online 'internships' are being offered by law firms too. In many firms the formal vacation scheme also forms a vital part of the recruitment process for a training contract.

## Barristers

There are approximately 17,800 barristers at the independent (or self-employed) Bar, practising in 400 sets of chambers across England and Wales. A further 3,116 work in an employed capacity for numerous organisations, including the Government Legal Department and the Crown Prosecution Service, as well as in commerce and industry. Barristers practise in a wide variety of legal areas such as family, criminal, intellectual property and international border disputes. There can be considerable differences in the nature and lifestyle of a barrister's work; some almost never appear in court whilst others are in most days. Others may spend the majority of their time drafting pleadings and opinions. However, advocacy remains a vital skill for the barrister, and it is one of the most distinctive elements of this role.

## Getting in and entry points

The Bar Standards Board (BSB) have also completed a full review of education and training. This has resulted in some changes to the qualification elements which are designed to improve access, flexibility and affordability. There are three components involved in qualification:

- The academic component. You must have a degree and, if this is not in law, you need to take a law conversion course (such as the Graduate Diploma in Law), which covers the seven foundations of legal knowledge.
- The vocational component. This is to provide you with the specialist knowledge required for practice at the Bar. Previously known as the Bar Professional Training Course (BPTC), there is now a greater choice of courses; some are available at a lower cost than before.

Pupillage/work-based component. This is your period of recognised training where you are supervised by a qualified barrister. The majority of pupillages are undertaken with chambers and are divided into two parts ('sixes'): the non-practising six months, during which pupils shadow a supervisor, followed by six months of practice when pupils undertake advocacy and other legal services. After this final stage of pupillage, a barrister can either apply for a permanent position as a tenant within chambers, or seek a role at the 'Employed Bar' (such as the Crown Prosecution Service or CPS) or elsewhere. At every stage of qualification, competition for places is intense. Approximately one in five students who apply for one of the Bar training courses will successfully complete through to pupillage. Careful assessment of your skills, motivations, and academic credentials, combined with detailed research on the role will help you to decide whether this is the right option for you. Many chambers offer a few days of work shadowing in the form of a mini-pupillage, which can be extremely valuable.

## Other options in law

Many Oxford law students decide not to go on to take the professional qualifications to become a solicitor or barrister, but are still keen to utilise their degree and do so through different sorts of legally related work. If, for example, you

are interested in compliance or corporate governance, the role of company secretary might appeal. Secretaries are responsible for ensuring that an organisation complies with standard financial and legal practice, so must have a thorough understanding of the laws that affect their work. If working with individuals or causes is more suited to you, there are options working as campaigners, policy writers or case workers within the third sector, NGOs and government organisations working in areas such as immigration, housing, and many other social welfare and human rights related areas. Perhaps life in academia has caught your attention? If it has, there will be options for you, with the addition of further study, to work in teaching and research within higher education or other legal education providers or research institutes. These are just some of the possible options!

### Extra-curricular ideas

- Join relevant student societies, such as the Oxford Law Society, the Bar Society or the Oxford Women In Law Student Society.
- Get involved with mooted competitions or join a debating society.
- Join the [Oxford Law Faculty's careers mailing list](#) to hear about events, mooted competitions and work experience. Law and non-law students can sign up.
- Volunteer for a not-for-profit organisation to help individuals, such as Citizens Advice or Asylum Welcome.
- If you are a law student, consider the Bonavero Institute Student Fellowships to contribute to a variety of legal organisations or engage with the Pro Bono Publico programme.
- Improve your commercial skills – get involved in one of the Careers Service employability programmes such as The Oxford Strategy Challenge ([TOSCA](#)) or apply for an internship.

### Next steps

[www.careers.ox.ac.uk/barristers](http://www.careers.ox.ac.uk/barristers)

[www.careers.ox.ac.uk/solicitors](http://www.careers.ox.ac.uk/solicitors)

[www.careers.ox.ac.uk/international-law](http://www.careers.ox.ac.uk/international-law)

[www.careers.ox.ac.uk/human-rights-public-interest-law](http://www.careers.ox.ac.uk/human-rights-public-interest-law)

### Alumni profile

# Ruth Bala

**What:** I am a barrister specialising in regulated lending law (acting for banks and financial institutions against the consumer industry). I am typically in court two or three times per week and I also undertake a lot of advisory work.

**Why:** The area in which I specialise is very technical and I have built up a genuine expertise over my 15 years of practice. Court is tremendous fun and the thrill of cross-examination is unmatched. There is scope to rise quickly and make a name for yourself. The income is very good at the Commercial Bar. Being self-employed means I can work from home a great deal, which helps me to manage childcare and domestics alongside my practice.

**Challenges:** At the Bar you tend to sink or swim. If you develop a busy practice, then the hours can be long and the work is intellectually exhausting. It is unproductive to dwell on losses or get weighed down by pressure from solicitors. You need to maintain a ruthless focus on completing the next case as effectively as possible.

**Advice:** I got a 2.1, but it is easier getting through the paper round for pupillage applications if you have a 1st, especially at the Commercial Bar. Once you are through the paper sift, the importance of your degree classification recedes. Interview processes for awarding scholarships and pupilages have improved over recent years and a lot of weight is placed on your ability to answer problem questions. The competition is intensely fierce and you should have some quality extra-curricular experience under your belt (quantity is less important). Even the application processes for voluntary legal experience can be competitive, so diarise the deadlines for your targeted placements and for applying for Inns' scholarships.

A colleague once advised me to 'be the barrister you are' – that is to say, do not try to model yourself on some perceived notion of how a barrister should speak and act.



### Position

Barrister, 4 Pump Court.

### Background

BA Classics, Oriel College, 2003.

## Alumni profile

# Robert Pieters

**What:** I am a trainee solicitor working at Jones Day, a global corporate law firm.

As a trainee solicitor, which makes up the first two years of your career at a law firm, you have the opportunity to experience a broad range of different areas within the firm, from litigation to M&A (Mergers and Acquisitions), to specialist areas such as competition.

**Career journey:** When I started at Oxford, I never expected that I would become a lawyer. It was through meeting other people who were interested in this career, particularly other non-law students, that I decided to see if a career in corporate law could be for me. While I attended events with several law firms while at Oxford, the skills that could be drawn on from non-legal experiences gained during my studies also proved valuable, such as roles in student societies, JCR committee, or non-legal work experience. After graduating, I was able to take part in a vacation scheme (a two-week internship) at Jones Day, which gives you and the firm an opportunity to find out more about each other. From this, I was fortunate enough to secure a training contract which included sponsorship to attend law school for two years, before starting at the office.

**Top tips:** Getting a training contract at a major law firm can often be a challenging process, so it is always worth remembering that there is no single path to becoming a trainee solicitor. Some people secure a training contract while still studying, whereas others gain experience in other areas before entering corporate law; some people have law degrees, whereas others (like me) studied something else before converting – non-legal experience can be extremely valuable to discuss during the application process. The main piece of advice I would give to all applicants is to take advantage of opportunities to meet people at different firms whenever possible, to find out first-hand about their experiences as lawyers.

**Position**

Trainee Solicitor, Jones Day.

**Background**

BA History and Politics, Keble College, 2019.

## Alumni profile

# Amanda Clift-Matthews

**What:** I specialise in criminal appeals before the Court of Appeal, Supreme Court and Judicial Committee of the Privy Council. Many of my cases are homicide cases, where I have a special interest in women and children convicted of murder. Being an appellate lawyer allows me to have better control over my time than if I were in and out of Court every day.

**Why:** Over time you get to know what style of advocate that you are and what you most enjoy. This is not a field for someone who is looking to make money. It is a job you do because you believe in it and are dedicated to making the criminal justice system better.

**Challenges:** I found early life at the Bar quite challenging. I was making decisions that affected people's liberty when I was only 23 years old. Long evenings working on the next case and early starts travelling around the court circuit can be the norm. But I found it, and still find it, an enormous privilege to be able to meet people from all sectors of society and assist them if I can.

**Advice:** Competition for pupillage is intensely fierce. During the initial pupillage sift, our chambers looks for both academic excellence and candidates who have demonstrated genuine interest in their chosen field through part-time or voluntary work, such as working at a law centre or legal charity.

Many chambers conduct blind interviews where each candidate tackles the same set of problems, and the interviewer knows nothing of the candidate's background. At that stage, whether you are selected is about how agile you are in your reasoning process and how well you answer the questions. Maturity is often an advantage.

Do not be afraid of taking a year out to do some legally related work. If you do not get pupillage first time around, it will only add to your attractiveness as a candidate if you spend the year usefully building up your experience.

**Position**

Barrister, Doughty Street Chambers.

**Background**

MPhil Criminology, Wolfson College, 2023.

## Alumni profile

# Bella Shearer

**What:** I work in the commercial part of the BBC, investing in TV programmes and distributing them around the world. I draft and advise on a range of commercial contracts for the production and financing of scripted drama and comedy TV programmes. I enjoy being part of getting content made that brings joy and entertainment to a lot of people.

**Why:** At university I realised I wanted to practise law but life at a big corporate firm was not for me. I did not set out to work in-house: I came across a BBC training contract opportunity while studying for the Legal Practice Course. I thought it sounded different to anything else I had seen advertised, so I went for it.

I have been at the BBC Group ever since. Multiple roles within the BBC have provided me with the benefit of quite a broad experience, such as attending court for injunction applications, advising documentary makers in the editing suite, and financing some famous titles.

**Challenges:** In my job it is not enough just to be up to date with all the latest legal developments. Key internal decision-makers often seek input at an early stage of deal-making, so I need to apply industry knowledge to provide commercially (as well as legally) sound advice. The media industry and media law change all the time so it can be a challenge to keep up, but I think that is also what keeps it fresh and interesting.

**Advice:** Plenty of people move to in-house roles after qualifying in private practice. Whether you are applying for in-house training or making the jump shortly after qualification, make sure you understand the industry the organisation is operating in.

I found talking to lawyers at career fairs, subject matter talks and networking events helpful when I was a student. Ask lawyers what they do not like about their job as well as what they like about it. This should give you a feel for the industry or corporate culture and whether it is a good fit for you.



## Position

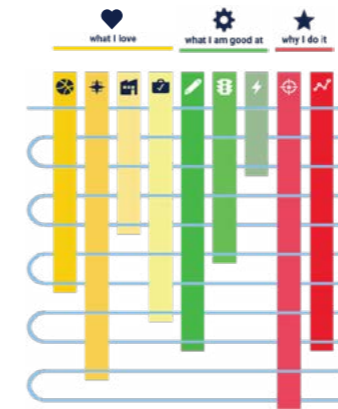
Senior Business Affairs Manager,  
BBC Studios Distribution.

## Background

BA Jurisprudence, Wadham  
College, 2015.



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**Main Location:** Chancery Lane, London.

**About Us:** South Square is a leading set of commercial law barristers. Our members have acted in many of the most important restructuring, insolvency, banking, commercial, company and fraud-related disputes of recent times.

**Opportunities available:** We offer up to 2-3 pupillages.

**Graduates sought:** Minimum academic qualification is a 2:1 degree.

**Visa sponsorship:** We welcome all applications and assist with Visa related matters to secure pupillage.

**Graduate salary:** Junior tenants can expect to earn materially in excess of their pupillage award in their first year. More information can be found on our website under Financial Planning.

**Vacation work:** We offer funded and un-funded mini pupillages.

**Annual vacancies:** 2-3 pupillages per year. 10 funded and 20 un-funded mini pupillages per year.

**Application advice:** Apply for pupillages via the Pupillage Gateway. Email a CV and cover letter for mini pupillages to [pupillage@southsquare.com](mailto:pupillage@southsquare.com).

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📍 Examination Schools, OX1 4BG

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Micro-internships last between two and five days and take place either remotely or in person.

