

# Gaining pupillage: is it still all about who you know (and what if you don't know anybody)?

If you're on the BVC right now and you've got pupillage, well done! This is a useful read for those without pupillage – ie the majority – and for those without legal 'breeding'.

## Bye bye old school tie

Historically the Bar was a notoriously nepotistic profession. Sons (less often daughters) of QCs and judges could school at Eton/Winchester/Harrow, decamp to Oxbridge, read 'jurisprudence' (not 'study law'), be taken on by father's clerk and then make their fortune, all without their feet touching the ground. The Bar was an opaque world in which an insidious old boy network ensured that there were always jobs for the boys.

Thankfully, things have changed a great deal. While still steeped in tradition, it is now a fairly transparent profession where overt nepotism is not tolerated. According to the Bar Standards Board any "chambers offering unadvertised pupillages as a 'favour' are in breach of the Equality Code [and] the Bar Standards Board may not register such a pupillage." And quite right too.

In terms of the number of pupillages available, you'll already know the statistics don't make for comfortable reading. But one positive effect of the limited availability of positions is that there are too few pupillages for them to be given freely to sons, nephews and godchildren. The bottom line is this: if you want pupillage you have to be good enough to get it and no one can rely on the strength of his or her connections alone.

Like any job worth having, applicants will use every advantage possible to set themselves apart from other candidates. And who can blame them? We're talking about things like mini-pupillage experience, marshalling, awards, scholarships and written recommendations. They won't get you a pupillage in themselves but, together with a decent application form, some solid academics and a bit of luck, you'll be on that interview shortlist.

So, what can you do right now to help level the playing field with your more privileged peers? What can you do today to improve your chances of making it past the first cut when the machinery of the Pupillage Portal rolls into action?

## Networking: it really is easier than you think

While nepotism may be unfashionable, networking is very much in vogue. It's not pretty, it's not always fun, it is, however, necessary. Thankfully, it's easier than you might think, and not quite as soulless and mercenary. And you can start doing it right away. Even if your Dad's a builder not a barrister, by the time you finish the BVC/BPTC you can have a few (legally connected) people who can, and will, help you out. Thanks to their intervention, your CV could be transformed into something good enough to secure at least a few interviews and hopefully a pupillage.

You may be able to get some useful experience just by asking around among your familial or social connections. These need not be posh connections or even very close ones. One of our contacts recently did some marshalling with a recorder outside London. Our contact's girlfriend's mum had delivered the recorder's babies a few years before and that tenuous connection was enough.

## Getting in with the Inn crowd

Our top tip, however, is to involve yourself in your Inn as much as possible. It's almost certainly too late to become head of the students' association (or preferably social secretary) but any kind of involvement will bring benefits and make you a more attractive candidate. There is no point sneering at old boy networks any longer; you are now, effectively, part of one. Use it. Talk to people and get your face known.

Get to know the most important people in the Inn, by whom we mean the education department. In our experience the friendliest and most knowledgeable people in the Inn, they have all the inside information, can alert you to important deadlines, and maybe even smuggle you into a qualifying session if you're a couple short before Call. They also act as the perfect facilitator between student and friendly bencher.

By way of example, one evening at post-debate drinks, a source of ours was talking to a member of the education team. They mentioned, entirely in passing, that they would love to do some marshalling at some point. Without warning, they were frogmarched to the nearest amiable judge. “X would like to marshal you, Master Y.” The bencher gave our source his e-mail address, and they contacted him the next day. The marshalling was arranged for the following month and our source’s CV was improved dramatically in the space of that 30-second exchange. Undoubtedly they would have been too nervous to approach the bencher on their own.

## Mooting and debating

One of, if not the best way, to get known at the Inn is to involve yourself in mootings and/or debating. It’s far more prestigious to be involved in the competitions at Inns than those at law school (unless you have progressed to a national stage). Not only does mootings build your confidence and make you a better advocate, it enables you to meet people. The judges will invariably be benchers of the Inn, and by definition they are either senior barristers or real judges. They have given up their free time to help out, so by and large they are personable people who genuinely want to get to know students and help them where possible. They will often head to the local pub afterwards, so join the crowd and get yourself along there.

Mooting and debating can have an unexpected and wonderful effect on both your pocket and job prospects. For example, the runners-up at one Inn’s mootings competition final this year were presented with a cheque for £325, and the winner took home £1,500. Not bad for a night’s work. Far more important than the money were the named awards “for excellence in mootings.” To top it all was the frankly priceless letter of recommendation, written for each competitor by Treasurer of the Inn (a man at the pinnacle of the profession). The letter contained the line “I recommend X to you most strongly as you consider your pupillage intake for the year.” None of the competitors knew that the letter was part of the prize when they entered. Imagine having that letter attached to your application. See how mootings might be worthwhile now? Most Inns’ mootings and debating competitions begin in January, so you’ve still got time to enter. Man up and do it.

## Law school

What can your BVC/BTPC provider do to help your chances? Well, they can give you an excellent education and the resources to get that crucial ‘Very Competent’

grading. Beyond that, some students tell us that they’ve found formal career development assistance pretty useless. By all means go to the careers service, but don’t go expecting the world. The opportunities that your Inn can provide for you far outweigh the opportunities you can find at law school. Having said that, pro bono work is valuable and you should try to get involved in the schemes run by your law school. Obviously you’re doing it because of your compassionate, altruistic nature, but it won’t have escaped your attention that pro bono is another major addition to your pupillage application. It won’t take over your life, it can be pretty interesting and it gives you something to talk about in interview.

It is important to remember the tutors on your BVC/BPTC course, by and large, used to be barristers. They are therefore an invaluable resource. Got a tutor you get on with well? Tap them for contacts. Don’t have one you get on with particularly well? It doesn’t matter. Most of them like helping. And it looks good for them when students get pupillage. So ask anyway and buy them a drink afterwards.

## Mini adventures

Alongside the frantic networking, there’s some less sociable tasks to be getting on with at this time of year. If you’re light of a mini pupillage or two, you need to be contacting all the chambers in your favoured practice areas right now. Often sets won’t get back to you for weeks or even months, often they will have no space left for mini pupils, and it’s always possible that they’ll simply not like your CV. So ping out as many applications as possible. They don’t take a great deal of time, as the covering letter can be almost identical provided that the sets you’re writing to do the same kind of work.

## Know your priorities

The BVC/PTC year is a slog. It’s intense in parts, boring in others. Sorting out dining, mootings, debating, mini-pupilages, marshalling and the like should stay at the top of your priorities no matter how much of your time is taken up by studying. It is genuinely not as difficult to take the necessary steps as it might first seem and it’s likely that you’ll have a pretty good time doing the extra-curricular stuff.

These activities, taken together, give you more than a fighting chance of reaching interview stage; if you want a pupillage, you’ll need to do them.

Good luck!