



1998-2023
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REPORT ON PUPILLAGE PROCESS, 2023

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Introduction

This is the first published review of St Philips Chambers' pupillage process, and we hope that it will be a helpful guide to those thinking of applying to us. It is based on the January-May 2023 process, in which we recruited 7 pupils to start in October 2024, each taking a specialist pupillage in one of our practice areas (crime, family, business and property, employment/personal injury).

Credit should also go to 5 Essex Court Chambers, who for years were the only set in England and Wales to publish a report like this, and who were an excellent example for us in undertaking this exercise.

Why are we doing it?

Pupillage applications have hugely changed over the years, primarily for the better (hopefully no more questions like "which biscuit would you be, and why?"), but they retain an element of mystique and, unfortunately, inconsistency across the board.

At St Philips, we have taken the view that candidates' academic history and current interests are not accurate indicators of future performance, nor do they encourage diversity within recruitment – people naturally recruit people who look, sound or behave like themselves, and that's no way for a business to grow.

Quite apart from trying to ensure the success of St Philips in the years to come, we are firm believers in equal opportunities at the Bar, which has to be representative of the people who make up our client base. Our recruitment of barristers in recent years reflects this ongoing commitment to encouraging

applications from diverse backgrounds, but we know there is more work to do

Part of the task involves removing any air of mystery from the process, and allowing potential candidates to know

- a) what will be required of them,
- b) how they can maximise their chances of success, and
- c) whether, if they are successful, this is the kind of place they would like to work at.

We hope that this report goes some way to doing exactly that.

Who are we?

The Pupillage Committee ("PupCom") this year comprised [Ali Tabari](#) as chair, together with [Ben Close](#), [Jonathan Barker](#), [Carl Templar-Vasey](#), [Matt Cullen](#), [Cat Ravenscroft](#) (all crime), [Sarah Buxton](#), [Nick Brown](#), [William Horwood](#), [Anna Peaston](#), [Bethany Armitage](#) (all family), [Gavin McLeod](#), [Jonathan Gale](#), [Natalie Kearney](#) (business and property), and [Elizabeth Hodgetts](#), [Colin Baran](#), [Bruce Frew](#) and [Sofia Ashraf](#) (employment/PI).

All are, of course, volunteers, and some are also qualified pupil supervisors. All participated in marking the paper applications and conducting interviews, and all had a vote when it came to choosing the candidates to make offers to.

We are also enormously grateful to members of chambers staff, without whose invaluable help no pupillage process could have been carried out. Juliette Print as chambers administrator, Pamela Paul and Vas Papantoniou on reception, Lauren Matthews and Guy Dunwoody in Events, and Joe O'Donnell and Paul Cousins in IT – thank you all so much.

The pupillage calendar

St Philips is not on the Pupillage Portal, but we follow the same timings, to ensure fairness; we intend to do the same next year. Our applications opened in early January 2023, and closed in mid-February 2023. We conducted first-round interviews at the end of March, final-round interviews at the end of April, and made offers on 5th May.

In early January, we ran a Pupillage Information Evening in chambers, which was openly advertised as being a relaxed and informal evening where any potential candidate could attend and ask their questions (and have some drinks and snacks too).

We outlined the pupillage application process, and gave practical tips on what makes a good paper application – we tried to steer clear of the usual platitudes about spell-checking the form, and brought out some real-life examples of previous answers which had worked well, and which had not.



In attendance were around 100 potential candidates, together with 12 current St Philips pupils or junior tenants, who were all available to answer questions from our guests.

We did not ask senior members of chambers to attend, because we did not want any of our guests to feel inhibited, or as if they were in an informal interview – it was explicitly not a networking evening, and instead was entirely focussed on helping candidates do their best. As we will detail below, it had the desired effect.

Our process

Candidates filled out an application form which contained their personal details and academic history, provided any additional relevant information in 250 words or fewer, and then answered 5 questions, each limited to 250 words.

Name-blinding

Our chambers administrator removed the personal information from each form (keeping them only for reference), and labelled each form as 'SP001', 'SP002' etc. This 'name blinding' exercise aimed to minimise the risk of subconscious bias creeping into the minds of the markers.

Academic history sift

The academic history and 'additional relevant information' section were given to the PupCom chair. His task was to see whether each candidate had an academic history which was at least sufficient to support a successful application. Generally, a candidate with at least a 2:1 degree and BBB at A-Level or equivalent was the standard required and, if they have completed law school, at least a pass on the GDL/LPC/BPTC; however, exceptions were made for those with older degrees or A-Levels (roughly 2010 and earlier) which had been more than compensated-for by relevant work experience in the meantime.

Several candidates explained the mitigating circumstances behind any sub-standard exam performances, and these were treated on their own merits on a case-by-case basis – often those performances were a blip in an otherwise solid academic history, and were clearly anomalous.

Unfortunately, around 10% of the applicants demonstrated an academic history which was consistently below the level which would support a successful career at the Bar or would withstand the rigours of the interview process and, in order not to give false hope, we declined those applications.

For those who passed this stage, their academics were simply a gateway to the next stage – their academic history would not become relevant at any other stage, unless in the exceptional circumstance that two final-round candidates were in a 'dead heat', in which case academic and

work history might be a factor (amongst others) to play a part in making a decision. That was not the case this year.

Written applications marked

Of the remaining 90%, the written applications were distributed to PupCom members to mark, with all personal information stripped out. All that the markers saw was the 'SP--' number, and the answers. Each of the 5 questions carried 5 marks, and each form was marked by two separate PupCom members who did not see each other's marks – this meant that each candidate achieved a total score out of 50 at the end of this process.

Where the difference between the two markers was 8 points or greater, it was marked for a third time by the PupCom chair, again without knowing what the scores were. That third score was added to the others and then multiplied by 0.67 (for example, a candidate was scored 25 and 11, the chair scored them 21, and the way to reach the score out of 50 was $25+11+21 \times 0.67 = \underline{38}$). Pleasingly, this type of disparity was very rare.

Candidates who achieved a score of 34 or more were put through to the next round, which comprised around 35% of the paper applications. This was not a number that was set in stone, but allowed us to take a sensible number of applicants through to the interview stage, where we could be confident that they would have a reasonable chance of being successful.

These scores and answers did not become relevant again until the final round, when they may have formed the basis of some questions asked in the second half of the interview.

First round interviews

Those successful candidates then faced a 10-minute interview via Zoom, in which they were asked the same three questions as every other candidate in their chosen specialist practice area. It may be that we revert to in-person interviews at this stage next year, but this remains under discussion.

Two questions were based on the candidates' chosen area of law, and the third was on a current affairs topic. The panel knew nothing about the candidates' personal details (except their name),

nor their academic/work history, nor how they scored in the paper application. Of those candidates, approximately 33% were advanced to the final round.

Final round interviews

Each final round candidate was sent a problem question a week in advance of their interview, each one tailored to the specialist area of practice they had applied for. It was only at this stage that the interview panel saw anything of the candidate's academic/work history, and their answers to the written questions.

The in-person interview lasted up to 35 minutes, and was run by PupCom members in that specialist practice group: the first half involved the candidate giving their presentation on the problem question, and taking follow-up questions from the panel; the second half was more of a discussion about the candidate's CV, which was where work experience (including pro bono) and mooting/debating experience became especially relevant.

We offered 2 pupillages in crime, 2 in family, 2 in employment/PI¹, and 1 in business and property. Each of our first-choice candidates accepted our offer, despite several having had multiple offers from sets in Birmingham and beyond. We hope that this is a positive reflection on our recruitment process, but we are always open-minded about how to improve.

¹ Initially there was only 1 employment/PI pupillage on offer, but this was amended to reflect (a) business need and (b) the high-quality field of applicants.

What went well, and what didn't

Paper applications

We felt that the quality of applications on paper was a real improvement on what we had previously seen – hopefully it is not just wishful thinking to guess that the tips given in the Pupillage Information Evening had something to do with it.

The strongest candidates demonstrated some common traits in their written answers:

- They submitted their applications long before the deadline. Those who submitted their forms within a day or two of the deadline often rushed their answers, or failed to proof-read them properly.
- They saw 250 words as being a limit, not a target. Sometimes less is more, though it is always a balancing act not to make the answer too sparse.
- They evidenced everything they asserted, and avoided general statements with no firm foundation to it (“I am an excellent team player”, rather than the much better “My experience as captain of the university hockey team honed my ability to work as part of a team”, etc).
- They talked about more than just law and legal experience. The best learnings often come away from studies or a workplace.
- They understood the ‘question behind the question’. For example, why would chambers be asking a question about what you have learned about being responsible for a team, or how you showed integrity when the morally wrong choice would have been far easier? What we are really asking is whether you will work well giving direction to your team shortly before a trial, or what you would do when a lucrative case throws up intractable ethical problems.
- They had clearly thought hard about whether their examples really went to the heart of the question, rather than shoe-horning into an answer some story or example they wanted to use at all costs.
- They did not just explain what they did, but how and why (those being the bits we really want to hear about).

- They did not use the same experience (e.g. participation in a moot, or a job) for more than one question.
- They avoided trite or cliché answers. It is not especially impressive to tell us that you did not pocket that £20 note that a customer left on the floor (i.e. you resisted committing a crime), but it is more impressive to tell us about a tough choice you took which had real and severe consequences for you.
- They avoided banalities and 'fillers', and avoided attempting to flatter St Philips or 'name-dropping'.

The weaker candidates did the mirror image of the above. It was sometimes frustrating to see candidates who clearly had some excellent material available to them, and yet failed to deploy it properly.

Interviews (first round)

A 10-minute interview rewards a candidate who is able to hone in on an issue and discuss it authoritatively, and quickly roots out candidates who rely more on 'padding' to survive. Conducting it remotely has the obvious downside of preventing many candidates from expressing their personalities as well as they might otherwise do, and might well exacerbate nerves – we were aware of this, and made appropriate allowances for it.

The stronger candidates shared similar characteristics:

- They were structured in their answers, but the structure was expressed in a natural, not formulaic way. This meant that the interview became a discussion, rather than resembling a series of formal submissions.
 - Candidates who began every answer with a robotic "I have three points I would like to make in response to this question. The first is XYZ..." scored lower on their communication skills than those who led with a more relaxed approach.
- They knew their subject matter. It was clear which candidates had 'crammed' for the interview by reading the last month or so of legal press on their chosen practice area, and which ones had clearly taken a genuine interest for the past year.

- They did not repeat themselves.
- They came to a conclusion, and did not sit on the fence.
- They were prepared to defend their answers, even when challenged by the panel, and to do so with proper reasons. This goes back to knowing their subject matter.
- Especially on the final question on current affairs, they clearly took an interest in the world around them, and were able to advance mature arguments on topics as diverse as who should host major sporting events, who should and shouldn't be allowed to go on strike, celebrities' expectations of privacy, and taxation on unhealthy foods.

There was a repeated trend in respect of two common occurrences in the interviews, which we thought detracted from candidates' performances, and were lacking from the performance of the stronger candidates:

- The first was the overly-formal structuring of answers, as if this were a moot and not an interview (as discussed above);
- The second was the tendency to ask for time to answer every question. Some questions simply did not require it, and it smacked of 'buying time'; sometimes the pauses were so long that it became a little disconcerting; often it ramped up the expectations of the panel, on the basis that if an answer has been so carefully considered it ought to be well worth waiting for (which penalises the candidate by unwittingly raising expectations).

We marked candidates on: communication, effective advocacy, analytical thinking, and ability to respond to questions, each out of 10 for a total of 40 points. The candidates put through to the final round generally achieved scores of 27-30, which was the result of our attempt to strike a balance between consistency, on the one hand, and flexibility, on the other.

Final round interviews

The final-round interviews involved problem questions devised by specialists in the field, and were designed to be difficult (though not prohibitively so). They rewarded thorough preparation, and there were a small number of candidates who had plainly spent insufficient time researching the topics and applying sharp analysis to them – those interviewees were unable to do themselves

justice, which was always regrettable.

The strongest candidates had some common traits:

- They had plainly spent a long time researching and planning their answer – somewhere around 6-8 hours seemed to be the 'sweet spot'.
- They gave firm advice, albeit sensibly caveated in appropriate places. Clients need to be given a firm and discernible steer, rather than being given a suite of options with no indication of which is the best course of action.
- They identified the key issues, and kept those as the focus of their answers. This meant that when they were asked questions by the panel, they were able to deal with them in a way whereby they avoided being led down rabbit holes and dead ends; this also helped them to maintain a good structure to their presentation.
- They thought through the practical implications of the legal advice they were giving the fictional client. This demonstrated maturity, rather than an over-reliance on solely legal knowledge.
- They recognised where an aspect of the question was finely balanced, but came down in favour of one route or interpretation.
- They were then able to justify positions they took in their advice, and were robust when dealing with challenges. This confidence came as a result of their excellent preparation.
- Their presentations were engaging and interesting. Tone and pace were important, as was the use of ordinary and not over-formal language.

Candidates should be aware of something rather counter-intuitive about these interviews. The harder the panel pushes a candidate, the more it shows how impressive they consider the candidate to be – the harder questions are designed to test the outermost limits of the candidate's ability, and should be taken as a compliment. An interviewee who stands up to the advanced question will inevitably be a realistic choice for pupillage.

Who received offers of pupillage?

The candidates who received offers all gave exceptional performances at interview. Often they had some relevant work experience in the field, which gave them an edge in answering the advanced questions, and they often demonstrated a mature understanding of the subject matter.

One successful applicant had been a reserve choice for St Philips in 2022, and had clearly gained some superb work experience in the meantime which allowed them to really shine this time around. They will join a long list of current St Philips pupils and junior tenants who applied to us more than once before being successful – we value those who react to adversity with determination and focus, and there is no future 'black mark' against any unsuccessful candidate. We know that candidates develop and improve over time, and their potential is not 'fixed' at any one point in their journey.

Some of our successful candidates received offers from other chambers, and we were delighted that they chose to accept a place at St Philips instead. We had two other candidates who met the standard for being offered pupillage, but were pipped at the post by candidates who put in even stronger performances; they both accepted offers of pupillage at excellent sets elsewhere, which vindicates our assessment of them as being good enough for an offer.

There was no common trait between the successful candidates as to gender, socio-economic background, ethnicity, education history or outside interests. They were recruited on their own merits, having demonstrated (in their own unique ways) that they had the traits required for a successful career at the Bar. We are very excited to see them again in 2024, and to see more excellent candidates in the competition next year.

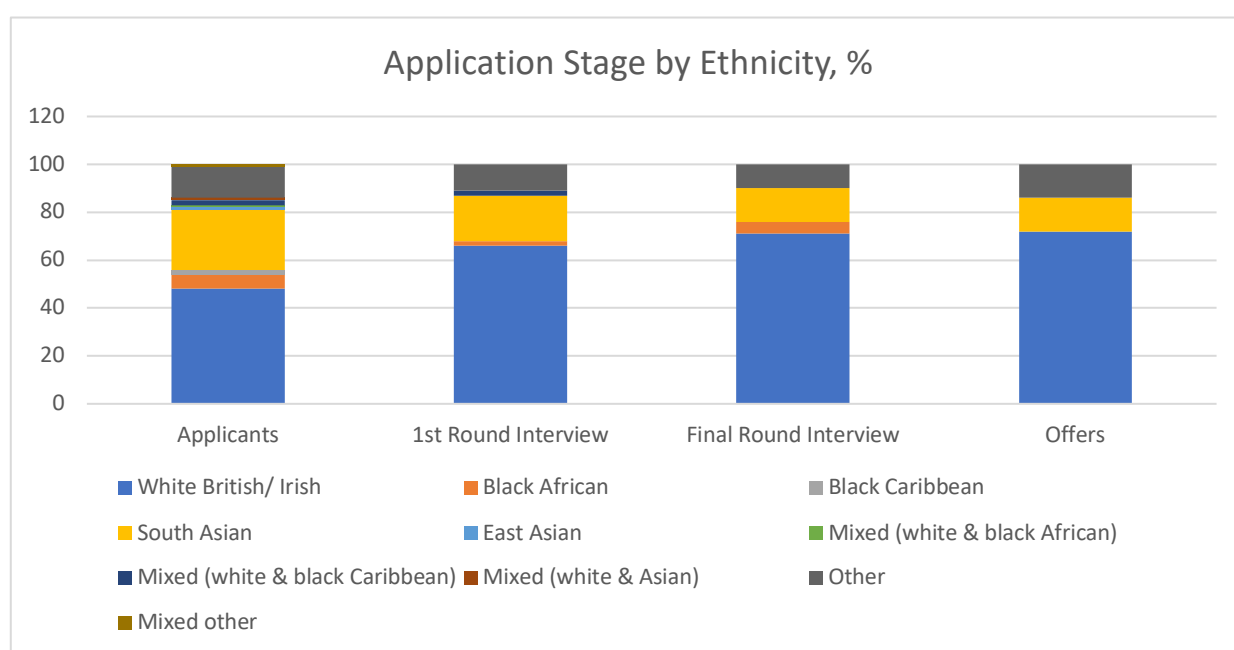
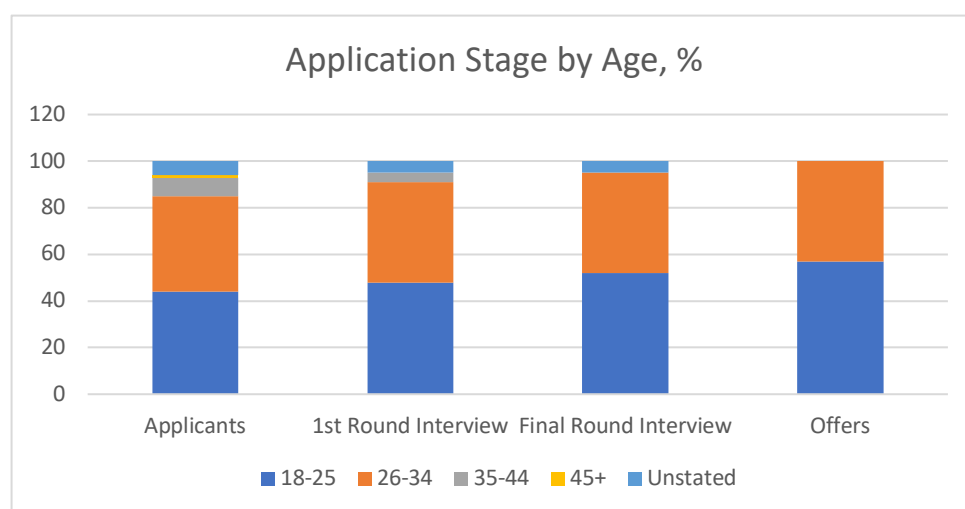
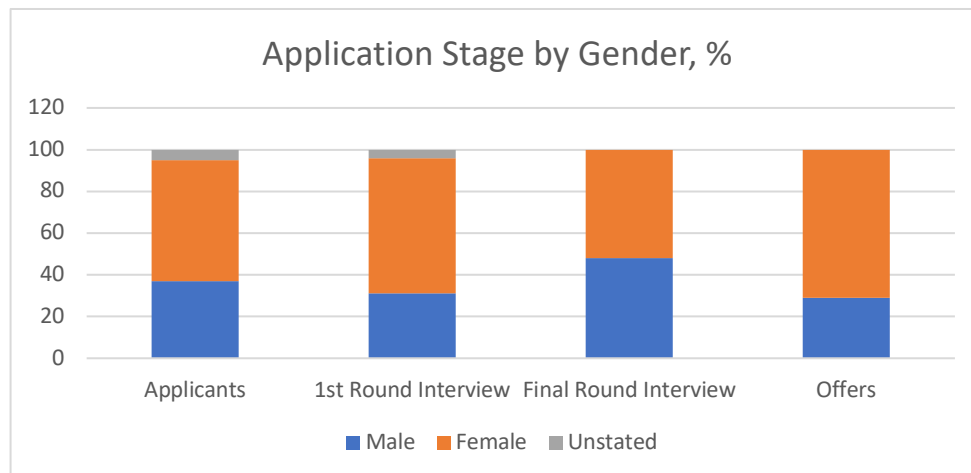
Conclusion

We hope that this report has been helpful in setting out our process, and giving some indicators of what successful candidates tend to display, both on paper and in interview.

We wish any prospective candidates the very best of luck in finding pupillage, and we strongly encourage you to consider [St Philips](#) in the next round of applications – it really is a wonderful place to work and, whoever you are, you will fit in.

June 2023

Relevant statistics



By gender (as percentages)

Stage	Male	Female	Unstated
Applicants	37	58	5
First round interview	31	65	4
Final round interview	48	52	0
Offers	29	71	0

By age (as percentages)

Stage	18-25	26-34	35-44	45+	Unstated
Applicants	44	41	8	1	6
First round interview	48	43	4	0	5
Final round interview	52	43	0	0	5
Offers	57	43	0	0	0

By ethnicity (as percentages)

	Applicants	First round interview	Final round interview	Offers
White British/Irish	48	66	71	72
Black African	6	2	5	0
Black Caribbean	2	0	0	0
South Asian	25	19	14	14
East Asian	1	0	0	0
Mixed (white & Black African)	1	0	0	0
Mixed (white & Black Caribbean)	2	2	0	0
Mixed (white & Asian)	1	0	0	0
Other	13	11	10	14
Mixed other	1	0	0	0