

BIVR's Heritage

Origins of the Institute

General

We started with the illustrious name of "The Institute of Shorthand writers Practising in the High Court of Justice", later "in the Supreme Court of Judicature" and through gradual metamorphoses now find ourselves "The British Institute of Verbatim Reporters". In the early days shorthand writing was all about working in the High Courts and no one could have foreseen the technological world that would bring with it speech-to-text subtitling or digital tape-recording. Charles Dickens wrote one of the very first forms of shorthand, and thereafter followed Gregg and Pitman before machine shorthand in the form of Grandjean, Palantype and Stenograph made its debut. The profession was completely male-dominated, pen writing experts whose notes were for the most part transcribed by "readers" (also known as "assistants"). It says much for the accuracy of the notetaker's outlines that this was at all possible. It also says much for the more leisurely tempo of life in those days. With today's frenetic pace and desire to outdo everyone else in the speed of delivery, one wonders whether the outlines would have been quite so well formed in those circumstances.

Origins

In the early 1800s a petition to Parliament by Shorthand Writers Practising in the courts of law was prepared in which the petitioners "with almost seraphic fervour", prayed for the institution of an inquiry into the practice of the art of shorthand writing with a view to its recognition and regulation as a profession by imposing upon it regulations similar to "those imposed upon the practice of liberal professions, for securing competency in regard to character, general acquirements and professional skill, which while they deter the incompetent, are found to offer additional attraction to men of respectability, talent and education."

Unfortunately, the ear of Parliament was not receptive to the demands of a small minority – then as now being more attentive "to the voice of importunity or the demands of the multitude".

Even before that research reveals that in 1530 Sir James Dyer (later Chief Justice) recorded in shorthand arguments and judgments "in all cases of importance", and in 1571 it is revealed that Thomas Norton recorded the trial of the Duke of Norfolk for high treason.

However, it is not until 1849 that any attempts were made to form an association of shorthand writers when The Society of Practising Shorthand Writers appears briefly on the scene, with its constitution being adopted in 1850. One of the

objects of this body is stated to be "The maintenance of the respectability and the promotion of the interests of the profession, and the establishment of a fund for the relief of sick or distressed members, their widows or orphans". It appears that of the 33 known shorthand writers at the time, 25 pledged themselves to conform to the rules of the Society. Unfortunately, the Society appears to have collapsed in about November 1851, so very short lived indeed.

Fourteen years later a group of twenty shorthand writers assembled in preliminary meeting and unanimously resolved "That it is expedient to form an Association of Shorthand Writers, the objects of which shall be to secure the efficiency and improve the status of its members, and to adopt measures for promoting the interests of the profession generally." A resolution in favour of forming an association to be called The Institute of Shorthand Writers was adopted in October 1865, and a constitution was adopted. Membership was offered immediately to every person, above the age of 25, who had been in actual and exclusive practice on his own account before 1 January 1865 and who could "within a month satisfy a majority of the first members that he possessed 'such qualifications of respectability, intelligence and professional skill as afforded a reasonable guarantee for his accuracy and fidelity'." It appears that subsequent to that, however, every applicant for membership had to satisfy the Committee that he was well skilled in the art of shorthand writing in addition to the fact that he was a fit person to be admitted. It appears that in the first year of its existence there were 28 members (although records reveal that there were in fact 44 practising shorthand writers).

"Minutes of Proceedings of a Meeting of Shorthand Writers held at the Law Institution on Saturday 20th May 1865"

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	Minutes of Proceedings at a Meeting of Shorthand Writers held at the Law Institution
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	Shorthand Writers held at the Law Institution
	on Saturday, 20th May 1865.
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	Present. Volth. pp 180-4
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	4. B. Snell Esq in the Chair.
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	been read, It was moved by M. Knight and
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**	It was moved by M. Mught and

Seconded by M. W Counsell, "That it is expedient to form an association to be called The Metropolitan Shorthand Writers' Association' upon such a basis as shall afford some quarantee of the efficiency of its members." There was moved in amendment, by Me fregory, and seconded by M. Levy the following Resolution - "That it is expedient to form a Society to be called, The association of Shorthand Winter's. The amendment having been put to the Meeting there appeared: against the amendment. For the amendment. Majority against Amendment. There was moved, in amendment, by Me Reed, and seconded by M. Hodgers Sen't the follow ing Resolutioni- "That it is expedient to four an Ossociation of Shorthand Writers, the objects of which shall be, to seewe the efficiency and inprove the status of it's Members, and to adopt measures for promoting the interests of the Profession generally."

favor of the Umendment, which having been fut to the meeting was carried unanimously. It was and moved by M. George Swell seconded by elle ellecting be adjourned till this day forthight, at the Law Institution at 5 p. m. and that a copy of the Resolution passed be sent to each of the Gentlemen who were incited to attend on the present occasion."

Adjourned till Saturday 3rd June meet at 5 p. m. at Saw Institution.

(Signed) F. Flersee

Unfortunately, after much in-fighting the Institute was dissolved by resolution of the members in November 1867 and it was not until 4 March 1882 that the next attempt to form an association of shorthand writers was made. On that date a general meeting of shorthand writers, attended by 58 members of the profession, unanimously resolved: "That it is desirable that a Society or Institute of Shorthand Writers practising in the High Court of Justice be formed". It was also resolved that this be done by reviving the 1865 Institute (with such modifications as were deemed necessary at the time). A special committee was appointed to draw up a constitution and was also empowered to elect as first members of the Institute all applicants for membership who were in bona fide practice as shorthand writers in the High Court of Justice. On 17 April 1882 the first General Meeting of the Institute of Shorthand Writers Practising in the High Court of Justice, the constitution adopted and "the foundations (were laid) of an institution that has steadily progressed.....". Amongst the objects of the Institute at the time were "To promote the more efficient practice of the art of Shorthand Writing in connection with legal proceedings, and to raise the qualifications and status of the members". Anyone who applied for membership after that date had to satisfy the Council that he had served as an articled pupil in the office of a member or members for not less than five years and passed such examinations as required under rules.

Thus we have the beginnings of the Institute that has remained with us until today (although modified by amalgamation with other bodies and up-dating of the Memorandum and Articles (formerly the Constitution) to take account of changes in culture and technology). The Institute was registered with Companies House and incorporated on 20^{th} January 1887.

No. 23811 C. N.L. 230 71.
Certificate of Incorporation
Institute of Shorthand Writers practising in the Supreme Court of Judicature.
Institute of Shorthand Writers practising in the Supreme bourt of Judicature (the word
Limited "being omitted by Licence of the Board of Trade). is this day Incorporated under the Companies' Acts, 1862 to 1883, and that this Company is Limited.
Given under my hand at London, this Juventieth day of January One Thousand Eight Hundred and Eighty Seven:
Feo: £5. Registrar of Joint Stock Companies.

Framed original Certificate of Incorporation (held at the registered address)

MEMORANDA.

EVERY Company registered under the Companies' Act, 1862 (ss. 39—40), must, before carrying on business, file with the Registrar of Joint Stock Companies, Somerset House, a Notice of the Situation of its Registerd Office, and subsequently of any change therein.

Every Company, having a Capital divided into Shares, must file annually with the Registrar a Summary of its Capital and List of its Members (ss. 26—27), made up to the 14th day after the first Ordinary General Meeting in each year, and to be registered within 7 days after such 14th day.*

Every Company formed under the Companies' Act, 1862, must hold a General Meeting within Four Months after its Memorandum of Association is registered (Co.'s Act, 1867, s. 39). The first return of Capital and Members is to be made up to the 14th day after this Meeting, and registered within 7 days of such 14th day.

A Copy of every Special Resolution passed by a Company (ss. 51—52), must be printed and forwarded to the Registrar within 15 days from the date of the confirmation of the Resolution.

All Documents tendered for registration must be signed by an authorized Officer of the Company (s. 64), and must be according to the approved Forms, and bear an impressed Companies' Registration Fee Stamp of 5s., except in the case of an Increase of Capital, when an *ad valorem* Stamp must be impressed upon the prescribed Form for giving Notice of such Increase (s. 34).

Stamped Forms for the various Notices and Returns under the Companies' Acts may be obtained at the Companies' Registration Office, Somerset House. The charge is 5s. 2d. for each Stamped Form, except for a Memorandum of Association or a Notice of Increase, in which cases the Fee depends upon the nominal Capital. Unstamped continuation Forms for Lists of Members are sold at One Penny per Form.

This provision does not apply to a Company registered pursuant to s. 23 of the Companies' Act, 1867, and holding a Licence from the Board of Trade to dispense with the word "Limited" as part of its name.

Memoranda on the reverse

Examinations

We have nothing to show the form of any examination in the early days of the Institute, merely that in about 1850 an Institute of some form did exist but the invidious task of deciding upon applications for membership was not imposed on the Committee (Council as it is now known) but was decided by the Annual General Meeting -- always held on the first day after the Hilary Term. The rules stipulating suitability for membership read as follows:

"That no person shall be eligible as a candidate for admission into the Society who is under twenty-one years of age, or who has not practised the art of Shorthand for seven years, or who has not been articled to a member of the Society for at least five years, and who does not practise solely on his own account.... A candidate had to be certified by two members from their personal knowledge as a fit and proper person to become a member."

This effectively precluded the assistants to the shorthand writers, the readers who undertook the difficult task of transcribing someone else's shorthand notes. Also, when the first application for membership was made by a woman in 1952, Elizabeth Crook (later Elizabeth Boyarsky), she was refused because she had not been a pupil or assistant in the office of a member for five years – never mind her ability to write competent shorthand and read it back. However, by April 1954 she managed to comply with that requirement and was "welcomed as a new member to the Institute". (see later under "Women in the Institute") Fortunately, it was only four years before another woman was admitted into membership, Mary Rice in April 1958. There does not appear to have been an application form for membership, merely an individual application followed by some sort of supervised practical examination. Our researches show an application by Mr C.D. Snell on 17 January 1917 which says: "I beg to apply for admission to the Institute of Shorthand Writers"." He then refers to an extract from a letter written to him by his grandfather, Mr G.B. Snell, which states:

"My dear Charlie I have a mem. In my diary for Saty. 22nd June 1901 that I told your father I would take you into my office, another on June 28 that y our father told me that you would like to give a fortnight's notice to the people you were then with, and another on Monday the 18th

July following that on that day you entered my office for three months on trial."

It appears that on leaving his grandfather's office, Mr Snell joined the office of Messrs Harry Counsell & Co.

We find correspondence from February 1907 from Mr A. Walsh and Mr Alfred Law to the effect that:

"In accordance with the request of the Council I have examined Mr C.D. Snell in practical notetaking in court and so far as that is concerned in my opinion he is well fitted for Membership of our Institute" (Walsh); and "I hereby certify that Mr C.D Snell has satisfactorily passed his examination by me in practical note-taking in court" (Law)."

Therefore it looks as if there were two practical exams, but both in the same environment. (Wouldn't be allowed these days!) The names of all these gentlemen – Snell, Harry Counsell, Walsh and Law – of course are engraved in the annals of the Institute since its very earlier days right up until the present day.

The written examination was always based on a series of lectures that would-be members were required to attend on various facets of reporting in the courts of law as then constituted, and certainly many current reporters would struggle with the papers because they were very law-orientated. The first of these lectures was delivered on 24 June 1946, in the presence of The Hon. Mr Justice Atkinson, and was delivered by Mr P.A. Edmunds, President of the Institute at the time, who continued to write shorthand in the Court of Appeal until a very great age. One interesting paragraph in the transcript of his address reads as follows:

"..I remember that on one occasion I reported a speaker who had died many years before, or at least, that is what they told me; but even death had not stopped his flow of speech, and he had a great deal to say. He used a medium in order to express his views, and when I produced the transcript in court, I was cross-examined about the nature of the next world." The mind boggles!

The world of reporting has changed dramatically since those early days and therefore current written papers tend to include questions on general knowledge, punctuation (this would not have been necessary in the early days, schooling at that time ensured that EVERYONE knew how to punctuate), spelling – increasingly a problem with greater reliance on texting – and how to cope with certain difficulties that might arise during one's reporting life. Knowledge of basic law is not usually tested in today's modern examinations. I think our forefathers would have been somewhat horrified.

Women in the Institute

Among the first photographs of the early pioneers of the Institute is one dated 1863 of Mr J G Hodges (whose firm in that name continued until the 1990s).



J G Hodges Snr

We have to wait until the 1970s before a woman appears on the Council, Helen Tennyson, to be followed a year later by Elisabeth (Betty) Willett who became the first woman President of the Institute in 1975.



Mrs Elisabeth (Betty) Willett

The first woman to become a member of the Institute was Elizabeth Boyarsky, a Pitman writer, who was admitted in 1954, approximately 70 years after the Institute's registration. Early photographic records reveal a bevy of distinguished gentlemen, many of whom are dressed in frock coats, even more with a very full beard, but not a lady amongst them. They were kept firmly in the home!



Mr Carter and Mr Thomas Hill (Circa 1891

Contrast that to the current day (2008) when the entire Council is composed of women and our last male President was in 1999.

Even more interesting is that the first female Council members were both machine writers (Palantypists), in contrast to the decidedly Pitman-oriented male population.

Jolly Times

Socialising had until very recent times been part of the Institute's ethos. Once again, photographs from those early days reveal annual outings as far back as 1933 (again, all male occasions). Certainly by the 1960s the annual gatherings had transformed themselves into a dinner dance in London, an occasion when staff and partners from all the major firms got together to celebrate another good year. Sadly these big events faded out through lack of support, but there has been the odd dinner when members have met together for a chat, and also Council members have usually had an annual social gathering, mostly in the home of the current President, but occasionally in a London restaurant. The photographs below give just a flavour of these events over the decades.



Bognor, Circa 1933

Higman, Balment, Hiscoke, Brewin, Canova, Smeeton, Marchant, Cross, Stammers, Howards, Hill, Bispham, Lock, Cannon, Hunter and Sugden

(Note that Mr Bill Brewin passed away in August 2010 aged 94)

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Helen Tennyson, Brian Hammond, Betty Willett, Bill Frensham, Bert Newman,
June Swann and Paul Sanders 1976
at Wimbledon Park, then home of the Willett family.



Mr and Mrs Harry Jones (Circa 1970)

Variety

There is no doubt about the breadth of reporting assignments covered by our membership throughout the ages, although markedly changed in the last thirty years from the early days of the 1800s when "practising in the supreme court of judicature" was encompassed within the Institute's title because it reflected the work that most reporters did in those days. Only after many years did reporters become involved with public inquiries, planning applications, trade union conferences, international organisations (such as the UN), so much so that the appendage about the supreme court of judicature became unnecessary and the Institute became renamed as The Institute of Shorthand writers, subsequently once again changed to The British Institute of Verbatim Reporters. Now, of course, we have a whole new profession within a profession in subtitling for deafened people – we had to wait for the technology to arrive for that to happen.

But the photographs below give two very markedly different assignments at different times in the Institute's history. The first is a murder trial at Lewes Crown Court, where the shorthand writer is from the firm of Hibbit & Sanders;



and the second a very unique glimpse of justice, African style, with George Birnie (father of our very own Lindsay Bickers) taking a note under a tree in the middle of the Bush.



George A Birnie. taken near Bulawayo, S Rhodesia 1938

Truly wonderful!

By 2001 we have been using Computer Aided Transcription (CAT) technology for some time and, with faster and larger memory computers, are offering Realtime transcription as well as Verbatim Speech-to-Text live transcription for deafened people at meetings/conferences.

Here we see a collage of two photos showing the late Heather Jackson and VSTTR Lisa Cordaro, a Speech to Text reporter in action, at Danbury Park in September 2001.



And Finally?

What of the future? Who knows? The mad dash for something for nothing, even if it means sacrificing quality, has seen a turn away from a professional shorthand writer to an anonymous machine, churning away, with sometimes scant concern about whether anything, let alone everything, is being recorded efficiently. Our numbers are diminishing in general, although one branch of the profession is growing, that of speech to text with the service the reporters there provide for deafened people. Efforts are being made to train professional reporters but these will all be machine writers; sadly Pitman verbatim reporters no longer seem to be emerging.

The threats to the future of our profession have been with us for some time, gaining momentum as technology improves, but remain basically the tape recorder (now digital and vastly improved) and voice recognition (improving but

still limited). What else is out there to threaten a vibrant profession that has existed for nearly two hundred years?

Research material taken from the archives of BIVR E J Willett, June 2008.

In 2010 Claire Hill passed the BIVR's Qualified Realtime Reporting (QRR) examination with 100% accuracy.



Claire receiving her medal from President Jean Lukins