



PROFILE

Simon Elliott

Simon is a criminal law specialist with a busy practice in London and the South East. Simon prosecutes and defends in the Crown Court. He is currently a Level 3 CPS Advocate. Simon also undertakes regulatory and other work.

When did you decide that you wanted to be a barrister?

I suppose this is quite embarrassing, but the truth is that I decided I would be a barrister at about three years of age. This was actually because I was given a red dressing gown as a child, and I used to pretend to be a judge! At that point, I remember very clearly, somebody told me, “If you want to be a judge, you have to be a barrister first.” So, that is precisely what happened. It was what I decided to do before I had even started school, and, in all honesty, being a barrister is all that I ever really thought of as a career. My subjects at school were tailored towards this objective. I studied law at university, and then I went to law school, and here I am today, very happily pursuing the only career objective I have ever properly entertained at Church Court Chambers.

What was your career path like?

I was called to the bar in 2007. Following that, I worked in Germany for two years, teaching law at a university there. Much of the work which I did involved helping students with English legal subjects and practical skills, so they were not behind because of the enormous differences between our legal system and the German one. This enabled these students, many of whom had been at Oxbridge or the Ivy League schools, to go on and study English law. As you can imagine, that was immensely satisfying. On my return to London, I carried out my pupillage at Two Harcourt Buildings in the first instance, and ever since then I have been at Church Court.

What would say are your main specialist areas as a barrister?

I am a criminal barrister, so I take on the full range of crime. That includes Youth Court work but is usually centred on Crown Courts, taking on all that they have to offer. Recently that has entailed some cases involving robbery, money laundering and a fairly large-scale drugs possession with intent to supply case. Although I carry out both prosecution and defence work – and I extremely happy doing either - I would say that I predominantly prosecute. I am a grade three prosecutor at the moment, and did pupillage in a predominately prosecution set. Now that I am well-established, if the CPS or the solicitors for a defendant have me in mind as the particular barrister best suited to the case, I am usually asked for by name at chambers through the clerks.

Have you prosecuted any unusual cases recently?

Indeed, recently I acted in a case in which the defendants belonged to a ring which stole cars in an ingenious way. They would find an expensive car advertised for sale in a newspaper or on a website and then during the viewing they would take a fake key. This enabled them to swap the key after the test drive without the owner's knowledge, and then to drive it away afterwards. Prior to that, I also spent a considerable period working with HMRC, advising them on high-profile, high-value cases to bring them to a close in a more expeditious and cost-effective way.

Do you still have any ambitions as a lawyer?

Of course, my very youthful aim of becoming a judge is still there! To be a circuit judge one day would be the absolute dream.

You published your first book during lockdown. How did that come about?

I am neither a professional writer nor an illustrator, but almost by accident I found myself in the position of being able to pursue both during the first lockdown when I had a lot of time on my hands, like many other people. I'm not good at not being busy. I started drawing and I started painting, and eventually I got myself an iPad to work digitally as well. At that time David Hockney was releasing beautiful iPad drawings, which I found very inspiring. I started learning a lot about Hockney through books, films and podcasts, which got me really into his incredibly interesting life. This led me towards eventually writing and illustrating the biography, which was published last year. The most extraordinary thing is that it was signed off by Hockney himself! He read it and actually gave me notes. Now it is actually in translation in several other languages.

Have you published any further books?

Following the success of the Hockney biography, I was commissioned to produce a second book, which is an illustrated biography of Van Gogh, which was published in August of this year. I am also in discussions about another artist biography.

Why did you decide to focus on artists?

I am a real art enthusiast, and so is my wife. She has worked at various galleries and some of the big auction houses. It's wonderful; we have this tremendous, shared interest. Much of the travelling we have done together has revolved around art or architecture. We spent our honeymoon on Naoshima, the Japanese island famed for its art.

And you have also taken a brave step into the world of stand-up comedy?

Every year I try and take on a new thing. About three years ago I decided to enrol on a stand-up course at the Bill Murray pub in Islington. I had eight weeks of classes, presided over by an experienced comedian, and at the end of it I did my first ever gig in the pub in front of around 150 people. I've been performing at open-mic comedy nights ever since.

Do you think your background as a barrister has helped you in front of an expectant comedy club audience?

Yes, it has been hugely helpful. For many people the terror is public speaking, and thanks to the training and the day job I am comfortable with that. When I made my first appearance at the Court of Appeal, I remember finding it incredibly daunting, but now I find it quite straight forward. So, it is fair to say there is a lot of common ground between the advocacy that one does in court and talking about a book for an hour or doing a 20-minute stand-up set. The fear that remains, however, is the pressure of making people laugh.

Will you be continuing your literary and illustration work and your comedy alongside your legal career?

Definitely. I am a compulsively busy person. For me, the absolute ideal is having genuine variety in my life. In the same way as at the bar I look to prosecute and defend, taking on the full range of crime, so too I like to have my books. The books are a brilliant sideline, enabling me to pursue an entirely different interest. I have now appeared at several literary festivals to give talks about my Hockney and Van Gogh books, which has been incredibly rewarding. A book event, to my mind, is halfway between the day job and stand-up comedy.

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