Society of the Bears: MA History Internship Report Ali Haddi

Summary of Research Output

The main project of my time at Middle Temple Library was the transcription of five record books presented to the institution in 1826 by the Ancient and Honourable Society of the Bears. This process would culminate in a blog post, summarizing the books and their historical importance, to be added to the Library's Rare Book of the Month blog. The Bears were a recreational club comprised of barristers who were active from as late as 1738 to 1823. These books contained the minutes of the club, consisting of admissions, discussions on policy and, primarily, wagers. The purpose of the transcription project was to have the content available digitally, so that the Library may present it online for the consumption of those interested in learning about an underexplored facet of English social history.

The record books are valuable remnants of history in that they shed light on the social activity of a specific section of England's intelligentsia. Through their wagers, which dominate the minute books, readers can observe the topics and gossip prevalent at the time. They discussed a wide range of issues, ranging from vacant positions in the Court of Chancery to the Napoleonic Wars. Readers will enjoy access to the perspective of these lawyers on famous events in European history. This includes the Queen Caroline Affair of 1820, the legal aspect of which the Bears discussed heavily in their wagers. The transcription reveals a valuable piece of English social history and will be of value to all those concerned.

The blog post outlines the content of the books, explaining the value to social and legal historians. Utilizing secondary sources, I have attempted to put the Society of the Bears into the context of Georgian England, an era, according to Peter Clark, when 'voluntary associations pervaded the British World.'[1] While shedding light on the social lives of Georgian barristers, the blog also seeks to bind the Society with the growing trend of club activity in Britain, connecting those of the legal profession with those of other occupational, intellectual and social backgrounds. Of course, I discussed the distinct nature of the Society, explaining how occupational travel and term dates molded procedure. This will be discussed below. The Rare Book blog seeks to enlighten its readers to the existence of antique books that are, for the most part, unknown to the historical community. My blog post, in this vein, should raise awareness for

[1] Peter Clark, *British Clubs and Societies, 1580-1800,* (Oxford University Press, 2001) p.131

the transcript and attract those interested in performing historical research to which the books will be able to contribute.

Both the National and London Metropolitan Archives were investigated for any useful sources. While they contained files referring to the establishments frequented by the Society, it quickly became evident that the Bears left no trace beyond the books being studied. However, minute books from other organizations, such as the Society of Gentlemen Practisers and the Lowtonian Society, were compared in order to ascertain the extent to which the Bears stood out from or followed the trends of their contemporary groups.

Literature Review

With a group as historiographically invisible as the Society of the Bears, I had to look at the world around them to understand them as best as I could. As discussed in the previous section, the records of the Ancient and Honorable Society of the Bears contains information primarily related to two historical topics: the history of the English legal system, particularly social and recreational, and the history of recreation, with heavy emphasis on clubs and associations. In terms of available secondary sources, the latter bore most of the fruit in terms of useful information. Historiography regarding lawyers and the Bar in the United Kingdom is noticeably uncommon, with Baker lamenting 'this deficiency, which is a very large one.'[2] Certainly, there have been improvements since Baker's time. The most relevant of modern studies is David Lemmings' *Professors of the Law* (2000), devoted to the social history and culture of eighteenth-century barristers in England. He explains that the Bears were one of many lawyer's clubs, where they 'cultivated their fellowship by forming select dining clubs, such as the 'University club' which met at the Crown and Anchor Tavern in the 1770s.'[3] Interestingly, the Bears would also meet at the Crown & Anchor from 1791 to 1794, showing the Tavern's appeal to those of the legal profession. Lemmings goes on to say that such clubs were generally for law students and newly called barristers, serving as an 'equivalent' to 'the assize circuits [which] were virtually clubs for mature practitioners.'[4] This did not apply to the Society of the Bears, which contained life-long members, a few of which were recorded to have passed away while in office, including the inaugural President.[5] Lemmings gives more attention to the debating clubs, which

[2] J.H. Baker, 'Counsellors and Barristers: An Historical Study', *The Cambridge Law Journal,* p.205
[3] David Lemmings, *Professors of the Law: Barristers and English Legal Culture in the Eighteenth Century,* (Oxford University Press, 2000) p.121
[4] Ibid p.142
[5] Unknown Author, 28th Oct 1748, *Bears* op-cit

existed due to 'the absence of institutional education' alongside the popularity of 'gentlemanly drinking and dining societies.'[6] The members of such clubs discussed cases and procedure for the purpose of improving their oratory skills. From the diversity of wager topics, it is likely that the Bears were a dining club in which conversation, and thus wagers, developed organically.

While the Bears showed no inclination towards self-improvement in their records, it is confirmed that their members were involved in other clubs. Of these include the Society of Gentleman Practisers which was established a year after the Bears and was officially dedicated to curbing 'the decay of local courts litigation'.[7] Though they had a declared objective, Birks regards their initial composition as little more than 'a dining club or similar society.'[8] Even after the realization of their moral goals, 'the convivial aspect of the society' remained active, members continuing to 'swap legal gossip over a hearty dinner and several bottles of port.'[9] Parallels to the Bears can be found in the Practisers' records. Edwin Freshfield, who wrote an introduction to the records compiled and published in 1897, revealed how the Practisers would make 'bets upon subjects harmless or even stupid'.[10] He described how they, as the Bears did, would bet quantities of food and wine over topics as trivial the distance between two locations, as well as legal matters. The Crown and Anchor was also one of their regular haunts. Very interesting in Freshfield's discussion of convivial clubs was his reference to 'a rough minute-book of a legal club which came into my hands'.[11] Though we must be cautious in assuming this "legal club" was the Society of the Bears, the fact that the activity described by Freshfield is near identical to that found in their manuscripts makes it very likely. The fact that Freshfield has used this book as a source for general club activity implies that the Bears were not unique in their recreational behavior, it appearing to be common practice for their fellow associations. On the other hand, looking through the records of the Gentlemen Practisers, is quickly apparent that its content is primarily related to its official legal business, with discussions of court cases appearing frequently in detail. This is virtually absent from the Bears records, comprised almost entirely of recreational activity. Indeed, compared to the minute books of other associations, the lack of serious content within the Society's records is striking. Though I had entertained notions of the Bears being an abolitionist group, a number of abolitionists, such as Henry Brougham, being

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[6] Lemmings op-cit p.142
[7] Michael Birks, *Gentleman of the Law,* (Stevens & Sons Limited, 1960) p.144
[8] Ibid p.146
[9] Ibid
[10] Edwin Freshfield, Introduction to *The Records of the Society of Gentlemen Practisers,* (Incorporated Law Society, 1897) p.xcvii
[11] Ibid

among their membership, it soon became apparent that the Society of the Bears was indeed a purely recreational club, designed to combat the stress concomitant with the legal professions.[12] Though some of their members were also members of goal-orientated factions, such as the Practisers, Bear meetings were ultimately for pleasure.

Though the aforementioned authors have given brief references to the activities of dining lawyer clubs, it does not negate the fact that the records of the Society of the Bears present the only glimpse of a purely recreational lawyer association, one generally absent in secondary sources. The prime authority on British clubs is Peter's Clark's *British Clubs and Societies, 1580-1800* which provides an abundance of information on how clubs 'became one of the most distinctive social and cultural institutions in Georgian Britain.'[13] He explained that a rash of urbanization led to a powerful stream of migration towards the English capital. These newcomers represented a wide variety of professions, including lawyers. Faced with excessive crowdedness of the big city, these segments of the intelligentsia required strategies through which to safely and securely associate with those in their respective peer groups. This need, combined with the spread of independent thinking and a decline in state and corporate interventionism, facilitated a mushrooming of club and associational activity in London, with similar reverberations taking place in other British cities. Clark declares there were around 25,000 clubs in the English-speaking world and 130 different types of clubs in the British Isles.[14] He also states that 'lawyers were somewhat slower to organize' clubs, in contrast to other professions.[15] However, the Society of the Bears predates many associations he discusses. Previously mentioned was the Gentlemen Practisers, heavily contrasted to the Bears in their mission to combat inappropriate activity in the legal institution. In addition to these Societies was the Verulam law club, situated in Lincoln's Inn Fields. As with the Bears, Verulam lacks a historiographical presence though they did have a noteworthy mention as a 'Bar Joke' in the 1818 issue of *The Porto Folio,* a Philadelphia-based periodical that reported the club had their spoons, marked with the head of Lord Bacon and their official words, stolen by a thief who was later prosecuted by the Old Bailey.[16] Though this seems to be a made-up story, the fact that they were known in the United States suggests they were generally known among intellectual circles in the Anglophone world.

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[12] Giles Templeman, Jan 23 1812, *Bears* op-cit
[13] Clark op-cit p.2
[14] Ibid
[15] Ibid p.117
[16] Oliver Oldschool Esq, 'For the Port Folio – Bar Joke', *The Port Folio,* Vol.6, July-December 1818, Philadelphia, p.415

Being only a little less obscure than the Bears today, it would not be improbable to infer that the latter group also enjoyed a degree of renown.

In contrast to the ambitious goals of the Gentlemen Practisers, we know from the Bears' manuscripts that the Society was almost entirely dedicated to recreation. As stated above, the members would enjoy lavish meals while discussing affairs of the day. These would spawn wagers. This led to the notion that the Society served as a form of gambling club, prompting research into another obscure field of history. White discusses private clubs to which gambling was the main purpose. As with the Bears, members were admitted by election and not purchase, attracting 'not only the richest men in London but the most brilliant.'[17] On the other hand, according to Clapson, all gambling was publicly regarded as a degenerate activity in Georgian England. However, wagering was seen as 'less disreputable' than other forms of gambling which were associated 'with cheating and indulgence.'[18] Among these alternatives was card games, or specifically Whist, which was seen as an especially dangerous pastime. According to Mullin, those who lost sizeable amounts in such activities would have been perceived as unreliable by prospective clients or associates. To avoid this, some players sought 'to keep their stakes low and to play at games that favoured the skilled player, rather than the forces of chance.'[19] Though the Bears have made brief references to 'the cards used in the Society', their devotion to wagering suggests they too enjoyed the thrill of gambling without the larger risk accompanying more serious gambling.[20] While White describes 'extraordinary recklessness' and losses averaging around £4,000-5,000, Mullin cites record books from the period in which wins and losses were 'nearly always in the two- or three- penny to sixpence range.'[21] The Bears betted larger sums than those discussed by Mullin but broadly less than those in White's clubs. The Society initially bet bottles of wine, certainly more costly than a sixpence, before simply wagering one or more Guineas. Based on the studies by White and Mullin, it can be discerned that while the Bears were willing to take greater risks than some of their contemporaries, they were less willing, or perhaps financially able, to hazard the significant

[17] Jerry White, *A Great and Monstrous Thing: London in the Eighteenth Century,* (Harvard University Press, 2013) No page number
[18] Mark Clapson, *A Bit of Flutter: Popular Gaming in English Society, c.1823-1961,* (Manchester University Press, 1992) p.1
[19] Janet. E. Mullin, *A Sixpence at Whist, Gaming and the English Middle Classes, 1680-1830,* (The Boydell Press, 2015) p.121
[20] Unknown author, 8 Dec 1749, *Bears op-cit*
[21] White op-cit, no page number
Mullin op-cit p.121

losses described by White, thus avoiding the stigma depicted by Mullin. Therefore, the Bears were characterized by a degree of pragmatism, off-setting their desire for excitement.

Though the Bears were permitted to make wagers any time at any place, they possessed regular dwellings in which scheduled meetings took place. Studying these locations shows the type of crowd to which the Bears liked to associate with. Until 1794, the Bears would meet at a tavern, the first being the Crown and Rolls, 'at which the Society has aSembled for a long time past', which was 'shut up' and replaced by the Crown and Anchor.[22] Aside from the working class, taverns were known to attract the wilder elements of the professions, including lawyers. According to Newman, taverns were known as havens for those discussing 'potentially treasonous or seditious ideas.'[23] The Bears' taverns were no exception, the former serving as a den of 'card clubs' as well as a meeting location for Lord George Gordon's Protestant Association, using the tavern to plan out their activities, culminating in the Gordon riots of 1780.[24] The Crown and Anchor had an infamous reputation, even starring in satirical sketches remarking on its subversive clientele. Newman provides a chapter on the tavern, explaining how it was 'built to cater to the increasing demand for large, high-gatherings.'[25] It was 'a neutral space', known both for elegant dinners and drunken raucousness and contained clients from all over the political spectrum, being the main meeting site for Charles James Fox's Whig Club.[26] Yet the area around the tavern was rife with crime 'and a potentially dangerous place for the wealthy to travel'.[27] Those attending meetings at the tavern easily became victims, and it is a wonder why associations with such a high-class of membership would congregate at such a location, especially the apolitical Society of the Bears. Linking with the rush of betting, one could assert the Bears were engaged in a form of "slumming", seeking out areas within Chancery Lane with a reputation for danger. Indeed, there appears to be no political motive of the Bears to attend such a radical environment, and it was without fanfare that they relocated to Serle's Coffee House in 1794. The late eighteenth-century saw the decline of the tavern at the expense of the coffeehouse, which increasingly served as intellectual hubs in the urban environment.

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[22] Foster Bower, 7 Nov 1791, *Bears* op-cit

[23] Ian Newman, *Tavern Talk: Literature, Politics & Conviviality,* (PhD dissertation, University of California, 2013) p.132

[24] White op-cit, no page number

T.B. Howell Esq (ed), *Proceedings Against Lord George Gordon, for High Treason,*

'Cobbett's Complete Collection of State Trials, and Proceedings for High Treason and Other Crimes and Misdemeanors from the Earliest Period to the Present Time' (T.C. Hansard, 1814) p.565

[25] Newman op-cit p.141

[26] Ibid

[27] Ibid p.143

Unlike the two taverns, Serle's does not seem to have had any reputation, being absent in secondary sources. The Bears provided no reason for the change of scenery after only three years at the Crown and Anchor. It is likely they simply followed the trend of the Georgian middle class, joining their contemporaries in the sophisticated coffeehouse. It was also possible that the dangers of the Crown and Anchor became too wearisome, though if this was the case, the manuscripts provide no evidence.

Reflective Account

I had selected to do my internship at Middle Temple Library for the opportunity to gain experience in the field beyond the archive-scanning typical of the undergrad student. Having no experience in paleography and having struggled in the past to read antique handwriting, the prospect of bettering myself while simultaneously participating in the transcription and study of a heretofore unknown series of records was of great appeal. Middle Temple's head librarian, Renae Satterley, was a reliable source of information and advice regarding the comprehension of eighteenth and early nineteenth-century handwriting, warning me how difficulty could vary depending on the author. Certainly, mastering the learning curve was an arduous process and the first few days had me fraught with worry over my suitability for this role, and the satisfaction of my superiors. Nevertheless, I pushed myself to adapt and, alongside Renae's assurances, I found assistance from the National Archives online paleography tutorial.[28] They explain the distinguishing attributes of handwriting from 1500 to 1800, particularly how letters were written. Compounding on this, the Archives provide a tutorial to facilitate a greater familiarity with paleography while allowing the student the use of digital documents from throughout the aforesaid range. This allowed me to accustom myself to the nuances of eighteenth-century writing and apply it to my own transcription work. During the latter phase of the internship, I became confident in my work, able to transcribe entries perfectly, though the occasional word or phrase would remain incomprehensible. A noteworthy challenge emerged when I came upon a page written almost entirely in Greek. I had no experience in the Greek language and, to compensate, I relied on a Greek keyboard to type up the page, which was significantly clearer compared to the English cursive. Thus, while I am certainly not an expert paleographer, I believe I have faced the challenge well and have improved in a previously underdeveloped ability.

[28] Available at: https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/palaeography/default.htm

Perhaps underestimated in my application for Middle Temple was my lack of knowledge regarding the law, the legal system or legal history. This deficiency manifested itself whenever the record writers would comment on a facet of the contemporary legal system, referencing prominent judges, laws and cases. Of course, challenges would emerge whenever a member referenced the world around them. The Epsom Derby represented a particularly formidable phase of the project, especially as many racehorses mentioned in the record books are not referenced in the secondary sources that I came across. The titles of certain books and plays remain unknown, due to my inability to put a name to the near unfathomable series of letters. An example comes from a wager referencing a paragraph in some form of periodical that was released on the 20th December 1818, discussing 'some barrister in the Court of Chancery resentful in his appearance.'[29] The name of said periodical, appearing to me as "Preminis", was not deciphered due to both my lack of clarity in the writing of the word itself as well as my lack of knowledge regarding early nineteenth-century media. Research has not yielded any results on this matter, forcing the title to remain, for now, in obscurity. As my time with the project went forward, these omissions would become less prevalent. One reason for this is simple experience with both the handwriting and the topic. It came to the point where I could identify the names of both people, roles, other concepts with ease, particularly legal concepts and legal institutions. In the case of words less penetrable, research could often yield results. When only the first or last name of a member was known, my response was to examine periodicals such as the *Gentleman's Magazine,* which frequently mentioned men of renown. The topic being lawyers, looking at legal works would also turn up the names of Society members. With these sources, it often came down to which name most resembled the difficult word. Naturally, with the full names known, I used them to conduct research to fully satisfy myself in the knowledge that I have found the most likely answers. Secondary sources also contributed. It was through studying the Battle of Toulon that I understood William Perkins wager that 'Admiral Lestock will be broke for his misbehavior' against the Spaniards.[30] Understanding the context of such entries allows for greater and easier comprehension, even when facing the most difficult handwriting.

The Middle Temple Library's Rare Book of the Month blog, to which I am contributing, contains entries regarding a variety of antique books. Unsurprisingly, the majority of these books have

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[29] Robert Matthew Casberd, 23 Dec 1818, *Bears* op-cit

[30] Quote - William Perkins, 15 Mar 1744, *The Ancient and Honourable Society of the Bears,* 1738-1823
Secondary source - Laughton, John Knox, *Dictionary of National Biography, 1885-1900,* Vol.33, (Smith, Elder, & CO, 1885) p.114

legal tones and themes with the occasional religious or biographical work. These entries pay much attention to context, using the world to explain the origins of an interesting piece of work. As stated in the Literature Review, in order to give an account of the records of the Society of the Bears, I had to consult secondary sources regarding both the history of lawyers in England and recreational societies. Renae was helpful in this capacity, recommending books available at Middle Temple that would enlighten me of the former topic. As the Bears sometimes wagered in coffee-houses, Renae contacted Markman Ellis, author of *The Coffee House: A Cultural History* who recommended a variety of essential books that widely expanded my knowledge on the social lives and clubs of the Georgian intelligentsia.

Writing an account of the Society of the Bears was a difficult task due to the obstacle of their complete absence of historical record. To the knowledge of the Middle Temple Library and Archive's staff, the record books and a note of receipt by the Library in 1823 serve as the only direct mention to the Society of the Bears. This makes studying them especially fascinating, considering that I am one of only a few people to have fully studied these books. Furthermore, the knowledge that my transcripts will be placed online, for much of the historical community to read for the first time, is particularly gratifying. Nevertheless, this makes research inevitably demanding. As aforesaid, the books themselves contain primarily wagers and admissions, with the occasional entry regarding promotions and Society procedures. They contain little direct information on the Society's origins or members. Therefore, while serving as useful sources on English social history, via the topics of their wagers, the books ironically help little in uncovering the history of the Society itself. It can be observed that, when the members themselves refer to their club's history, they never discuss a time prior to the first entries of the record books, strongly implying that the Society did not exist until 1738. As stated in the Literature Review, the Bears received an indirect reference in Freshfield's introduction to the records of the *Gentlemen Practisers.* However, this still sheds little light.

With information vis-à-vis the history of the Society being unattainable, we turned our attention to its members, hoping to determine a link, besides their professions, that bound them together. I discovered in my research that, of those whose opinions on the subject were documented, the members appeared to be opponents of slavery. On this revelation, Renae and I had contemplated with the idea that the Society of the Bears was an abolition society. This idea proved unlikely, especially as the topic of slavery only emerged in a wager, in which a Mr. Graves bet a haunch of venison and some wine that 'the Slave Trade is not abolished… within

the present century.'[31] This was hardly the appearance of men concerned with fighting the slave trade and, thus, the idea was abandoned. This was where the secondary sources, particularly those suggested by Markman Ellis, came to play. As outlined in the Literature Review, the works of these authors illuminated the world in which the Bears resided in, showing their similarities and differences with their contemporaries.

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