



# THE FACULTY OFFICE

## The Master's Address to the The Worshipful Company of Scriveners

Spring Dinner – 22<sup>nd</sup> April 2026

Worshipful Master, ladies and gentlemen, I must begin by thanking you for your generous invitation to Tony and myself to join you tonight in this wonderful Hall. Of course, a disadvantage of being asked to speak after dinner in the Vintners' Hall is the need for restraint as the fruits of the vintners' craft waft tantalizingly past, but it has all been very enjoyable, nonetheless.

I must confess to feeling a little as though I were in a game of Consequences, which goes like this:

“The Master of the Scriveners

*met:*

The Master of the Faculties

*at:*

The Vintners' Hall.

*He said to her:*

Lots of delightfully flattering welcoming words

*She said to him.....”*

Well, what **does** she say?

The answer is that I'd like to spend a few minutes celebrating the links between this Worshipful Company and the Archbishop of Canterbury's Faculty Office. Some of you will have heard some of this before, but I hope that there will be a historical nugget or

two which proves interesting and that the “Consequence” will be the building up of the fellowship between our two institutions.

As we know, the office of notary public originated in ancient Rome. Notaries were well established by the time of the Emperor Justinian, who was a tireless legislator and codifier of law. He was minutely interested in absolutely everything. In 529CE, he passed a law compelling notaries, on pain of forfeiting the premises from which they were licensed to practice, to be present at the execution of legal instruments. To prevent forgery, the law required that a protocol must appear on the same sheet as the instrument and that the papyrus be properly watermarked and bear the date of its manufacture – in short, **rules and regulations for writing**, because Justinian recognized the **importance and power of the writer’s craft**.

And if Justinian’s requirements sound familiar to some of you, that’s because they continue, largely unchanged, to constitute the essential parts of a notarial act. So there, 1500 years ago, we find the essentials both of the notary’s professional duty and of regulation by some external person or body.

You might say – “We know all that, but how did the Church get involved?”

To answer that question, we need to delve into some more history. With the fall of the Roman Empire, Justinian’s great law project was forgotten and his books were lost. But notaries didn’t entirely disappear; so, when Roman Law was rediscovered by Christian monks in the 11<sup>th</sup> century and applied in the systematisation of the Western Church in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, it is unsurprising that notaries became important figures. The doctors at Bologna, who were developing civil and ecclesiastical systems of law, recognised **accurate writing** as key. Operating in a world which was largely illiterate, and where writing was unmechanised, the medieval notary’s function of producing authentic documents and records was fundamental to an ordered society regulated by what we now think of as the Rule of Law.

Coming next to English history, in 1279, the Archbishop of Canterbury was first given authority by the Pope to appoint notaries. This remained the position until Henry VIII’s break with Rome. The Ecclesiastical Licences Act 1533 transferred many papal powers to the Crown, including the power of appointing notaries by faculty. The Act authorised the Archbishop to appoint a Commissary (a Judge, known as “The Master”) and a Clerk. The clerk was to *‘wrytte and regestre every suche...facultie...and shall fynde parchment wexe and ʒonven laces ʒonvenient for the same’*. It remains an important task of the FO’s clerk (one of your members) to instruct the calligrapher to prepare parchment faculties for new notaries, as well as carefully scrutinising each application for admission.

**Calligraphy, parchment, quills** – “This is more like it”, I hear you Scriveners saying – “Is that why she’s here?”

Well, not entirely, although notaries are the only profession who receive **authorisations to practice, hand inscribed on vellum.**

Modern legislation, whilst repealing many of the former provisions, has confirmed the jurisdiction of the Master to admit and enrol notaries in England and Wales. Since 1873, the Master has also always been the senior ecclesiastical judge of the Church of England. I am the second woman to be Master; there is some discussion of a gender-neutral title, about which I am unfussed, although I have refused to be known as “The Mistress”!

Thus, the link between notaries and the Church has been preserved.

Now, if we go back to 1373 – a momentous date – the Lord Mayor of London and Aldermen made an ordinance on the petition of ‘the reputable men, the **Common Writers of the Court Letter of the City**’. This ordinance regulated the writers of wills, charters and other things by requiring:

*that no one may...keep shop of **the said craft** in the said City, or in the suburb thereof if he is not free of the City and also made free of the craft by men of it...no one shall be admitted to the said freedom if he be not first examined and found able by those of the same craft who shall...be assigned in this business and be Wardens of the said craft...every scrivener of the said City, and of the suburb thereof, shall put his name to the deeds which he makes so that it is known who has made the same.*

The effect of this ordinance was that, until 1999, notaries wishing to practise in central London had to pass the Company’s stringent examinations and be accepted by its Court. As you know, to this day, any general notary wishing to call themselves a ‘scrivener notary’ must pass further exams and undertake supervised training. Historians discern notarial influence in the formation of your Company, although you have always admitted non-notaries with relevant skills and interests too. And the connection of scrivener notaries with the development, expansion and sustaining to this day of London as a **centre of international trade** is an important one which is sometimes overlooked, but not at the Faculty Office, where we value our collaboration with scrivener notaries and their professional Association.

One historical nugget of which both your Company and the Faculty Office should be proud is the welcome which Jewish notaries received from the Company and the Faculty Office. E R Samuel’s study for the Jewish Historical Society of England, published – poignantly – in 1951, traces the careers of some 45 Jews who were admitted to your Company. Because the notarial oath did not require subscription to the Christian doctrine of the Holy Trinity, Jewish practitioners could make it in good

conscience. Samuel describes notarial qualification as “...the second of the liberal professions (medicine being the first) to which Jews in this country gained entry.”

At this time of geopolitical unrest and inter-racial tension even within our own City, the values that bind us together as citizens seeking to live by the Rule of Law are of the greatest significance, not only for us, but for the wider world. Notaries, pre-eminently amongst the legal professions, play a fundamental part in the conduct of what we might term private international relations – that commerce between citizens and corporate entities all over the world which not only supports and maintains economies but also **builds connections** between people of different nations, racial groups, cultures, languages, faiths and ways of life. These are values which also inform all that you do as a Livery Company, and I feel privileged to ask you to raise your glasses now to toast this Worshipful Company.

**Morag Ellis KC**

**Master of Faculties**

