

Eight Reasons Why You Must Go to the BIALL Conference

Abstract: With another highly successful BIALL Annual Conference behind us, LIM co-editors Jas and Mike Breslin – the latter a first-time attendee this year, the former a veteran of 18 conferences – explain why this really is an unmissable event.

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The 53rd BIALL Annual Conference, entitled ‘Gaining the edge – investing in our skillset’, and held at the Europa Hotel, Belfast, was a huge success in many different ways, but the one metric in which it fell short was attendance. With 199 delegates it was actually up on 2022’s Wyboston event (176), yet when compared to pre-Covid conferences the numbers are not encouraging (see [Figure 1](#)).

As the total membership is 548, it’s clear that under 50 per cent of BIALL members did not attend the conference – which maybe isn’t so bad, depending on whether you’re a glass half full or glass half empty sort of person (though it should be remembered that the attendance figures include non-members, speakers and exhibitors). Anyway, either way the trend is still downwards.

No doubt there are many good reasons for this, and one might be that in these straitened times employers are unwilling or unable to support those wishing to go to the Conference. But, just maybe, there are some BIALL members who have never been, have never seen the point in going, or simply do not know what they are missing. With these people in mind we have put together a list of, we think, some compelling reasons why you should attend next year’s conference, mainly by highlighting all the great things that happened in Belfast. The hope is that after reading this you will be ready to sign up for the 2024 extravaganza, which is at the Queens Hotel in Leeds – an Art Deco Grade II listed building which can count Nelson Mandela and Princess Grace of Monaco among its past clientele – from the 12th to the 14th of June.

1. NETWORKING

However much you communicate via email, on the phone – though that in itself is a dying art – or on social media, nothing beats meeting people face to face, as communication is about so much more than words. Meeting someone also gives you the chance to find out a great deal more about them, cementing professional relationships.

And the BIALL Conference is simply the best networking opportunity there is for people working in the field of legal information in Britain and Ireland. On top of this, there are always representatives present from overseas organisations and other sister associations, and

meeting this wide range of people gives you the chance to share ideas, and compare your approach to work with others, perhaps validating it, maybe giving you food for thought, while often making new friends in the process.

2. PRESENTATIONS

Why go to the presentations? Because these are at the heart of the conference. Information is what we’re all about, and a presentation of 40 minutes or so will be packed with information. At this year’s Conference there were presentations on law firm trainee training, social justice in the library, marketing your library services and much more (as is traditional, we will be publishing a selection of articles based on some of the presentations in the Winter edition of LIM Issue 4 2023).

Talks on Artificial Intelligence were the big draw this year, though, with Robin Chesterman’s session on ChatGPT and Larry Fenelon’s presentation on legal tech being particularly popular and thoroughly absorbing.

But it’s not always about the obvious, such as those things that are clearly to do with the workplace, and in Belfast we were treated to a presentation by Dr Phillipa Lally on ‘Promoting change: the role of the unconscious processes’, a thought-provoking session on the forming and breaking of habits – as useful for the struggles in daily life as it is for work.

3. SHARING KNOWLEDGE

Of course, presentations are not a one-way street, and the Conference gives you the opportunity to present a paper of your own. While this might seem daunting, the Conference is actually a friendly and safe environment, and the ideal place to hone your presentation skills. Also, people are always keen to hear what others are up to in the profession, whether that’s talking about a particular piece of software or a database that you’ve rolled out, or a new initiative you’ve implemented, or even passing on your tips and skills on researching a specific area of the law, so you’re almost guaranteed a friendly and receptive audience. Do it once or twice and it even becomes fun. Honest!

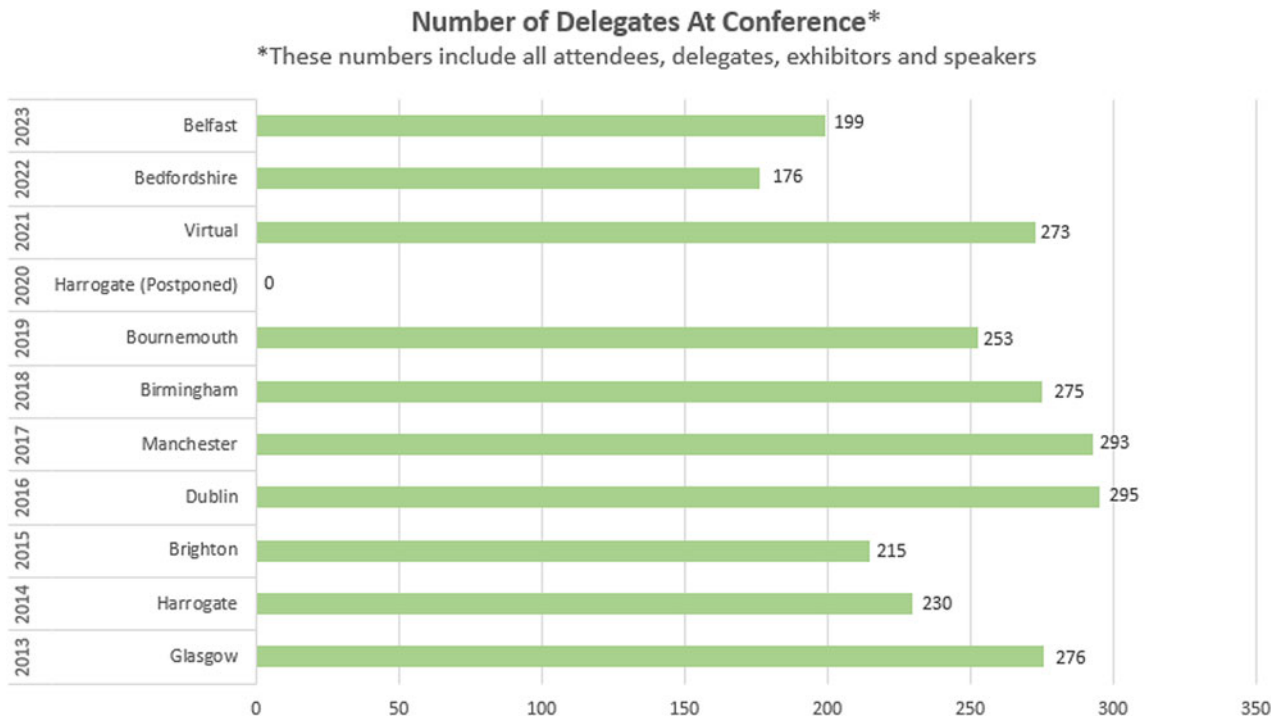


Figure 1: This year's Conference had nearly 100 fewer attendees than Dublin (2016) and Manchester (2017), but the trend was downwards even before Covid

Also, as a presenter you receive a discount on your delegate fees, which is great for those on a tight training budget who recognise the value of attending the

Conference. This makes it easier to justify your attendance to those who hold the purse strings at your firm or organisation, as well.



Dr Philippa Lally's presentation on forming and breaking habits was thought provoking and useful on many levels

4. NEW IDEAS

In our interview with then President Diane Miller in the Spring (Number 1 2023) issue of LIM, she waxed lyrical on the benefits of going to Conference and she was particularly enthusiastic about the opportunities it presents for picking up new ideas and fresh perspectives. “When I go to Conference I take a notebook and I come back and it’s full, it’s absolutely full,” Diane said. “I sit there and I think, ‘I could do that, I could try that, I haven’t thought of that. Oh, that’s brilliant’. Or ‘they do the same as we do’. That means it gives you some validation of the things you’re doing, but it also allows you to think outside your normal box. Going to the Conference gives you time dedicated to re-evaluating what you’re doing, how you do it, and how you can make it better.”

5. INTERACTING WITH VENDORS

The exhibition space at the Conference is always buzzing, with suppliers and vendors from across Britain and Ireland and further afield, and it’s a real opportunity to see what’s out there in terms of goods and services for the legal information profession, to learn about new developments and to get a feel for products you’re not familiar with. There are also demonstrations where the vendors show their wares in action, which is always useful.

There’s also the chance for you to meet your account representative away from the negotiating table, getting to know more about them and their business in a more informal setting.

6. THE CRAIC

Conference is not all about work, and at the end of each day there’s plenty of fun to be had, with many



Lovely lollies – it's not all pens and notebooks when it comes to exhibition space freebies

opportunities to meet fellow delegates in a relaxed and informal environment. In Belfast, for example, on the Wednesday evening there was an evening event in the Cathedral Quarter, with a visit to pubs and the chance to sample delicious street food.

The main event, though, is the President’s Reception followed by the BIALL Annual Dinner, where each year we celebrate the accomplishments of our members and stand-out suppliers, with the presentation of the BIALL and LexisNexis Awards (see page 158).

But it’s not just pubs and fine dining and the Conference Committee often arrange interesting tours, for instance there was a walking tour in the Queens Quarter in Belfast while there was also a tour of the Linen Hall Library.

Just because ‘the craic’ is an Irish expression, it doesn’t mean there will not be more of the same on offer in Leeds in 2024, too, as the city is renowned for its nightlife – with a 48,000-strong student population it just has to get that right!



A delegate gets familiar with a vendor's product



The Giant's Causeway is just a short trip from Belfast and many delegates paid it a visit. There will be plenty to see and do in Leeds in 2024, too

7. FREEBIES

If your stationery budget has been slashed in recent times then there are pens aplenty on offer in the exhibition space, as well as neat notebooks, thumb-drives and sustainable water bottles, amongst many other wonderful hand-outs. Not only cool stuff, but often sweets, too. Go for the chocolate, leave with a subscription, is the thinking. One thing's for certain, your Conference bag will be bulging with plenty of goodies after a good look around the stands.

8. VISITING NEW PLACES

It seems fair to say that many at this year's Conference might never have visited Belfast if it wasn't for it being hosted there. But it's also fair to say that they're probably glad they did, because Belfast is a fascinating city with a wide range of tourist attractions, including Titanic Belfast (an innovative museum built on the slipway where the doomed liner was built), which was visited by many Conference attendees; the lovely and lively St George's Market; the tours that take in Belfast's darker past during the Troubles, and much more. It's also just a short drive, or an easily arranged daytrip, to the Giant's Causeway, which was an opportunity not to be missed and many attendees made the short trip north.

Next year, it's Leeds, the self-styled "unofficial capital of Yorkshire" with its vibrant street art, excellent cafés, restaurants and pubs, top notch entertainment venues, stunning architecture – including the 19th Century Leeds Central Library, as much a destination as it is a repository of books and place of reading – themed walks, art galleries and museums.

Two attractions that are worth a special mention are Kirkstall Abbey, founded over 800 years ago and said to be one of the best preserved Cistercian monasteries in the country, and the Royal Armouries Museum, which has displays of arms and armour from right across the world and also puts on daily live performances which include combat demonstrations (simulated, we assume) and even gives visitors the chance to have a go on the crossbow firing range. Not just for military buffs, this, and well worth a visit.

In a city this size it's no surprise that there are plenty of shops, too, but Kirkgate Market is the place to visit, dating back to 1875 and one of the largest covered markets in Europe – and also the site of the original Marks & Spencer stall, which is still there.

So, with so much to gain from attending the Conference, and so much to see and do in this remarkable city, if you've never been to Conference before, then 2024 is surely the year to sign up and get involved. See you there!