

## **Caroline Rees QC, 30 Park Place Chambers, Cardiff**

Caroline Rees QC becomes the second of only two female criminal law silks in Wales following her success in the 2017 QC competition. She was one of 32 women (from the total of 119) appointed silk following the QC ceremony in Westminster Hall in February 2018.



Caroline had had no previous connections with the legal profession when the deputy headmaster of her Welsh language comprehensive school in Llanelli encouraged her to attend court with his barrister son. That experience fired Caroline's interest in pursuing a career in advocacy. She took her law degree at Birmingham University and then attended Bar school in London. Whilst at university, Caroline worked in a Job Centre where she said she acquired some highly valuable skills that set her in good stead in her career. In particular, Caroline said that she learned to be comfortable in 'hearing her own voice' and how to deal and communicate with a wide range of people, some of whom were vulnerable.

In 1994, Caroline began her pupillage at 33 Park Place, Cardiff. She moved to 30 Park Place in 1999 where she has remained ever since. Initially, she worked primarily on personal injury cases, with some criminal work, but it was the latter that she was particularly interested in as she developed a wider practice. She particularly enjoyed the courtroom advocacy. She went on to develop her current particular specialism in cases entailing serious sexual offending including allegations of historical sexual abuse. Caroline was also instructed on high-profile cases including ones on people trafficking for purposes of sexual exploitation, and on homicide and drugs conspiracies arising from large scale police operations.

These days, when talking to young people who aspire to a career in advocacy (and in particular in criminal law), Caroline encourages them to look beyond seeking mini-pupillages (as valuable as these are) to also gaining a much broader experience of the world of work and, particularly in dealing with a broad range of people in society. In addition, Caroline encourages young people to read good literature and watch good films, plays etc., in order to expose themselves to ideas and language that will assist them in developing great communication skills, which are essential at the Bar. She personally believes that senior members of the profession like her have a social mobility responsibility to go into schools and talk with pupils. This enables young people to see that most barristers are not anything like the aloof, upper middle class stereotype they might see on their screens attired in strange wigs and gowns, and that people like Caroline come from similarly 'ordinary' backgrounds as themselves. In other words, if they have the necessary ability and willingness to work extremely hard, they too can aspire to the senior levels of the legal profession.

There was no single spur to Caroline applying for QC when she did. It was more a case of having been an incredibly busy senior-junior for a number of years, an increasing number of her peers and judges whom she greatly respected were suggesting to her that she should think seriously about applying for silk. Caroline still had to overcome a residual reluctance to apply arising from the notion that "Queen's Counsel was not something for people like me". She had been concerned that the profile of her cases due to the nature of her specialism – which were before Circuit judges rather than High Court judges - would count against her. However, having been appointed a Recorder in 2016 had brought Caroline in to greater contact with female silks, which was encouraging. There were few women QCs in Wales and she began to feel it was incumbent upon her to do something about that, by making an application.

Caroline knew that her cases were ones of substance as defined in the QC appointments process, and having looked carefully at what she had done in terms of the scheme's competencies, she realised that she could make a credible application. She would encourage other would-be applicants in her specialism not to be put off if they did not have murder cases, as historical sex cases could be just as weighty in terms of their importance, complexity and substance.

Caroline was also encouraged by the 'profiles' on previous successful applicants with more unusual backgrounds, and in particular one on her fellow criminal barristers, Mary Prior QC, in Leicester. Mary's story inspired Caroline not simply in terms of her practice profile but also in terms of coming from a modest background, and was also fired up by her professional ethos and enthusiasm in being a role model for others.

Having decided to make her application for silk, Caroline had to trawl through her cases with the competency framework and the guidance for applicants close to hand in order to identify those cases and potential assessors that seemed most likely to be the source of the necessary evidence of excellence. There was a great deal of detail to get to grips with in the framework and guidance, but all the necessary information was there. It was important not to under-estimate the importance of your work and cases, which was possible as these were what you dealt with day-in and day-out. You had to be prepared to step out from your comfort zone and advocate for yourself for once, and this was an unusual, even alien experience.

Caroline would recommend future applicants to have a rather longer preparatory build up to their application than she gave herself, in terms of checking what they were doing in their cases against the competencies as they went along, over a period of a couple of years leading up to an application. She believed that it was very important to complete the application form yourself even if you did seek outside help, although having a trusted colleague, perhaps a newly appointed QC, to look over the completed form was a good idea. Finally, having a really well completed application form provided a solid foundation if you were called to interview.

Caroline said she really enjoyed the interview. She felt that the members of the Selection Panel who interviewed her had 'really done their homework' on her and her cases, and were 'genuinely interested in me.' The interviewers struck just the right note, asking very testing questions within a friendly interview. They provided her with 'the best opportunity to show my best'. Caroline particularly enjoyed the exchanges on diversity. It was, in her view, vital to 'be yourself' at the interview and be 'honest about yourself on the application form.' She sensed that the interviewers would be extremely adept at sniffing out any false notes or coached answers.

Caroline said that after 20 years working as a junior including in more recent years as a senior junior with a "punishing workload", she felt that becoming a QC was almost like a fresh start, and "incredibly exciting". She hoped that the QC 'badge' would enable her to widen the scope of her practice, perhaps to include more homicide cases. She also hoped that being a silk would enable her to carve out a better work/ life balance. She referred to the domestic side of her life as the "usual managed chaos" of a very busy working mum (Caroline is married with two school-aged children). She added, "we shall see!"

Caroline and her family greatly enjoyed the QC ceremony. She said it was "brilliant" and "much less austere" than she had imagined. The icing on the cake for her was the letter of congratulations that she received from her old school Deputy Headteacher (now in his mid-80s) who had been instrumental in setting her on the path of her highly successful legal career.