

Harini Iyengar interviewing Master Hallett

00:59:14

Harini Iyengar So I'm here on Monday the 14th of October 2013, with Master Hallett in the Royal Courts of Justice.

Master Hallett My full name is Heather Carol Hallett and I was born on 16 December 1949 in Eastleigh in Hampshire.

HI Thank you. I'd like to ask you first why you chose to join the Inner Temple.

MH I'm afraid in those days it was as simple as I suspected I wanted to do crime, that meant being on circuit and it had the biggest car park.

HI What were your first memories of visiting the Inn?

MH We used to come down from university to eat our dinners, so it was a rather chaotic view of the Inn. All one saw really was this great crowd of students piling into hall to have their food and drink as much of the alcohol as they could in as short as time possible and then get the train back again. In those days we didn't have the advocacy training, the lectures, it really was only a case of coming down, meeting the Sub-Treasurer and dining.

HI I read somewhere that you had been refused a scholarship, was that by the Inn?

MH Ah things have changed enormously haven't they? Yes, in 1972 or 1971, I can't remember which, I applied for a scholarship. I came from a very modest background; my parents really didn't have enough money to help me to any great extent. I was interviewed I was told, essentially, that giving money to a woman would be wasted. So I took that on the chin as one had to in those days, and I applied again the following year and they asked me how things were going.

02.04

I said they were going well, I'd got a place in chambers but I still had a lot of debt and I really needed some help. The response that time was ah well things are going so well, you don't need any help. I think I got a Duke of Edinburgh or something, but I didn't get the kind of money that I needed, whereas the children of benchers who may not have had the same academic qualifications as I had, were getting the money. That's how life was then.

HI What was your call ceremony like?

MH You couldn't have your family there, which was really sad because obviously my parents were terribly, terribly proud. It was very hot day, the hottest day anybody's ever known in July and I only had one black suit, which was thick wool so I can remember thinking I was going to pass out. We were all sitting at the dinner tables and I remember vividly our names being called, and we stood up and were called to the bar, I remember someone saying about another student who was being called that day – oh is that old Jimmy's son! I just thought this is a different world, where certain people had all the connections and some of us didn't.

HI What did you wear for court?

MH It was the thickest black wool suit that anybody's ever... I think my mother might have made it even, but I only had the one. So it was a black suit and I think we had the full kit. Tabs, bands and wig but of course there were no photographers so we didn't have any photographs of this, you can create a memory. I can't really remember, I think I wore a wig the first time, at call.

04.01

HI And a skirt suit.

MH Yeah I didn't start wearing trousers until fairly late on, my time as a QC. I started wearing trousers quite early on when I was on the bench. And I remember being approached by a very senior female judge saying Heather you're wearing trousers. I said, yes, most of the people in this building seem to – because of course they were men. And she said, do you think I could? I said you're very senior, of course you could! The trousers would have been severely reprimanded.

HI Apart from dining what qualification requirements were there?

MH Passing exams, I think that was it.

HI When you started your pupillage what was the dress code for women?

MH Again a skirt suit, no jewellery, skirt not showing any skin, apart from the face, sleeves down to the hands, skirt down to the knees and obviously always tights or stockings.

HI And was that the same whether you were in court or not in court.

MH If you were not in court you were expected to be dressed very soberly. You could just about get away in those days with a dark blue suit, but everything had to be sombre. There were a couple of rather fearsome female judges, that if you appeared in front of them with even a pair of stud earrings, they would spot it. You weren't allowed to wear any jewellery save a wedding ring or an engagement ring.

HI Where did you do pupillage?

06.01

MH I had virtually no contacts in the profession at all save that my father who was a police officer came across Michael Gale, at court, doing some case, I think it was a firearms case in which my father had refused a firearms certificate as Assistant Chief Constable and essentially I was introduced to Michael Gale, and the Head of Chambers at 6 Pump Court was a benign autocrat, he believed totally in the equality of the sexes and because he was a benign autocrat he was able just to take people on either as pupils or as tenants, as he saw fit and he took me on and place me with Michael Gale for a part of my pupillage and with himself for another part.

HI At that time did you eat lunch in the Inn?

HM No because I was circuiter, I was hardly ever in London. My contact with the inn in those days was really very limited. If you're a circuiter, I lived in south-west London, at the end of a day, I would obviously far rather go home although you felt you had to go into chambers to show face or the clerks would think you weren't sufficiently industrious or keen. I would go home. Now my contact with the Inn in those days was really very limited.

HI At that time were there any women's networks – did you encounter other females?

MH There were no official networks at all. I think we ended up creating our own without realising we were doing it, before we'd heard about the word *networking*. A group of us over the years, gradually got together and we'd have our own dining club.

08.03

I can't tell you the names because it is rather rude. I think we just did it without thinking. We supported each other informally and so we just networked in that way I suppose.

HI You touched on it a bit: how did the social mix at the bar and around the Inn compare to your experiences at school and university?

MH Well for me, I went to mixed state schools throughout my time, my education so it came as a bit of a shock to me to go to university and find that women were only 10% of those reading Law and then 10% of the bar. It did come as quite a shock. I liked my fellow lawyers, I'm one of those rare beings I do actually like other lawyers – I find them fun and interesting on the whole, so I soon discovered that it didn't really matter whether they're male or female, I just enjoy their company. The importance of women for me came about the time when I started to think about having a family and then you really were concerned about how you were going to combine the two. In those days very few women were successful who had children. Successful women mostly were women who didn't have children. **Hilary Hartmont's** mother was one of the rare exceptions but they were generally women who'd given up having children to make it at the bar. So that was a time when you suddenly thought, I think I need the support of other women, or unconsciously I think I did.

HI Until that stage would you say your experiences as a woman pupil and junior practitioner was different from your male colleagues?

MH Oh definitely. Women were only destined to do crime or family, they couldn't bother their pretty little heads with anything involving money or... solicitors would refuse to have you, just because you were female.

10.02

Clients would refuse to have you, nobody stopped them, the clerk would just take the brief away. Yes it was a totally different experience. You had to fight so much harder and you were always having to prove yourself whereas the men just assumed that it was all going to work in their favour. A lot of the clerks were extraordinarily sexist in their attitude. Mine weren't too bad actually, for the time, they were pretty supportive.

HI And in the same way do you feel your experiences as a person from a more modest background with two working parents was different to your colleagues with a more affluent background?

MH Yes I suppose it took me a fair time to feel I belonged whereas I think that those from a public school background had come in with much more confidence and they were surrounded by people from a public school background, so for me, it was getting that sense of belonging that I was in the right place. Eventually I did and I never found any overt discrimination, just because I was state educated. Nobody ever accused me of being common or not having a right to be there, it was just the innate feeling of you're in the right place that they had, and I didn't.

HI May I ask when you married?

MH 1974. I met my husband at university and we married in 1974 having had a broken engagement in between.

HI Was there any assumption from your chambers or from your family that after marrying you would show less interest in your career?

MH Yes In those days because they weren't used to women barristers having children there weren't that many of them, they'd be watching you like a hawk, the first signs of pregnancy, and once you'd had one child, they were watching if you'd have a second.

12.02

So you were treading water somewhat from the minute you got pregnant and then treading water in between the babies. Once you'd had two, most people... oo that's ok she's done her stint, they never seemed to assume you might go on for three or four. Well I didn't! So once I'd had two then nothing really stood in one's way provided you were happy to do the kind of work that women were 'meant to'. Namely crime and family. As I was happy doing crime and family it didn't really matter.

HI Did you disclose to clients that you'd married?

MH Didn't think about doing that, I just wore a wedding ring. I was known as Miss Hallett wearing a wedding ring; I suppose people might have wondered but I never consciously denied it or not raised it.

HI What years were your children born?

MH 80 and 82.

HI What length of maternity did you take?

MH Four months for the first, six months for the second.

HI Was that your own choice?

MH Yes I wanted after the first one to limit it as much as I could because I was afraid that I wouldn't be taken seriously when I got back. Second one I had the confidence to take a bit longer but then I found it really difficult to get back on the horse because I'd been away for six months. I just wasn't sure about going back into the world. I reckon probably I was happier going back after four months.

HI What were the rules on chambers' rent and contributions?

MH Just kept paying. There weren't any rules in those days, no allowances were made whatsoever. Maybe they didn't, I may not have paid rent during the time I was off because I wasn't earning and your rent was geared by your earnings; I don't think there was a minimum rent you paid, so I suspect I probably got a low rent period once I got back because I suspect my fees would have covered me for the time I was away but there were no special provisions.

14.16

HI What were the rules on advertising at that time?

MH Oh very strict against it. We just couldn't. If you went to a party held by a solicitor you were accused of going touting and accused of bad behaviour and people were frowned on for mixing with solicitors, even if they were old friends of theirs. It was ridiculous in that sense. I'm not saying I approve of the rampant advertising for lawyers we have now but it was incredibly restrictive. The attitude towards solicitors was ridiculous and insulting. There was one chap I remember who was very senior in the bar mess where I worked a lot. Even if you had a partner from a highly respected firm of solicitors, come to court to see how the case was going which was rare because usually it was clerk from the solicitors firm – this chap would shout out 'strangers in the mess' and insist that this chap wasn't allowed through the door. It was monstrous. It's not surprising that solicitors felt they were treated appallingly because they were. I remember at the time thinking, this is just rude, apart from the fact it's just stupid, it was rude.

HI So when you went into practice, did you have any opportunity to do what we now call marketing to promote yourself?

MH No, you would have been shot. Certainly you'd have ruined any chance you had of progression if you'd try that. The rules were far from helping you, they hindered you. I had one judge in Kent, who deliberately sat early when he heard I was in front of him because he didn't approve of working mothers.

16.03

Knowing that I had to drive from London, all the way to wherever he was sitting and knowing that I might have been up during the night with a child with a temperature or whatever, he would sit early and he would sit late, because he didn't approve of working mothers. Not only were there no allowances made, obstacles were positively put in our way.

HI Do you think becoming a mother affected your earnings once you'd resumed practice?

MH No I think that once I'd proved that I was sufficiently determined, I think that my earnings were probably on a par with my colleagues who were at similar level and ability. I also had the benefit of growing up in a very supportive network in the bar mess, where the senior people would be there for help and advice and I just grew up in that system, it was like being part of an extended family really.

HI At that stage, when you were a bit older and you'd had your children did you experience any direct sex discrimination?

MH As in – it carried on for many years, as in clients or solicitors saying they didn't want a woman, yes. Sexual harassment, yes. As I've said a judge would sit early and late just because I was a working mother, all sort of different forms of it, yes.

HI Were you able to respond in any way?

MH There were some women who wouldn't take it on the chin. But I'm afraid I was one of those that thought as long as it didn't go too far, so for example if a judge put his hand on your backside or something, as long as it wasn't something that was too serious the easiest way to make progress through this profession was to just put up with it and shut up.

16.14

Part of me wishes I hadn't now because I suspect it might have brought things out in the open earlier, but whether or not I'd have made progress through the profession, because you would have been thought of as unsound, which is how women who made a fuss were described.

HI Did women share those experiences with each other?

MH Yeah we knew. The overt touching or groping happened usually at dinners when men had too much to drink and they seemed to just assume that they were entitled to put their hand on a woman's knee – unbelievable really – but they did. So we'd say oh Fred's been at it again... [laughs] At times it was really quite difficult, some of these men were really quite senior. As I say as long as it didn't go too far, most of us just gritted our teeth.

HI Was there a senior woman who you knew at that time?

MH Not sufficiently closely to go to. There was ... there were a couple of women just ahead of me in chambers but they were only a year or two senior to me and they were the first women in chambers. So there weren't in my chambers, there weren't in the bar mess. There were on or two but not people who I knew well enough to tell what was going on and even then I wasn't sure how they'd react because they'd grown up in an even tougher time, so they'd probably advise me to just get on with it and not rock the boat. It was how people coped in those days.

20.00

HI You were appointed as a QC in 1989. What was the appointments process then?

MH You applied – literally put your ... can't remember if you filled in a form. You applied to Lord Chancellor and the Lord Chancellor's officials would carry out enquiries of the Chairman of the Bar, the Chairman of your mess, judges, presiding judges, High Court Circuit judges and according to my sources, names just seemed to float to the surface. You had to apply but essentially then it was a consultation process, whom was thought to be worthy of appointment.

HI How did you decide when to apply?

MH My husband told me to. We were at exactly the same call. He decided he wasn't going to apply that year but he told me told me to. He applied the following year and got in.

HI So was there an element of competition between you two professionally?

MH Oh the opposite, he told me to apply for silk; we were different worlds. He was very much ... he started off doing everything as I did, civil and crime but his chambers were very much more civil orientated, so he was doing general common law from the civil point of view and I began to specialise more and more in crime. So we weren't ever in competition. We were only ever in two courts together. No, three. One was an inquest. One was a mortgage fraud. And one was a bank robbery where a husband and wife were accused of bank robbery and the solicitor thought it would be rather fun to have a husband and wife barrister team – allegedly.

HI How did becoming a QC affect your practice?

MH We just got bigger and better work. I managed to get work in London whereas until that time my work had been mostly in Kent and Sussex, because the London practitioners, the London sets of chambers really had London sewn up.

22.19

Once you became a QC it became easier to get good work in London so it expanded my horizons geographically and in quality of the work that I did.

HI Do you think appointment to silk affected the way you were treated by colleagues or clients?

MH Oh very much so. You immediately have a certain status and standing which I think affected one's performance too, I think that still does. I see people in court before me. They may be very good as juniors but something comes with the stamp of becoming a QC, they gain even more in confidence and eloquence. I think you're conscious of the fact that you've achieved a particular position. It didn't help when I tried to get into prisons. If I went with a male junior the prison officers would look to the man who was in charge and assume I was the secretary carrying the papers, but there you go.

HI What sort of ceremony did you have?

MH A wonderful ceremony at the House of Lords in – the Painted Room? The Gilded Room? Anyway a fabulous room. We did have a photograph. But I always remember, you don't have time, in those days the announcement was always made on Maundy Thursday – you then had to rush off and hire the kit for the ceremony that was not that long afterwards, two or three weeks. So all the kit was hired and I'm standing there just about to go into this big room for the major ceremony with all the great and the good.

24.09

My two sons were there and my younger son who then would have been seven, who obviously cottoned on to all the emotion and tugged my gown and said mummy I'm going to be sick. I thought, this is classic – only the women are going to have this. Fortunately my male clerk stepped up to the plate and said don't you worry Ms Hallett, I'll sort this one out. I think it was sheer emotion on his part, he was never sick, he just realised it was a really big day for me.

HI What was your kit as a female?

MH Oh I love it. I wanted to wear breeches, and I've gone on Woman's Hour saying I wanted to wear breeches but again in the time available, and I had a black velvet skirt, so I just wore a black velvet skirt. The lace cuffs, what I love about the silk's kit, I love the lace cuffs, there's something gloriously feminine about having lace over your hands, chabert; silk's jacket; silk's gown and full bottom wig.

HI Was it just the pressure of time then that stopped you wearing breeches?

MH I think Helena Kennedy, because she was the first one to do it the following year; I think we may have spoken about it on the same programme. Anyway she did go through with it and she looked wonderful.

HI You were appointed as a Recorder of the Crown Court in 1989. Is that a similar informal appointment process?

MH I was already an Assistant Recorder as we called it in those days, which was the first step on the ladder, from 85.

26.03

You were just... I think what happened when I became an Assistant Recorder, the Senior Judge in the county where I used to work, a fabulous man, Judge Streeter, called me into his room and said right Heather it's time you started sitting. He was a mentor in many ways. He had been wonderful when I was pregnant with my second child, he heard that I'd missed – by the ushers of course who used to be terribly protective of their lady barristers especially when they were pregnant – the ushers had told him I missed three antenatal appointments and the doctors were getting cross with me because I'd told them. I said I've got to make this one. On the day, when I had to make this fourth appointment or the doctors were going to haul me into hospital – the judge heard all this; I had a jury out, the jury went back. Judge Streeter called me in, he said, you're prosecuting Heather, the jury are out, off you go, you've got to go to your antenatal appointment. I said, I can't leave a case! He said, if the jury acquit there's nothing for you to do and if they convict I'll call the officer, which is what you do if you're prosecuting. Fortunately the jury came back within 5 minutes before I could leave the building, but I didn't really know what to do. He was the one, having mentored me throughout my career, the early days he'd call me in and say, if you cross-examine a shoplifter in half an hour then sit down, the job's not for you; he taught me a lot about getting on with the job. So when he said it was time for me to sit, I thought okay. I just applied and it was exactly the same process – they consulted.

HI What attracted you about becoming a recorder and doing a different type of job within the court room?

MH I suppose because it's different. Instead of problem-posing somebody, it's problem-solving.

28.03

I always rather though it would be quite an interesting alternative to being a barrister. I also thought it would help me be a better barrister because if you are sitting there as the impartial umpire, you're seeing how both sides do it, you're thinking if I were defending I would have done that, if I were prosecuting ... I did find it that, I found it a rather good training exercise as well as an interesting experience.

HI Did you have any formal training for that role?

MH In those days the judicial studies board as it then was, wasn't in its infancy but it was still pretty restricted. You went on a residential course, to teach you a bit about how you do it and you went on fresher courses for sentencing but nothing like the kind of help we give judges these days.

HI Did the social mix as a Recorder differ from in your practice?

MH Social mix as in...?

HI The type of people that would become Recorders.

MH It was still only 10% because it was that generation. There were only 10% women who were barristers; in those days not many solicitors sat, some did. So it was still largely the bar that was the pull. It was 10% so still 10% only that became recorders.

HI By that stage when you were more senior, as a Recorder, were you still experiencing any direct sex discrimination?

MH Oh yes. It carried on. The Bar Council and the Inns worked out at a fairly early stage that things were going wrong and they put in a huge amount of effort and have been extraordinary successful in combating sex and race discrimination but it must have gone on.

30.00

I've told a story publicly before about a time when I was given some kind of promotion as a barrister and the senior judge responsible made it plain how I ought to thank him – and that was as a QC. Yes it was going on for some time.

HI What I wanted to ask you if it were appropriate is how you got rid of him on that occasion?

MH My husband who is the least jealous man in the world saw what was happening and said it's time to go home; we were at a party and he just took me home.

HI Did the Judge get the hint?

MH No he probably had too much to drink and probably didn't realise what he'd done. I've never named him and I don't intend to. I think if we saw each other tomorrow he would just assume we're old friends.

HI How did you become a Bencher?

MH I'd always done a lot of work for the profession, as in the circuit, and I'd done a lot of work for the bar, the Bar Council; I'd been on many committees of both Circuit and the bar. So although I hadn't done much in the Inn it was thought if you'd shown commitment to the profession – you can't do everything and I was a working mother out on circuit most of the time – I think the Inn just looked at my track record of work for the profession.

HI Was there a ceremony for that occasion?

MH No I think all that happened was that the next time you went in to lunch you went into a different room, or sat a different table and people shook you by the hand. The unfortunate thing was that about four days before I became a Bencher I had opened a window the easy way namely by sticking my hand straight through it when I was doing an exercise class with some other lady barristers.

32.00

And I cut myself very badly and my hand was completely bandaged up. My fellow benchers, I don't know if they were blind or not looking – they were grabbing me by my hand and shaking me. I was thinking how do I scream in agony quietly.

HI As a Bencher what duties or obligations do you have?

MH I always thought the best part of the job as a Bencher is the obligation/duty to look after the new entrants. You can do that in many ways: advocacy training, scholarship interviewing. There are many other ways to serve as a Bencher. You can serve looking after the house, looking after the way things are run generally throughout the inn or looking after the estate; it's a huge amount of work for some of the people. My interest was more with the new entrants, the training and

scholarships, dishing out scholarships and the like because of my own experience probably. [laughs]

HI Well my next question was what changes you would say had occurred in the inn between your being called in 1972 and becoming a bencher in 1993?

MH It's almost as if they're two different places. When I think back to the kind of people that ran the Inn in those days and the Sub-Treasurers today, it's chalk and cheese. I think we have a fabulous Sub-Treasurer in Patrick Maddams – he cares so much about the Inn, I don't think he's ever had an ounce of discrimination in his body. That's not quite what it was like back in the 1970s. It's a whole different atmosphere. I think the Inn has really led the way with getting rid of gender discrimination, race discrimination, disability and social mobility. The Inns have a huge amount of work to try and ensure that people from modest backgrounds think of coming to the bar and I'm really proud of what they've done. It's a different place.

34.16

HI Do you have a view of what's driven that change?

MH I'm about to deliver a lecture tomorrow in Oxford where I say that it's two reasons: one is that obviously we had legislation and it's advisable if lawyers obey the law. But also it's because we are a profession. I think that a lot of people realise that a profession – we're proud to be professionals and it means you have a duty to your profession and you have a duty to behave properly and fairly and to make sure that everybody gets a fair deal. I think that's why, probably, the professions were ahead of the game when it came to getting rid of overt discrimination. I can't say we've got rid of all discrimination but we've got rid of overt... you can't have sets of chambers doing as they did in my time: no blacks, no women, no Jews. I'm afraid it was as dreadful as that.

HI During the 90s and the last few years, do you recall any memorable legal or social events?

MH The 90s... I'm sure I could if I had my diaries with me. But not off... I suspect that because I've got so many rich memories of the last few years, I suspect all the past memories have been swept aside, I've just got my own memories from recent years where I was playing a significant part of them. I fear I'm being selfish, only remembering what I've played a part in.

HI How did you come to be a Deputy High Court Judge?

MH I don't know. I didn't apply I don't think. Somebody must have just said... Probably a time when they were looking to have more women. Don't know.

36.11

HI Am I right to think you didn't consciously collect judicial referees as we have to try to do now?

MH No! Didn't have to do any of that. You just had to make sure you hadn't upset anybody on the way I suppose, which is probably why women kept quiet about discrimination.

HI What did that role involve?

MH Deputy High Court Judge? Sitting in the Royal Courts of Justice, both in Chancery and Queen's Bench, which given my background was a bit challenging.

Essentially it involved proving that, despite the fact I'd become known as a criminal practitioner, I could cope with High Court civil litigation, because as a Deputy you were doing the work of a High Court Judge save for the most exceptionally difficult cases. You were doing... I can't remember what actions I tried now, it's blurred, but it might be clinical negligence, it was proper civil litigation at high level.

HI Were you able to look to colleagues or ask for guidance?

MH No there wasn't much support then, certainly wasn't much support in this building. Certainly it's something we've tried to improve over the years. No one else in my chambers did, nobody I did sat as a Deputy so... and my husband didn't at the beginning although soon after he did. There weren't many people to ask really, you were left to your own devices, it was really quite scary. There was no training then either for Deputy High Court Judges. The only training I got was to sit in crime. I had no idea how to craft a judgement, I didn't even really know who went first second and last.

38.00

I knew very little about pleadings, I hadn't done any since I was about five, seven years call really, it was very scary.

HI Wow!

MH Looking back it's a miracle I survived.

HI And when did you first get involved with the Bar Council in a leadership position?

MH Leadership, well I'd chaired the odd few committees over the years – been a member of them, chaired committees over the years. I suppose the first real front line job was Director of Public Affairs in 93, 94. About the same time I became leader of the South Eastern circuit, I became Director of Public Affairs – essentially I was spokesperson. So if BBC Radio 4 wanted to interview you, or The Times, if they wanted the Bar's point of view, the Director of Public Affairs was the first person to whom they spoke and the Director also shared the Public Affairs Committee, working out how you could create a better image for the Bar.

HI Again, did you make that up yourself or were you given media training?

MH Media training, we were given one session – a former BBC or it might have been current – a BBC journalist would teach you one or two tricks. The trouble was the tricks he taught you were all politicians' tricks, so like work out what your message is, don't bother answering the question, just get your message across. I said, I'm a lawyer, I expect people to answer my questions honestly, I can't do that. We had a slightly interesting debate. Anyway I got the point, which is work out what your message is, so I tried to combine the two by answering the question and getting my message across. I didn't like the idea of avoiding the question – say that's an interesting question and then give a different answer, which is what politicians do.

40.03

HI What prompted to participate in those activities for the profession as well as your own practice?

MH A very senior member of my husband's chambers who went on to become a Law Lord and he's gone public saying this so I'm not letting him down, Lord Griffiths

took me to one side at a party I was attending as my husband's wife and said you'll never get anywhere doing crime in Kent, so I thought I'd prove him wrong. I also got fed up with all my colleagues complaining in the Canterbury roving room – why doesn't the Bar Council do this, why doesn't the circuit do that. They were always whinging and never doing anything about it. I thought I'd combine the two; I'd raise my profile and I would pay the profession that I love dearly, that I owed so much, I'd pay back something if I could.

HI When you became Chairman of the Bar Council in 1998 what did your job involve on a daily basis?

MH Responding to drastic potentially dangerous government initiatives, chairing important committees at the Bar Council, making speeches, giving interviews, running the Bar Council, travelling altruistically on behalf... but watching out... you'd attend a meeting somewhere glamorous like Florence so people would think you were there on a jolly, but in fact you'd meet lawyers there from Australia or Hong Kong and you'd discover that governments were trying to do much the same or had done much the same to those professions, foreign jurisdictions as they were planning to us. You'd gather some really quite useful information. I remember vividly going to Vienna for one meeting and discovering that the World Trade Organisation decided it was within their remit to say you could qualify as a lawyer in U-whatsitstan and therefore be able to practice in London.

42.16

The World Trade Organisation was attempting to decrease a qualification. So that kind of thing would ... I exaggerate a little on what the World Trade organisation was plotting, but that sort of thing you could discover what was going on.

HI What happened to your practice at that time?

MH Didn't work at all for the year. I was paid a salary so I didn't do any cases; some Chairmen of the Bar would do the odd case, but because my practice was on circuit it was really difficult to combine. You couldn't just leave the Bar Council and do a week or two's trial in Maidstone or Norwich or somewhere – so I didn't work at all for that year.

HI Obviously you were at a different level of seniority, but could you compare and contrast that kind of break from practice from your break when you'd had your children.

MH I didn't have much chance to work out what was happening. I went back to practice in January 99, just got used to the idea of queuing up to see some alleged paedophile at Wormwood Scrubs after a year of mixing with the great and the good and I got the offer from the Lord Chancellor without an application, just literally tapped on the shoulder in the April. So I never got a chance to see what that year's gap would do to my practice. It didn't seem to affect it, I seemed to go straight back into lots of work.

HI Were you happy to leave your practice at the bar at that stage?

MH I wasn't sure... yes I was and I wasn't. I lost a lot of sleep because I wasn't sure I was doing the right thing, but I knew I was doing the right thing, all sorts of conflicting emotions in my head.

HI In terms of your income, do you feel that was a good decision and the right time to leave the practice?

MH In terms of income, I was a publicly funded barrister so I never made huge amounts of money in fact on one occasion, I was fed up of the headlines fat cats, I told the Evening Standard exactly what I earned and what I took home.

44.13

I was earning a perfectly reasonable living, just it wasn't the kind of living that people assumed all barristers earned just because a few commercial ones did. Becoming a High Court Judge was for me probably good financially because I got a pension. I'd never been able to put aside enough money for a proper pension.

HI Did it have any impact on family life at that stage?

MH I was appointed in April 99, my children were by then 19 and 17 so they weren't quite as dependent although even teenage children like to see their mother occasionally, even if they don't admit it. Of course I had to go away for six weeks at a time. It was doable at that time and I had a husband was very supportive and understood, so it all worked out fine actually.

HI With the full-time judicial appointment did your social networks change?

MH Yes very much so. I suddenly discovered a whole group of friends. And colleagues that I just respected enormously, enjoyed their company. I got an extra group of friends, it's great. Very supportive, very collegiate. If there're any problems, it's a very supportive network, the judiciary.

HI Your appointment to the Court of Appeal in 2005, did that take place before the Judicial Appointments Commissions...

MH Yes, again old system. It was a very odd week for me. On the Wednesday of July 2005 we won the Olympics; on the Thursday I was on the District Line and told with my husband and told to get off the tube, it was the day of the London bombings. On the Friday, the first time I think in living memory, the Royal Courts of Justice were closed, so I was at home; the Lord Chancellor rang me at home to say would you like to go to the Court of Appeal.

46.22

So it was a weird three days. Then a little while later, five years later or so, I became a Coroner to the inquest of the London bombings, it was almost destiny somehow.

HI Looking at the new system, do you imagine that you would have applied yourself at that time?

MH I think I'd have applied at some stage but if I'd have applied then I don't know. I'd only been on the High Court for six years, I'm not sure I would have had the confidence to apply unless someone had told me to.

HI What's your view of the formality of the current judicial appointment process?

MH I think we can make improvements. There are a number of areas where we can ease the process ... it's public knowledge that because I applied to become Lord Chief Justice they asked us for all sorts of things like essays – I think there are ways we can improve that process and I'm not convinced it's the right way to appoint senior judges.

HI What's your job like as a Lady Justice of Appeal?

MH Infinitely varied, half my time in crime, half my time in civil, despite the fact I was known as a criminal practitioner, I have to do a lot of civil, which I'm glad because I wouldn't want to be known as a one trick pony. This week could be anything from murder to fraud to alleged sexual offences. Next week or the week after I go to sit with the Chancellor in the Rolls Building; it would be VAT, company law, anything.

48.04

The week after that I might be with a family colleague in which case it's family cases – it is a huge variety of work.

HI What kind of hours do you generally work?

MH Ten to twelve a day.

HI What assistance do you have?

MH None. I have a clerk, who basically arranges my travel, gets my sandwich for me, helps with arranging interviews like this, but no legal help at all... How we doing?

HI I'll keep going until you want to leave... Coming on to the coronary inquest into the London bombings, how did you come to be appointed?

MH Lord Chief Justice asked me to do it?

HI Was it a choice or a duty?

MH I never thought about turning it down. Of course it's duty; if the Lord Chief Justice asks you to do something, unless there's a very good reason not to, you do it; I never thought about turning it down. It seemed it was a job that had to be done. I was prepared to do it.

HI Did you have any previous experience of the work of a Coroner?

MH Apart from attending the odd inquest years ago, when inhouse days the coroners didn't like people asking questions! No, not really, but I had a fantastic team which I put together quite quickly. I made a few enquiries, found out who the best solicitors were, best advocates, best barristers, and best administrator and I got the most wonderful team, who helped me through the difficult bits.

HI How did the high level of public interest affect your task?

MH Made it very difficult. It was an indescribably difficult task anyway because there's so much emotion, so many bereaved families who could almost feel their emotion – still so raw because they'd had no answers for so long. This was five, six years on.

50.12

The survivors had suffered so terribly; all their families, friends and relations. The bombings affected people throughout the world and there was interest in the inquest throughout the world. I would say when I used to do cases involving young children, their emotional wave was a bit like radio waves and you wouldn't be human if you didn't soak them up to a certain extent. Maintaining a professional objective exterior was probably one of the toughest tasks when confronted with such awful stories, such heroism, such bravery – it brought a tear to your eye, you wouldn't be human if it didn't.

HI I had a look at your report of the 6 May 2011 to the Secretary of State and at certain points you had to say the issue was out of your remit when writing such a report under rule 43. Did you have any opportunity to pass on informal recommendations?

MH No, but in the report where I wanted to pass on a recommendation I did so, even though it wasn't an official, so anybody reading the report would see what I recommended. For example I praised the air ambulance and I said things about them. What I want entitled to do under the provisions of rule 43 was make a formal recommendation because there has to be basically a threat to life and some of the issues didn't get quite that far, although I thought there could be improvements. Jargon, the use of jargon is ludicrous – people change the names of things for the sake of it and create these idiotic titles, but could I say that that would actually involve a risk of death? It was tricky.

52.00

The potential is there because if people don't understand who you are or what you are, so I was torn as to whether that formally came within rule 43 but I made it perfectly plain what I thought about it.

HI Coming on to your appointment as Treasurer of the Inn, was there a particular progression towards that role once you became a bencher?

MH I was then asked by some Treasurers to go on the Executive Committee; I carried on doing what I could for the Inn, doing advocacy training, scholarships and the like. I think no obvious line of progression; I think the Treasurer's system is a bit archaic; the Treasurers get together present, future and past – past going back a certain number of years – and come up with a few names which they bandy around between themselves, but I think we could possibly do a better system.

HI How did being Treasurer fit in with your judicial responsibilities?

MH It was a tough year. I was still doing the inquest; I was Vice-President of the Queen's Bench; I was Treasurer of the Inn, which involved meetings and dinners most days, speeches – it was tough. I was Chairman of the Judicial College. 2011 was a very hard year, because I had no allowance here for the time I was Treasurer. Some of my colleagues retire to become Treasurer. I was doing all these other jobs on top, so it was probably foolish of me really.

HI Having been Treasurer, what's your current relationship with the Inner Temple?

MH For a few months afterwards I tried not to be there too often because I think you shouldn't be looking over your successor's shoulder but then people started saying, Heather where have you been. Last Thursday we had a dinner with a number of Inner Templars – again we formed an informal dining group. I go back there as much as I can. I don't go as often as I would like but I do go as often as I can.

HI I understand that Benchers will remain Benchers for life.

54.06

So what do you think the most senior benchers can offer through the Inn to their junior colleagues in the bar and the judiciary?

MH As long as they don't come out with war stories, which I've probably done too much in this interview. They can offer the benefit of their experience. A lot of the more senior benchers have been wonderful advocates in their time; they know what works; they are very good lawyers, they can help people. For example appenent advocacy, I would have thought some of the more senior benchers have been senior pennant judges, they can say what appeals... there are all sorts of ways more senior Benchers can help. Just by listening – sometimes the new entrants, just meeting people and the senior people listening to them, advising them with the benefit of their life at the bar and life in general.

HI Now Master Hallett, you were rated the eighth most powerful woman in the country, in the Woman's Hour power list in February 2013. As we heard briefly, you've had so many different positions of power, what are your favourite positions of power?

MH I don't see them as positions of power to be honest but I suppose if you interpret the law in a certain way and it goes for or against the government, maybe that gives you a power, I don't know. I don't see it as power. What would be my favourite position, which carried with it a certain amount of power albeit I wouldn't see it as a position of power, I think Treasurer. I loved being Treasurer. I also had the privilege of sharing it with her Royal Highness Princess Royal. First time ever two women. She was, when she could come, a delight. It's a very special year; you feel as if you're leading this huge extended family with the members of staff who feel as if they're part for the family.

56.07

It's just great. So Treasurer. You've got time for one more so choose well!

HI As you'll know well Lord Sumption's given this series of lectures suggesting we must be patient and wait for the passage of time to improve the balance between male and female judges. Lady Hale has given lectures that express a different view that because of the different life experiences they've had, women judge differently. Do you have a view on that debate?

MH I certainly have a view on the debate, in both aspects. One – it's all very well for Jonathan to say we've got to wait but with the greatest respect to Master Sumption, some of us are a bit impatient and we've heard this argument before and I'm sorry, we fail to see why we should wait. We're fed up of people talking the talk, it's time for them to walk the walk. I mean people across society, not just lawyers. I think it's time senior men started accepting that they can't just say we want more women in politics, we want more women on the bench, they've got to do something about it and that means quality of life – it's the only way in my view we're going to make a difference. Now we've got all the other building blocks in place or nearly all of them. We've got to attack two things actually: we've got to attack unconscious discrimination and we've got to attack quality of life because a lot of women are voting with their feet and they're not around to be appointed to the senior posts. As far as the second point, which is whether women judge differently, I'm not sure I necessarily agree with that but I do agree with Lady Hale that we all judge differently depending on our backgrounds. If you're a woman you're going to have a background that's different to men. If that's what's meant by women judge differently, then I entirely agree – in any event the reason for having a more diverse bench is because the bench must reflect the society it serves.

58.02

It is ludicrous to say if 50% of the population are women that there aren't as enough women around, as able if not more able than the meant to do the job. I don't need to use the 'women judge differently' argument, from my point of view, I just say it's fair, it's proper and you'll only keep the confidence of the public if you have a diverse judiciary. I don't like the idea that the senior judiciary – we make a few steps forward and then we fall back as people retire or leave for other reasons. I'm afraid if Lord Sumption were here today I'd say it's all very well [laughs] but some of us have had enough waiting.

HI Master Hallett thank you so much, I'm very impressed with what you've said [inaudible...] but most of all how recently you were able to make use of the time.

MH [laughs] Thank you very much, that's what women do isn't it.