

# *The Warwick Grand Assizes:*

## *Re-visited*



IATL funded one day workshop at the old  
Warwick Court House

27th February 2014

This workshop was a rare opportunity to experience an 'authentic' Grand Assize and see the law of the past brought to life. The workshop began with a tour of the Old Court House in the historic town of Warwick. This is an atmospheric building and students were given a tour of the historically intact court rooms, cells and 17th century dungeon to see how the administration of criminal justice has changed over the years. Then, using the original court documents from the County Records Office, local criminal trials from the 18<sup>th</sup> century were re-enacted in the very courtroom in which they were heard originally.

### **Interdisciplinary, inclusive and diverse**

The workshop provided a novel opportunity for a diverse mix of students, staff and sixth formers to learn together outside the classroom. Students from all year groups, and staff and students from both the Warwick Law School and the English Department took part alongside sixth form students from local schools. The workshop was both innovative and inclusive, forging and strengthening links between the Law School and the wider community, both within and outside the university.

The trip was offered free of charge to all undergraduate law students; tickets were allocated on a first come, first served basis. The trip proved very popular, with all tickets being allocated within thirty minutes and a long waiting list. Tickets for the trip were also offered to local Widening Participation partner schools. Two sixth form students were able to join us for the event. Students from the English Department who were taking the Shakespeare and the Law module also came on the trip, along with Professor Carol Rutter from the English Department and Professor Paul Raffield from Warwick Law School.

### **Learning outside the class room**

Many students had not been in a law court before this event. Visiting a court, especially one so historically intact, enabled the students to fully appreciate the theatricality of the court setting and the drama of the proceedings - aspects of the law that can easily be overlooked when students experience only paper accounts of proceedings.



The historically intact court room



A student recreating the role of judge in one of the re-enactments

### **Students as researchers**

The workshop helped students understand the trial process and bring to life trials from the past. The students were divided into two groups and each group were assigned a local trial that had been heard at the Warwick Court House in the nineteenth century to re-enact. For each case, the students were given access to copies of the original court records held by the County Record Office, including copies of the original depositions from the witnesses and the defendants. Some students took the role of witnesses, some of advocates and some of judge and jury - everyone participated. Students were given time to prepare their legal arguments and to scrutinise witness depositions before re-enacting their trial for the benefit of the other group, who acted as judge and jury, coming to a verdict on the evidence they heard.



Students taking the roles of defence advocates and witnesses

The mock trials gave students a fresh, 'authentic' experience of the law. In their undergraduate studies, students do not have the opportunity to cross examine witnesses or to act as judge and jury. This was a creative and collaborative experience which incorporated a blend of innovative student-led, performance-based, open space learning.

The workshop as a whole also helped students appreciate the historical context of the law: very often students are required to learn the detail of cases from the eighteenth and nineteenth century but can find it difficult to appreciate the historical context in which the judgments were given. The tour of the court house, and in particular the court cells and the dungeon, brought to life the administration of justice in the past and how this has altered.



The seventeenth century dungeon



The Victorian police cells in operation until the court house closed in 1990s

### **Review of the event and feedback**

The use of open space, performance-based, student-led learning outside the classroom enabled students to better understand and appreciate the cases they encounter in their studies, and, in particular, the historical context of the judgments they read.

In order to create a lasting resource, copies of the court documents will be kept in order that the mock trials can be performed again with different groups of students.