The Bar Council

Kirsty Brimelow KC, Chair of the Bar

Speech for the swearing in of the new Master of the Rolls,

Sir Colin Birss

Monday 2 November 2026

My Lady Chief Justice, Master of the Rolls, Heads of Division, My Ladies, My Lords, members of the Bar and of the courts, distinguished guests.

It is a great pleasure, on behalf of the Bar of England and Wales, to congratulate Sir Colin Birss on his appointment as Master of the Rolls.

The Dean of the Faculty of Advocates of Scotland, Roddy Dunlop KC and the Chair of the Bar of Northern Ireland, Denise Kiley KC also convey their warm congratulations.

Sir Colin, you assume an office with a history stretching back at least to the thirteenth century. Its original responsibility was the safekeeping of the Crown's charters, patents and court records, written on parchment rolls.

The medieval keeper of records gradually acquired judicial responsibilities. Across the centuries, the office evolved into the leadership of civil justice and the presidency of the Civil Division of the Court of Appeal. Yet its connection with our national records survives.

That history solemnly carries an enduring message. Justice depends upon an accurate record: of rights, of obligations, of what was argued and what was decided. Whilst the means of preserving it may change; the need for public confidence in it remains.

Your appointment is fitting as a judge who understands both patents and artificial intelligence but we should, however, acknowledge your recent record of institutional reform. You became Chancellor of the High Court and, within a year, had apparently abolished yourself—emerging like a shiny new moth from your Chancellor chrysalis as President of the Business and Property Division.

We hope the office of Master of the Rolls is not feeling nervous.

It has survived for some eight centuries. We trust you will give it at least a few more months.

In preparing for today, knowing that there likely will be reference to all manner of online rules and committees, I tried, whilst struggling to connect a second screen, to request the views of my AI friend Chat GPT as to what they thought of their friend Sir Colin. This was the response:

"I don't have personal feelings or know him socially, so I couldn't honestly say that I like him in that sense. But my impression is favourable: there is much in his professional approach to respect."

Faint praise, indeed.

And so, I turned to the Chancery Bar and Intellectual Property Bar. These are not my own natural homes, and I was delighted at the rich vein of gossip that is present.

And it was all I could do to stop them drafting themselves. I was sent a transcript of speeches welcoming you as Chancellor of the High Court on 18 November 2025. One barrister remarked that they had made three speeches for you as you sprinted up the judicial ladder. He was like a soldier who had returned from battle with his prose carefully handed over intact to be worn as medals. Now I am not an IP lawyer and so I am treading very cautiously in swiping their anecdotes. But there is one that caught my eye. In my own words…

In the heart of the Scilly Isles lies the island of Tresco. It is renowned for sightings of rare visiting birds particularly during Autumn migration. It is a place where the exhausted birds can rest and feed. Some are far east from their normal routes. They are called vagrants. Amongst these vagrants is a human variety- rarely sighted – but a constant. It is our new Master of the Rolls. Now my big reveal is that My Lord is not blown off course and so is not a vagrant at all but goes to Tresco to eat pizza. You have a particular favourite. Whilst AI may be able to notify you of a more local pizza spot, I understand that it is a pleasure to see you communing with family and friends - of course alongside the Blackburnian warbler and the great blue heron.

Career

Your education started at Largs Academy on the Firth of Clyde in Scotland before moving to grammar school in Lancaster. Your stellar intelligence always has been on display and you won an exhibition to read Metallurgy and Material Sciences at Downing College, Cambridge, graduating in 1986 with a First.

You intended to pursue research and then decided to become a lawyer after setting fire to a transistor in the laboratory. Transferring from fire to occasional fireworks, you were called to the Bar in 1990 and practised in intellectual property law, appearing in 166 reported cases in Westlaw, overwhelmingly patent or trademark

cases involving complicated medical or chemical processes, applications and technological developments.

There also was a famous case of Fabio Perini, concerning the mechanics of the device that stops loo roll unravelling. To be clear, in all my research, I am not suggesting that the Chancery and Intellectual Property Bar thought of Andrex when learning that you are Master of the Rolls.

You took silk in 2008. You were appointed Senior Circuit Judge in the Patents County Court in 2010 having been the Deputy Chairman of the Copyright Tribunal and then was appointed a Judge of the Chancery Division in 2013 and elevated to the Court of Appeal in 2021 and to Chancellor of the High Court. Your Lordship once was described at the Bar as "the acceptable face of nerdiness".

However, your Lordship also demystifies the law and recognises that the absorbing points of law and question of principle have real impact on the parties, whether their business survives or their home and family life is secure.

That approach also may reflect your support of the CLIPS scheme by Advocate and administered by the Chancery Bar Association. You commented when you became Chancellor that you regarded it as a very important aspect of work in the Business and Property Division, recognising the criticality of access to justice for the most in need. In relation to specialism, you said that you do not need to be a housing expert to provide legal help to a person facing eviction but required a good legal brain, the ability to listen and the ability to be an advocate. Wise words for us all.

You follow Sir Geoffrey Vos, to whom the Bar offers its warm thanks for his service and his sustained commitment to modernising civil justice.

Technology offers considerable opportunities: to simplify procedure, reduce unnecessary expense and help people understand their options. The test of its success will be the experience of those who need the courts.

Can they understand the process? Can they participate effectively? Can they obtain advice and representation when they need it? Can they understand the reasons for winning or losing?

Those questions have accompanied civil justice through centuries of change. They will remain essential whatever appears on the screen.

The Bar looks forward to working with you. Our members bring daily experience of where procedure helps, where it obstructs, and where a practical change can transform a client's experience. We will contribute that knowledge candidly and constructively.

Sir Colin, I hope that my words convey a little of how much you are admired and respected at the Bar. Previously, you have expressed your support of the junior Bar and this is welcomed. We are confident that your enthusiasm, kindness and brilliance – all descriptions from the IP Bar -together with your humour and searing intelligence will continue to shine brightly.

May your tenure strengthen public trust, widen access to the courts, support the junior Bar and enable your intellect and energy to continue to soar.

On behalf of the Bar of England and Wales, I extend warm congratulations and wish you every success as Master of the Rolls.