



Off and running in an unexpected direction



With my predecessor Dr Ahmed Mukhtar at my Declaration

'HIT THE ground running' High Sheriffs in nomination are advised frequently, but where to run and in what direction? Fortunately, previous High Sheriffs and the Under Sheriff are ready to give generous and helpful advice, so off you set on the great adventure of being High Sheriff, travelling through your own county meeting remarkable people and visiting places that you might otherwise never have the opportunity to see.

In July the Hon Mrs Justice Carr helped Northampton's judges celebrate 25 years since the opening of its Combined Court Centre in Lady's Lane where it moved from the Grade I Sessions House, a magnificent building where I held my Declaration but which is currently only used by the coroner. This year has regrettably seen the closure of two of the county's four Magistrates' Courts but despite this, the Justices of the Peace have been very welcoming in allowing me to sit in on cases as have judges and the coroner. This has been a huge privilege,

one that I have found fascinating, with cases varying from the gruesome and depressing to even unintentionally funny.

His Honour Judge Tim Smith made an award under the Criminal Law Act 1826 to a singularly brave individual and his young son who went to the aid of a shopkeeper who was being assaulted and racially abused. The father held down the assailant until the police arrived while others stood by videoing the event on their mobiles. It was a great pleasure to give the High Sheriff's Award to this man but, as a sad reflection of modern times, the recipient did not wish there to be any publicity for his own safety and that of his son.

I had grave doubts about visiting HMPs Onley and Rye Hill as I thought they would be gruelling experiences, particularly the latter which is exclusively for sex offenders, but I found the staff and the governors of both positive, full of initiatives and engaged with local companies for the benefit and training

of offenders. HMP Onley has one of the highest success rates of its prisoners not reoffending upon release, a result of the hard work and effort of all those involved. Northamptonshire's courts send many offenders to HMP Woodhill in Milton Keynes, so I shared a visit there with my counterpart in Buckinghamshire, Milly Soames. The governor Rob Davis gave up almost three hours of his precious time showing us around this Category B establishment, introducing prisoners and staff in a very secure but relaxed environment; there was even a wedding taking place in the chapel. The governors and staff at all three prisons are utterly professional, approachable and dedicated to their work in trying to turn around the lives of offenders, a great many of whom have backgrounds of drug and alcohol abuse, mental health issues, poor education and dysfunctional home lives. These are all problems where I question whether prisons should be responsible for such treatment, or are the right places for this.

So which direction am I going in? My prison visits have been an unexpected epiphany and I would like to get involved in this field, starting with attendance at a lecture next month given by the Howard League to learn more. The Howard League for Penal Reform was named after John Howard, a pioneer prison reformer and High Sheriff of Bedfordshire in 1773.*

◆ Caroline Brocklehurst
High Sheriff of Northamptonshire 2016-17



Above: Judges celebrating 25 years of the Crown Court building