



A positive force in the county

IN THE months leading up to the Declaration it all seemed to be about 'What sort of ceremony shall I have?' and 'How on earth am I going to find court dress?' In the end, of course, it all worked out; the court dress fitted and since we live on a smallholding we had space to hold the Declaration ceremony in our Living Willow Theatre with the local primary school children singing a welcome to the judge. An additional surprise was the offer from the descendants of the local Rebecca Rioters to contribute to the event by reading their own Declaration to the judge that 'notwithstanding the lack of employment which this will provide for the judge here present' they would ensure 'the peaceful public employment of the people in the Parish of Llanwrthwl'. The original rioters in west Wales in 1839-43 were tenant farmers, disguised as women, who attacked tollgates in protest at the charges they were obliged to pay. They called themselves 'Rebecca and her daughters', probably originating from Genesis, chapter XXIV, verse 60, where Rebecca's brother exhorted her descendants to 'possess the gate of those which hate them'.

The whole day set a tone that I was keen to follow: that the office of High Sheriff should be mutually celebrated as a positive force within the county.

Sue Large pointed out in these pages (Winter 2013-14) that Powys covers a huge area with a low population and few visits from High Court Judges. I have managed to sit alongside a judge on an appeal, however, listening to three-and-a-half hours

of the most elegant English from three barristers and the judge himself. That and two days observing in Magistrates' Courts really brought home to me the huge commitment and hard work that is put in by the judiciary.

I was able to say thanks in a small way by hosting the Magistrates of Powys at a barbecue one sunny September afternoon. Apart from the lower cost involved, if you do have the space and someone to help you with the sandwiches, I believe that home entertainment is much appreciated.

I think my big breakthrough in understanding the role of High Sheriffs came during the week of the Royal Welsh which is our local Agricultural Show, the largest in Europe. I went on each of the four days, always wearing the High Sheriff's badge. After a couple of days I found myself quite at ease entering whichever stand looked interesting, introducing myself and always saying 'this year's High Sheriff'. It's the Office not the man! Those few show days introduced me to a great number of voluntary organisations, to all of which I have written and many of whom I have since visited.

Final tip: use your regional fellow High Sheriffs. We are very lucky here in Wales to have a well-defined region of eight counties. We are quite well spread out but there is an annual meeting and great sense of belonging.

I am loving my year! The best of luck to all serving and to follow.

◆ Phil Bowen

High Sheriff of Powys 2014-15

Below: The High Sheriff's Declaration ceremony attended by His Honour Judge Furness, Rebecca Rioters' descendants and Nantmel schoolchildren

Below right: The High Sheriff and Sue Bowen (front far right) at their barbecue at home with Powys Magistrates

