



The Magistrates' Court Mock Trial Competition

A GIRL sat trembling in the dock at Reading Crown Court. She had just listened to her counsel making an impassioned argument as to why she was innocent of stealing her neighbour's PlayStation. Then, with every word of his summing-up, the prosecution barrister demolished the defence. The judge asked her to stand for the verdict and, in ringing tones, found her guilty. She turned pink and burst into tears as she was led down to the cells.

This was not an ordinary day in Reading Crown Court. All the participants in the case were 13-year-old school students but such is the enthusiasm with which they play their roles, it all seemed horribly real for the young girl.

The Magistrates' Court Mock Trial Competition is run by the Citizenship Foundation nationally. The High Sheriff is Patron which brilliantly connects the Shrievalty with the judges, magistrates and courts which are at the heart of the Office of High Sheriff. They encourage their individual counties and metropolitan areas to organise the heats locally, a job which falls on the magistrates. The lack of a Crown Court is no bar to the competition taking place.

In the Royal County of Berkshire, we are proud of the way in which High Sheriffs, past, present and future, support this competition both financially and with their presence at the heats. The commitment of over 40 of our magistrates makes all the difference. This year, 26 schools entered. 'Berkshire does run the largest heat in the competition – with the most schools,' writes Ruth Dwight from the Citizenship Foundation.

Students learn about all aspects of the criminal justice system and court procedures. They appreciate what it

means to be an active citizen and gain a good knowledge of the legal system, greater than many members of society. Through public speaking, debate and working as a team, they develop confidence and skills. One student was inspired to enter the legal profession: she is now studying Law at Oxford.

In Berkshire last year I invited the winning school of our regional final to the Crown Court judicial service in Reading Minster. The whole team came, with one reading the prayers jointly with the vicar of the Minster. The confidence of this 13-year-old girl in speaking to a congregation of over 600 people was remarked upon by all. Half of the collection – £1,000 – went to the Mock Trial Competition.

The event costs between £4,000 and £4,500 a year to run and funds are held by the Berkshire Community Foundation. We offer up to £300 to each school to cover travel costs when the national finals are a long distance away as they are this year in Nottingham. Past High Sheriffs and Deputy Lieutenants support most of the costs of the competition.

As Ruth Dwight writes: 'the Citizenship Foundation is tremendously grateful to the High Sheriffs who have been supporting the Magistrates' Court Mock Trial Competition across many areas of England and Wales for over 20 years. With their support – and the great efforts of the magistracy – we are able to provide a unique and valuable experience to over 6,000 young people each year. We look forward to working with more High Sheriffs as we increase the reach and quality of public legal education across England and Wales.' For more information please visit www.smartlaw.org.uk.

❖ **Victoria Fishburn**
High Sheriff of Berkshire 2016-17



Top: Charlotte Rice from The Holt School at Reading Minster for the judicial service

Centre: 2015 national final at the Victoria Law Courts in Birmingham: St Peter's Catholic High School, Wythenshawe, Manchester v The Folkestone School for Girls, Kent (Photo credit: Paul Clarke)

Above: Victoria Fishburn with the winners of the 2016 regional final from The Holt School, Wokingham, Berkshire at Reading Crown Court