



A celebration of partnership

Below: High Sheriff's Reception at Walton Hall, the Open University: John Skelton, Francesca Skelton, Peter Horrocks CBE, Vice-Chancellor of the Open University and his wife Rosemary Rogers Photograph: Frazer Waller

WHEN INVITED to accept the nomination for High Sheriff, my first words were 'But I haven't got a big house!'; 'Take them to the pub!' said the encouraging High Sheriff.

I was not 'of the land', but an incomer to Milton Keynes, the new town approaching its 50th birthday in 2017 which now constitutes a third of the population of our ancient, ceremonial county of Buckinghamshire.

Rather than rely on my local thatched pub for entertaining, I decided to embrace partnership and showcase important organisations in the county. My first partner was Milton Keynes College. Holding the offender learning contract for 28

prisons, they are passionate about prison education. Chief Executive Dr Julie Mills was immediately enthusiastic about jointly hosting a High Sheriff's Justice Dinner, to reflect on the achievements and challenges of the justice system in our county.

On a June evening an excellent dinner was prepared by the MK College students at the splendid Bletchley Park, thanks to the generosity of its Chief Executive Iain Standen. The speaker was Baroness Kennedy QC and the 100 guests included our Lord-Lieutenant, judges, magistrates, the bishop, police and crime commissioner, the chief constable and senior Thames Valley Police officers, governors of our four prisons and representatives



Photograph: Marion Mason



even sourced a talented young bugler to herald my arrival and short speech.

The partnership theme continued throughout the year including a High Sheriff's Reception at Willen Hospice and a High Sheriff's Afternoon Tea at the Art in the Park Festival held by Anouar Kassim and his MK Islamic Arts and Culture group. Both events offered opportunities to invite guests from across the county.

My final event was a Celebration of Partnership held in a splendid new building in the centre of Aylesbury. University Campus Aylesbury Vale is a partnership between Bucks New University and Aylesbury College, demonstrating an impressive commitment to the skills agenda. I partnered with UCAV, the two Community Foundations (Milton Keynes and the Heart of Bucks), and Aylesbury College students provided hospitality and catering. I was so pleased to introduce the wide range of guests to this new, transformative campus.

At all times these partnerships were about mutual benefit. The partners respected the Office of High Sheriff and valued the opportunities it brought them to nurture networks and showcase their contribution to our county. High Sheriffs may have lost their power to command in the name of the Sovereign, but what impressed me were the opportunities to provide a neutral, positive platform for people to share their challenges, achievements and ambitions. I have been struck by the commitment, energy, and engagement of all the people I have met. It has been a privilege, as it is now to hand the High Sheriff's baton to Milly Soames to continue the connections and conversations across our ceremonial county of Buckinghamshire.

Francesca Skelton DL
High Sheriff of Buckinghamshire 2015-16

of probation, national offender management, business, universities and charities.

As I welcomed the guests, I playfully remarked that many in the room had stripped High Sheriffs of their ancient powers, but what we could now marshal was the power of ideas, connections and conversations. The feedback afterwards was enthusiastic, with immediate outcomes such as judges arranging visits to their local prisons, and magistrates inviting the head of offender learning to give a presentation.

For my second event I approached the Open University. With a new Vice-Chancellor, Peter Horrocks, joining in May, could the High Sheriff introduce him to the county of Buckinghamshire? This idea was embraced enthusiastically and my High Sheriff's Reception was held in July organised by the generous and committed OU team who

Top: Celebration of Partnership, Aylesbury: presentation of High Sheriff's Award to Jenny Street, Chairman of Bucks Federation of WIs

Above: High Sheriff's Justice Dinner, Bletchley Park: High Sheriff, Dr Alan Wilson, Bishop of Buckingham, Francis Habgood, Chief Constable of Thames Valley Police, Baroness Kennedy.

Right: Handing over to Milly Soames at her Declaration



Photograph: Marion Mason