



Photo: Cambridge Evening News

# Hat, sword and collection bucket

**Above:** Linda Fairbrother on her charity walk meets Bill Hensley, Mayor of Huntingdon, and Tanya Foster, Deputy Mayor (centre)

MEETINGS, MEETINGS... I didn't think that, as High Sheriff, there would be so much to organise and unfamiliar skills to master. But, like Grand National jumps, every month there's another big event to gallop towards, leap over, and race to the next in a cold sweat. Once jumped, only the good memories remain, and the two particular standouts so far are my Declaration and the six-day 'Coast to Cambridge' Walk.

I wanted my Declaration to be a secular event,

and an enjoyable one. A first decision was to have a humanist chaplain to represent all faiths and none. Then, as well as performing the necessary formalities, I compiled two six-minute readings: 'High Sheriffs in Cambridgeshire' and 'A question of Justice'. I had spent the previous two years collecting suitable material, and then shaped quotations into coherence with a linking script.

Some elements were thought-provoking, such as a medieval sheriff's demolition of illegal gallows

in a certain town (no information on how many were hanged before local enterprise was squashed). Or the unfortunate man bankrupted by a visit from Good – but Expensive – Queen Bess in the 16th century (modern holders of the office may sympathise). Other readings kept the audience amused, like the trial of the Knave of Hearts from *Alice through the Looking Glass*, where among other foibles, the judge delivers sentence before the trial begins.

The other standout event was a charity walk, which began as a simple idea, and became far more complicated. In the end, I had a wonderful six days walking from Wisbech in the north of the county to Cambridge in the south, about 80 miles. Taking along hat, sword and collection bucket was easy – carrying the big banner was more of a trial. Each brought a different group of walkers to talk to, and different businesses, schools, and voluntary groups to visit.

It was fascinating to explore my county this way, finding out about communities large and small, discovering sad and inspiring stories: on the first day, a former alcoholic now on the staff of a hostel for the homeless; on the third day the overweight bullied youngster, who had gained confidence and skills at a young people's project and is now about to join the army. Mayors and councillors met us, the Peterborough Football Club Rabbit came to wave his two-foot carrot in support and wonderful Macmillan Cancer Support groups baked far too much cake. Even a mother seal



with her pup awaited us on the banks of the Great Ouse, 40 miles from the sea.

So many other wonderful experiences also live in my memory: a boxing club for troubled young people; sleeping rough with just a small piece of cardboard and a sleeping bag; dancing in a borrowed sari to celebrate the nine Hindu goddesses; the privilege of sitting in court with various judges.

Now only two more big fences to go: a second community party; and a premiere of specially commissioned music on the theme of 'Hereward the Wake' with 200 children taking part.

So I'm looking forward to fewer cold sweats – and meetings – for the second half.

◆ **Linda Fairbrother**  
*High Sheriff of Cambridgeshire 2014-15*

**Top:** Meeting the Peterborough Football Club Rabbit

**Inset:** High Sheriff sleeping rough in Nene Park, Peterborough for World Homeless Day

**Above:** High Sheriff (centre) with charity walkers at Upton, near Peterborough

**Left:** L/Cpl Jack Boyd and Cadet Holly Shaw of Cambridgeshire Army Cadet Force, Corps of Drums, guard the High Sheriff