



## That special feeling

I'LL ADMIT I was daunted. How, inside a single year as High Sheriff, can one validate a role that has existed for over a thousand? But here was a start: noticing my badge, a cocky young Londoner doing time at Deerbolt Young Offender Institution asked, 'So what are you, Miss?' I replied, 'High Sheriff of Durham, appointed by Her Majesty The Queen for one year to look after the Forces of the Law.' (This became my standard shorthand explanation.) His graphic comment was: 'F\*\*\*\*\*g hell!' He had a point.

Being High Sheriff is both an extraordinary privilege and an intimidating responsibility. Not coming from the judiciary, the prison service, the emergency services or the military myself, learning what it takes to keep us all safe has been an education, one shared at times with my husband Jonathan, my chaplain Canon Trevor Pitt or the Under Sheriff Helen Dexter, and one that has impressed us all.

In County Durham, relating both to Newcastle and Teesside Crown Courts, not to mention the Crown Court in Durham City, the High Sheriff sees plenty of judges. Joining them in court was both a privilege and a shock. To absorb the horror of a manipulative man making three others torture a fifth member of the household to death

over many months, or to see a father convicted of raping his own twelve-year-old daughter, were experiences I am glad not to repeat. Anyone who tells me again that judges are out of touch will get a very short answer. On the other hand, entertaining judges to dinner, which we did informally at home, and joining them on other occasions at their lodgings featured among the greatest pleasures of the year.

Visiting prisons (County Durham has five, including HMP Frankland – 'Monster Mansion' in the media) I didn't see squalid, chaotic or frightening conditions, although all admitted to occasional eruptions; instead I saw good work to detach prisoners from drugs, educate those of low previous attainment, and give training for future jobs. All the prison governors I met were most generous with their time, and these were some of the most fascinating conversations in the entire year.

Famously, County Durham's is the UK's only 'Outstanding' police force, a distinction held already for three years, and it was a revelation to see at first hand what that means. From all four emergency services I learnt much – for example how heavy, hot and frankly intolerable it is to

**Below:** Four speakers at an event in Bishop Auckland to celebrate the suffragettes: Durham County Councillor Joy Allen, the Lord-Lieutenant of Durham Sue Snowdon, the High Sheriff, and Bishop Auckland MP Helen Goodman





Far left: At my Declaration with His Honour Judge (Christopher) Prince and the Chief Constable of Durham, Michael Barton



Left With Seaham Coastguard Station Officer, Dean Cassidy

wear full protective gear for even 20 minutes in a situation like the Grenfell fire or the Salisbury poisoning. The fitness requirements for both men and women are extreme, let alone the relentless training that goes into the level of organisation and discipline these jobs demand. Heroes indeed.

On the military front Durham has no army base or airfield to compete with North Yorkshire or Northumberland but I greatly enjoyed meeting Army Reserve members at their local bases, and seeing the work that goes on to educate cadets and care for veterans.

Throughout my year I focused strongly also on the voluntary organisations that underpin all the above: those who support prisoners and their families, who work with drug and alcohol addicts, who help women who have fled abusive relationships, and who care for the mentally ill and vulnerable. These often unrecognised people are the bedrock of society, and my admiration for them is boundless.

Today, I am repeatedly asked: 'Have you enjoyed your year?' My answer is a resounding 'yes'. It was the most rewarding, most interesting and most revealing year of my life. The magnificent service of Matins for Her Majesty's Courts of Justice in Durham Cathedral inevitably heads the list of highlights, and being granted another Cathedral Service of Thanksgiving shortly before I stood down was an exceptional privilege. Alongside these, other memorable events were the High Sheriff's Awards, three royal visits, and explorations in areas of County Durham I knew less well, kindly hosted by mayors and council chiefs.

One unexpected delight was an event in Bishop Auckland to commemorate the suffragettes, at which I was one of four speakers. Another

was citizenship ceremonies. I asked one Iraqi candidate why he had chosen to become British. 'Because your country, out of several I have lived in since leaving Iraq, most closely matches what I believe in.' Asking him to explain, I got this very heartening answer: 'Good race relations, honesty and justice.' 'I don't think we do any of those things perfectly.' I said, 'but perhaps we do them better than some countries.' 'Correct,' he said.

As to whether, in a single year, any High Sheriff can make a difference, I quote an email from a voluntary organisation I visited in Hartlepool: 'I just wanted to say, on behalf of all our members, a huge thank you for taking the time out of your busy diary to visit and see what we achieve with our members. They (as well as the volunteers) were ecstatic that you took the time to speak to them on an individual basis. It made them feel very special.' That, in a word, justifies entirely the High Sheriff's role. I am honoured, and humbled, to have occupied it for a year.

## ◆ Caroline Peacock

*High Sheriff of the County of Durham 2017-18*



Left With my husband Jonathan and, in the centre, Teesdale and Weardale Search and Mountain Rescue Team Leader, Steve Owens