



# The Sheriff bird...

IT WAS a November night and I was running up the seemingly never-ending stairs of a multi-storey car park in the wake of two young police constables answering an emergency call. My heart was pounding and the ceremonial duties of a High Sheriff, clad in velvet and lace, had never seemed more distant. What an extraordinary role it is that links one with the justice system on so many levels – and what a privilege it has been to be part of it. I've felt moved and honoured when a youth worker – and former user – of a club that I visited tweeted that I was her 'new best friend'; I've been humbled and awed by the compassion and rigour of judges preparing to sentence. I have followed in the footsteps of a rich and valuable tradition as well as finding ways of doing things which, to me, felt more appropriate for the present day.

As part of my attempt to understand the shrieval role in the 21st century, I joined police on patrol on many occasions and marvelled at the extraordinary work they do. Young officers can be faced with suicide attempts, alleged rapes, domestic violence and heroin overdoses in one shift, yet still retain their composure and professionalism, reacting with humanity and respect. Thanks to being able to accompany them on a regular basis, I've seen the exceptional way in which they do their duty, day after day, night after night. For them, a 'routine patrol' is just that – however unusual the events and impressive their response.

I have found that making return visits has been key in forming relationships. It has been heart-warming to be welcomed back to youth projects by workers who had assumed my interest would only extend to one 'official' visit – and it has been a privilege to get to know some of the users and staff on a more informal, low-profile basis. It has really touched me how much it matters to them that they aren't just a 'one-off' entry in an official diary.

I have relished every second of my involvement with our courts of law and have been keen to show young people the excellence of our judicial system. I have regularly invited students to accompany me to court, to engage with the judicial process in a more immediate way than is possible from the public gallery, and to have the chance to talk to judges, magistrates and barristers. We are so fortunate in this country to have trials where each case is rigorously explored with erudition, fairness and compassion.

The work of prisons has also been an inspiration to me. I have been heartened to see prisoners developing literacy and numeracy skills and drawing strength from the quiet space of the chapel, despite the constraints of their environment. HMP/YOI Winchester's Restorative Justice project 'Inside or Out' is delivered by prisoners to young people on court referral orders and it has been encouraging to witness how effectively this demonstrates the harsh realities of life 'inside' and the consequences of crime. When I made awards to prison staff I was told by the governor that the prisoners who worked alongside the staff were as pleased as the officers were by recognition of their work on a project – said one: 'Tell that Sheriff bird I'm chuffed'.



Above: Out with Community Payback

Opposite page: On a police Raptor vehicle



Right: On 6 April, Mr Tom Floyd was sworn in as the new High Sheriff of Hampshire and Mrs Rachel Brooks was appointed as the Under Sheriff of Hampshire. Rachel is replacing Mr Jim Kennedy of Blake Morgan who has served as Under Sheriff of Hampshire for the last 28 years. At the end of the ceremony an engraved armada dish was presented to Jim Kennedy by Tom Floyd and the outgoing High Sheriff of Hampshire Lady (Louisa) Portal. This gift was provided by all the High Sheriffs of Hampshire in appreciation of the huge amount of support and service that Jim Kennedy has rendered.

themed lunch parties. Two of these, on 'Reducing Reoffending' and 'Motivating Young People', included presentations by relevant organisations. The intimate scale of these occasions provided an opportunity for links to be forged, and I am delighted – and a little surprised – that local charities have been able to secure nearly £100,000, partly as a result of our more personal style of entertaining.

From the slow-stepping processions in the Law Sunday service to the race up those interminable stairs, my year as High Sheriff has certainly kept me on my toes! The Office is far more worthwhile than I could ever have dreamt: an opportunity to give support and encouragement, and, due to the independence of the role, to work without anyone attributing to me motives of publicity, career advancement or inspection. I was so grateful for the freedom to visit, learn from and engage with so many individuals and organisations. It has been a rare privilege to work at the interface between the highest traditions of the justice system and their applications in modern life.

◆ **Louisa Portal MBE DL**  
*High Sheriff of Hampshire 2015-16*

