



A Kentish tale

IN APRIL 2017, I donned my court dress for the first time and followed in the footsteps of my grandfather and great-grandfather, who were both High Sheriff of Kent, with my own memorable Declaration service in Wye Church.

From the cab of a tractor it is quite impossible to imagine the thriving network of community-based projects quietly making a difference to lives across the county. One of my first invitations was to give out Local Community Awards to volunteers in tiny villages. Arriving in court dress made a bold statement and, not surprisingly, I was given a much warmer welcome once I explained that the role of High Sheriff was entirely self-funded!

Although I set out in my year to support rural activities and education, I have also spent many hours with judges in both Maidstone and Canterbury Crown Courts, sitting with them while they dealt with complex and harrowing cases. This led to the privilege of making Court Bravery Awards to those whose lack of concern for their own lives has been breathtaking. I am glad that for a brief moment their gallantry was recognised.

Early in my year I was invited to a Kent Police dinner where 300 special constables gathered to celebrate a year of achievement in the prevention of crime across the county. This initiated a valuable relationship with the chief constable and I attended several passing-out parades and award ceremonies. My time in various fast-moving squad cars

has taught me that our police are indeed stopping criminals in their tracks.

I have visited all of the prisons in Kent on a number of occasions to see the work of the governors and the prison officers. A young man, to whom I gave a High Sheriff's mentoring award, has now been released and with his award has secured a job.

The High Sheriff's Charity Awards held with Kent Community Foundation saw six worthwhile organisations receive certificates, cheques towards their work, and valuable PR. I also hosted a 'Causes that Matter' tea party for the managers and leaders of over 70 charities in Kent to meet each other and discuss challenges they face.

I have shared a silent toast with The Princess of Wales's Royal Regiment and witnessed the presentation of their new colours; I watched 36 Royal Engineer Regiment march down Maidstone High Street with bayonets fixed and the Royal Engineers invited me to watch an explosives exercise on Rochester Bridge.

At a packed Easter Service this year, I was reminded of the moving occasions I have enjoyed in our two great cathedrals. The Justice Service with its pomp and circumstance, supported by our judiciary, formed an important part of my year. Kent is home to a mosaic of religions and I have

Below left: High Sheriff with representatives of the Kent Fire and Rescue Service, HM Coastguard and Reserve Forces at the Blue Light service

Below right: At the High Sheriff's garden party, L-R Lt Col Will Betts, Lt Col Will Robinson, Assistant Chief Constable Jo Shiner, Mr Andrew Shiner



Abbeyfield Kent Society celebrating its 50th anniversary in Canterbury Cathedral, (L-R) High Sheriff, Lance Sgt Johnson Beharry VC and Viscount De L'Isle MBE, Lord-Lieutenant

visited the Jewish Synagogue, the Gurdwara Sikh Temple and the Nazir Mosque, and was warmly welcomed by them all.

A first for Kent was the Blue Light Service that I held in Rochester Cathedral. We created a magnificent choral evensong and gathered a congregation of representatives from the emergency services. A police sergeant summed it up for me: 'Thank you,' he said, 'for thinking of us; it was nice to be appreciated for a change.'

I welcomed members of the royal family to Kent on several occasions: HRH The Princess Royal on the coldest day, HRH the Countess of Wessex on the hottest, HRH the Duke of Kent on the wettest and HRH Prince Michael of Kent in the fog. The royal family are indeed staunch supporters of our county!

A Man of Kent, I thought I knew so much about my county, but from the year I have just experienced, I can honestly say I have just scratched the surface.

◆ George Jessel DL
High Sheriff of Kent 2017-18

