



A Kent Declaration... *from a friend's perspective*

A FEW months ago, I attended a service in a tiny church in the Kent countryside. It's called St Botolph's, and lies in the grounds of Lullingstone Castle. It was a vile day with strong winds, scudding black clouds and heavy showers. Some lady guests were dressed in wedding-type clothes, with smart dresses, fascinators and high-heeled shoes, which sank into the turf as they crossed the lawn to reach the church.

But we weren't there for a wedding – we were there to witness something much more unusual: the Declaration of our friend, William Alexander, as High Sheriff of Kent.

We all waited expectantly. Trumpets sounded. Then along came the procession, which was as long as the church itself. There was the outgoing High Sheriff; the Chief Constable of Kent; the Lord-Lieutenant; two judges, one of whom – in a long wig, robe and knee breeches – looked as if he'd walked straight out of a Dickens novel. There were chaplains and churchwardens. And most important of all, there was the High Sheriff designate, looking a picture in a black velvet coat and breeches, with snow-white ruffles at his neck and cuffs, silver

buckles on his shoes and a sword at his side. Marvellous!

William had to swear a magnificent oath full of sonorous phrases, the gist of which was: 'In all things I will well and truly behave myself in my office'. After being presented with his badge of office, he spoke about what he hoped to achieve in his year, because, aside from all the ceremonial duties he or she has to perform, a High Sheriff these days is expected to take on a project of some kind, often related to the justice system. William is interested in the rehabilitation of prisoners, particularly focusing on raising literacy and educational standards with the aim of improving the prospect of gaining employment after release. (Sadly, I don't *think* he'll be allowed to charge all over Kent leading a hue-and-cry or a *posse comitatus*, as the early High Sheriffs did. But you never know.)

He also read extracts from Magna Carta (in which 27 of the 63 clauses refer to sheriffs) and from the Charter of the Forest. I'd never heard of this document before, but apparently it was much more to do with the rights of the common man,



Above: William Alexander signing his Declaration witnessed by Mrs Barbara Ide JP under the watchful eye of Lord Clarke of Stoke-cum-Ebony, Justice of the Supreme Court

as distinct from the rights of the nobles.

Having written a book about Alfred the Great (*Warrior King*), I'm fascinated by the Dark Ages and the period immediately after them. But reading – and writing – about that time is one thing: this felt like a visceral link back to the England of over a thousand years ago. It felt archaic, but still relevant. It felt as if we were just the newest page in a long, long story that is part of living history. It was a privilege and a delight to be there.

◆ Sue Purkiss

www.suepurkiss.com

www.the-history-girls.blogspot.co.uk



Shrieval procession from the house of Percyvall Hart (High Sheriff 1707) to Lullingstone Church