



Aspiring to inter-faith harmony

WHEN I took office in April 2015, Leicestershire was bathed in the afterglow of international attention surrounding the re-interment of King Richard III and my first move was to present High Sheriff's Awards to teams that my wife Janet and I had worked with in preparing the Cathedral ceremonies. The King's tomb in Leicester Cathedral and the site of his original grave nearby continue to attract thousands of visitors from all over the world.

The other backdrop to my year was the astonishing turnaround in the fortunes of Leicester City Football Club. When my year began the Foxes were bottom of the Premier League but on handover on 8 April 2016 they led the League by seven points and during my year had gained an incredible 88 points and a huge international following. Some supporters have even adopted King Richard as the team's talisman.

Leicester's high profile and the city's burgeoning international reputation have encouraged civic pride among its diverse communities. Outside London, Leicester is Britain's most religiously diverse city, comprising substantial communities of various denominations of Christians, Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs and many other faiths besides; parts of the county are equally diverse. Leicester is often held up as a model of inter-faith harmony but not surprisingly there are tensions, not always hidden. As a trustee of the St Philip's Centre, a Christian organisation for the study of and engagement with other faiths, I had already completed a postgraduate diploma in Inter-religious Relations, so I planned to introduce the Shrievalty to different faith groups and to help soften some of the cultural and religious divides.

My wife Janet and I joined the Sikh Vaisakhi celebrations and I was interviewed by Vaisakhi radio; I also made presentations in the largest gurdwara in the East Midlands. We attended Leicester's Central Mosque in Ramadan to mark the twentieth anniversary of the Srebrenica massacre



Photos by Janet Arthur

Above: The High Sheriff speaking at the Jain Temple. **Below left:** The High Sheriff tucks in at the Mosque Summer Fete. **Below right:** Navratri Stick Dance



and to join the evening Iftar when the fast was broken. We were welcomed to other Sunni mosques (including a mosque summer fete) and to Leicester's only Shia mosque and we were very pleased to attend the formal opening of Leicester's only Ahmadi mosque. I accompanied Earl Howe, Minister of State at the Ministry of Defence with responsibility for community engagement, when he inspected building works at the 'Earl Howe' mosque in Earl Howe Street, Leicester. We visited the historic Orthodox Jewish synagogue and the less formal Progressive Jewish Congregation. Hindus welcomed us to celebrations for Ganesh, Navratri, Diwali and Holi and we were shown round the very modern

Swaminarayan temple and the Brahma Kumaris' equally modern centre; we also enjoyed excellent hospitality at the very ornate Jain temple. We also visited Sikh, Hindu and Muslim faith schools.

I held one Judges' Welcome Service in the Dominican church of Holy Cross and participated in numerous services in Leicester Cathedral, notably my Magna Carta Justice Service, which was well attended by many representatives of other faiths. Leicestershire's diversity is enriching and colourful – but as I write this the priority for all Leicestershire's citizens is to paint the League blue.

♣ **Gordon Arthur**
High Sheriff of Leicestershire 2015-16