

SOMERSET

News from and about members



You won't believe it

IF I was commercially minded I might be able to recoup some of the expenses of the last year by publishing my diary. It is provisionally entitled *You Won't Believe It*, my nightly refrain, and it would probably be classified and shelved under Fantasy Fiction. Serving, or acting, as High Sheriff for 53 weeks was the most extraordinary experience and privilege. Somerset is a county of extremes, with levels and hills, caves and beacons, beaches and forests, castles, abbeys and battlefields, and the largest construction site in Europe, centred on Hinkley Point. Satnav covers the major routes, but a good old-fashioned Shell Guide should be on hand (or in the glove compartment if, like me, you drive yourself). How can one ignore a finger-post pointing towards Brympton d'Evercy, Butleigh, Compton Pauncefoot, Clapton-in-Gordano, Hatch Beauchamp, Marston Bigot, Nempnett Thrubwell, Stogursey, Weston Zoyland or Wiveliscombe? This is the world of Coleridge (who wrote *Kubla Khan* while living at Nether Stowey), Evelyn Waugh (resident of Combe Florey) and TS Eliot, Siegfried

Sassoon and Anthony Powell (all of whom are buried in the county).

One of my initiatives was to write to all 24 mayors and ask them to list any interesting facts and features peculiar to their patch. With the exception of one town which John Wesley considered 'one of the dullest places in the country', the responses were astonishing. I had no idea that John Lewis and Wallace Wyndham Waite (one half of Waitrose) both came from Shepton Mallet (45 years apart) or that the statue of Lady Justice on top of the Old Bailey was cast in Frome. I am preparing to pass all this on, and humbly suggest that High Sheriffs should be encouraged to promote knowledge and pride in the history of their counties. It is a way of bringing people together and giving them common cause. As the MP Jo Cox famously said: 'We are far more united and have far more in common than that which divides us.'

When I first pulled on the uniform I was warned not to let the power go to my head. I have failed to detect any scent of power and the tights alone should deter the slightest sense of superiority. I

Opposite page:
The High Sheriff of Somerset being presented with flowers by the Chief Constable of Avon and Somerset, Andy Marsh

Below: The High Sheriffs of Gloucestershire, Somerset, Devon, Dorset and Bristol at Wells Cathedral 19 March 2017





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have had misadventures along the way, and many moments of high humour – all dutifully recorded in the diary. Yet at every encounter and event I was greeted with warmth, favour and respect. The admirable policemen and women graciously accepted their bravery awards from a man with the name of Coward. In return the chief constable was kind enough to present me with a bunch of flowers, which endeared both of us to my wife, Laura.

I was relieved to have made it through the year without incurring any penalties or public rebukes. I am the fifth Edward Bayntun to have been pricked, and in 1654 the fourth invited the diarist John Evelyn to dinner. Evelyn was not impressed, recording: ‘Our coachman made so exceedingly drunk; that returning home we escaped incredible dangers; tis it seems by order of the Knight, that all Gentlemans servants be so treated: but the custome is barbarous, and much unbecoming a Knight, much less a Christian.’ In Sir Edward’s defence, it could be said that he was generous to a fault. Perhaps in 350 years time my diary will be a source of quotation and wonderment – but for now it will remain unpublished.

◆◆ **Edward Bayntun-Coward**
High Sheriff of Somerset 2016-17