



South Yorkshire 2013-14

On my travels around South Yorkshire during 2013-14 I have regularly been asked two questions – 'Would you like to stay as High Sheriff for another year?' and 'What has been the highlight of your year?'

The answer to the first is 'no'. That is not because of the hard work involved but because nothing could cap the year. It was such a wonderful experience but not one that could ever be repeated. The answer to the second question was a little more difficult as there have been a number of highlights.

First and foremost was the enjoyment of meeting and entertaining so many delightful (and learned) legal men and women – the judges of this county who work so hard, dealing with some quite harrowing cases and yet remaining so positive. Sitting on the bench as an observer opened my eyes to the workings of the courts and increased my admiration for those who preside over our justice system.

The second highlight was the High Sheriff's Awards. Early on I set myself the task of finding the 'unsung heroes' of South Yorkshire. With the help of

Voluntary Action Groups in the region, I met women's groups, the homeless, the military, care workers, young people, older people and those in between in community centres, shelters and charities. Every one of them has made me feel both humble and privileged – humbled by the work they do and the many they have helped, and privileged that my position as High Sheriff afforded me a glimpse into their lives and gave me the chance to acknowledge their work with a High Sheriff's Award.

The third highlight was my prison visits. This may seem strange to many, but not only had I never been inside a prison but my knowledge of their inhabitants was very limited. We could debate the rights and wrongs of the prison system and never reach a conclusion but one of the things I learned was that illiteracy is a real problem for many inmates and it is something the prison system can address. Prisoners have a choice of meals which they select beforehand. One young man told me that he had



The High Sheriff of South Yorkshire, Lady Sykes, with David Mills, Executive Director of BMI Thornbury Hospital at the launch of the hospital's new CT scanner.

been there for several years and chose his meals by numbers – one to four. A visiting teacher at the prison had taught him to read and now, for the first time, he knew what he was ordering.

My final highlight was the citizenship ceremonies. We in the UK take so much for granted and yet here were people who have worked hard to earn what we just accept as ours by right. It was there I met a very young girl who asked me if I was The Queen. I said 'no', but I am not sure she believed me because she took my hand and refused to leave my side all the time I was there. It made me realise how privileged we all are. □

Lady Sykes

High Sheriff of South Yorkshire 2013-14



Lady Sykes with Steve Bentham-Bates, a volunteer at the Rotherham Military Community Veterans Centre and winner of a High Sheriff's Award.