



Opening doors

WHEN ASKED to explain my year as High Sheriff I liken it to an invitation to a large house party with two conditions; one that I wear official dress and the other to open as many doors as possible. So I arrived at the vast mansion in Warwickshire in my velvet. The first door I opened was that of the judges who welcomed me with open arms, introduced me to the Justice Service and allowed me to sit with them through murder trials. It was fascinating. The chief constable led me into the room where forensic testing took place and into the command room where just 20 police officers were dealing with all the calls from the county and lastly into the camera room where 300 cameras from five towns were being watched 24 hours of every day helping to catch criminals. I followed the criminals through the next door into the prison at Onley where the prison governor gave the Bishop of Warwick, my chaplain and me an entire day of his time to show and to explain the principles of his prison and how he tries to prepare prisoners for life afterwards. The next door was that of the probation service and of social workers who work so hard to prevent offenders from reoffending.

The passages in the mansion were full of surprises: the Lord-Lieutenant with HRH The Princess Royal who had come to check up on Warwickshire's plough horses and HRH The Prince of Wales who surprised us with his birthday party at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre. The door which led me into the world of Shakespeare was coated in gold. The Birthplace Trust, the costume department, the theatre, King Edward VI School where Shakespeare was educated in the Guild Hall and Holy Trinity Church where he was buried – all a magical mystery tour. Shakespeare's father was the mayor of Stratford and although he was not on the staircase it was lined with mayors from all our towns – each mayor doing a remarkable job and understanding their people. The last room was that of the volunteers – a veritable hall – filled to the brim with wonderful, generous people giving their time and their love, and making others feel better.

But the thread which bound this beautiful mansion together was one of 'faith'. There were many different cultures trying to get on and understand each other. Dinners with Sikhs; multi-faith weeks with visits to mosques and temples;

Above: Warwickshire Legal Service on Monday 13 October 2014: Major Patrick Darling, High Sheriff of Herefordshire, Anne Burnett, High Sheriff of Northamptonshire, Clare Hopkinson, High Sheriff of Warwickshire, Robert Bland, High Sheriff of Shropshire, Tom Frost, High Sheriff of Gloucestershire and Dr Tim Watts, High Sheriff of West Midlands

the uplifting, joyous and utterly glorious Christian services with the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby; the bishops; all the Warwickshire regiments with their brass bands and many other services; they all made this house party so special.

When asked if I had achieved anything, I had to confess nothing, beyond nominating the Kenilworth Youth Club, joint winner of the National Crimebeat Awards, which was a triumph. Of course, I raised a little money for various charities but really I did nothing except bring a smile with me wherever I could. I shook a great many hands, thanked everyone I met and loved every moment.

My advice to those who have the honour, the privilege but above all the opportunity, is to open as many doors as possible and to remember that there is no one looking over your shoulder or comparing you to anyone else. It is your year so plan it well in advance and enjoy it.

♣ **Clare Hopkinson**
High Sheriff of Warwickshire 2014-15