



Local tradition in a modern context

WHAT AN honour, what an opportunity, what a responsibility, what a privilege! All of these thoughts passed through my mind when asked to be High Sheriff. The variety of events I have attended and the people I have met have made it a wonderful first six months. My first thought was: what am I going to wear? As a female High Sheriff there is far more flexibility about your official outfit. Representing Warwickshire, I decided to approach an organisation that is a master in designing and making costumes – the Royal Shakespeare Company. The Director of Design, Stephen Brimson Lewis, worked with me to create what is, in my view, a perfect combination of traditional and modern design – a dark purple silk dress and woollen coat decorated with cut steel buttons and antique lace and the hat with its shaved ostrich feathers which sets it off perfectly. Commissioning the RSC also fulfilled two of my objectives: first to highlight the unique contribution Warwickshire makes to arts and culture and second to use local talent.

The next essential preparation was planning the focus of my year. Knowing what you want to get out of the year is important. I have lived in the county for over 35 years but felt I did not know enough about what is really happening at grass roots level; now I had a wonderful opportunity to learn about and publicise



Above: Visiting the Shakespeare Hospice's new children and young people's unit

the work of a wide range of people. I also wanted to explain to people the role of the High Sheriff and why it exists. Deciding on what charities you want to support and how you can best do this is also important; raising awareness can be just as important as money raised.

The first six months were enlightening. Despite being involved in voluntary work for many years I had completely underestimated how great a contribution local people make, something which tends to go unrecognised and unsupported by public funds.

This year offered High Sheriffs the opportunity to be the County Returning Officer in the general election. It was

“The variety of events I have attended and the people I have met have made it a wonderful first six months”

very interesting being taken around a number of the polling stations to meet the team which administers the whole process and also to watch and understand the very complicated procedure of the count. Involvement with civic leaders plays a prominent part in the role of High Sheriff. We have over 15 mayors and other dignitaries within the county and so I held a tea party for them immediately after the election, which meant not only that I could get to know them but that they could get to know each other.

My summer garden party was held on one of the warm days of the summer. However, my first major fundraising event, a ladies' charity lunch making use of the garden party marquee, was interrupted by storm-force wind and rain. Luckily it did not dampen anyone's spirits. People's generosity overwhelmed me – a local florist gave us her time and expertise doing an



Above: Janet Bell Smith and her husband Stewart Bell

amazing flower arranging demonstration; friends rallied round to help with food; and auction and raffle prizes came flooding in.

I am now focused on my Annual Legal Service, which is to be held in Coventry Cathedral. This is an awesome task but my two Chaplains, a wonderful husband and wife team, are ably supporting me.

I have had the honour and enjoyment of being invited to events by numerous charities, religious organisations, schools, youth organisations, cadet forces, as well as to investitures, prize-givings, the emergency services and Queen's Awards ceremonies. The scale and work done by so many people for the good of others is humbling.

I would recommend a year as High Sheriff to anybody.

◆ Janet Bell Smith JP
High Sheriff of Warwickshire 2015-16