



A glass-half-full man

ONE OF the most enjoyable aspects of my role is the interaction with colleagues in surrounding bailiwicks. We have combined together to support various initiatives where there is a cross-border interest, and have spent a number of very pleasant evenings together.

I felt very much the new kid on the block, being merely the 43rd High Sheriff of the West Midlands – many of my colleagues in the likes of Worcestershire, Shropshire and Warwickshire have predecessors going back over 1,000 years. This year is particularly special for Pam and me, not only for having the privilege to represent this region in which I have lived all my life, except for a few years in West Africa, but also because we are celebrating our 50th wedding anniversary.

I spoke to as many predecessors as possible in preparation for my year of office, and they all emphasised the importance of supporting the judiciary, some lamenting the fact that this role was to some extent taking a back seat. They stressed their admiration for the judiciary, and I have to say that my experiences so far have supported that view.

Contrary to popular misconception, all the judges I have met are doing an incredibly challenging and demanding job, have been dedicated, hard-working, very much aware of the considerable powers

placed in their hands, and also excellent dining companions. So much so that some, if they were to leave the judiciary, could contemplate a career as stand-up comedian.

I have had the privilege of meeting and supporting two Lord Mayors and five Mayors and their consorts within the region. They come from all political backgrounds, and to a man and a woman I have found them to be hard-working and dedicated to serving their communities, having done so over a long period of time.

I am equally cognisant of the responsibility to promote the role of the High Sheriff and its relevance today. I cannot be sure how impressed people are with me or the role itself, but I have certainly been impressed by the many wonderful and generous people whom I would never have had the opportunity to meet – they really are the glue that holds so many of our communities together.

Community cohesion is important to me, having grown up in a district that became one of the most culturally varied in Birmingham, especially at a time when there is a great deal of uncertainty and tension both nationally and internationally. The West Midlands is home to a rich diversity of cultures. Diversity enriches our lives for the better, but at times it can bring problems and it is important that we redouble our efforts to promote



Above: A fitting tribute to the Black Patch gypsy community, finally commemorated more than 100 years on

mutual understanding. To this end, I am working with the Heart of England Community Foundation, The Feast and Birmingham Churches Together, to encourage community groups to begin a dialogue that will lead to mutual respect and understanding, and ultimately reduce tension. It will be a long journey. However, I am a glass-half-full man and my optimism is reinforced by the knowledge that most people, regardless of their faith or upbringing, are fundamentally good.

So far this year I have attended numerous diverse events and one in particular I would like to share. This was a commemoration at Handsworth's historic church, dedicated to the gypsies of the 'Black Patch' who were buried in unmarked graves, many of them very young children. The Bishop of Aston who presided over the service put me on the spot in her sermon. Apparently one of my predecessors at the turn of the last century was responsible for driving the gypsies off the Black Patch – a space where Matthew Boulton dumped his foundry waste, and interestingly, the birthplace of Charlie Chaplin – in order to create a public park. I was privileged to lay a wreath at the commemorative stone in the churchyard and I am pleased to say I got away unscathed.



Above: The High Sheriff's garden party on the hallowed turf of Edgbaston Stadium presented a rare opportunity for all of the region's Lord Mayors and Mayors to get together

◆ Keith Bradshaw DL
High Sheriff of West Midlands 2016-17