

BY ROYAL DECREE

The recently appointed High Sheriff of Gwent, Dame Claire Clancy DCB DL, kindly created some space in her busy schedule to explain to **Stephen Johnson**

Established during the reign of Ethelred the Unready, the position of High Sheriff is the oldest secular office in the country, a position mythologised in the legend of the Sheriff of Nottingham and his nemesis Robin Hood.

The current High Sheriff of Gwent is the charming and dedicated Dame Claire Clancy, who is more likely to offer you a cup of tea and a biscuit than have you hung, drawn and quartered for poaching on royal land.

Dame Claire, a former chief executive and clerk to the National Assembly for Wales, a post she held for 10 years and described as “The best job ever. I loved it”, officially became the new High Sheriff of Gwent at the end of March. She was nominated by a former High Sheriff, Mr Andrew Tuggey, who is currently the chairman of the Gwent High Sheriffs’ Community Fund Panel, with the suggestion catching Dame Claire unawares, but it was an invitation she felt she couldn’t turn down.

“It was a complete surprise,” said Dame Claire. “I was due to retire from the Assembly and I had been keen not to take anything on as I was very tired, but it’s one of these things you don’t say no to. The way I felt then is the way I still feel now. ‘Wow! What an honour’.”

There are echoes of the past reverberating around the duties of a modern High Sheriff. Its formation, over a millennium ago, established the position to oversee the rule of Law and provide hospitality for a visiting monarch. Back in the day of Robin Hood, the High Sheriff was the Law, and that connection continues today, with the High Sheriff of Gwent maintaining strong links with the local police force, but with the addition of and working with young people.

“The most important part is the charitable works in partnership with the police in support of young people and vulnerable adults to help reduce crime,” said Dame Claire. “This year, through the High Sheriff’s Community Fund, we are sponsoring 25 different projects, such as Dance Blast in Abergavenny and Cymru Creations in Tredegar.”

The fund can allocate grants of up to £5,000 from an annual budget of £75,000. The most recent grants were awarded at a ceremony held at the Bridges Community Centre, in Monmouth. Providing hospitality also remains part of the brief. If the High Court is sitting in the county, then the High Sheriff must ensure that the presiding judge is looked after.



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As the position is unpaid, the cost of hosting the judge comes out of the High Sheriff’s own pocket. In fact, all costs accrued by the person in the role – from the purchase of the ceremonial robes, which Dame Claire pieced together off eBay – to travel costs etc, are all paid for by High Sheriff, a situation Dame Claire recognises as causing a limitation when it comes to nominating candidates for the role.

“The High Sheriffs’ Association is trying to make the position more inclusive,” said Dame Claire, “but as there’s no funding, for understandable reasons, you have to pay for everything, and that can exclude people, so that’s a bit of a dilemma.”

The eBay-purchased ceremonial outfit was soon put to good use – just one week after Claire’s declaration she was invited to attend the Freedom Parade for HMS Monmouth. “They had their marching band, it was sunny and warm, and the young officers were inspiring. Everything about that day was fantastic.”

Just as inspiring, but in completely different ways, have been her visits to St David’s Hospice in Malpas, and attending a concert by the Gwent Music Youth Orchestra,



one of the organisations which has previously received supported from the High Sheriff’s Community Fund.

“The concert was awesome. When one young person conducted the final piece... they blew my mind by just how good they are. St David’s Hospice is the most amazing facility. My husband died of cancer and if only he could have been somewhere like St David’s for his last few days... it must make such a difference to the families.”

Looking forward to the rest of her tenure as High Sheriff, Dame Claire is determined to visit every one of the 25 projects supported by the Community Fund, and to mark her time in the post by making awards to volunteers. “I would like to recognise the unsung heroes,”

she added. “Those volunteers who give their time, especially to help youngsters.

“I can issue certificates in the name of the High Sheriff as a way of saying thank you. I’m asking people to let me know of volunteers who may not get a reward in other ways so that I can present them with a certificate and say ‘thank you’ on behalf of the community.

“The world is a better place due to these volunteers and the projects they support and what they are prepared to do, which is really humbling. So, one of my top priorities is to say thank you.”

To nominate an unsung hero, contact Dame Claire Clancy.

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