



Litter-picking a safe option

IT'S NOT straightforward explaining what a High Sheriff is. For me, as a historian, it's often easier to talk about what the High Sheriff used to be and do. Even when you've been through the standard list of principal duties, there is still the unasked question hanging in the air, 'But what do you actually do?' Twitter provides one way of answering that question. It's important to explain and demystify the Office of High Sheriff, and I also publish a blog so that I can write at greater length about some of the things that I am particularly interested in, both current and historical.

We're often asked what charities we're supporting, and in Essex that's an easy question to answer: the High Sheriffs' Fund, which dates back to 1993, is now administered by the Essex Community Foundation and gives out about £30,000 in grants each year to voluntary groups and charities that are involved with crime reduction and community safety. An increasingly large part of the High Sheriff's role is supporting and promoting the voluntary sector within the county, and in among all the topics competing for attention, I've tried to follow three – women offenders, Travellers and litter – which relate



Litter-picking in Hawkwell with the 4th Rochford Scouts

to a greater or lesser extent to my experience as a magistrate.

Much research has been done in recent years into women who are caught up in the criminal justice system, often as a result of being manipulated by abusive male partners. They tend to suffer disproportionately by being sent to prison, and, as they are very often carers, their families do too, particularly in counties like Essex which do not have a women's prison; ours go to HMP Peterborough, which I have visited with the High Sheriff of Cambridgeshire, His Honour Neil McKittrick. I've been talking to probation and various charities in Essex, as well as the national charity Clinks, to see how we can improve services for women offenders and their families, and I'm hoping we can bring people together at a conference later in the year.

The issue of Travellers, and how they co-exist with settled communities, is an ever-present one, and there have been some confrontations in Essex in recent years that have been national news. These situations are not helped by entrenched attitudes that amount to what is often referred to as the last acceptable form of racism. I don't pretend to know how the situation might be improved, but I have been enormously impressed by meeting those who work closely with Travellers – including specialist police officers, council officers, and the Essex Countywide Traveller Unit – who treat them fairly, as individuals, within the law.

Many people will infer a link between Travellers and litter, but that's a coincidence. Creating litter is of course a crime, and as well as being a visual blight, it can be an environmental and health hazard; and litter, like graffiti and broken windows, tends to go hand-in-hand with antisocial behaviour. Reducing litter, and encouraging the increasing number of people who go litter-picking, is an activity in which I can take a hands-on part; and going litter-picking is a very good excuse for chatting informally with volunteers. I'm working with Essex Scouts to organise a mass litter-pick next year, as part of the Great British Spring Clean, and I'm also using my litter-picking as a way of raising money for the High Sheriffs' Fund. It has to be safer than skydiving or abseiling.



Giving a good impression of conducting the Essex Marching Corps band at the High Sheriff's Garden Party

◆ Dr James Bettley
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