



Photo: Simon Warburton Photographer

‘... for such a time as this’

‘YOU HAVE come to your royal position for such a time as this’, to quote a line from my favourite book. Surely this is a time in history – and certainly in recent generations – when the role of High Sheriff presents significant new opportunities for each of us, despite the clear physical limitations and challenges.

When I spoke at my own Declaration in April last year, I said that, ‘As a county, we are facing uncertain times. As High Sheriff, I trust that I can offer some hope, encouragement and confidence.’ I sense that I have achieved this in some measure, though for our successors in 2020-21 the modus operandi will look considerably different.

My participation twice in the Burghley seminars for High Sheriffs in nomination pointed me towards Law and Order, which remained my principal focus throughout my year. Intentionally, I was keen to see the judicial process from beginning to end. My first ‘port of call’ was our chief constable who arranged for me to experience policing on the front line – from arrest to charge. Attendance in court for a jury trial proved fascinating though ‘Friday sentencing’ was especially insightful as all those pleading guilty (without trial) attended briefier hearings and our honorary recorder was able to deal with eight or 10 custodial or non-custodial sentences on the same day. Next stop was meeting prison governors and the opportunity to

see from the inside both of Cheshire’s prisons: HMP Styal (a closed women’s prison) and HMP Thorn Cross (an open institution), the latter now the regional centre for the Timpson Foundation.

Post release and often ‘on licence’, parolees are passed on to Cheshire Probation Service. The head of service and his highly experienced teams do a sterling job ensuring that men and women are safe to be released fully into our communities. In the spring, we hosted a dinner at home for this select group. It was an important evening for me as High Sheriff and an ideal arena to facilitate first-time introductions and round-table discussions. Pleasingly, personal contact details were exchanged and professional working relationships developed – in my view, a special legacy.

As we begin to appreciate only as we start our shrieval year, the opportunities for engagement across our counties are endless. In Cheshire we have over 4,000 charities supporting a population of nearly one million, so it was longstanding volunteers at all levels who had pride of place at my September garden party. University graduations and citizenship ceremonies featured as regular events alongside Prince’s Trust graduations and Fire Service Passouts. One-off evenings, including the High Sheriff’s Award for Literature, the High Sheriff’s Award for Enterprise and of course Crimebeat, have now become firm dates in the county

Above left: High Sheriff and guests at Chester Town Hall after his Legal Service, 3 November 2019

Above right: Mark Mitchell with a posse of his predecessor High Sheriffs of Cheshire, their spouses and his chaplain

calendar thanks to the vision and hard work of my predecessors who introduced each of them in earlier years.

Just before the close of my year and sadly the UK lockdown, I summoned a posse of former High Sheriffs of Cheshire back to the year 2000. This evening at home made for the most special of times together with humorous and nostalgic anecdotes and now for me too, an array of memories from my own year in office.

For each of the High Sheriffs of 2019-20, our time finished abruptly and for many of our successors their Declarations were made on various software packages on home computer screens. My own successor, Nick Hopkinson MBE DL, approached me and decided to fundraise for many of the neediest in Cheshire, hit hardest by the effects of COVID-19. This special High Sheriff’s fund is match-funded up to £1 million by Steve Morgan CBE, founder of Redrow Homes. As I signed off in early April, it stood at £650,000, match-funded to £1.3 million. Doubtless Nick will update on the powerful impact this support has had across our county in our next publication.

◆ Mark Mitchell DL
High Sheriff of Cheshire 2019-20