



Declaration made before kitchen cabinet

THIS PIECE is composed in the ghastly week when the number of virus deaths passed 27,000. I don't know how to write it. Jollity is of course inappropriate but so, perhaps, is despondency for, who knows, when *The High Sheriff* hits the newsagents in June, the enemy may be in retreat.

Sylvia Jay's year slipped quietly to its close in late March with the inescapable cancellation of a number of planned events for which she, and others, had toiled long and hard. Her passion had been to raise awareness of issues to do with crime and punishment, and of work done by the many voluntary, charitable and statutory bodies in our community to prevent criminal behaviour. Two highlights stand out, public lectures from figures not unacquainted with controversy. One was the ex-Parole Board chair Nick Hardwick, regarded by many as the fall guy when publicity regarding the release of a high-profile offender exploded. The other was Claudia Sturt, formerly a prison governor and now our nation's Director of Security and Counter

Terrorism, who spoke about 'What's Wrong with Our Prisons?' The answer is, a lot, and I earnestly say to any reader of this publication who may be thinking of robbing a bank – don't.

A particular regret was that the presentation of the High Sheriff's Awards had to be cancelled and the certificates sent out by post. It was an utter privilege for me to look through the nominations with the High Sheriff and see the amazing fundraising and other work done by a vast range of citizens, from old soldiers to seriously sick teenagers. By and large we Brits are a decent lot.

Amanda Ponsonby's year started with a bang, or at least the audible popping of a cork from Oxfordshire's finest sparkling wine. There was cheering from her family as she made her Declaration to the Chair of the Oxfordshire Bench via FaceTime. I made mine over the telephone. We believe this was probably a first. Amanda was planning to work closely with the Oxfordshire Community Foundation during her year. Similar to her fellow High Sheriffs, she had a diary packed full of



Amanda Ponsonby when she made her Declaration in her kitchen



The High Sheriff with her husband Lord Jay and Judge (Joanna) Vincent before the Oxford Legal Walk in aid of local charities

engagements all over the county and was raring to go. Then, with only three weeks until D-day, everything vanished with a puff of COVID-19. Now a month into her role, she has had to become an actual and virtual High Sheriff. Her days are full of Zooming, FaceTiming and telephoning. Charities, judges, prison governors, head teachers, church leaders and even her Under Sheriff get calls. She feels frustrated that she can't be out on the frontline but is determined to be very well briefed by the time she is released from lockdown.

But other Oxfordshire High Sheriffs have had tough years too. Saewold in 1066 must have been a bit apprehensive about the future. Who would change places with Robert Fitz Ellis of Waterperry (1341-2), whose year coincided with the Black Death? And it couldn't have been much fun for David Walter of Godstow (1644) who set fire to his own house to prevent it being used by parliamentary forces. They occupied it anyway.

Could be worse...

◆ Michael Payne

Under Sheriff of Oxfordshire 2019 and 2020