

## Chairman's Report for the AGM 2020

It is indeed a strange Annual General Meeting – I cannot hear you and I cannot see you which is a great shame as I have come to know a great many members and would have liked at least to have seen you. I have to take it on faith that you are actually there and understand that there are over 170 members present.

The AGM has always been an excellent gathering of past, present and future High Sheriffs, and the buzz of conversation in the half hour before lunch has always been uplifting. We obviously cannot emulate that buzz today, but I propose that we put anyone who wishes to stay after the meeting and the talks, on to full video so that if you would like to comment or ask a question, Andrew and Amanda can highlight you.

What a huge change of circumstances we have seen since last year – beyond all imagination. We cannot escape the fact that 2020 has been an exceptionally difficult year for High Sheriffs. The value, and pleasure, of getting around the county and putting into practice so many of the well thought out plans for the year; the sense of purpose in meeting so many of the unsung heroes who help to keep the county together; the nervous moments of putting on court dress, or a larger than expected ostrich feather hat for the first number of engagements; the Royal visits; all this has been put on hold to some extent. I say to some extent, because as you will hear after the meeting from the High Sheriff of Herefordshire, Tricia Thomas, there is still so much happening throughout the counties, even in lockdown.

Initially, it was not easy to know how best the Association could help. From the beginning, we encouraged High Sheriffs to get together by means of regional video meetings; these continue to be extremely helpful and will, I am sure, continue in years to come – we all learned very quickly, well, quite quickly, the basics of Zoom, Teams, Whatsapp, and whatever. We arranged for dispensation from the Privy Council to have the reading and signing of the Declaration to be performed virtually before a JP or High Court Judge and I have seen recordings of several of these events which have been very well arranged and interesting to watch as well as being a piece of history for families to keep. This year's High Sheriffs have been very inventive – they have had to be. It is quite likely that those in nomination for 2021 will have to prepare for similar ways of Declaring for Office, but I am optimistic that their year will be less constrained.

The ability to meet and talk with many High Sheriffs by video this year has brought an extremely valuable new relationship between High Sheriffs and the Association. We are getting suggestions and ideas that were being left outstanding in years when High Sheriffs did not need to add to their burden. Good ideas include, for example, the greater need for continuity from one High Sheriff to the next; public relations; social media; even the need for less formal attire on occasions when a High Sheriff insignia polo shirt may be more appropriate than a suit; relationships with Community Foundations and more productive relations with the Lieutenancy.. We are working on many of these ideas which will help in years to come. The key as ever is to protect the dignity of the Office at the same time as continuing to make it relevant as customs change.

The video meetings arranged by the Association have been valuable. There have been three so far – Regional Coordinators, High Sheriffs in nomination, and most recently for current High Sheriffs. It is the first time that members of Council have been able to connect directly with many High Sheriffs while they are in Office; we have usually been more focussed on those in nomination, to ensure that they are well prepared. Once a High Sheriff takes Office, there are few opportunities to meet and discuss although the Secretary is often asked esoteric questions to which he usually has the answer, and if not Andrew Wells always knows the solution.

Sadly, many of the most interesting and useful events which we organise have also had to be put onto video format. Despite the hard work by Virginia Lloyd in putting the Burghley seminar together, it had to be cancelled. However, there will be a mini-Burghley which was going to be in London but now inevitably will take place by Zoom for those High Sheriffs in nomination for 2021. Most of those who were going to speak at Burghley this year will be speaking at the mini-Burghley on January 27<sup>th</sup> including the Queen's Remembrancer, a prison Governor, a Lord Lieutenant and a High Court Judge. Most of you will remember how useful the Burghley seminar was in preparing you for Office, and I believe that the mini-Burghley will also be helpful.

The Nomination ceremony at the Royal Courts of Justice last week also had to be held without those in nomination being able to attend in person. The Lord Chief Justice, flanked by a member of the Court of Appeal and 2 High Court Judges were there for the Queen's Remembrancer to seek one new name for each county and the ceremony was video-ed for the benefit of those in nomination. Many thanks to James Williams for taking on the organisation for the shrievalty this year.

Council meetings which normally take place quarterly in London have moved to video, much to the delight of many Council members who no longer have to travel, sometimes for 3 or 4 hours to get to the meeting. We get just as much work done in the two hours of the meeting, in fact rather more, and we are getting the hang of not interrupting each other, which has often been a problem in the past.

In the last twelve months there are some specifics, in addition to the generalities, that I would like to mention. We met at the Fishmongers' Hall last November. Two weeks later, two people were killed there in a terrorist attack. One of our Council members, David Jones was, and still is, Prime Warden of the Fishmongers and he has been the mainstay in managing much of the aftermath – a difficult, demanding and emotionally very draining task, which continues even now as he has agreed to stay on as Prime Warden for an exceptional 18 months instead of the usual one year. It is still only a year ago that Annie Hall, High Sheriff of Derbyshire in 2017 so tragically died in the floods in November 2019. The High Sheriff in nomination of the West Midlands, Wade Lyn who is here with us today, developed an extremely serious case of coronavirus just four days before being sworn in as High Sheriff and had to spend the next 3 months in intensive care in hospital and was unable to be sworn in. His predecessor Michael Kuo has continued with the shrieval duties, but Wade is now not going to have a late ceremony and will apply for nomination again in a few years' time. I would not want these instances to pass unnoticed.

It has been trying for all High Sheriffs who have had their plans, three years in the waiting, put on hold. A few that I have spoken to have decided to ask their Nomination Panels to consider them for Office after a gap (statutory) of three years, which if my maths is right means that they are eligible to be pricked again in 2024.

There were some highlights in the year – the visit by 100 members and their guests to Westminster Abbey in February was certainly one of them, and we are most grateful to the Dean and Chapter for welcoming us so generously. The Regional meetings, well organised by Council member John Lee, were able to be completed before restrictions set in and these meetings were considered to be extremely useful in preparing those in nomination for Office. Regional meetings have been re-arranged this year to take place by video – not a huge hardship but the lack of direct personal contact between nominees will be a disadvantage.

I am delighted that our fellow Council member, Andrew Tuggey, has recently been elected to be Chairman of the UK Community Foundations. The Association has for some years been ensuring that High Sheriffs make good use of this excellent organisation, whose expertise in their county can be of great help.

We continue to produce guidance papers for the shrievalty, the latest being a paper on Prisons and the Prison Service which John Young has produced suggesting ways in which a High Sheriff might encourage and support the Prison and Probation Services. The paper on Affordability has been very helpful to High Sheriffs in nomination.

We have taken very seriously the challenge of understanding the various Video formats and learning how to manage the various meetings, including this one, that have been invaluable this year. Despite her personal workload, Amanda Parker has been a great inspiration in getting Council to understand this and Robina Shah is arranging social media workshops for High Sheriffs in nomination. Social media is now a form of communication that High Sheriffs are using to great advantage.

You will see that we have been advised by Tom Birch Reynardson to alter the Articles to allow the AGM to be held digitally in future. I hope that we will not have to resort to this and can go ahead as planned to have the meeting next year at the Goldsmith's Hall, but we have to be prepared.

The revised Declaration is certainly the most important development which has been achieved this year. In January, after many months of research and with the help of Tom Birch Reynardson and Lord Lisvane and the advice of the Privy Council, we were glad to be able to announce that:

*The wording of the Declaration of the High Sheriff upon taking Office has been revised so that High Sheriffs can honestly declare that they will serve The Queen's Majesty as set out in their declaration, and not have to use phrases that have become meaningless over the course of time.*

*The wording of the revised form of the Declaration has been reviewed by the High Sheriffs Association and subsequently approved by The Queen's Remembrancer, and The Queen has now given her consent for the use of the revised version.*

The form of the Declaration which has been used since 1887 is still available for use but your Association is keen to encourage that the Declaration is more clearly in accordance with the duties and expectations of the Office, and more clearly understood by members of the public. If you have not already seen it, the wording of the revised Declaration is available on the Website.

I am always delighted at the quality of the High Sheriff Magazine which is the result of a great deal of work by Andrew Wells. Andrew has said that he cannot go on editing the magazine by himself for ever, so I am making a plea for anyone of our members to give him a hand. We will probably need to pay a reasonable amount in order to find someone, but please email me or Andrew if you feel that you can help with this, either yourself or if you know that someone would be interested. Thank you, Andrew for all this hard work which is very much appreciated.

We are all making the best of the new opportunities that video conferencing brings, and we do see good and lasting benefits with webinars and videos being now just part of our daily life. We are arranging workshops, for want of a better name, for High Sheriffs on such subjects as Awards, Social media courses, Declaration services by video, public relations by video, National Crimebeat and a range of other subjects. We may have a monthly Q&A session in February, March and April for the 2021 High Sheriffs to make use of.

I would like to thank all members of Council for their hard work and good advice which enables the Association to be of such benefit to High Sheriffs, and in particular I would like once again to thank you, the members, for continuing your most valuable support which enables us to do so much for the shrievalty, past present and future.

Thank you.