

Being a High Sheriff in the 2020 pandemic – Patricia Thomas , Herefordshire

Early on in my nomination, I was given some great advice: go to every event you can and meet as many people as possible. Knowing others in the same position proved invaluable in March as we went into lockdown just as High Sheriffs were being declared.

Those who spoke to me in the early days will know that I was totally bewildered and struggled as my plans were cast aside. I'm in business and have always been able to find someone to provide a solution if I could not find my own – not this time.

I am indebted to my regional WM group, including Wade, and other HS's I had met along the way, who rescued me by Zoom and Teams. Of course we are all from different backgrounds, but we also all had different starting points: Some had been provided with databases, had already made good contacts, had a great relationship with their LL, were tech savvy, had good internet connections and knew about social media. None of us had all of the above, but we all knew the bit we knew, and this is what we shared. We have learned so much from each other and these are treasured friendships.

The advice from my LL was to keep my head down, and not to catch the virus! But then how could I be the HS?

I, like others, got stuck in, sending hundreds of emails, making calls and Zoom came into its own. You can attend many more virtual meetings in a week than actual, and no wasted travelling time. It's not the same but I found I got to meet more people, on a more personal level, and have made strong connections. Some HS I know have been doing 6 back to back Zooms a day!

This was how I learned about my county, how it works and who is who., structure of the judiciary and the police, how the charity sector and local council integrate, how charities are run (and that not all like sharing).

As a novice, I hesitantly embraced social media, which I had thought would be a blog of the many accepted invitations which were going to be flooding my way. What a different world we were in when I heard that! Facebook became my shop front, as I learned from others how to be proactive and 'out there' in lockdown. It was my opinion not my experience I was sharing and when people were experiencing hardship and sorrow, it was a fine line and anyway - who on earth cares what the HS thinks? But thankfully some did.

As easing started, we needed to be seen, to act responsibly and make progress with planned projects.

With my plan for improving employability skills in young people with a work experience handbook for employers now in tatters, the task was how to reconstruct the year. I recalled a speaker at Burghley who said, “Remember why you have been nominated and put your experience and expertise into your role”. It was a good thought to remember on days when one doubted oneself.

Change was needed! In October I launched a school’s competition called Just the Job for Y6 and Y7, to raise aspiration of work opportunities and employability skills, I have 1700 pupils signed up so far.

All HS have had to dig deep and making use a distinct set of skills, the list of achievements so far is diverse, lengthy and impressive. A few examples

- Dean in Shropshire has been all over her county, talking, highlighting and witnessing on her crusade to tackle Domestic abuse, child poverty and deprivation. She must have worn her outfit 50 times.
- Mark in Worcestershire with political neutrality has lobbied MPs, County Council and the Business Community about the direct impact of Covid-19 upon society and our communities.
- Helen in Glos has been active on a theme of ACES working closely with Glos Constabulary, with funded training programmes for youth magistrates.
- And we’ve all been out: visiting market towns and mayors – oh those town clerks know a lot! Meeting charities and individuals doing amazing work, spending days in court, visiting police stations, fire stations and the forces. We have found funding streams for charities, connected people, had tea with carers, given online talks to groups and cadets and handed out HS awards.

Some HS’s had events planned which could be adapted to the new regulations.

- Charlie’s bike ride took him and his team all over Staffs, engaging with many people and was superbly supported by the police.
- Remony in Kent managed to fulfil hospitality by holding 5 seminar dinners on consecutive nights between lockdowns entertaining up to 30 people outside at one sitting.
- In August, I staged The High Sheriff’s Foodie Tour of Herefordshire, a 60 car tour of our beautiful county, raising over £11k for the HS Fund.
- My High Sheriff’s Lecture changed to webinar, and last Friday I am proud to say the lecture was delivered by Baroness Hale of Richmond. And it reached 400 people instead of 80.

And during all of this busy-ness, it's been infuriating to be pitied! We do not want your pity! We are going about our duties with meaning and purpose! It is by no means a wasted year!

John Manley of Bristol's reaction to pity is this: *The High Sheriff is the oldest secular office in the Country and in the nearly 1100 years of history since Saxon times it has lived through The Black Death, The Great Plague, Norman Conquest, WW1, WW2, English Civil War, 100 Years War, ... and every time we have adapted. This is another such year...*

Had we known what was coming, we could all have done with different sorts training.

- Mentioned frequently: Social media, introduction to Zoom, Teams etc how to chair virtual meetings, options for good internet.
- What about non-prescriptive handover packs with useful tips and suggestions that could be developed in each region?
- Advice as how to make key contacts before you start in office, and how to use technology to plan events, both real time and virtual
- Webinars and online meetings are the way forward. How about an earlier introduction to National Crimebeat, and hot topics like ACES and DA?

In essence being a HS in a pandemic has been an unusual challenge, but HS's have been able to adapt and thrive. Without events to attend, what we have shown is that the HS role offers much more relevance than ceremonial duty, it can truly make a difference with meaningful and worthy contribution to our communities.

Post Covid19, life is not going to be the same again and we need to consider how we do things going forward.

I am sure that the Association Council will take careful stock of what has been achieved by this year's HS's and take ideas on board. Now is the opportunity to preserve the history but move the Shrievalty forward with vision and innovation ensuring that the role in our counties is both relevant and really useful in the future.