



Using the press during lockdown

AS WAS the case for most of the new High Sheriffs, what was supposed to be a glorious day with eighty guests witnessing my Declaration, actually came down to me – home alone except for my wife – reading my Declaration down the phone to a JP in Plymouth. My Under Sheriff and Deputy Under Sheriff did exactly the same from their own homes. At least we celebrated with a bottle of bubbly and smoked salmon sandwiches. The ‘virtualness’ of the day was to become something of a theme during the following months.

As a career journalist, my first intention was to spread the word about the purpose and responsibilities of being a High Sheriff. An initial article in the county magazine *Devon Life* was probably the first anyone knew about me personally or that I was now in post. It was the first step in raising the profile of the role.

Next I approached all the local papers that I know were part of a publishing group – one article about your aspirations for the year and it could appear in four or five fellow editions. I wrote to the CEOs and senior officers of the blue light services and offered messages of thanks to those who had gone above and beyond during the pandemic. These were seized on for their in-house newsletters, usually with a photograph in court dress. They appeared in publications for prisons, the police, the air ambulance, the fire service and the Border Force. And I always

followed these up with a slightly modified version on headed paper so it could be put on appropriate noticeboards.

In Devon we have a plethora of small freebie magazines, supported by advertising. A 1,000-word article for one based in Dartmouth was picked up and used by several other free magazines. The advantage of them is that they reach a demographic that probably wouldn't usually have ever heard of the role of High Sheriff. Besides 4,000 copies going through private letter boxes, they are distributed through pubs, take-away premises, opticians, clubs and small corner shops. And in the case of Devon, many were picked up by tourists and presumably found their way up-country.

The other useful outlet for getting the message across was of course virtual media. An invitation to ‘attend’ the monthly Zoom training session of 100 police cadets from across the county led to an energetic question and answer session about the purpose of a High Sheriff. A request to say thank you to



A lonely Declaration

seven retiring magistrates was attended by 60 current magistrates and court staff. Wreath laying for VJ Day got 1,500 hits on Facebook. And there were several large online panels that were obviously curious about the High Sheriff; these varied from the Lord-Lieutenant's charity panel to the Police and Crime Commissioner's online crime update.

But perhaps the most valuable source of information and exchange of ideas resulted from our highly successful online meetings of the nine West Country High Sheriffs, from the Isle of Wight to Cornwall and up to Gloucester. Tactfully ‘chaired’ by a computer-savvy HS, each person was able to update the others on successes and disappointments. The group, formed last year at the regional meeting at Athelhampton, quickly became supportive and deeply useful cyber-friends. It was at times a daily invaluable resource for requesting advice or notifying original ideas. And the online meetings made us realise both how diverse but also how similar our challenges in this extraordinary year have been.



A rare in-person event: the High Sheriff with PCs Caitlin Labajo and James Despard-Clark from Torquay Police Station

Using the press to raise the profile of the role of High Sheriff: articles in the county magazine *Devon Life* and a free newspaper

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High Sheriff of Devon 2020-21