



# Connecting, listening, and thanking



**O**N 11 March I retired as a GP in Pulborough in preparation for my year – within two weeks I was back at work. The predictions of at least one hundred COVID-related deaths a day in West Sussex alone created a sense of urgency in the NHS and the wider social care community, not witnessed by the health service since it began in 1948.

Since 1974 when the two counties of West and East Sussex were officially formed, there has been a joint declaration in the Crown Court at Lewes in East Sussex. So my plans to be the first High Sheriff, let alone the first physician, to make their Declaration within West Sussex had to be rapidly changed and, instead of a major event in Chichester Cathedral, I began my shrieval year at home and on Zoom. Little could I have predicted that my theme of ‘safeguarding the vulnerable’ would prove so appropriate.



**Above:** Declaration montage

**Below:** What to wear this morning: court dress or PPE for a COVID 'hot hub' clinic?

For me, cancelled shrieval events were replaced by 'hot hub' COVID clinics and court dress was exchanged for PPE. Rapidly introduced new clinical practices to minimise the risk of infection spoke of the unprecedented danger of this novel infection and the public's weekly show of support for the NHS was greatly appreciated.

Although many sadly lost their battle against the virus, West Sussex was thankfully spared the worst. The local hospitals had just enough ventilator capacity in ITU and our senior coroner did not have to open the 'Nightingale' mortuaries which she had established.

However, my role as High Sheriff was by no means sidelined by medicine and, for me, three activities have become paramount: connecting, listening, and thanking.

As annual ceremonies and receptions had to be cancelled, or moved online, so I became very busy adapting my role and proactively reaching out to

connect with leaders from every sector across the county. In this, the administrative help of Julia Mansergh, who is also a local JP, has been invaluable.

There can be few years where a crisis has created so much uncertainty for, and required such a rapid and extensive response by, so many different elements of our society; the judicial, education and voluntary sectors all remain greatly challenged as are the police, prison and probation services.

Listening to the key architects of our county's response to COVID and on behalf of West Sussex thanking them and their colleagues for their exceptional efforts has been, and continues to be, a deeply significant element of my role. Perhaps it has never been so important.

However, the unique independent position of a High Sheriff within the county has led to other opportunities and initiatives.

The inspiring acts of altruism and kindness carried out by individual members of the public, acting in a voluntary capacity, are being recognised in a new and specific award. To replace my summer reception, I convened a Zoom conference 'Tackling Loneliness Together' which connected 120 representatives from every locality and sector of the county to focus on this very significant issue. I am currently visiting businesses to highlight their role in supporting communities to remain resilient and, once a week, the West Sussex local news media publishes my High Sheriff's briefing so that I can inform the public about the great work going on in the county to support them.

There is certainly a great deal to write about.

## ◆ Dr Tim Fooks

*High Sheriff of West Sussex 2020-21*



### OPPOSITE PAGE

**Top:** Attestation of Police Constables, Sussex Police

**Far left:** The High Sheriff with Jo Shiner Chief Constable Sussex Police, Simon Carello JP, Katy Bourne Police and Crime Commissioner Sussex