



You don't agree to be High Sheriff if you are frightened of a challenge

THE YEAR of 'Lockdown High Sheriffs' has ended; the feathers and swords are in the dressing-up cupboard and we join that very merry band of ex-High Sheriffs. So what to say about our year?

It was an extraordinary twelve months. A statement from the prime minister on 23 March changed everything. Long-thought-out plans were shredded and diaries whitewashed; we made our Declarations and were then launched into a void. Kind friends rang to commiserate, but you don't agree to become a High Sheriff if you are frightened of a challenge. The pandemic gave us a focus and extra purpose that no High Sheriff has had for many many years.

There have been many accounts of what the 20/21 High Sheriffs have achieved as we exchanged formal events for impromptu engagements at the grassroots. Countless fresh and exciting ideas emerged and will be handed down to our successors and I would simply like to focus on one element – the High Sheriff's Awards. How good it is that there are no set rules about how these are given. Each year, in every county a different process is used – our Lord-Lieutenants do not have this privilege. They can put people forward for national honours or garden parties, but that is a lengthy process over which they have no ultimate control, and in a crisis year like this last one, a simple and very personal system that can thank people who have made an enormous contribution to their communities is vital and very much appreciated. High Sheriff's Awards are exactly that.

In Oxfordshire, I decided to concentrate on groups of volunteers who had made a real difference during the pandemic. I could have recognised only their leaders but in this difficult year, it's teamwork that has shone through, and those posses

of dedicated quietly spoken volunteers needed thanking as well. DLs, mayors, the clergy and many others helped me draw up my list. I was determined I would hand over every award in person – after all a High Sheriff is simply a rather showy volunteer – so in my last month I set off to every corner of the county to find my 50 groups. My awards' ceremonies were informal and often unannounced. I met people in market squares, food larders, an abbey garden, a brewery, under umbrellas outside a village pub, village shops, school kitchens and many more. It was different, but every award provoked a joyous celebration. For me it was truly humbling to hear at first hand the awesome efforts of every group, and I am left with a bursting pride at what the people of Oxfordshire have achieved. So whatever your year brings, make the most of this very special privilege – our High Sheriff's Awards.

Finally – life as an ex? With our new encyclopaedic knowledge of our counties we can continue to make a difference by bringing together people who have inspired us during our year. So much good can come out of new connections. My first gathering is already planned as I fulfil a promise made to the governors of Oxfordshire's two prisons. I will be introducing them to a new inspirational education centre for food and farming, and, to add a touch of spice, I have invited the owner of a local creamery, a vegetable grower, a young dairyman and an octogenarian celebrity food star called Prue to join the party. It will be fun. I wonder: who will gain the most? Who knows, we may just get to see cows being milked in the prisons and freshly grown veg on their daily menus.

◆ Amanda Ponsonby MBE
High Sheriff of Oxfordshire 2020-21



News from and about members



Top left: Visiting Wantage Primary School

Clockwise from top right: Amanda Ponsonby presents High Sheriff's Awards to:

Barton Community Larder

Faringdon Viral Kindness and Flowers for Molly

A Helping Hand (Grove and Wantage)

The Porch (one of Oxford's charities for the homeless)

Oxford Together on a windy Port Meadow

