



No shortage of areas for focus

DECLARING IN Exeter's Guildhall, the oldest civic building still in use in the UK, where Judge Jeffreys held court, has framed my year so far.

It took a little while to feel my way into the role. The amount of research and administration is not inconsiderable, and I have found that with people changing jobs, working from home, and the challenges of running the business or organisation that they do, keeping up with the annual change of High Sheriff has been low on the list of priorities. However, I have been warmly welcomed once I made the approach, and visits and articles have been appreciated.

With two Crown and County Courts, two Coroner's Courts, Magistrates' Courts, Tribunals, three prisons, a probation service that has 'renationalised' (and will take four years to fully embed), and emergency services that overlap neighbouring counties, and civic responsibilities, there is no shortage of areas for focus.

Early on, I became even more aware of the many organisations, charities and volunteers that work with and 'satellite' around all these areas, and how many have adapted to continue delivering much of what they do through the pandemic months. Organisations like Citizens Advice and the Devon Community Foundation have responded creatively, and have found, as have others, new and more accessible ways of being available and giving the support so badly needed.

The increasing use of social media by High Sheriffs is a welcome development broadening the reach of the role, and as an effective way of rapid updates on the day-to-day goings-on in the many areas of interest. It is also time-consuming and needs constant vigilance to avoid potential Pooh traps.

The WhatsApp group for the Western Circuit set up in November quickly morphed into monthly Zoom drinks, and has been a great source of encouragement, advice and sharing, and also a pleasure; again, an unexpected upside of the pandemic in that we see each other much more than we might otherwise have.

The Lord Chief Justice held a Court of Appeal hearing in Exeter, only the second in recent memory. There being no room on the bench, I watched and listened from the witness box, only slightly surreal. It was a thorough, thoughtful and impressive process.

Visiting the prisons is salutary, but again, there have been unexpected upsides. As wings have been shut down, there has been a reduction in bullying as a result of reduced indebtedness among prisoners, and a stronger sense of community on landings. The staff have found ways to keep prisoners engaged with distraction packs of Sudoku, crosswords, and painting by numbers kits, and have also managed to keep literacy teaching going with individual learning packs, some prisoners doing much better with these than in the



Drawing of Court of Appeal hearing at Exeter Combined Court by court artist Elizabeth Cook; Below L-R with Mr Justice Garnham, Lord Chief Justice, Mr Justice Linden



classroom environment. I was delighted that HMP Dartmoor received the much under-publicised RHS Windlesham Trophy for the best prison garden – no mean feat inside a granite fortress on the top of a moor – where they have a nursery and grow vegetables.

I have recently discovered who was the first woman Sheriff in Devon. While spellings vary, National Archives and other records agree that William the Conqueror made 'that famous knight Baldwin de Brionius, hereditary sheriff of Devon' in 1068. His son Richard inherited it, and after his death in 1137 the office passed to his sister, Adelise fitz Baldwin, who held it until her death in 1142. She styled herself 'Vice-Commitissa Devon'. I rather like that!

◆ Lucy Studholme

Lady Studholme, High Sheriff of Devon 2021-22



With the High Sheriff of Cornwall Mark Thomas and the Governor Steve Mead at HMP Dartmoor



An award for outstanding bravery for Firefighter Shakespeare from Chief Fire Officer Lee Howell