



From Zoom to Boom

Below: Commemoration ceremony in Worthing for the Canadians who died during the Second World War

WELL, THAT is what it has been like for me; and the question is: will it continue?

The Declaration ceremony was virtual as I became the High Sheriff of West Sussex at the end of April, and I have to admit to being quite nervous about whether or not mine would be another ‘abnormal’ year, with minimal contact with the people of West Sussex, other than at a distance.

My predecessor, Dr Tim Fooks, had weathered that particular storm heroically, meeting and speaking to a vast number of organisations online, while advancing his theme of loneliness and social isolation, so relevant to his year. (Tim has published a collection of the articles he wrote in the press throughout his year as a record of the pandemic in the county – proceeds to charity.*)

And so it started, with a small number of actual meetings, all socially distanced, masked, thoroughly hand-sanitised and limited in numbers; greatly appreciated by me and better than Zoom, but not yet the real thing. And of course there was the procession of Zoom, Teams and telephone introductions and meetings, all of which were invigorating and useful... but I wanted to meet people!

And I think they wanted to meet their High Sheriff, particularly the young lad at Springboard who was intrigued by my sword. It absolutely made his day.

We all agree that while Zoom has its place and will be a useful tool in the future, there is nothing to replace the actual meeting, the casual conversation, the visit



and inspection of a group or an activity. That is the way to really find out what is going on and how people feel. And of course there are the set-piece events, the pageantry, the processions, all of which are important to the Office and part of the fabric of civic society in the county. There is no substitute for the actuality of these events.

By the end of May the enquiries for meetings and events began to trickle in, and became a decent stream by mid-June, which saw the first diary clash – how exciting, we are on the way! By July the diary was filling up, and August was really quite busy. Isn't everybody meant to be away on holiday and not that interested in meeting the High Sheriff in August? Not this year.

Below left: Making this lad's day during a visit to Springboard Horsham

Below right: Virtual Declaration ceremony

There is still the rigmarole of handshakes or elbow bumps, mask on or maybe off (‘it's up to you’) and not too close, please. I adjust to what makes those I meet most comfortable; this is the way of life for now.

September and October are looking like being normal service, with receptions, dinners, judges' services and awards ceremonies aplenty; long may it continue.

But for how long? Will the winter see renewed restrictions? Possibly, and if so this High Sheriff will revert to Zoom. But at least I, and more importantly the good people of West Sussex, enjoyed the Boom in the summer.

*Tim Fooks (ed), *West Sussex in the COVID-19 Pandemic: a year like no other* (Kings and Princes Press, West Chiltington 2021)

◆ Neil Hart DL
High Sheriff of West Sussex 2020-21

