



The weight of history

A SURE sign of reaching the end of one's year as High Sheriff is when the most common question is no longer 'What is a High Sheriff?' but 'What have been the highlights of your year?' Personally speaking, it's been far harder to answer the second question as there have been too many to list. But one highlight which will undoubtedly linger long in the memory was a visit to the Parker Library at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge one cold, dark evening in November alongside my wonderful fellow High Sheriffs from Buckinghamshire, Essex, Greater London, Hertfordshire, Norfolk, Northamptonshire, Rutland and Suffolk.

The Director of the Parker Library, Dr Philippa Hoskin, had kindly arranged a private viewing of various manuscripts and items of interest, and one which piqued everyone's interest was a manuscript referring to the 'scirman' (shireman, sheriff) dispensing justice in Anglo-Saxon law code associated with Ine, the seventh-century king of Wessex.



Director of the Parker Library, Philippa Hoskin, with the manuscript detailing the Anglo-Saxon law code associated with Ine, the seventh-century king of Wessex. This is the earliest surviving record of English royal legislation



(L to R): Simon Brice (Essex), Michael Gurney (Norfolk), David Wood (Rutland), Lynn Cooper (Greater London), Caroline Bewes (Cambridgeshire), Amanda Lowther (Northamptonshire), Lionel Wallace (Hertfordshire), George Anson (Buckinghamshire), Edward Creasy (Suffolk)

The text on display that evening, which was written in the early tenth century, is the earliest surviving record of English royal legislation, and, astonishingly, is widely believed to be a copy from an earlier original. Philippa translated the particular reference, which was taken from the Laws of Ine (dated 688-695), as: 'If anyone demands justice before any shireman (scirman), or any other judge, and cannot obtain it through default of a pledge (from the accused), he shall pay compensation and obtain proper justice within seven nights.' Since, Philippa explained, this reference was taken from the Laws of Ine, the Office of High Sheriff would therefore have originated in the seventh century – much earlier than any of us present that evening had previously believed to be the case.

After moving on to the University Arms Hotel in Cambridge for dinner with our spouses, the 'comitatus' of High Sheriffs present that evening (the lack of any collective noun for a group of High Sheriffs led us to agree on 'comitatus'!) reflected on the weight of history behind the Office, and we rapidly revised our historical dates for

our answer to the frequently asked question 'What is a High Sheriff?'. Stating that the role dates back to the seventh century certainly has eyebrows raised even higher, especially when attesting to having seen the reference in a manuscript!

Had I described my current role to a 'scirman' back in the day, the very idea of High Sheriff's Awards, visiting foodbanks, linking in with the emergency services, Zoom meetings, and doing a parachute jump for charity would have been far too futuristic to describe, let alone contemplate! Yet the abiding connection of the role with the justice system remains the main focus over a thousand years later, and I have absolutely loved encouraging, supporting, recognising and thanking those working in law and order within the county of Cambridgeshire. It has been both humbling and a real pleasure to have been given the opportunity to serve as High Sheriff in Cambridgeshire – over 1,300 years after the first 'scirman'!

◆ Caroline Bewes DL
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