

The importance of bringing people together

Andy Bliss QPM

High Sheriff West Sussex 2023-24

Shortly before I retired as a Chief Constable in 2016 I wrote a short article for the High Sheriffs' Association's magazine about the importance of the support that High Sheriffs offer to policing. It's a great pleasure, as I now 'round the halfway marker', to offer a different perspective – on my year so far as High Sheriff of West Sussex.

Based on my previous experience in policing of working with High Sheriffs, I deliberately set my focus wide – to support organisations which protect and care for the public. I didn't want to arrive in office and then, as I really got to know my county, realise that I had set my focus too narrowly. So, as well as the courts, the police, the fire service and many other statutory organisations, I have also met with a really wide range of charities and voluntary sector organisations – Scouts, Guides, the RNLI and many others – particularly those working alongside the criminal justice sector and also those helping to tackle homelessness and food poverty.

Reflecting my lifelong interest in history as well as the antiquity of the High Sheriff's role, I have also focused on the charities that promote the history of the county, including archives, historic houses and archaeological sites across the county. Many of them rely heavily on volunteers; all have been welcoming and they clearly see value in the holder of an ancient office supporting and promoting the valuable work that they do.

At the end of the summer I held an outdoor reception in the Roman gardens at the impressive Fishbourne Roman Palace with representatives of the charities and public services which deal with some of the most challenging issues in society present as well as some from the heritage sector – a great mix of people who would not ordinarily meet. Learning that the High Sheriff would be attending in court dress, the brilliant staff from Sussex Archaeological Society even dressed in Roman costumes to create an enjoyable atmosphere in this unique and historically important place.

One big difference from my previous job is that the role of High Sheriff has little direct power but it has been striking how



At the High Sheriff's reception at Fishbourne Roman Palace with Leanne O'Boyle (Chief Executive), Abbey Hawkins, Sam Pettifor, Penny Horsfield, and Jess Keeley of Sussex Archaeological Society, and Alex Nikolov, Sussex Police Cadet



Richard Bickersteth (East Sussex), Andy Bliss (West Sussex) and Timothy Wates (Surrey) (all foreground centre) with Chief Fire Officer Simon Petts of Gatwick Airport Fire and Rescue Service and his team on joint visit to Gatwick Airport Fire Station, West Sussex

much the support to an organisation of a visit or thanks to a group of volunteers can mean. As I connect with organisations across the county I am frequently able to make connections and put people in contact with other – examples have included charities which might benefit by collaborating together and two parts of the justice system that might have an opportunity to share space. Over the next few months I am planning two networking events: one for charities working with the homeless and another for the heritage sector, to enable busy CEOs to meet colleagues and make connections.

Some aspects of my previous policing experience have been invaluable. Resilience is vital, as on each engagement as High Sheriff one is very much 'on parade'. So, I programmed in a few short

breaks during the year to recharge my batteries and to catch up with admin. This decision has proved to be invaluable. So too has another habit from my operational policing days of having a 'go bag' in the car containing spare cufflinks, safety pins, water, sun cream etc. – I have had recourse to it frequently.

I am fortunate in West Sussex to collaborate frequently on engagements with my East Sussex counterpart, Richard Bickersteth, and have greatly enjoyed his company and benefitted from his experience and advice. A great support team is essential and Kevin Smyth (Under Sheriff), the Revd David Murdoch (Chaplain), Julia Mansergh (PA) and Alex Nikolov (Police Cadet) all continue to help me make the year as successful as possible for those whom we serve.