

Unexpected consequences



At a meeting of the Northumberland Partnership Against Rural Crime on the day that the Sycamore Gap tree was cut down

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High Sheriff of Northumberland 2023-24

Having been a magistrate since 1999 I was keen to use my year as High Sheriff to gain a fuller understanding of our legal system. One of my first engagements was the swearing-in of new magistrates at the court in Newcastle and I went on to attend four more of these events over the year. At the suggestion of the High Sheriffs' Association I spent an interesting morning watching proceedings in a Tribunal Court and I also visited the Coroner's Court, the Crown Prosecution Service and the Probation Service. I made three trips to HMP Northumberland, not only to see the prison itself, but also to meet with those charities that support prisoners and their families. My final prison visit was to HMP Frankland at the invitation of the High Sheriff of Durham.

I was fortunate enough to be invited by two High Court judges to join them for the day to hear their cases. One day was spent in the Family Court while the other was spent watching a murder trial

involving a child and in both cases I heard pretty harrowing evidence. I am full of admiration for our judges who listen to the very worst aspects of humanity on a daily basis. Both the judges I sat with were among those who came for dinner at home. I tried to make these evenings very relaxed (home-cooked kitchen supper in most cases) in the hope that the judges could unwind to some extent and I hope they all enjoyed themselves as much as I did.

Northumberland is the least densely populated county in England and, although I was not born and raised here, I consider myself extremely lucky to have called it home for 35 years. Having no city or cathedral the iconic feature of the county was the tree at Sycamore Gap on Hadrian's Wall – sadly the tree was cut down in an act of vandalism at the end of September. This had unexpected consequences for me in that I found myself being interviewed that evening by Evan Davies on Radio 4 and the following morning I had to make my way to Sycamore Gap to be interviewed by BBC Breakfast TV which was immediately followed by an interview by Radio Newcastle.

Although I may not have attended as many civic ceremonies as some High Sheriffs I did have the opportunity to visit a lifeboat station, HM Coastguard



Unconventional court dress footwear at Morpeth Group Riding for the Disabled

and the Mountain Rescue Service where I met the volunteers who give up their time to keep us safe and come to our rescue when needed. Their dedication and professionalism is truly awe-inspiring, particularly as they are often working in extremely challenging circumstances. The rural aspect of the county necessitated taking wellies on some of my visits but only once did I wear wellies with court dress. This was on a visit to the local Morpeth Group Riding for the Disabled when, after a tour of the stables, I gave out long service awards at a celebratory lunch.

I was delighted to celebrate those charities which work with children and young people at our recent awards ceremony where we distributed over £50,000 from the Northumberland High Sheriff's Fund to 48 different charities including Scouts, Guides, Young Farmers, Air Cadets and charities supporting children who have witnessed domestic abuse or have been permanently excluded from school. Meeting all the amazing volunteers who give so much to the county has been truly humbling but has also been the highlight of my wonderful and memorable year.



With Dylan Gibson (who continues to share his passion for karate despite losing his sight in November 2022) receiving his High Sheriffs Award, accompanied by his sister Gemma and pictured with Caroline Pryor (Vice Lord-Lieutenant of Northumberland) Photo: Verity Johnson



Wellies not needed visiting the mountain rescue team, but woolly hat essential