

A voyage of discovery

Robert Drewett DL

High Sheriff of Somerset 2023-24

Having lived in Somerset for all my life – bar a period away for education and a stint in London – and chaired the regional agricultural society, been a Deputy Lieutenant for some time and trustee of a variety of other locally based charities, I thought I had an inkling about the county. How wrong I was!

As I discovered, the marvellous thing about being High Sheriff is that you learn so much about the county in which you live. But it can take time...

Somerset maintains a tradition of encouraging each new High Sheriff to be a free spirit and take whatever path they choose. This had the merit of making me think hard about what it was that I wanted to achieve but, equally, the lack of any form of central database meant wasted hours identifying groups to visit and discouraged continuity. In a small break with tradition within Somerset (always a dangerous thing to contemplate for a High Sheriff) I created a list of contacts to lodge with the Under Sheriff (so that we can be GDPR compliant). Many will do that already and it is hardly rocket science, but I hope that it might be a small assistance to those that follow.

One thing that I struggled with throughout my year was how best to explain the relevance of the role of High Sheriff in the modern world. That you are The King's representative for law and order



Planting an oak tree to mark the Coronation of HM The King in Victoria Park Bath with Gloria Craig DL, Cllr Dine Romero (Mayor of Bath), Cllr Sarah Moore (Chair of Bath & North East Somerset Council), Cllr Kevin Guy (Leader of Bath & North East Somerset Council) and Mohammed Saddiq (Lord-Lieutenant)



Hitching a lift with the Wadworth heavy horse team at the Royal Bath & West Show



Preparing to join the Chard carnival procession with a light sabre rather than a sword for the occasion

should be sufficient, but the nuances of the role mean that, in practice, you do far more, as all High Sheriffs will attest. One way in which I addressed this was to maintain a regular presence on social media and sought to post a record of what I'd been up to most days. It was hard work, but it was rewarding when I met people who told me that they enjoyed following my exploits – and the number of negative responses were mercifully small. I hope that my amateurish exploits may have helped in a small way to enlighten people as to the multi-faceted nature of the role.

What was wonderful was how keen organisations were to share with you their stories and how that, in turn, enabled me (as the current incumbent of the Office)

to say thank you to them. I seem to have been particularly lucky to have worked in parallel with a great group of local civic leaders. Tapping into their knowledge and encouraging them to host me for a day and to introduce me to charities within their towns was a great way to meet a diverse group of organisations – but with a common theme, which was the enormous dedication and enthusiasm of every group of volunteers that I met. I was glad to have postponed my tea party until September, as it gave a chance to invite more of those that I had visited, and a lunch at the beginning of March to introduce those in leadership roles to the High Sheriff in nomination allowed me to include others that I had met in the intervening period.

While I very much enjoyed sitting with judges and magistrates, and getting to know the police and other emergency services better – is there any former High Sheriff who did not enjoy a shift with the response team or the chance to get behind the wheel of a (stationary) fire engine? – it was meeting the small local charities and, in particular, the movers and shakers within those organisations, that is my lasting memory.

Finishing my year with a far greater knowledge of my county – and having made many new friends – has been an enormous privilege.