

History is for everyone

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High Sheriff for West Sussex 2023-24

Struggling to decipher a letter in ancient script from Henry VI written in 1440 to the Sheriff of Sussex, cared for by the brilliant team at West Sussex Records Office, I suddenly realised that I was looking at something rather familiar! As a former Chief Constable I have seen a few arrest warrants in my time but this was an instruction to apprehend two men who had stolen two cows and two bullocks 'by force'. For me it was a fascinating point of connection but it was also striking that when the letter was written to my predecessor, Sheriffs had already held office in the county, serving the Crown, for some five hundred years.

My main focus during my year in office was on the charities and voluntary groups which protect the public and keep them safe, focusing particularly on homelessness and poverty. But, holding historical office in a county rich in history, it also seemed very appropriate that I should also support the organisations – mostly charities – that care for and promote its distinguished history and cultural heritage. That's why I invited quite a few representatives of those organisations to a summer reception in the Roman Garden at the fabulous Fishbourne Palace to celebrate the pleasure and interest that they contribute to our interest and quality of life.

West Sussex has a wealth of 'heritage assets': grand historic estates, two splendid cathedrals, castles, forts and,

of course, many modest old buildings. That's not to mention the many significant archaeological sites and the array of museums, large and small, across the county; plus the impressive range of historic maps, plans and documents held at the Record Office in Chichester.

So, as I travelled around West Sussex meeting curators, archivists, archaeologists, volunteers and public visitors, what did I learn?

I have found that many of the charities had, like many other sectors, struggled financially during the pandemic and are now striving to attract more visitors and funding. Many are using technology to enhance people's appreciation of and access to heritage. And many are engaging communities in new ways – archaeology walks run by Worthing Museum where people get a chance to handle actual artefacts while visiting sites are just one example of this approach.

At every single place I visited I was greeted by dedicated and knowledgeable staff, frequently supported by brilliant and enthusiastic volunteers who contribute so much to our historic places. The number of people who volunteer to support heritage organisations – ranging from the

National Trust to small local museums – is seriously impressive and I found many that I spoke with did other voluntary work too.

Understanding the past can help us to understand the present and inform our plans for the future. So, it was heartening to see many heritage organisations thinking about how to explain history from a contemporary perspective while also ensuring that history is for everyone – including people from new communities or those who are less well off.

In challenging economic times, many people are looking for inexpensive ways to sustain their morale. Beyond the necessity of a warm, dry home and adequate food, for so many people enjoying the arts, watching sport or, in this case, visiting historic places enriches our lives. Many of the places I visited were free or inexpensive to visit and offer fun, interesting and informative days out for families and friends.

During the course of my year in office I was invited to speak at numerous museums, community groups and also to police cadet units – on a couple of occasions ably assisted by my police cadet, Alex Nikolov. On each occasion I spoke about the history of the role, the court dress and what the role of High Sheriff entails today. I found that this history intrigued most people that I met, prompted all manner of positive conversations and helped me to explain the relevance of the role in contemporary Britain.



With Marilyn Le Feuvre DL on a visit to Crawley Museum Photo: Peter Mansfield-Clark



At my summer reception at Fishbourne Roman Palace in conversation with Sam Pettifor, Sussex Archaeological Society Photo: Andrew Mardell



At a West Sussex Constabulary history exhibition organised by Alan Moore (centre) and supported by Mike Rumble (left)