

Counter-balance to disillusion with human nature

Kate Silk JP

Lady Silk, High Sheriff of Powys 2024-25

Powys is big and empty. At 2,000 square miles, it's double the size of Luxembourg and about the same size as Trinidad and Tobago. Around 130,000 people live here, but we only have two towns with more than 10,000 population (in both cases, just over): Ystradgynlais and Newtown. Agriculture, tourism and the public sector are main employers. We are a community of communities with many small villages where families have lived for generations. We have also welcomed many newcomers, attracted by our wonderful countryside.

Powys still exists as an administrative county so, unlike all other High Sheriffs in Wales, I only have one local authority with which to engage. But Powys is made up of three historic counties with strong identities: Breconshire, Radnorshire and Montgomeryshire. High Sheriffs are drawn from each of these historic counties in turn.

Transport is a problem. High Sheriffs must take on engagements anywhere in their county. We only have two railway lines – the mid Wales line with five trains a day meandering through the middle of the county, and a line which serves Welshpool, Newtown and Machynlleth. Neither is near me and my village has one bus a week. So driving is the only option. But to get to Machynlleth in the north-west means a drive of almost two hours; to get to Llanfyllin in the north-east it's over two hours; and even Ystradgynlais in the south-west is an hour away.

My shrieval mileage has been enormous,



taking me to a fascinating variety of events: from preserving curlews to supporting refugees, from running clubs for those with disabilities to removing invasive species... and many more. The enthusiastic commitment which so many volunteers show is awesome.

It is a great counter-balance to any disillusion with human nature. Some of that disillusion comes from having been a magistrate for almost 30 years. The courts I sat in when first appointed are now closed, like others in the county. Now we have only magistrates' courts which sit occasionally in Llandrindod and in Welshpool. While having no visiting High Court judges may be a financial relief, I am concerned that local justice is no longer delivered in Powys. And the Dyfed-Powys Police are a stretched resource – one of the smallest forces in numbers in Wales and England, but covering the largest geographical area.

At Llangoed Hall for a lunch with former High Sheriffs and those in nomination; with David Price (2018), Lt Col Mike Lewis (2015), Ann Tudor (2016), Sally Roberts (2025), Sue Thompson (2017), Tia Jones (Lord Lieutenant), David Jones Powell (2006), Reg Cawthorne (2023), Robin Gibson-Watt (1981), Rhian Duggan (2020) and David Peate (2019) Present but not pictured James Turner 2007

I am using my shrieval year to raise awareness of one area of criminality: domestic abuse. Over the years I have seen its pernicious effects on individuals and families. The national picture is depressing: over 2 million people are affected and the estimated cost is a staggering £74 billion. Only five per cent of perpetrators are brought to justice. In 2023, 242 people lost their lives. And there are particular problems in rural areas. It is much more difficult to be anonymous than it is in a city – and isolated people can be abused without anyone being aware.

Working with two local domestic abuse charities – Montgomeryshire Family Crisis Centre in north Powys and Calan DVS in south Powys – I have been able to talk to victims at length. Their stories can be shocking and harrowing. I have also met judiciary from the Family Court, senior police officers, politicians and businesses, all of whom share the aim to counter domestic abuse. In October I am holding an event which will be addressed both by Lord Thomas of Cwmgiedd, a Powys resident and former Lord Chief Justice, and by a victim of domestic abuse. I will be doing more.

It is a privilege to be a High Sheriff. You meet wonderful people and you have a platform for doing some good yourself. I am looking forward enormously to the rest of the year.



At my Declaration with the Rt Hon the Lord Thomas of Cwmgiedd, former Lord Chief Justice of England of Wales Photo: Lewis Chatfield