

Successful volunteering fair

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High Sheriff of Somerset 2024-25

As High Sheriff I have been introduced to ‘Somerset exceptionalism’ – the county stands out for its community initiatives, volunteering groups and enterprise. Why is this? Some attribute it to the dispersed rural nature of Somerset with fewer of the central or local government interventions which tend to be set up in larger urban centres. This has led to a self-reliant and independent spirit, with many committed people providing their own solutions to problems or matters that need addressing.

Of course, an underlying streak of nonconformism has its challenges; after all, Somerset was at the heart of the Monmouth Rebellion and my predecessor in 1685, Edward Hobbs, had a busy year meeting the needs of Judge Jeffreys. But it is also a trait that should be celebrated. Early in my shrieval year I presided over the wonderfully anarchic and quirky Glastonbury Beltane (May Day) celebrations, and that spirit of enterprise and diversity is present across much of the county.

As a retired police officer at chief constable rank, I have many years’ association with High Sheriffs. In some respects, my appointment is payback as I have enjoyed the active support, friendship and largesse of many High Sheriffs over the years. Being an ex-officer, I know the emergency services well and have focused on some of the lesser known areas of their work, with visits to the local organised crime and counter-terrorist teams, along with support teams from different services who have never seen a High Sheriff before.



With Cllr Vanessa Garside (Mayor of Taunton), her consort Mansour and RE:ACT volunteers at the Join in Somerset volunteers fair Photo: Alain Lockyer

For many years, I had a national responsibility in setting policy and practice across the UK for volunteers in policing, so my biggest concern was the significant fall I had observed in active volunteering across the whole of England and Wales. The figures are stark. A decade ago, 27 per cent of adults in England volunteered once a month. Now it is just 16 per cent. The fall among young people (under 20) is even steeper. The indications are that it wasn’t as substantial a decline in Somerset as other counties, but it’s still an extremely worrying trend.

Like many High Sheriffs, I wondered what I could do about it. I eschewed a traditional garden party and decided to hold a volunteers’ fair, ‘Join in Somerset’, which provided an opportunity for volunteer organisations to showcase their work and services and to seek new supporters and volunteers. It was held in Somerset’s county town, Taunton, on a Saturday in September, and over 90 charitable and voluntary groups set up street stalls. Thousands of local people



With DS Henry Beckley and PC George Beckley for final patrol after 38 years as a police officer and first patrol as High Sheriff

visited the stalls as I had partnered with the town council who ran additional cultural celebrations that day. It was a massive success – all the organisations reported being inundated with inquiries and many signed up new volunteers.

A gathering of 90 organisations is a modest step, but the event has raised awareness of the problem of declining volunteering and has promoted an important discussion in Somerset about what we can do to change things. Some mayors of Somerset towns now plan to hold similar events and the Somerset councils have agreed to support a conference in February to explore potential solutions.

In the context of my previous 38-year career in the police, history was made at the start of my shrieval year. For three weeks I was both a chief police officer and High Sheriff. I had to conclude a statutory inquiry for the Home Office so advice was sought and permission granted for this unusual arrangement. It is believed I am the only High Sheriff to have held office while also a serving police officer.



Opening the Beltane Day Celebrations in Glastonbury



With Joanne Scofield and volunteers, Worthy FM Radio at Glastonbury Festival