

What a High Sheriff does

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High Sheriff of Northumberland 2024-25

The inevitable question 'What does a High Sheriff do?' still remains a difficult one to answer. At the beginning of the year it was difficult because I really wasn't quite sure; and now at the end of the year it's because I have too much to say about it. I try to explain how the connections have built up over the year to draw the whole county together. The vast collection of organisations and places, activities and initiatives, volunteers and long-term workers I have encountered has been breath-taking. The interrelations spring up all the time – the Scout leader also volunteers with the Mountain Rescue team; the lead gardener of a charity green space also sings in the inclusive folk group; the volunteer chef at Escape, the drug and alcohol abuse support network, trains at the award-winning boxing club; and the magistrate is a trustee of the charity which provides day-care services for people with complex mental health needs and learning difficulties.

Meeting our Police and Crime Commissioner at theatre groups, knife crime meetings, the domestic abuse services charity and at various other moments has built a relationship where the High Sheriff's knowledge has proved useful. I have had time to head to the more remote areas across Northumberland and visit the smaller groups. I have also had the 'grass roots experience' of going out, for example, on exercise with the search and rescue team, hearing how they are so often called upon to look for vulnerable people under extreme stress. And I have spent time with prison charities supporting ex-offenders and also prisoners out on ROTL at the bike repair shop or Newcastle Cathedral café. 'I like you for your contacts' was my last interaction with the Police and Crime



Youth club 'Hexham Youth Initiative' at the High Sheriff's Awards evening, with Northumbrian born Alexander Armstrong



Awarding certificates at the Kokoro Karate competition

Commissioner and that was when I knew that High Sheriffs do play a valuable role.

The contacts within one particular category, youth groups, have led to one of the most exciting proposals to emerge from this year. The Northumberland Challenge, an initiative organised through a network of youth clubs, is a simple, affordable, achievable version of the Duke of Edinburgh Award scheme, which may encourage children to take up the DofE or other activities in the future. I have met over 10 youth groups throughout Northumberland and in learning about their interconnected aims it has been a logical step to combine the 'authority' of the High Sheriff with this project – to engage young people in volunteering, getting out in their county, experiencing new things and challenging themselves. The Challenge booklet, with its six missions, will also contain a short history of High Sheriffs, showing young people that their efforts are valued and will be supported. The four future High Sheriffs in nomination and our Under Sheriff, plus the Community Foundation, all collaborated on this scheme with the youth clubs, and the very satisfying conclusion is that the successful completion of the Northumberland Challenge will be acknowledged with a special High Sheriff's certificate.

On the legal side of the High Sheriff coin I sat with High Court judges four times in the Crown Court in Newcastle, had three dinners at home with four judges and was invited three times to their lodgings, witnessed the swearing-in ceremony of

new magistrates and visited both the Magistrates' and Business and Property Courts.

Every week in my diary has been different, with a mix of formal events and then those requiring waterproofs and walking boots, or just jeans. Changing on the side of the road into the coat, lace and hat has become standard practice and made me appreciate all those whose position requires them to wear some form of uniform. Ironically, these accoutrements bring an anonymity to the role, which allows us each year to meld into the role of High Sheriff.

I recently received an email from a Turkish refugee I have got to know very well, who works in Northumberland for the national Dialogue Society. He explained that it is important for him to work with the High Sheriff because 'you are covering everyone in our county, representing everyone and working for everyone'. His sentiment might answer some questions about what a High Sheriff does.



Visiting the Woodfuel Centre near Blyth, a social day-care centre, supporting people living with complex mental health needs and learning disabilities