

# We all cry at these events

## Caroline Harlow

High Sheriff of Devon 2025-26

'I'm sorry. I'm not allowed to unlock this gate for you. We'll have to wait for a prison officer to arrive.' I was coming to the end of my Independent Monitoring Board membership before my year as High Sheriff of Devon and these, my first words to Andy, sent my year in a wholly unexpected direction. He was in prison for serious offences related to his gambling addiction and Andy had shown me something completely new. A light bulb went off in my head – the theme for my year would be to draw attention to this unrecognised evil that hides in plain sight.

Andy is now a free man working tirelessly with charities working to reduce the harm from gambling addiction. He has helped me weave this theme into so many of my marvellously varied shrieval duties. Occasionally senior people in the emergency services, armed forces and others have said, 'How interesting... not really a problem with us.' Yet a little while later these same people seek me out saying, 'You have made me think, tell me more.'

Some duties have just been fun: opening the 680th Dalwood Fair or celebrating a community-run shop – meeting people, valuing them and enjoying their success. Yet during my Declaration I promised that my year would be '...gritty not pretty'. I loved using my office to help convene a forum about the homeless in Exeter with 40 key players from the police, churches, charities, employers and those with lived experience.

I now expect the unexpected! At the D-Day Landings ceremony in Torquay they said that I would not have to do anything except be there. However, during the ceremony I was presented with the first wreath to be laid and frantically tried to remember how I had seen it done before.



With the Devon and Somerset Fire and Rescue Service

The British Legion invited me to several further events, so I must have done all right! It was privilege to meet these dedicated people who remembered their comrades, honouring them still. I loved hearing their stories and seeing how much they still care. VJ Day was especially poignant for me.

This year I have seen a common theme in many of the people and organisations that I have visited and talked with. They are all in different ways either keeping us safe today or remembering those who have paid a very heavy price to keep us safe in the past. These events showed me how the role of High Sheriff matters – conferring an extra layer of meaning and dignity to many of the events I have enjoyed attending. I am so lucky to perform this role.

The Royal Marines Commando Training Centre, Lympstone – somewhere very important to us in Devon – hosted my garden party which allowed me to honour,

in a magnificent setting, unsung heroes from the prison service, charities and many others I have met.

I continue to be very interested in custody and have visited both prisons in Devon, the custody suites in courts and police stations. Seeing inside our nearest women's prison and understanding some of the very different issues from men's prisons I found unglamorous but important. I've been fascinated to witness the difficult but vital work done by Magistrates' and Crown Courts and the probation service.

Preparing for the police awards ceremony I shared my biggest worry with the senior officer coordinating the ceremony. 'When I hear these stories of people who do such amazing things, but they don't think that they have anything at all unusual, I'll just cry.' The reply? 'Don't worry, Caroline, we all cry at these events, that's what they are all about.' And they did, and so did I.



In the air ambulance with a Devon Air Ambulance paramedic if space



Judging the Sylvania Community Shop bake off



At the 680th Dalwood Fair with the squadron leader of the (internationally famous) Bradninch Red Barrows display team