

# Reflections at the halfway mark

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High Sheriff of Tyne and Wear 2025-26

We are fed a relentless stream of news telling us how broken Britain is – headlines focussed on division, decline and despair. But so far, as High Sheriff of Tyne and Wear, what I've experienced are glimmers of hope, deep wells of kindness and an enduring spirit of community.

I was deeply honoured to be asked to take up the role but, I'll admit, I was unsure of the relevance in 2025. The answer came quickly and powerfully during a swearing-in ceremony for new magistrates. Speaking with each of them afterwards, thanking them for their commitment, I began to understand just how meaningful this role can be. There is still a need for someone to stand on behalf of the state and community and say, sincerely: thank you.

That need has echoed throughout my engagements whether at long-service awards for firefighters, at citizenship ceremonies and countless other moments where people give of themselves for the good of others. When High Sheriffs carry out these duties with integrity and authenticity, it can make a real and lasting difference.

One of the more sobering parts of my year came during a day spent in the criminal courts, where I sat through three harrowing sexual assault trials. It coincided with the release of the Leveson Review into the criminal courts. Judges were candid about the need for reform as court backlogs continue to grow, delaying justice for victims and defendants alike. I left with an even greater admiration for the judiciary, legal teams and court staff – their intellect, resilience and dedication to upholding justice deserves our deepest respect.



At my Declaration which was overseen by His Honour Judge Sloan KC (Honorary Recorder of Newcastle)

In Tyne and Wear we have a well-established High Sheriff's Award Scheme, supported by a generous endowment with the Community Foundation. Thanks to the support of local philanthropists, we're able to make around 50 awards of £1,000 each to organisations which support young people. These projects help young people grow in confidence and purpose, learn new skills, develop friendships and feel a sense of belonging in their communities. The year ends with a joyful celebration, where we honour the volunteers who show up week in and week out.

On a personal note, I've been reflecting on the turning points in my own life. One of



With Ray Spencer (former CEO of the Customs House theatre) at South Shields Carnival

those moments came when I was awarded the Bromley Scholarship during my first year studying Law at the University of Liverpool. As the first in my family to attend university and coming from a working-class background, I arrived feeling out of my depth. That award changed things. It gave me confidence, opened doors to law school and helped me secure a training contract. It shifted my aspirations and gave me the belief I could reach them. Now, as High Sheriff, I have the chance to pay that gift forward. I'm delighted to announce the creation of the High Sheriff's Award for Law – a new annual scholarship for a promising Law student from a widening participation background at Northumbria University. My hope is that it gives someone else the boost that meant so much to me.

And finally, no year in office is without its surprises. Mine came at a local mayoral installation (I'll spare the blushes by not naming the council). During a particularly animated speech from the opposition leader, in a flurry of objections and list of things that must be abolished, he inserted the High Sheriff's hat! I must confess I'm rather fond of mine. I found it in a local charity shop and glued on the ostrich feather myself. It will remain firmly on my head until the very last day of my shrieval year!



In the background are the North Sea and the lighthouses of North and South Shields



With Terry McDermott, Chair of North Shields Fishermen's Heritage Project, celebrating the 800th Anniversary of North Shields