

Being High Sheriff of Herefordshire in the 2020 pandemic

Early in the three years of nomination, I was given some great advice by Bill Jackson: go to every event you can and meet as many people as possible.

How glad I was to have followed this advice, when on 20th March 2020, exactly a year ago today, I was declared High Sheriff of Herefordshire in the office of the Under Sheriff as the Covid-19 pandemic took hold and the country went into lockdown.

As for very many other people, those first weeks were a struggle. I was totally bewildered as those years of planning for the year were cast aside. I'm in business and have always been able to find someone to provide a solution if I could not find my own – but not this time.

I am indebted to my regional West Midlands group of High Sheriffs, and other High Sheriffs I had met during nomination. All in the same boat, we were the only people who really understood the position of a newly declared High Sheriff in lockdown. How were we going to fulfil our duties? On Zoom and Teams we shared ideas which inspired and supported each other, and I treasure the friendships I have made.

I recalled a speaker at The High Sheriff Association's summer conference at Burghley a few years back who said, "Remember why you have been nominated and put your experience and expertise into your role". It was a good thought to remember on days when one doubted oneself.

So, what to do? I had been provided with 'The List' by James Hervey-Bathurst so I got stuck in, sending hundreds of emails which lead to phone calls and, very soon Zoom came into its own. This was how I met people. Thank goodness for technology! I learned about our county, how it works and who is who, about the structure of the judiciary and the police, how charities are run, how the charity sector and the local council integrates. And there were benefits. You can attend many more virtual meetings in a week than in person, and no wasted travelling time. It's not the same but I found I got to meet more people on a more personal level, and I made strong connections.

I had decided on a theme for my year, 'Preparing Young People for Work' which I had been working on for about 18 months with some members of Herefordshire Business Board. I, like many other employers, have identified that the majority of young people arrive in the workplace unprepared for the world of work. They do not realise what employers expect of them and the rewards of satisfying employment. Few have the opportunity of inspiring work experience. I wanted to devise a work experience handbook for employers, to make providing work experience placements much easier for businesses of all sizes. I had ideas of how to share work experience between 2 or 3 companies and to have business safari days for groups of younger children. But now, Covid-19 meant companies were facing uncertainty, staff were being furloughed, people were working from home if they could, premises were shut, we were in lockdown. My plans were in tatters so now what? Time for a re-think.

As a novice, I hesitantly embraced social media, which I *had* thought I would use as a blog about the many accepted invitations which would flood my way post declaration - what a different world we were in when I heard that! As I learned from others how to be proactive and 'out there' on social media in lockdown, Facebook became my shop front. It was my

opinion not my diary I was sharing and when people were experiencing hardship and sorrow, it was a fine line. With all that was going on in the pandemic, did anyone actually care what the High Sheriff thought? Thankfully, some did!

There were many, many calls and virtual meetings: with The Police and Crime Commissioner, The Chief Constable, YSS, HVOSS, MIND Herefordshire, CLD Trust, West Mercia Women's Aid, St Michael's Hospice. Hope Services, Hope Centre, Healthwatch, Encore, Echo, PEGS, NILS, Market town mayors, and more... All doing brilliant work.

Then July saw the easing of restrictions and I was very keen to start meeting people with Hand Face Space advice being followed at all times. There were many highlights:

Meeting Robert Thomas MBE at Vennture and learning about this very worthy cross-church organisation. With their motto of 'Love people Better', the programmes of Family Pastors, Street Pastors, Lean-on-Me, Ambassadors and BBO, are making a real difference with professionalism and kindness.

South Wye Police Boxing Academy is just one of the fabulously successful clubs at the amazing Hinton Community Centre. Vince McNally MBE has developed the centre to be the base for many groups for people of all ages. Lockdown meant things had to stop, but as soon as he was able, Fit and Fed during the school holidays ensured those young people most in need had daily activities and food.

Close House, a youth centre tucked away in the city provides a safe place for young people to chill out. It has fantastic EPIC programme of youth volunteering.

I spent most of a day in the woods at The Cart Shed, seeing the calm and safe environment they provide for those of all ages suffering with mental health issues – what a special place.

Meeting Will Lindesay and the HVOSS drift trikes in Castle Pool gardens.

Volunteering at Leominster Food bank, which lead to trips to Fare Share in Birmingham for supplies for both Leominster and Bromyard Food Banks

The night when between 9pm and 3am, Richie and I joined Robert Thomas and the Vennture Street Pastors seeing the kindness of the pastors in action in the midst of the night-time economy. My Facebook post of our night out had a record-for-me of over 42,000 reaches!

Spending a day in the magistrates' court courtesy of the Chair of Herefordshire Bench, Libhin Bromley JP, where I saw the Justice System in action. HHJ James Burbidge kindly came to the courts to meet me. I returned to Hereford Justice Centre just before Christmas to join HHJ James Burbidge and our newly appointed Lord Lieutenant Mr Edward Harley OBE to witness new JP's being sworn in.

A visit to Ledbury Police Station to meet Inspector Tudge and his SNT teams which later lead to a trip in a police van with one of the Rural Crime officers. We went to my home village of Pencombe to visit a local farmer who had had his lorry stolen. I'm not sure who was more surprised to find me there – him or me! Smart Water was deployed.

2 days of cobbing the walls of the new round building at Longlands Care Farm at Whitbourne. It was muddy, hard work and great fun.

Attending the naming of Canary Bridge by our then Lord-Lieutenant Lady Darnley, complete with Canary Girls in period attire. Giving online talks to Rotary clubs and groups. Meeting Police Cadets by Zoom.

A cuppa outside with a group of carers at Bodenham, listening to their stories and sharing some of my shrieval tales. A couple of hours that made a world of difference to them after months of isolation as care packages stalled.

Meeting Dave Tristram, Funding and Enterprise Officer at Herefordshire Council, and finding funding streams for organisations in need, such as PEGS and West Mercia Search and Rescue.

Connecting people, and connecting with people, really is what being the High Sheriff is all about.

I had thought Hereford Cathedral would be my second home with many services planned in 2020. In the end I attended only two services to commemorate 75th VJ day and the end of WWII, both were beautiful and memorable. Near Armistice Day, the RBL Field of Remembrance was another moving event, and there was a handful of short wreath laying ceremonies at the war memorials at Hereford, Bromyard and Pencombe, either in person or pre-filmed, or both.

I was the guest of The Worshipful Mayor of Hereford, Cllr Kath Hey, at the Mayor's Parlour at the Town Hall. I enjoyed the tour by Mayor's Officer John Marshall of the small museum of city history. Well worth a visit.

I wrote to the mayors of our five market towns, asking to meet their teams, visit the high street and a charity. Visits followed to Bromyard, Ross-on-Wye, Kington, and Leominster. Each one special in its own way, all had stepped up to the challenge of ensuring those shielding had food and medicine delivered. The dedication, resilience, resourcefulness, and community cohesion shone through. Oh those town clerks know so much!

The High Sheriff's Fund is held at Herefordshire Community Foundation and at the end of each year in office the High Sheriff can make grants to organisations of their choice. We are lucky to have a foundation in our county distributing money to Herefordshire organisations and individuals in need. Each High Sheriff is expected to contribute to the fund, but not specifically to fund raise. The more you add the more you can distribute, and not being the sort to ask for money, I wanted to hold events that would open up the shrieval world to many more people - and that would be fun! But how do you do this in a pandemic?

With a group of friends and with trusty navigator Bill Pardoe by my side, I've taken part in a rallye tour in the Charente for the last three years in my father's Jaguar XK140. This combines two things in life I love – food and cars so what better way to raise money! Could I organise a similar event and promote the hospitality sector in our county which had been so badly hit by Covid-19? I outlined my idea to the Police Superintendent and in theory it looked OK, so I forged ahead. I contacted venues who were amazingly supportive of the idea and Bill Pardoe with his fabulous knowledge of Herefordshire and rallying, mapped out the tulip route book. This is no small feat, it took Bill days of driving round, on his own as he was

still shielding. I designed the route book, found sponsors, checked and re-check Covid compliance and arranged food at each venue, and sourced items for the contactless raffle and for a goody bag for each car. Entries for the tour sold like hot cakes! The pandemic meant that cancellation was a possibility at any moment, so the run up to the event was very nerve wracking - apparently I was rather difficult to live with.

The High Sheriff's Foodie Tour of Herefordshire took place on Sunday 30th August. In glorious sunshine, 60 cars each with 2 people from the same household left Broad Street in groups of 3, forming a bubble of 6 for the day. After coffee and pastries at the city centre's wonderful Green Dragon, we went to Pensons for hot drinks, delicious cake and an art exhibition, headed to Lemore Manor for a gourmet picnic lunch, on to The Hay Barn at Dulas for afternoon tea and finally ending with a glass of perry at Westons. Any age of car was allowed with free raffle tickets for drivers of electric cars. We had an eclectic mix of new, not so new, vintage, 4x4, sports and super cars, and raised £11,000. The day was enjoyed by all, and lots of people were introduced to the role of the High Sheriff for the first time. I was delighted - and relieved! Thank you to everyone who took part, donated and sponsored this event. Special thanks to Bill as without him we would not have had a Foodie Tour and to Meg Thomas, Ella Pickard, Caroline Davies and Tracey Williams who sold raffle tickets and marshalled on the day.

So what about my theme? In October I launched Just the Job, a school's competition for Y6 and Y7 to raise aspiration of work opportunities and employability skills. Over 1700 young people were registered for the competition and 250 submitted entries – not bad for a first competition I am told, and especially in these challenging times of remote teaching for schools.

Just the Job is about getting students to think about what kind of person they are, what subjects and topics they like, what kind of jobs would suit or inspire them, and what POWER skills they need to that job really well. I call Power skills all the things that are not a subject at school – being reliable, listening, punctual, resilient, being willing and interested, taking the initiative when needed, being communicative, not resenting being told what to do etcetera. I had a great team working on Just the Job – Helen Bowden, Frank Myers, Debbie Gittoes, Chloe Thomas and other member of Herefordshire Business Board, and Jo Henshaw project managed. It's been a tough challenge for schools to deliver this project during another lockdown and we had to move the closing date and accept entries digitally so they could be judged remotely. Huge thanks to teachers and students for their submissions. You can see who won on the new High Sheriff of Herefordshire website!

In November, the Shrieval Lecture usually takes place in Court No:1 to an audience of around 80 people. The Honorary Recorder of Hereford, HH Daniel Pearce Higgins, another Pencombe resident, had been helping me find a new venue (as Court No:1 is out of action) and a speaker. I was genuinely thrilled when Baroness Hale of Richmond agreed to deliver the lecture on 13th November, and I looked forward to welcoming her back to Herefordshire. As the date approached, the country was sliding into lockdown again but thankfully Lady Hale was happy to deliver the lecture remotely. Rural Media agreed to

kindly facilitate with the live stream to YouTube and we planned that Daniel and I would go to their offices to guarantee there were no technical hiccups. At the last minute this plan had to change due to social distancing issues and we were then both relying on Pencombe telephone exchange. Thankfully Rural Media were 'with' us and it went without a hitch. Lady Hale wearing a spider brooch, delivered an excellent lecture on the Rights and Responsibilities of Children which was viewed by a much wider audience, and has had around 290 post event views on YouTube.

And since Christmas, I've still been Zooming, working on the new website (I may have mentioned it!), preparing for the judging and prizes of Just the Job, and working on a non-prescriptive handover pack for Jo and those who follow. I have been finding funding streams for organisations and considering where grants from the High Sheriff Fund are going this year. I have also instigated a SING, that's '*Sheriffs in Nomination Group*' which will meet informally, hopefully over lunch, 3 times a year to share experiences and ideas.

And during all of this busy-ness, it's been a tad exasperating to be pitied by people who think I haven't done anything and that I have had a boring year! It was not the year I expected but why dwell on the negative when I have no control over the situation?

Here is the response to pity of Dr John Manley, High Sheriff of the City of Bristol 2020: *The High Sheriff is the oldest secular office in the Country and in the nearly 1100 years of history since Saxon times it has lived through The Black Death, The Great Plague, Norman Conquest, WW1, WW2, English Civil War, 100 Years War, ... and every time we have adapted. This is another such year...*

For the 2020 High Sheriffs, possibly always to be known as The Corona Sheriffs, the rolling motto for 12 months has been:
Plan, Check, Re-think, Change, Wait. Plan, Check, Re-think, Change, Wait.

Being adaptable and flexible in one's approach, and remaining positive, has been key in bringing meaning and purpose to the role. I had help from key people for whose support I am extremely grateful.

The Under Sheriff, Jeremy Wilding Esq MBE, who as the oracle of all things shrieval in the county, has provided me with considered and timely advice. His role is so important providing continuity year on year and he does a very good job!

My most irreverent chaplain, The Rev'd Andrew Mottram has had little to do this year due to Covid-19 restrictions, so I am delighted for him that he is playing a part in today's ceremony.

HH Daniel Pearce-Higgins has provided helpful support throughout the year, working on the Shrieval Lecture venue, procuring the guest speaker and generally giving me lots to think about.

Mrs Elizabeth Hunter, High Sheriff of Hereford and Worcester 2010, and now President of the High Sheriffs Association has always been there for me when I needed a shrieval ear.

And of course, out of adversity comes opportunity.

Without ceremonial duties or events to attend, the ambassadorial side has come to the fore. I have had more time to thank and connect people and champion wonderful organisation in our county; it shows that this ancient role in today's world still has relevance and that if you are lucky enough to be High Sheriff of Herefordshire, you can truly make a worthy contribution during your year, even in a pandemic.

I send every best wish to the next High Sheriff of Herefordshire, Joanna Hilditch, whose year I hope will open up and be nearly normal – fingers crossed. Jo has exciting ideas for her term of office and I know the Shrievalty in Herefordshire is in very good hands.

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