

Well what a year! Something the Bishop said at the recent dedication of the Bells in Brinsop about the comparative brevity of life and the part one plays in the grand scheme of things made me think about the role of High Sheriff and my own short spell within that. Indeed, if “All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players: they have their exits and their entrances” I can put my tenure in a proper perspective. My year has been a short scene in a 21st century play! The role of High Sheriff is however a compendium of plays – we have a record of the Sheriff of Herefordshire since 1090 after all – a changing role over a thousand and thirty years, perhaps not always a “good” role, but certainly the oldest royal appointment.

However, the office of High Sheriff today is an opportunity to look under the skin of your community, to connect people and groups, to use your communication skills to effect change, to understand the needs of your county's society and to help where you possibly can. It is also a huge and humbling privilege – it's been amazing that every time I have picked up the phone to anyone, they have welcomed my contact and with open arms have shown me their organisations, shared their troubles and fears and told me of their successes and their challenges.

It's also of course a great opportunity to wear a marvellous hat with a feather, ruffles and frills and the smartest green coat I have ever had.

You will be relieved to hear I am not going to go through all the things I have done one by one, instead my written report takes the form of an Insta Diary. For those of you who are not too familiar with the notion of social media this gives you a brief illustration of a year's activity where I have been out and about into our community as much as possible (covid permitting) – this is not an unusual year for a High Sheriff, just a bit more illustrated.

Not only does this give you an idea of the breadth of people that the High Sheriff can see and meet, highlighting their great work, but I also wanted to give the office of High Sheriff an accessible, approachable and inclusive feel, presenting it to a wider audience than just those whom I have been lucky enough to meet.

I have also engaged with other groups through these social media channels and spread the word to the wider community about the role of High Sheriff and how it can be a power for good. My objective was to modernise the role a bit, and bring it into the 21st century, remembering that it is an unpaid role and that there is no blue-print. Yes, there are a few functions at which you perform a role and make short speeches, but in general you do what you want, which has suited me well!

In a year that we sadly said goodbye to His Royal Highness Prince Philip, were blighted by covid restrictions, suffered the beginning of the onslaught of innocent people by a mad Russian in part of our continent, I have been able to focus here in Herefordshire on some of those things that were important to me. Herefordshire is a remarkable county full of remarkable people – and I have learnt more about it in the last year than I have learnt in the whole of the last 50. I didn't know even the half of it!

Gio and I started the shrieval year with continuing to volunteer at the Leominster Covid Clinic – this was a micro-illustration of so much of what I would see in the remainder of the year – lots of people giving their time freely to help others, and in that giving finding something rewarding for themselves too.

Each and every charity is supported by a cohort of volunteers, and every charity and agency seems to go above and beyond its remit. Much like the NHS and the way they have acted during covid, so too do the police and the fire service – one of the outstanding firemen that I met had hardly ever been off response duty in his 40 years of service for example. Meeting up with our Super Superintendent Edd Williams every month and further to that with many of the local policing teams has also been an eye opener; as well as working with DCI Emma Whitworth on a current Safeguarding Women and Girls campaign.

One of the things I was told before taking up office a year ago was that it was a good idea to adopt a theme. I thought that mental health in agriculture would be fitting bearing in mind my background. Although it was apparent that this was an area that needed attention and I spent some time with a small new charity We Are Farming Minds in fund raising and profile raising I also came to recognise that the Mental Health of the county is clearly an area that nearly all the charities I have met are focussed on.

Whether it's Riding for the Disabled, Echo, an old peoples charity, a cancer charity, the MS oxygen charity, whether it's food banks, community gardens, support centres or indeed charities 100% focussed on mental health such as the Cartshed, Longlands Care Farm or Strong Young Minds all of them are battling with the new post covid environment which has caused havoc with all our mental health, not least in the young, the old and the isolated. Herefordshire's mental health is not good – but there are so many who are trying to help improve it. It couldn't help but be my theme.

In the individuals I have met there are always common qualities of kindness, generosity and humility as well as of course extreme professionalism. These qualities were those which I wanted to highlight in my podcast. In case you haven't heard about the podcast I have interviewed 26 Herefordshire people over the year and launched a podcast interview once every two weeks. These are all available to listen to on-line – if you have a smart phone, or computer you can just google them under Benchtalk.

They also represent a huge diversity of people, a wide range of backgrounds, age, sexuality and religion. They're from Jonathan Bland a 14 year old volunteer in Leominster to intrepid mountaineer 90 year old Alan Blake; from Kate Bingham our famous Vaccine Czar to Boo la Croux, Miss Drag Queen UK; from Sarah Brown our Dean to Charlie a participant at The Cartshed; from Alison Davies the Knife Angel champion to Louise Taylor who talks about her life as a blind person in Hereford.

Many of them are here today and each and every one has a story to tell - of their volunteering, their difficulties, how they cope in adversity, how they have helped, how they have been helped, funny or difficult stories about their lives and how they see their part in the wider context of the county. Such a broad section of interesting people – indeed

coming back to my first point – we do all of course have part to play in the tapestry that is Herefordshire.

Each podcast ends with three top tips for Herefordshire Tourism – one of the simplest and the best was Charlie's – the bus ride from Hereford to Hay-on Wye, just looking from the top deck at the beautiful scenery that surrounds him the river Wye, the mountains, the hills, the villages and our patchwork of agriculture – what could be simpler, or better.

Coming to tourism this has been another of my themes. I have chaired the Visit Herefordshire Steering Group that has been at the forefront of getting Herefordshire back on the tourism map. It started with a bike ride last April when we weren't really allowed out too much highlighting the natural beauty of our county; and thereafter engaging with the tourism community through the year.

With a team of great people on the steering group and with the dedication and commitment of Orphans Press (particularly Helen Bowden) and Fiona Reece at Travel Tonic we have created a new strong brand, developed a website, launched marketing campaigns, made a fabulous new advert as well as enjoying regular media presence... Excitingly this work is set to continue as we successfully secured a Destination BID for the county which means that we have funds for the next five years.

There are just a few diary notes that I would particularly like to mention that have been punctuation events of the year for me.

The first was the Big SleepIn, a Cartshed initiative where I persuaded 7 High Sheriffs, a Bishop and a Peer to stay out on a rather uncomfortable field on a misley May night – some in the open, some with a covering of cardboard and some on a scrap of old carpet under a large piece of canvas. Together we raised nearly £14,000 half for the Cartshed and half for the Herefordshire Community Foundation.

As part of relatively few ceremonial occasions during the year, we hosted the Shrieval Service in October which was an uplifting occasion at a time when we were just starting to emerge from our covid chrysalis.

This was soon followed by the Shrieval Lecture – Populism and the Rule of Law. I had asked Dominic Grieve if he could try to keep it simple for the layman – it was not entirely simple but extremely interesting and a well-attended evening with funds raised for the Perpetual trust and again the Herefordshire Community Foundation.

I have enjoyed my contact with the Camp and it was a great privilege to attend and lay a wreath at the Remembrance Service at Stirling Lines – what an incredibly moving service that was, outside in the bright November sunshine and very soon after the withdrawal of our forces from Afghanistan.

To a lesser extent, I was involved with the extraordinary Knife Angel when it came to Hereford. This was a much broader campaign than just its presence and thanks to Alison and

Meryl it leaves a legacy for Herefordshire and their work continues around Knife crime and more.

The year saw the launch of a couple of local cancer support charities with which I was involved, as well as helping to launch the Country Food Trust for Herefordshire – something which I intend to keep an interest in especially having visited all the foodbanks around the county.

The “Connecting Business and Community” morning was a very well attended event and included fantastic performance from 2-Faced Dance. Outcomes can be frustratingly slow from these kind of events but there were plenty of connections made. This work will continue and I am still working with Amy Pitt at the Council from Talk Communities so I hope there will be legacy to this project.

The final punctuation, probably full stop, of the year in case you didn't hear or see of it is the ridiculous escapade where I ended up strapped to the top of a 1940s biplane, 500 metres above the Gloucestershire countryside alongside the High Sheriff of Gloucestershire. Suffering from vertigo as I do I knew that my final challenge had to be something that would truly challenge; as it did – a choice between a free fall parachute jump or Wingwalking were my two options. It was terrifying and exhilarating in equal measure although the worst moments were those before waiting to take off.

The way that I put the fear into perspective was to think of those in real fear – in Ukraine and in other parts of the world where there is indiscriminate bombing, shelling or persecution or the fear of women who have none of the freedoms that I take for granted – compared to all this my stunt was actually nothing especially where my pilot was from the Red Arrows; and Health and Safety are paramount. I was of course fine! But thanks to so many of you I have raised well over £30,000 and many of the charities I have visited during the year are the recipients of these funds.

I just want to end with a few thank yous!

Thank you to every charity, agency and organisation who has taken the time to host me. Thank you to all the mayors for hosting such excellent visits to your towns, and city. Thank you to all my podcastees and thank you to Rural media – particularly Rich Matthews and Elle Adams for helping me put together the podcast and Sophie Butler my podcast editor; thank you to Daniel Pearce-Higgins, Hereford's Honorary recorder for your support throughout; Tricia Thomas for help and being so magnanimous after your own difficult year and to Andrew Piper and the Cathedral for navigating us through the choppy covid waters; thanks to Ben Griffiths my chaplain, who although underutilised has been more than supportive, thanks to our undersheriff Jeremy Wilding for his calm guidance. Thank you of course to my patient and wise husband Gio – you had my back; and now you've got me back. And in handing over to Sarah, I am sure the role of High Sheriff will continue to thrive and evolve. And finally a big thank you to all of Herefordshire for being who you are – I couldn't have done it without you – how lucky we all are.

And now, on with the business....