

Helen Bowden - Farewell Speech

Lord Lieutenant, Bishop Richard and Dean Sarah, Right honourable Sir Andrew Macfarlane, their honours Martin Jackson & James Burbidge, other members of the judiciary, Distinguished Guests, Ladies & Gentlemen.

It has been my privilege to serve as High Sheriff of Herefordshire over the past 51 weeks - though I am still wondering how I was deprived of that extra week!

It is hard to believe that a year ago, I was seated in Tamsin's chair, with my heart pumping outside of my chest with nerves, which I didn't even know was a thing.

I have kept top of my mind that the role of the High Sheriff has at its core to represent the King specifically within the criminal justice system - that is, Prisons, Probation, Police, and of course the courts.

I was also determined to make the most of the experience, so I have said 'yes' to almost everything. I've thoroughly enjoyed the many events, meetings and occasions I have attended.

I knew my timeliness was going to be a potential trip up for me so I heeded the advice of previous high sheriffs and aimed to arrive 30 minutes early for everything

(I said 'aimed' to those of you who are smirking!)

In fact, I got so good at this, that I arrived a whole week early for the swearing-in of the junior mayor at the Town Hall. A few phone calls later I realised my mistake.

I've also pushed the Shrieval remit at times, for instance opening the red squirrel enclosure at the Small Breeds Farm Park, but I made up for it by joining a group of young carers on an outing there later in the year, where I was able to proudly point out said enclosure to them!

The first phase of my term was dedicated to listening and learning.

I have appreciated the phenomenal access and support I have had throughout, from Superintendent Helen Wain and colleagues in the Police service, to Herefordshire magistrates led by Bench Chair Sue Furnival, and the Crown Court with Their Honours, Judges Jackson and Burbidge.

It was a particular delight to attend the official opening of the newly refurbished Crown courtroom at the Hereford Justice Centre in October and to attend the swearing in of two new magistrates in November.

I also made several visits to our local prisons of Hewell and Long Larten, returning back to Hewell last week with Ian Smith, my counterpart in Worcestershire, to present High Sheriff awards to some amazing teams and individuals. They work under huge pressure and often feel undermined by the media sharing negative stories - but most love their job and are highly dedicated. I'd love this message to be broadcast far and wide.

This access to the inner workings of the justice system was both illuminating and humbling. There are so many people in all areas whose instincts are to see the accused, convicted, or recently released, not as criminals, but as real people.

I sought out many service providers, council departments and groups working with vulnerable people, from Turning Point to the Cartshed, to Food banks and the Hub at Ross, Crate Stuff in Leominster, the Living Room and Leas Place in Hereford.

The commitment from everyone to help is astonishing and the difference to peoples lives they are making every day can't be underestimated BUT we are often talking about complex lives.

From my first sittings in the Crown and Magistrates courts, I felt drawn to the defendants. I wanted to understand why they were there. It sounds obvious, but you soon uncover that for a majority, the root causes are circumstances, background, and trauma.

I vividly remember a very frightened 22-year-old who was waiting on his own in the magistrates court to hear the verdict for his case. He'd made a mistake, and I tried to reassure him that he'd be okay and that this didn't need to define him.

I witnessed a more serious case of a 24-year-old already in prison for a violent offence, who was charged with an assault on a cellmate. It transpired that the cellmate's convictions were triggering trauma from similar abuse suffered as a child. During the court case, we were told he was turning his life around; he was an exemplary inmate studying for qualifications. But he now faced three more years in prison before he could start this new life. Trauma and poor mental health are important root causes of criminal behaviour.

I would like to see the adoption of a scheme called 'Youth Court Solutions' in Herefordshire and Sue and many magistrates have embraced the idea. It offers trained, trauma-based expert support from the minute young defendants arrive at the Court reception, helping them cope with the stress of the day. Statistics show the scheme has significantly reduced re-offending. We've had discussions in Herefordshire about making this service a whole court solution, not just youths. And, it could truly reflect our county with specific veteran support included too.

Throughout the year, I have seen the value of shared best practices. Inspired by Ian, in Worcester, and with the help of serving magistrate Leigh Brazewell, we introduced an initiative called 'Getting Court'. It involves bringing a minibus of 15 to 18 year-old students to spend a morning in court to observe proceedings and learn about the different functions - barristers, probation, court clerks, ushers- its fascinating!

Judges Jackson and Burbidge have been fantastic in helping shape the programme, and the feedback has been incredibly positive. It was the sentencing trial of the case I mentioned just now that QE students listened to on our first visit. I was impressed by how insightful and thoughtful they were in considering why this young man was where he was and the interventions that could have helped.

Away from the courts, It has been an absolute privilege to be on the front row of events showcasing the best of the county. I think back to the world-class Three Choirs Festival, to attending the poignant VE and VJ celebrations, numerous wonderful performances at the Courtyard and the armed forces day in Hereford, full of perfectly marching cadets.

Plus the sheer joy of the School games with 2,000 children which I kicked off in full gear alongside a child in a mascot outfit ... and the Young Farmers competition day where I had the high honour of judging the 'Pimp my Tractor' event.

I've also loved spending time with the St Johns Ambulance cadets, police cadets and the Hereford City youth council. I'm very pleased to see the cadets here today and wish them well in their future endeavours.

Civic occasions have also been a treat, from mayor making to freedom of the city awards and citizenship ceremonies and most recently a poignant town twinning between Ross and Ovruch in Ukraine. We are utterly blessed with our history and traditions.

I was lucky enough to be invited to the Council chairs meeting of mayors in May.

I brought cake which seemed to go down well and it helped me form valuable relationships with the mayors who by the way do an enormous amount of work as volunteers.

Our city and market towns are all very unique, they have different challenges but in each one they have fantastic charities and community organisations working alongside the council and police. There are too many to mention but I am humbled by the people running them, whether its the food banks and food shares, community hubs and youth clubs and sports clubs, and I've whiled away some lovely hours with volunteers and participants. (My pool and table tennis have improved no end!)

Across my year, there were a number of events which fell to the High Sheriff to organise. We held our summer drinks party at a beautiful home and garden at Hope under Dinmore which we borrowed for the evening. We were entertained by the talented West Mercia Women's Aid choir and the 151 Royal air force cadets band.

We held the Shrieval Service here at the Cathedral, with a wonderful sermon by lay priest and community worker David Bland, followed later in the year by the Shrieval Lecture given by esteemed former Supreme Court judge, Lord Sumption, who delivered a powerful talk on the many dimensions of free speech. Amongst many, this was a special event for me and I was very proud when some of our sixth form students posed astute questions to Lord Sumption at the end of his talk.

Then, my final event was to celebrate the many unsung heroes I have worked most closely with across the sector. With the generous support of the Herefordshire Freemasons, I held a special 'Thank You' dinner earlier this month at the Green Dragon Hotel. It was a fabulous occasion where guests exchanged ideas and numbers with like minded people. We also presented High Sheriff awards to a number of great people, young and not so young, who do unstinting good work, completely under the radar.

My predecessor, Pat Churchward, had mentioned issues relating to deprivation, drugs, and a lack of service provision in Leominster. Leominster is my home town, so that became an important focus for me early on. I visited Barons Cross and Ridgmore estates for drop in sessions and the Talbot Hotel, which is now temporary accommodation for men and I was disturbed to meet a 20-year-old who was there purely because of family circumstances.

I was immediately impressed by his resilience and desire to be positive despite his surroundings and tough start, but he was utterly stuck and had minimal support. I have walked alongside him for the last 10 months or more, learning along the way and am

delighted he is now in accommodation in Hereford, with a sense of independence and renewed confidence. He is close to pursuing a job in catering, which is his passion, and he is even mentoring a girl of a similar age to overcome her own challenging circumstances. Brandon is here today, and he is a shining example of why we all need to keep our faith in the individual behind the statistics.

Of course, I am not the only person concerned for those in need in Leominster. I searched them all out with the help of Talk Community and a group of us decided the town needed a Hub aimed at 11 to 25-year-olds, as well as vulnerable adults. We haven't let the grass grow; in the next two weeks, the doors will be opening at 'The Lemner'. Located in the centre of Leominster, it will provide facilities, activities, professional youth work and all manner of support services.

Inspired by what I had seen at Ross Community Gardens, I also managed to convince Stonewater Housing Association to release a patch of unused land in a deprived area of Leominster to the Haygrove charity. This will transform a problem area into a soon-to-be community garden. Lots of partners are now working together to see what can be achieved there and who can be helped. With the move of the fabulous charity Echo along West street there is a real feeling that we have hit a watershed moment for Leominster. Things are on the up!

At the outset of my term, superintendent Helen Wain had suggested I go to Bromyard to follow my interest in young people and to assess ongoing problems with some challenging behaviour. I've really enjoyed getting involved on the ground with the police agencies and community groups to help generate youth provision and listen to our youngsters. The problems aren't solved yet but there is positive momentum and some great ideas on the table. (Watch this space!)

In fact there does seem a real sense of positivity around the county in terms of driving more youth provision. It is needed everywhere. On my travels I've been aware that there are lots of children struggling to fit into mainstream school. It's a real issue not just here but nationally. We have an advantage in that we live in a wonderful rural county. One of our greatest assets for youth provision is our farms. As a farmer's daughter I have particularly enjoyed visiting specialist provisions such as Longlands, Jamie's Farm, and the Houghton Project, as well as the brand-new Harvest project at Blakemere Farm. They all provide a safe space for kids to thrive. There is a model here somewhere that could, I'm sure, be extended to each of our towns.

Along the High Sheriff journey, you are constantly aware that money is tight for charities and community groups so I did have one eye on growing the High Sheriff fund. The more money you can generate, the more you have to allocate to the great projects you meet along the way.

We held a golf day in October, where I must give an honourable mention to novice golfer Jon Roberts of Vennture. He played despite having sliced through his thumb the previous night cutting a pizza. His bravery is not forgotten.

As I approached the final furlongs, I wanted to boost the Fund, so I decided on drastic action: a skydive from 15,000 feet. I enlisted Sue Furnival as my free-fall partner.

I'd had a bit of practice abseiling down St Peter's church for the fire service charity. Our fire service run to danger when needed and are a great force for good and wonderful role models. I'm looking forward to an invite to the new Hereford station!

Back to our skydive, Sue was incredibly apprehensive but equally brave. The state of the pair of us when we landed was like two drunken sailors. But we did it, raising a welcome £7,000 - and I will forever think of Sue every time I switch on the washing machine.

I'm quite chuffed that some of that money is going to Churchill gardens in Hereford where again partnership working is changing a crime hotspot to a safe, and relaxing space for everyone.

I have somehow squeezed my year as High Sheriff along with my other main commitments, my day job and my netball coaching. I am indebted to my county and club adminner, Helen Booth, for carrying even more load than normal and the teams at Orphans Press and eighteen73 for compensating for me during my excursions. (I promise I'll work hard when I'm back!)

I am particularly grateful to my PA, Becky Bufton, for trying to organise me and always with a smile on her face and to consort Andy for picking up the pieces at home and being my plus one at many events.

One reassuring aspect of being High Sheriff is knowing you are surrounded by a family of those who have gone before you, wrapping around you like a security blanket. At the helm is the Lord Lieutenant, Edward, and Victoria, who represent the county so well. I have often been in awe of the way Edward finds the right words with charm, humour, and sensitivity. Thank you also to the entire band of Deputy Lieutenants for being such wise and friendly companions along the way.

I cannot finish without thanking all the team here at the Cathedral: Dean Sarah, the clergy team and the vergers, you have always been warm and welcoming, we are lucky to have you. There are many people of faith in the county who set fine examples, from a soul-searching sermon by the Rabbi at the Anne Frank memorial service, to our own Kathy and David Bland in Leominster, the two Phils in Bromyard, Kelvin in Ross, Lesley and Tony and Fathers Brendan & James here in Hereford. And of course my own chaplain, Angie Kateley, who has kept me calm at times and made me belly laugh at others, the perfect combination. I haven't named everyone but please know you are all truly inspirational.

I feel utterly blessed to have had access to so much knowledge, and I have worn my court dress and my badges with pride. I have loved it, and I have been changed by it.

But my time is now up. I will hang up my High Sheriff feather, and hand the sword to Tamsin who I know from the conversations we have had will do it brilliantly. I wish you as rich and rewarding a year as I have enjoyed.

Thank you to each and every one of you for supporting me along the way.