

The Sheriffs of Buckinghamshire

Sheriffs are the oldest office under the Crown and pre-date the Norman Conquest. Originally known as the King's Reeve or the Shire Reeve, his duties included keeping the King's peace and the collection of the taxes and rents due to the King, as well as commanding the local militia.

After the Conquest the administration of the Shires was placed under various Earls, but as the work increased the authority and duties shifted to the Sheriff, further increasing his importance. By the 12th century the powers exercised by the Sheriff had become more routine, and by the 16th century his role had become largely ceremonial.

Until 1575 the Sheriff for Buckinghamshire was also the Sheriff for Bedfordshire, but after that date they were severed and each County had its own separate and distinct Sheriff.

The appointment of a High Sheriff is a royal prerogative, and the Queen adheres to this principle tenaciously. Once a year, usually in March, she holds a ceremony to appoint her High Sheriffs, marking each appointment by 'pricking' the candidates name on a parchment roll with a long needle, called a bodkin. The romantic tradition is that Elizabeth I was doing her needlework in the garden when the list was brought to her and, as she had no pen available, she used her needle. However there is evidence that Henry VIII also pricked the list. Whatever the origin, Elizabeth II uses a silver bodkin to prick the list to this day.

The appointment of each High Sheriff is endorsed by a prescriptive Royal Warrant, which "requires you to take the Custody and Charge of the said county, and duly to perform the duties of High Sheriff thereof during Her Majesty's Pleasure, whereof you are duly to answer according to law."

The confirmation of the royal appointment occurs within each county at a Declaration Ceremony when the outgoing High Sheriff formally hands over the office to his successor, who makes a solemn oath in front of the Presiding Judge of the County. In Buckinghamshire this ceremony traditionally occurs in early April, at the County Court in Aylesbury.

The High Sheriffs' responsibilities were consolidated by The Sheriffs Act 1887, which is still in force. High Sheriffs represent the Sovereign in their counties in

upholding all matters relating to the Judiciary and maintaining law and order. Their responsibilities conferred by the Crown through warrant from the Privy Council can be summarised as:

- attending Royal visits to the county; attending on High Court Judges on circuit and ensuring their well-being; acting as Returning Officer for parliamentary elections; proclaiming the accession of a new Sovereign and maintaining the loyalty of subjects to the Crown; and appointing an Under Sheriff and carrying out various ceremonial functions.



Sir Edward Coke L.C.J., M.P.
Sheriff of Buckinghamshire (1625)

Following the Courts Act 2003, the High Sheriff's ancient responsibility for the enforcement of High Court Writs of Execution, via Under Sheriffs and executed by the Sheriffs' Officers, was transferred to the newly appointed High Court Enforcement Officers.

Today's High Sheriffs aim to support voluntary and statutory bodies engaged in all aspects of law and order. They take a special interest in the activities of such statutory bodies as the Police, the Prison Service, and the Probation Service.

As early as 1330 it had been laid down that the Sheriffs should have sufficient land in their counties to sustain the office. Up to 1700 the Sheriff was almost always a local landowner,

although he very often had connections with the court, and was chosen from the same class as Members of Parliament. After this date the Sheriff was chosen from a wider circle which included holders of quite small estates, prominent citizens of Aylesbury and London businessmen who had settled in Bucks. For instance Ansell, Bennett, Clayton, Dormer, Garrard, Hoare, Proby and Verney were all descendants of Lord Mayors. However the landed families provided a substantial number of Sheriffs. For instance the Cheney's supplied 12, the Hampdens 20, the Tyringhams 8 and the Verneys 6.

The current High Sheriff is Mrs Amanda Nicholson who read English at Oxford University and was awarded an honours degree. This was followed by a Master's degree in Creative Writing at Middlesex University before tutoring courses in Barnet and at Oxford University's Department of Continuing Education.

From 'The Sheriff of Buckingham' by Elliot Viney
Notes extracted by Keith Turner