

History of the office of High Sheriff

There have been High Sheriffs for at least 1,000 years. The original “Shire Reeves” were Royal officials appointed to enforce the King’s interests in a County, in particular the collection of revenues and the enforcement of law and order.

High Sheriffs had extensive powers. They judged cases in monthly courts and acted as law enforcement officers. They could raise the ‘hue and cry’ after criminals in the County and summon and command the ‘posse comitatus’, the full military force of the County.

Sheriffs are mentioned in 27 of the 63 clauses of Magna Carta of 1215 and were clearly fundamental to the running of the Shires. By 1254 the High Sheriff supervised the election to Parliament of two Knights of the Shire.

From about 1300 their responsibilities began to wane as more and more functions were centralised.

- The exchequer was established to administer tax collection and to audit the Sheriff’s accounts.
- A system of itinerant Justices and Assizes was set up.

Sheriffs, however, maintained responsibility for issuing Writs, organising the Court, prisoners and juries, and executing sentences once they were pronounced.

It was also the Sheriff’s responsibility to ensure the safety and comfort of the Judges. This is the origin of the High Sheriff’s modern-day duty of care for the well-being of High Court Judges. Further changes came with the creation of Coroners and Justices of the Peace and the establishment of Lord-Lieutenants as the personal representatives of the Sovereign.

Tradition says that Queen Elizabeth I originated the practice of appointing high Sheriffs by “pricking” their names when the Roll was brought to her while she was engaged in embroidery. Sadly, this is a myth since there is a Sheriffs’ Roll from the reign of King Henry VII, where the names are pricked through vellum. This is in fact an early form of document security. Sheriffs had to collect unpopular taxes and could be personally liable for any shortfall. There was therefore an incentive to try to avoid appointment. No matter how high the bribe, however, no official could disguise a hole pierced through the vellum against the appointee’s name. The practice of the Monarch pricking the names of High Sheriffs survives to this day.

In the 19th century Sheriffs’ responsibilities for police, prisons and Crown property were transferred to statutory bodies. Their surviving powers were codified in the Sheriffs Act of 1887. This Act, with subsequent amendments, remains in force to this day. Among other things it confirms the historic process of nomination by the Sovereign.