

Awards night's a surefire antidote to revive any jaded spirits

The Rt Rev Martin Seeley,
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People across the county volunteer or work for charities because they want to make a difference – they want to share with others something of what is good in their own lives. More than 300 people gathered last week in the striking setting of the East of England Co-op headquarters at Wherstead Park, near Ipswich. Every one of those people was there because they cared about people and they cared about Suffolk.

The occasion was the annual High Sheriff's Awards for outstanding volunteers and charitable groups in Suffolk. It is undoubtedly one of the highlights of the Suffolk calendar for me.

It is a sure antidote to any jaded spirit to hear about the extraordinary service cheerfully given to make a difference to others. Story after story, person after person, charity after charity,

show amazing kindness, ingenuity and hard work to help so many in our county.

As High Sheriff Geoffrey Probert said in his challenging and inspiring speech at the start of the awards, "My hope rests on the remarkable work that I have seen our volunteers and our voluntary sector to be capable of."

This voluntary work is the response to an immense array of needs across the county, made the greater by decades of cuts in local services by successive governments. And whatever the level of government or other funding, the glue for our society is the care we have for one another, looking out for each other, "loving our neighbour as ourselves".

This is the place the churches exist to occupy, to be there for others. As William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury during the Second World War, famously



The Rural Coffee Caravan, which takes information and friendship across Suffolk, was the brainchild of Canon Sally Fogden, pictured top right last summer in the new caravan. She's next to Ann Osborn, while George and Muriel Frost enjoy a drink.

Picture: SARAH LUCY BROWN

remarked, "The church is the only organisation that exists for the benefit of its non-members."

The Church can at times forget this and become self-preoccupied at a local and national level. But events like the High Sheriff's Awards shake us out of this, spurred on by the selflessness of so many: of all faiths, and no faith.

Among those who do so much to help others are Christians from so many of our churches, in towns and villages right across Suffolk.

The "Rebuilding Broken Lives" award, sponsored by Ipswich Building Society, was given by the High Sheriff to the Selig Trust. A Christian organisation, founded by local church leaders, they provide services for the homeless and run the Ipswich Winter Night Shelter and Ipswich Hope into Action.

The Winter Night Shelter sees many volunteers providing companionship, a hot meal, a warm and safe bed, and breakfast for homeless men and women in Ipswich every night during the winter. Six town centre churches open their doors to make this possible, and churches across Ipswich provide many of the volunteers.

Hope into Action, part of a national programme, helps homeless people take the next

step and find a home rather than just a bed; and Ipswich's first house opened in June last year. The charity provides support services and mentoring, to help vulnerable people get back on their feet.

Each year the High Sheriff includes an award that reflects their particular voluntary interests. Geoffrey Probert is involved in many ways in caring for the heritage of our county, and so his Special Award was for just that: Suffolk Heritage, sponsored by chartered surveyors Clarke and Simpson.

The Heritage Award was given to the Suffolk Guild of Ringers. The guild was formed in 1923 following the creation of the new Diocese of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich, and bell-ringers practise their art in 107 church towers around the county.

The guild has more than 600 volunteer ringers, of all ages. As well as producing the extraordinary music that so characterises our countryside and towns, guild members devote themselves to helping restore and maintain our church bells and bell-towers.

The High Sheriff's Awards concluded with the annual Lifetime Achievement Award, this year going to the remarkable and indefatigable Canon Sally

Fogden. Sally has spent her life serving God, farmers, and the disabled in Suffolk. Through the Farm Community Network helpline she has provided confidential pastoral and practical support to farmers and their families in need, helping those families face the often devastating crises that come with farming our food.

In 2001 she was instrumental in setting up the Addington Fund as part of the churches' response to foot and mouth disease. She remains involved and the fund now focuses on providing housing and hardship support for farmers in need.

Sally officially retired in 2006 but remains incredibly active, including as my agricultural chaplain. One of the most moving moments for me of the awards evening was her husband leaning over to me and saying, "I am so proud of her!"

There is one more volunteer to acknowledge, and that is the High Sheriff himself, Geoffrey Probert. Being High Sheriff is a voluntary role, but one that demands a huge amount over a very full year. Geoffrey has given of himself with great flair and energy, and with a perceptive understanding of our county's needs. His own Christian faith has fired his passion, to make a difference.



A picture from the past as members of the Suffolk Guild of Ringers display their skills at Henham Steam Rally, without the need for a tall church tower! The guild was formed in 1923.

Picture: WENDY TURNER