On behalf of Suzanne and myself, welcome to South Hall, or as it used to be known Guildford’s Third House of Correction. As you will know, It is traditional for the High Sheriff to host an evening to thank the Judiciary for their service and being that this house has played a part in the justice system, it seemed fitting to invite you to our home this evening. Before telling you a little bit about its history I was planning to tell you a bit about High Sheriffs, but being the most erudite and learned audience I have addressed in my Shrieval year so far, and with a posse of past High Sheriffs also in the room, you probably all know more about the role than I do.

It is the oldest secular office in the UK after the Crown existing since Saxon times, with the word Sheriff being a derivation of Shire Reeve. I am the 804th known named HS of Surrey and some of my illustrious predecessors, apart from those in the room, were mentioned in the Domesday Book, witnessed the sealing of the Magna Carta and signed the death warrant of the first King Charles. Our current King Charles pricked my name, as is customary on March 12th of this year and I was installed in Guildford Cathedral on March 21st.

The heyday of High Sheriffs was really after the Norman conquest when we would judge cases in the monthly court of the hundred (a sub-unit of the Shire), raise the “hue and Cry” in pursuit of felons, collect taxes and levies and were in charge of all Crown property within the County.

The post was traditionally only held for a year (although not enshrined in law until 1887), as nobody wanted to be High Sheriff; not only because you were never welcomed by anybody in the County as you collected taxes, but because in those early years the King would set an annual amount of what you were expected to raise and if there was a deficit at the end of the year the High Sheriff had to make up the difference; and there are some examples of this taking four or five generations of the poor High Sheriffs family to do so.

Sadly, our powers have gradually been eroded, firstly by the creation of the Exchequer, then coroners and Justices of the Peace came into being, then Lord Lieutenants were appointed and finally in the nineteenth century prison commissioners and local constabularies were established and crown property was transferred to Crown Commissioners.

So today the role is largely ceremonial and is to uphold and lend active support to the principal organs of the Constitution being the Royal Family, the Judiciary, the Police, the Prison service and other law enforcement agencies, the emergency services, local authorities and all recognised church and faith groups. In addition, with the Lord Lieutenant we recognise the incredible work being undertaken in the County by the charity and voluntary sector.

I have had the pleasure of visiting the Crown Court, including the Mock Trail event for schools arranged by the Surrey Magistrates Association, I have participated in the swearing in ceremony for new magistrates and am looking forward to visiting the coroners court very soon. I have been to Surrey Police’s headquarters and seen various areas of operation; and only yesterday I was there as part of a panel interviewing candidates for the position of Deputy Chief Constable. Recent HS of Surrey have had a close involvement with the police cadets. You will have noticed my two personal police cadets, Imogen and Grace, their role is to keep me on the straight and narrow and ensure that I observe the pledge I took at my installation ceremony that I will behave myself in my office.

With Suzanne, I have also visited 3 of our prisons in Surrey to date with further visits planned; but we also happen to live on the site of a Surrey prison! Until the mid 19th century there had been a prison in Guildford for over 600 years, originally in the Castle Keep, but in the early 17th century following an Act which said every city and town corporate should have a house of correction, the first one was built on the corner of the High Street and Quarry Street, soon outgrown, in 1767 at the vast sum of £852 the second house of correction was built a little further along Quarry Street but this too was soon outgrown so plans for a prison capable of holding 50 prisoners was drawn up on the castle grounds just beyond the bowling green. Three stories high with seven blocks, 5 for men 2 for women, with a chapel and infirmary it was described as a dismal blot on a charming scene and we have a print on the table in the dining room which shows how it dominated the Guildford skyline.

Controversially, it also had two treadmills divided into 8 compartments with risers of almost 8 inches. Prisoners worked six hours a day, three hours at a time 15 minutes on and 5 minutes off and the power generated was used to grind corn, the profits from which went 80% to the prison upkeep and 20% to the prison governor.

A visiting magistrate, Henry Drummond, wrote a letter to the magistrates giving an account of interviews with 22 prisoners who had suffered from being made to work on the treadmill at the Guildford Gaol; there are copies of this on the sideboard in the dining room to browse, if of interest.

Another interesting story was that in 1830 prisoners were set to dig a well through the solid chalk, possibly the one we uncovered in the garden, that you will see lit up, which is brick-lined, 5 foot diameter and 80 feet deep. Apparently, when being dug, they broke into an old chalk mine shaft from the disused quarry next to us and 15 prisoners escaped.

In 1852, this prison by then housing over 140 prisoners, together with Brixton and Kingston jails were all closed when Wandsworth prison was opened. This site was sold for £3,550 and the road put in and the five houses opposite built and South Hall was extended adding the large drawing room and more bedrooms.

If you have not already feel free to look around, there are various plans in an A2 folder on the dining room table, plus a computer model of how the prison looked on the laptop. Also, I have printed off a few copies of the history of the Guildford Gaols, please do take one home if of interest.

Also In the dining room you will see a lead door and lead lined safe in which valuables were stored from drunkards rounded up from the Weatherspoons of the day for rowdy behaviour and put in the cells below overnight. There were three cells downstairs, two remain, one still has the original door and is now used as a wine cellar, the second has a curved ceiling but the door now resides in the Guildford museum and the third which was a narrow cell used for housing a prisoner in a strait-jacket is now the downstairs toilet. The bars on the windows downstairs are all original and were where the prison office and kitchen were located, the old bread oven still exists and presently the caterers are camped out down there.

As I mentioned, it is tradition that the High Sheriff offers a dinner or supper for the Judiciary to thank them for their service and I am delighted to be carrying on that tradition and it therefore seemed appropriate, being that we are in the prison governor’s house that we asked The Clink to provide the food for us this evening and I have asked Jonathan if he would just say a few words

I would like to thank you again for coming this evening and for the work you do upholding the Kings Peace. Hopefully I will see many of you again at the Service for the Judiciary at Holy Trinity on October 3rd and before and after at the Guildhall.

I just want to finish by introducing you to next year’s High Sheriff. Neelam takes the reins on March 22nd and so please do introduce yourselves to her. As you may know, High Sheriffs during the year are encouraged to pick a Shrieval theme to shine a light on a topic which is important to them. Both Neelam and I are very keen to reduce the number of young people in Surrey becoming NEET, that is Not in Education, Training or Employment. Currently most public money is only deployed when young people are already NEET but we think prevention is better than cure and earlier and alternative interventions to help young people should be encouraged. I commissioned some research from the University of Surrey and have held conferences with stakeholders from across the County; the research paper and latest update are also on the side in the dining room, feel free to take copies if of interest, and I hope you enjoy the rest of the evening.