In 2006 Fiona Woolf became the only second female President of the Law Society, and significantly for AWS members, the first President who had also served as Chairwoman of the AWS. She has now added the distinction of becoming the first AWS Chairwoman to be elected as a Sheriff of the City of London.

Chain of Office

At a ceremony on 28 September 2010 Fiona was given her “shrieval” chain of office. This wonderful Anglo Saxon adjective perfectly describes the serious splendour of the symbol of her office. A Shrieval Chain is not a centuries old symbol of the office passed on from one Sheriff to the next. The election of each new Sheriff requires the creation of a new chain of office, which represents the antecedents and achievements of the wearer. In Fiona's case it is definitely a feminine jewel.

Fiona commissioned Grant Macdonald to design the chain, whose centrepiece or badge, represents the pattern of her life.

Her motto, “Plus Q'Hier, Moins Que Demain”, is derived from the inscription on the inside of her mother's wedding ring and the fluid atomic shaped central enclosure indicates the main focus of her career as a global electricity lawyer. Incorporating other elements to suggest her Presidency of the Law Society and her Scottish birth, the chain will be worn by Fiona on ceremonial occasions.

And there will be many of them!

What is a Sheriff?

In Anglo-Saxon times the Sheriffs or Shire-Reeves were appointed by the King as his representatives in cities, towns and shires, responsible for collecting taxes and enforcing the law. The notorious Sheriff of Nottingham is one infelicitous example that springs to mind. However in the Twelfth Century Henry I gave the City of London the right to choose its own Sheriffs, and in 1215 King John ratified the office of Lord Mayor, who was to operate as Chief Magistrate for the City of London.

Being a Sheriff is no mere ceremonial sinecure. Although present day Sheriffs are no longer responsible for the collection of taxes, they retain responsibility for the administration of justice within the City and also for the Central Criminal Court at the Old Bailey. Lord Mayors spend a great deal of their year of office acting as commercial ambassadors for the City of London with the support of their Sheriffs. While we might expect Fiona to be the ideal candidate for the former outwardly “legal” role, she is if anything even better placed to carry out the latter. She has worked in 38 jurisdictions and for 25 governments. It is not surprising that the City of London seemed conscious of its coup in persuading Fiona to become only the third woman to out on the Shrieval Chain.

What next?

Since 1385 no one can be elected as Lord Mayor without having “previously been Sheriff so that he may be tried as to his governance and bounty before he attains to the Estate of Mayor”.

There was of course no Interpretation Act in the Fourteenth Century and “he” and “his” were certainly restricted to the masculine gender. No women attained the status of Sheriff until 1981 when Dame Mary Donaldson was elected to the office, to be followed some time later by Pauline Halliday in 1999. When Dame Mary became Lord Mayor (and not Lady Mayoress, which is a title reserved for the wife of a Lord Mayor) in 1983, women were beginning to prove their worth in the City. Fiona will, however, be only the third woman to become a Sheriff of the City of London and may very likely become only the second woman to be elected as Lord Mayor.

The AWS wishes her every success during her two years as Sheriff representing the City of London and also by happy implication women solicitors.

Elizabeth Cruickshank is a former AWS Chairwoman and author of “Women in the Law”. If you would like to learn more about Fiona then read her article in Link 22.