

Interview with David Foley

David Foley is a well-known business leader in South East England who appears regularly on television and radio to comment on current issues. CEE X Port reporter Xavier Tule tracked him down in East Kent and quizzed him on what is happening in his corner of the Garden of England.



David Foley on ITV outlining the impact of tourism on East Kent businesses.

Question: *I see you are Chief Executive of two Chambers of Commerce. What does that mean?*

Answer: The Thanet & East Kent Chamber and the Dover & District Chamber of Commerce are dedicated to promoting profitable trading throughout East Kent which includes Folkestone, Dover, Deal, Sandwich, Ramsgate, Broadstairs, Margate, Canterbury and the lovely Kent villages.

Q: *Do you operate like the Chambers of Commerce in France and Belgium?*

A: We share many common objectives with our friends on the other side of the water such as supporting our local companies and liaising with government and other elected bodies. However, there is a key difference. Our membership is voluntary which means that we have to prove to our members that their subscription fees are a worthwhile investment. In essence, we must provide the best possible combination of price, quality and service which all keeps us all on our toes every day of the year.

Q: *What do you offer?*

A: We do our best to meet the needs of our members, whatever those needs might be. We publish the annual East Kent Business Directory and circulate weekly business bulletins as well as arranging regular networking meetings on topics of interest. Recent presenters include the Chief Cashier of the Bank of England and the Managing Director of the UK's largest hydroponics facility.

Q: *Did you say 'hydroponics'? What on earth is that?*

A: Hydroponics involves the cultivation of crops indoors using mineral nutrient solutions in an aqueous solvent. Thanet Earth is the leading operator in the UK. As an example, three of its six East Kent greenhouses produce around 400 million tomatoes a year in a space larger than 25 football pitches. It is a major success story in East Kent and at the sharp end of developments in agricultural science.

Q: *How do you measure economic development and how are you doing in East Kent?*

A: There are three main economic indicators: the exchange rate, the interest rate and the unemployment rate. The first two are nationwide, but the data on unemployment is measured every month on a local basis down to the level of every UK parish and village. I am pleased to report that the districts of East Kent show an annual fall in unemployment of between 9% and 14% which is most encouraging as we emerge from lockdown. [Source: ONS, June 2021]

Q: How long have your Chambers of Commerce been operating?

A: The Dover District Chamber of Commerce traces its origins to the year 1850 and can fairly claim to have a history of 171 years. The Thanet & East Kent Chamber is of more recent vintage, but they have worked closely together for the last 15 years.

Q: I have heard that you operate some sort of advice surgery, what is that exactly?

A: Since the demise of the local UK Business Link interviews some 11 years ago, we have operated the East Kent Business Advice Clinic (EKBAC). This is a free service available to any company trading in East Kent. Our expert EKBAC panel of senior lawyers, chartered accountants, marketing specialists, IT professionals and successful entrepreneurs offer guidance that is specific, confidential and free of charge to any company trading in East Kent. Whereas around 50% of all companies in the UK and the European Union close in their first five years, we have found that the failure rate of companies attending our EKBAC sessions is below 2%. It works and we do a lot of it.

Q; Do you do anything else apart from the Chambers of Commerce?

A: I sit on the main board of around a dozen organisations, some national, some local. Also, I am a trustee of two charities, a governor of a Further Education college and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts, Manufactures & Commerce.

Q: Just a dozen or so organisations? What do you do in all the spare time you have left over?

A: I am Chairman of a Kent Village Cricket Club and much enjoy watching cricket, playing the clarinet or guitar and making home-made-wine, but not all at the same time. My wife and I are kept busy with our own three children. We also like to keep in touch with many of the 43 foster children we have cared for in the past, some of them with severe disabilities they have overcome rather magnificently; a lesson to us all.



David Foley on the BBC talking about Prince Philip, a former player at Mersham-Le-Hatch Cricket Club.

Q: In your whole life, who has impressed you the most?

A: I cannot really answer that as my whole life has still not ended. But, in all seriousness, I have been blessed with some wonderful mentors who have been amazingly tolerant of my inadequacies and mistakes. Peter O'Connell was a brilliant educator at the forefront of pedagogical developments. Professor Geoffrey Bownas

CBE was the best possible source of knowledge on Japanese business practices. Sir John Swire was an inspiration to anybody looking to find solutions to problems in international business. More recently, Dr. Bill Moses has shown that the highest standards of ethical conduct sit comfortably alongside great business success.

Q: Can you offer one piece of business advice to our readers?

A: Certainly, and for that I must thank my father. When I was about fifteen years old, he asked me what should be added to a glass of single malt whisky. Astonished that my ever-law-abiding father should deign to ask the opinion of an under-aged drinker on anything to do with alcohol, I muttered something along the lines of:

“Soda, perhaps ginger ale or even frozen branch water if you want it on the rocks”.

I was supremely content with my knowledge of American slang, only to suffer complete ignominy when my father replied with the disdain of a Captain Mainwaring of Dad’s Army:

“Stupid boy. The only thing you should ever put in a good single malt is... another single malt whisky”.

Of course, he was completely correct. It was the best business advice I have ever received. So many companies diversify from their area of competence into sectors where they have neither the skills nor the experience to succeed. The message is surely that if you do something well and you do it successfully, do more of it.

Q: Finally, what do you think are the most important qualities in management and leadership?

A: Trust in the team who work with you and have the courage to be yourself. It does make sense and, if you think about it for a moment, you have to be yourself because everyone else is already taken.