

## History of the Dover District Chamber of Commerce

Founded as the Dover Chamber of Commerce, the area's largest business support body has monitored and promoted commercial development in Dover since 1850, the year when the first telegraph cable was laid from Dover to France. Through the Victorian era to the present day, the Chamber has supported business, commerce, education and skills under a variety of political regimes and economic cycles. Our archives for 28<sup>th</sup> April 1870 show that it was the contribution of £300 each by ten directors of the Dover Chamber which provided the finance to open Dover College the following year: "To provide for Boys a High Class Education on very moderate terms". School fees were set at £10.10 a year. Two college alumni, Frances Parsons in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Boer War and Arthur Harrison in WWI, have been awarded the Victoria Cross.

The Chamber celebrated the first flight across the Channel to Dover by Louis Blériot in 1909 and was even more enthusiastic about the first and quicker non-stop return flight by Charles Rolls in 1910. On Christmas Eve 1914, Chamber members shared the foreboding of worse to come when the first bomb to be dropped on British soil in World War I fell in the rectory garden of St James's church. As the "lock and key of the kingdom", Dover was a target for enemy action throughout both world wars, receiving continual shelling from 1940 to 1944. Like Londoners in the blitz, the resilience of Dover's citizens and companies proved inspirational to the nation as a whole as business continued as usual in Hell-Fire Corner.

Since the last war, the Dover District has faced many economic challenges, including the departure of the military from Dover and Deal, the closure of all four local coal mines, the loss of train ferries, the ending of duty free concessions and the opening of the Channel Tunnel in 1994 in direct competition to Dover's cross-channel ferries. The sinking of the Herald of Free Enterprise ferry in 1987 sent shock waves throughout East Kent. Chamber members felt keenly the grief of the families of the 193 fatalities in what was the worst UK civilian peacetime maritime disaster since the Titanic. The Dover Counselling Centre, founded soon afterwards, continues to be actively supported by the Chamber. The Deal bombing by the IRA in 1989 in which 11 young musicians perished saw the resolve of local citizens sorely tested again.

In an article in The Times of 16<sup>th</sup> January 1992, the then Chamber President, Peter Sherred, was quoted as saying: "We know that the introduction of the Single European Market in 1992 will have a substantial impact on Dover. We are hoping that someone will develop a hotel on the Western Heights". He added: "Industry or business which creates wealth rather than just circulates it will give us a much better platform for the future". The current board acknowledge the wisdom in those words.

In recent years, the Chamber has expanded its range of support significantly. By 2013, a reinvigorated Dover District Chamber of Commerce was able to claim a leading role in the National War Memorial to be built on the White Cliffs, Dover People's Port Trust and Dover Counselling Centre. Close links with Dover District Council and Dover Town Council have enabled the Chamber to offer solid support to expansion schemes, including the project to build a 130 bedroom hotel on Western Heights. Increasing liaison with the Thanet & East Kent Chamber has provided significant additional benefits. Under Chamber Presidents Charlie Elphicke MP, Laura Sandys MP and Sir Roger Gale MP, the Chambers can fairly claim to have a powerful voice for East Kent at all levels of government.

In August 2013, the Chambers opened a research office at the Discovery Park in Sandwich to coordinate business intelligence and offer more direct support to rural areas. The membership network now covers over 700 companies ranging from one-person start-ups to a multinational with over 30,000 employees. Chairman Dr Bill Moses and Chief Executive David Foley are looking to develop further international links, encourage inward investment, promote tourism and reduce the obstacles and regulatory burdens that stifle growth. In keeping with the tradition established in 1850, the Chamber directors give their time and professional skills without financial reward, content to see Chamber members flourish and the local economy expand for the benefit of the community as a whole.

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