

CONTACT

DR FIONA HILL
FINDING IDENTITY



North East England
Chamber of Commerce

TOGETHER WE GROW STRONGER

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ara James Yassar Becky Richard Stephen Kate Sarah Elizabeth
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Alexander Amber Zoe Skye Lily Megan Sophia Matthew Dav
en Rachel Andrew Nosheen David Sarah Matthew Jack Jenna
Charlie Lisa Amanda Matthew Charlotte Imogen Jo Grace Amy
Andrew Eleni Ben Adam Alexandra Alexander Stephanie Amy
orgia Hannah Connor Aoife Cameron Claire Olivia Tom M
dgett George Jodie Aaron Lyndsay Christian Iesha Laurie N
ymie Chris Brandon Jack Claire Suzanne Fern Thomas Anth
ames William Luke Callum Wayne Nham Lauren Rebecca J
Helen Ruth Georgia Jake Samuel Andre Jill Joe Taylor James
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Hello and welcome to the latest edition of CONTACT

Are you sitting comfortably?

Given the incredible political upheaval of recent weeks, where sky-high energy prices and rising inflation have been topped by the UK's appointment of a third Prime Minister inside four months, you'd be forgiven for feeling more than a little uneasy.

That uncertainty is mirrored across Europe and the Atlantic too, where Russia's continued assault on Ukraine causes ever more humanitarian pain, and where the US' legislative layout has taken another shift following the recent midterm elections.

This edition looks at said mutability, with North East England Chamber of Commerce experts highlighting the organisation's many support levers for members to pull on.

It also views the geopolitical picture through the prism of cover star Dr Fiona Hill, the County Durham miner's daughter who swapped the region's disappearing coalfields for life in the White House.

Fiona's extraordinary tale covers her time as Donald Trump's top Russia advisor during the tycoon-turned-politician's tempestuous time in office, her meetings with Vladimir Putin and how both men's - and their respective countries' - search for identity chimes with the environment of her childhood.

Of course, amid such an ever-changing global landscape it can be very easy to lose sight of our region's tremendous achievements, and the profound impact Chamber members have on this area and beyond.

With that in mind, we feature Blyth-based Tharsus Group, which picked up the business of the year and larger company of the year honours at the Chamber Business Awards, and we also highlight the work of Newcastle-based LamasaTech, which was named exporter of the year at the same event.

Elsewhere, we speak to Chloë Clover, co-founder of Middlesbrough's Wander Films, who tells the story of the venture's foundation, the impact of a recent office move and why there are plenty more developments in the pipeline.

Evolution is coming to CONTACT too.

This edition is the last you will see in this guise, with the publication switching next year to a new home within North East Times Magazine.

However, while it will be a change of look, the focus will remain the same.

From its new berth, which will provide greater audience exposure and awareness, CONTACT will continue to celebrate the Chamber's many success stories and promote its tireless backing of members, their employees and the region.

Thank you, as always, to our partners, advertisers and everyone who has contributed to this edition, and to the many people and businesses that supported those which preceded it.

I hope you enjoy this issue.

Steven

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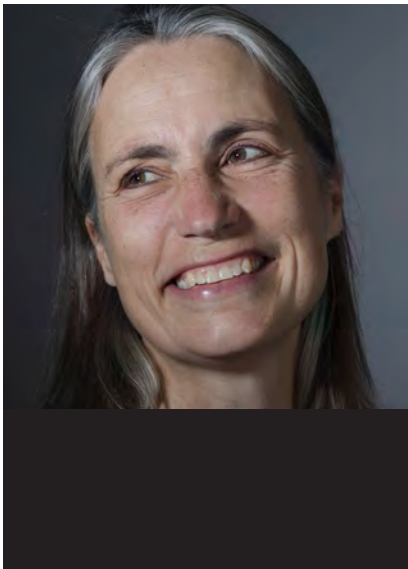
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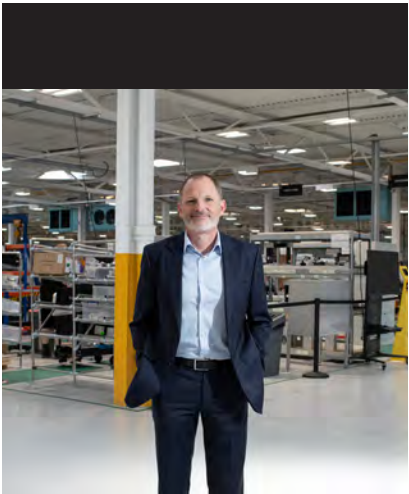
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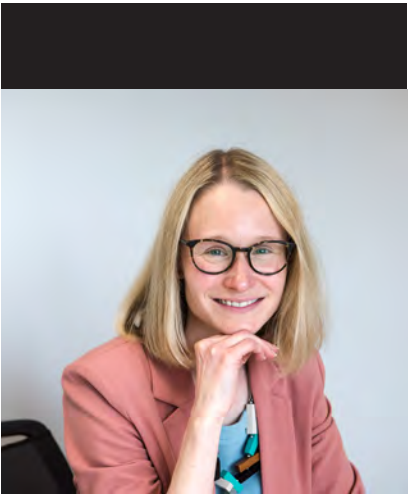


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WELCOME

JOHN MCCABE – CHIEF EXECUTIVE

FOREVER BY YOUR SIDE

Reflecting on a first full year in office; working with the British Chambers of Commerce to tackle business challenges; calling for political stability after an incredibly turbulent period; lobbying the Government on levelling up, skills, infrastructure, investment and devolution; and celebrating members’ awards success

John McCabe
Chief executive
@NEEChamberJohn

Most of us get to this time of the year and reflect on the previous 12 months.

We’ll all have our own personal memories of 2022, but when I think about the state of the nation, my mind goes back to the choice made by Collins Dictionary for its word of the year; permacrisis.

I’m at the end of my first full year as your Chamber’s chief executive.

If you’d told me on day one that I’d be on to my third Prime Minister by now, I’d have assumed all wouldn’t be well in 2022, but I’d never have been able to imagine the extent of the chaos that would lie ahead.

At the time of writing, the team and I are anticipating what will appear in the Chancellor’s latest budget.

Markets have stabilised in recent months, but pretty soon we’re all going to start paying for the catastrophic errors made in the early autumn.

It won’t be easy or cheap, but there is a route from despair to prosperity, and good businesses, aligned with strong public services, can show the way.

We’ve been working with the British Chambers of Commerce (BCC) to publish the ‘Proposals for Delivering Growth for the Business Community’ manifesto.

This comes on the back of our latest Quarterly Economic Survey, which highlights an alarming drop in business confidence and conditions, with key economic indicators falling back to COVID-19 crisis levels.

This is not a position anyone, particularly your Chamber, wants our businesses to be in.

The manifesto sets out 17 key policies designed to tackle the challenges facing businesses across the economy, the labour market, international trade and net-zero.

I want all of our members to be confident that we, alongside BCC, are campaigning at every opportunity to make your voices heard.

We’ve fed directly into the new Prime Minister, several of his

ministerial team and their special advisers.

And in November, I raised these issues personally with the governor of the Bank of England.

No one denies the Government has an exceptionally difficult task on its hands, but in the face of economic headwinds and political chaos, North East businesses are crying out for stability.

As a result, our core commitments and key asks remain the same:

One - retain and renew the focus on levelling up for business, people and places across the North East.

Two - continue to lobby for skills, infrastructure and public investment.

Three - bring the backing of the full business community to an extended devolution deal in the north of the region.

One of my most powerful reflections in my time in this role is how different the business conversation is in 2022, compared to the financial crash of 2008.

Over the year, I’ve heard businesses across a wide range of sectors talking about issues like good work and fair pay, the mental health and wellbeing of staff, and developing greener, more resilient supply chains.

These simply aren’t issues that were at the forefront of minds a decade ago.

And while we all wish the circumstances were different, it is a really great thing that these issues are so high up on your priority lists.

Despite the challenges, our business community continues with determination to work to succeed and make the best of the situations we find ourselves in.

My Chamber colleagues and I, and many of our members, continue to be inspired by this region’s ability to crack on.

I strongly believe this resilience is what makes North East England the best place to live, learn, work and play.

When I look back to our last major event - the Inspiring Females Awards - I am filled with pride at the achievements and remarkable stories that exist within our membership.

This was also evident in our Chamber Business Awards, which were held over the summer.

These awards are an opportunity to look forward, celebrate and be positive about our future.

We are facing difficult economic times, but events like these help to champion and support North East businesses, as well as the businesspeople who will help our region’s economy to grow.

I should also take this opportunity to share with you the news that this is our final edition of CONTACT in the guise you see it today.

As your Chamber continues to evolve, we’re working to bring you member news and stories in different formats.

This is something that will evolve as new trends, platforms and technologies come to the fore.

I’d like to finish by thanking all of you for your support.

The team in your Chamber is entering the new year with a new vision, one focused on being a collaborative force for good in the North East.

We stand shoulder-to-shoulder with you in the face of the challenges ahead.

I wish you, your colleagues and those around you, a peaceful festive period and a prosperous 2023.



LATEST NEWS

Your curated guide to the latest news, views, trends and technologies shaping the economic and business landscape of the North East

TECHNOLOGY

KROMEK GROUP BUOYED AS GREATER DEMAND FUELS PROGRESS

A technology firm behind apparatus aimed at foiling terror plots is looking to the future with “increased confidence” after a £1.1 million contract complemented stronger financial results and a million-pound-plus cash boost.

Kromek Group has delivered a six-figure supply of its security equipment to a US customer.

The deal marks another boost for the Sedgefield operator - known for wearable

nuclear radiation detector kits - after demand pushed annual revenues higher and it gained £1.7 million investor backing.

It also comes after Kromek secured two medical sector deals worth a combined £620,000, which include a £400,000-plus order from a “longstanding customer” to use its technology for bone analysis.

The deals build on improved annual results covering the period to April 30, which show the NETPark-based company's revenues increased 16 per cent on the previous year to £12.1 million.

Pre-tax losses fell £200,000 to £6.1 million, with losses across adjusted earnings before interest, tax, depreciation and amortisation dropping £500,000 to £1.2 million.

And Dr Arnab Basu, chief executive, says he expects the business to continue its momentum, with the present international environment providing Kromek with the “highest level of revenue visibility” in its history and scope to secure “substantial year-on-year revenue growth.”

He added: “We ended the year in a better position than we began it.

“We entered the new financial year with a higher order book than the previous year (and) the current geopolitical environment is driving greater interest from government agencies for our family of products.”



Dr Arnab Basu, Kromek Group chief executive, pictured inside the firm's NETPark base



MANUFACTURING

MACHINERY MAKER SECURES £5.2 MILLION RECYCLING DEAL

A County Durham heavy-duty machinery maker has landed a £5.2 million deal to deliver “pioneering” waste processing equipment.

Parnaby Cyclones is building a huge recycling system for Gateshead's GAP Group (NE) Limited.

Bosses say the appliance, described as “one of Europe's most advanced polymer and metal separation and recovery systems”, will sift materials including plastics, copper and brass from goods such as fridges, microwaves and stereos for secondary use.

They say it has already created jobs at Parnaby Cyclones, which is based in Chilton, near Ferryhill, with more tipped to be generated once the equipment is fully operational next year.

Adrian Parnaby, Parnaby Cyclones' managing director, said: “This is one of the single biggest projects we've ever won, and will give GAP one of the most technologically advanced systems out there.”

Peter Moody, GAP Group managing director, added: “This marks the latest milestone in our plan to become a market leader in waste electrical and electronic equipment recycling.”



Teesside International Airport says its cargo handling base will provide a significant boost to revenues

AVIATION

AIRPORT DELIGHT AS CARGO VENTURE TAKES OFF

An aviation base has opened a £2.5million cargo hub it says will deliver as many as 30 jobs.

Teesside International Airport has cut the ribbon on a 21,000sq ft freight handling hangar.

Bosses say the development includes “cutting-edge security screening technology” alongside freight-forwarding, customs clearance and storage services.

The move is part of a wider commercial focus at the airport, which is spearheaded by the £200 million Southside Business Park officials say will create as many as 4400 jobs by providing distribution and industrial space.

Elsewhere, existing tenant and global plane maintenance, removal and overhaul firm Willis Lease Finance Corporation - alongside wholly-owned subsidiary Willis Aviation Services - has submitted plans to create a £25 million, 200-job site.

Phil Forster, the airport's managing director, said: “If you get an airport right, it brings jobs, increased GVA, inward investment and inbound tourism; its influence is immense.

“And there are so many opportunities for us on the commercial side.

“We've got fantastic potential with freight, which will make a major difference to the economic side of the business, while allowing us to play our part in the North East's prowess as an exporting region.

“But we can go beyond that, owing to Teesside's central position on the map.

“With freight, for example, we can very easily serve the North East and Yorkshire, but truck things to other parts of the UK too, because we're not constrained when it comes to road links.

“And operators are seeing that landscape.”

FINANCE

JOY AS INVESTOR REACHES £20 MILLION MILESTONE

A business investor has smashed the £20 million barrier.

NEL Fund Managers says it is “proud of its positive impact” after striking nearly 250 deals since 2018.

The operator oversees the £18 million North East Growth Capital Fund and the £9 million North East Small Loan Fund.

The former offers unsecured investments of up to £500,000 to established businesses to help with job creation, with the latter providing

small and medium-sized firms with support worth between £10,000 and £100,000 to aid growth.

Both pots are backed by the European Regional Development Fund.

Dr Yvonne Gale, NEL Fund Managers' chief executive, said: “To have been able to invest more than £20 million in just over four years is testament to the quality of ideas that have come our way, but also the determination and dedication of our expert team.”



Dr Yvonne Gale, NEL Fund Managers' chief executive



ENGINEERING

ENGINEER WANTS 100 STAFF TO BUILD ON CENTURY CELEBRATIONS

A family engineer is pressing ahead with plans to complement its 100th anniversary with a century of jobs.

British Engines Group wants staff to lay the foundations for its next chapter of growth.

The operator, founded in Newcastle by brothers Charles and Harold Lamb, wants CNC machinists, grinders and automation fitters to strengthen its many businesses, which include BEL Valves, Rotary Power, Michell Bearings and Stephenson Gobin.

Alex Lamb, British Engines Group chair, said: "There is no doubt my grandfather and great uncle would have been amazed by this achievement, after

starting in a small workshop.

"I am incredibly proud to say the group is a major employer of 900 people in the region, and 1200 people across the world."

Bosses confirmed their growth blueprint following a centenary celebration at Sage Gateshead, which included performances from singers Beverley Knight and Lemar, and the Strictly Smokin' Big Band.

The event also raised £5560 for Tyneside and Northumberland Mind.

British Engines Group's further divisions include CMP Products, BEL Engineering, Stadium Export Services and Tyne Pressure Testing.



British Engines Group staff celebrate the organisation's 100th anniversary at Sage Gateshead

BUILT ENVIRONMENT

METNOR GROUP 'OPTIMISTIC' AFTER STRONG POST-PANDEMIC REBOUND

A construction, mechanical, electrical and pressure testing firm is forecasting record turnover after "significantly bouncing back" from the pandemic.

Metnor Group saw revenue and gross profit margins climb in 2021, as its divisions delivered a raft of projects.

However, bosses say the Newcastle-based business is well placed to hit record levels in 2022 and 2023, with "a number of contract wins" secured for the next two years.

According to results for 2021, released this summer, group turnover stood £13 million higher than the previous 12 months at £81 million.

Gross profit margins improved from five per cent to 9.9 per cent.

Its Metnor Construction arm turned over £63 million, compared to £48 million in 2020, as new contracts complemented the ending of projects delayed by COVID-19.

Work included the delivery of two North East hotels, with a £17 million scheme for Northumbria Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust also part of its order book.

The business' Norstead division, which provides mechanical and electrical contracting services, returned to profit as turnover increased from £17 million to £20 million.

Chris Cant, Metnor Group chief executive, said: "With a strong order book for the rest of 2022 and beyond, we're optimistic about the year ahead."



Chris Cant, Metnor Group chief executive

SECURITY

FUTURE SECURE FOR INTELLIGENCE FUSION AFTER SIGMA7 DEAL

A security threat information provider has vowed to bring "top-class talent" to the region after being bought by a global operator.

Durham-based Intelligence Fusion is now part of Sigma7.

Officials say the deal represents a "powerful offering", with Intelligence Fusion's real-time software set to be incorporated into Sigma7's risk information and services platform.

Intelligence Fusion provides a global map of incidents that could cause security risks to firms' operations, such as wars, terrorist activity, protests and natural hazards.

Michael McCabe, Intelligence Fusion founder and chief executive, said: "With a rapidly changing global threat landscape, an integrated approach to risk management has never been more important.

"The combination of the risk information and services companies Sigma7 has already acquired, along with Intelligence Fusion's data and technology capabilities, will create a powerful offering."

Andrew Hersh, Sigma7 chief executive, added: "Intelligence Fusion is the crown jewel in threat visualisation and monitoring solutions."



Paul Murphy, Caswellsgroup's commercial director

CONSTRUCTION

CLEAR CLIMATE HAILS 'FANTASTIC PROGRESS' AS MOMENTUM BUILDS

A renewable energy firm is lending its support to a £100 million city centre development.

Clear Climate is supplying air conditioning systems to Newcastle's Bank House office scheme.

The company, based in Peterlee, east Durham, is installing 26 pieces of kit - consisting of 300 indoor units - throughout the building, which is due to be completed early next year.

The win adds to momentum at the business - founded by directors Andy Smith and Lee Peachey in 2017 - having recently surpassed a £5 million turnover target with months to spare.

Lee said: "Bank House is the biggest commercial development project on the go in our region, so to be playing a part in it is fantastic.

"It really highlights how far we've come as a business in a relatively short space of time."

Clear Climate works with a number of businesses and organisations, including Durham County Council and Bellway Homes.



Clear Climate engineers work on the Bank House office scheme, in Newcastle

EMPLOYMENT

CASWELLSGROUP CELEBRATES ANNIVERSARY WITH RECRUITMENT DRIVE

A safety equipment and tool supplier is marking its 50th anniversary with a jobs drive.

Caswellsgroup aims to bolster its 70-strong workforce with a further 20 staff over the coming 12 months.

Bosses at the firm, based in Cowpen Bewley, near Billingham, say the expansion will help build on eight per cent growth across its 2021/2022 financial year, with demand for personal protection equipment, building sector tools and cleaning goods continuing to grow.

Paul Murphy, commercial director, said: "The company has gone from strength-to-strength over the years, progressing from a small local business to one operating nationally.

"We still work with the majority of our original customers, as well as welcoming many new ones from across the UK and Ireland."



INVESTMENT

SAFETY FIRM IN GOOD HEALTH AFTER CASH SUPPORT

A training provider has opened a base to nurture the workers of tomorrow.

TDR is operating from a new hub on Quorum Park, North Tyneside.

Bosses say the move has extended the organisation's breadth of courses, with training on turning and milling machines, as well as welding, fabrication and electrical inspection and testing, complementing apprenticeships in science, engineering, manufacturing and business administration.

Li Xue, chief executive, said the new school will enable the operator to provide and promote STEM career advice while delivering even better training for businesses.

She said: "Quorum Park has been our home for more than ten years, providing the perfect platform for growth, expansion and delivery of our services.

"It has great amenities, and the accessibility makes it extremely convenient for those attending courses.

"We really do look forward to going from strength-to-strength on the back of this latest investment."

Laura McGrath, Quorum Park events and sustainability lead, added: "With the skills agenda being a big driver for many of our tenants, we're keen to support and collaborate with TDR wherever we can, and love celebrating its many achievements."

EMPLOYMENT

ROWEN HOMES WELCOMES SENIOR FIGURE TO LEAD BUYING TEAM

A luxury homeware brand has recruited a senior industry player to supercharge its growth plans.

Rowen Homes has welcomed Rob Hudson as buying team lead.

Previously head of buying at MADE.com, Rob also counts stints with BHS and Next Home on his CV.

He is heading Rowen Homes' four-strong buying team, which is responsible for sourcing and developing more than 8000 products for the luxury online home store.

He said: "Rowen Homes has been a real disruptor, achieving great success since launching two years ago.

"I love the energy and pace within the business, and I'm looking forward to helping expand our supply base and current product categories."

Alice Hall, Rowen Homes' co-founder, added: "Rob has the exact skillset we need, being experienced in the technicalities of furniture and with the ability to manage large merchandising budgets."

FINANCE

MUTUAL IN MERGER TALKS WITH NORTH WEST OPERATOR

A mutual is in discussions over a merger.

Newcastle Building Society has entered into an "exclusivity agreement" with Manchester Building Society.

If successful, bosses say the deal would see the transfer of the latter's engagements to the North East savings and mortgage provider.

However, they say talks are "at an early stage", adding there is "no certainty any merger will occur".

If the deal does go ahead, they say the earliest an agreement could be completed would be mid-2023.

A spokesperson said: "No formal commitment to proceed can be made until all appropriate due diligence investigations are completed."

Newcastle Building Society has around 336,000 members and 31 branches, many of which have undergone significant refurbishment in recent years, as the mutual retains its high street presence.

Andrew Haigh, Newcastle Building Society chief executive - and North East England Chamber of Commerce president - previously told CONTACT: "We believe in the value of face-to-face customer contact.

"Whether it is on the high street or via digital technologies, looking after customers means being available to them."

As of December 31 last year, its total assets stood at £4.9 billion, making it the UK's eighth largest building society.

Manchester Building Society is the UK's 41st biggest mutual.



Howell Technology Group is moving to larger offices. Pictured are members of its team

TECHNOLOGY

OFFICE SWITCH 'WILL PAVE WAY' FOR IT COMPANY JOBS

An IT firm has revealed plans to create at least 20 jobs in an office expansion.

Howell Technology Group (HTG) is moving to a 5000sq ft base, which bosses say will help it "become the leading cloud provider across a number of sectors".

Officials say the switch - which will see HTG build the region's first Microsoft Centre of Excellence - will help the business meet a 150-staff target and edge closer to a £30 million turnover goal.

Kevin Howell, chief executive at the Hebburn-based business, whose client book includes investment bank Goldman Sachs, says the office move is a momentous occasion.

He added: "Our new headquarters provide us with the perfect base from which to expand, create more jobs in our heartland and support customers in their digital journeys.

"We aim to build on our successful track record; this is a big move and an exciting time in our history."

MANUFACTURING

PARTNERSHIP MARKS BOOST FOR GREEN STEEL AMBITIONS

A research and innovation centre is pushing ahead with work to transform steel production.

The Materials Processing Institute (MPI) is installing hydrogen pipes to launch a test base.

Officials say the venture, named H2DRI, will analyse the potential of replacing coke and fossil fuels with 'green' hydrogen and electricity in the steelmaking process.

Chris McDonald, MPI chief executive, said: "It's exciting to see work progressing on H2DRI, creating a pilot facility that will be pivotal into proving hydrogen is the answer to decarbonising steel production on an industrial scale."

The pipework is being fitted by Gateshead-based Commercial Maintenance Services UK, with Nigel Riley, senior project manager, hailing its role on "such an important initiative".

He added: "This is one of the most far-reaching projects to date, given it has the potential to transform the steel industry and cut harmful emissions."

The work is part of the Government's Net Zero Innovation Portfolio Industrial Fuel Switching Competition, with Middlesbrough-based MPI working alongside Teesside University, C-Tech Innovation, Swansea University's Steel and Metals Institute and global metals and mining company Rio Tinto.



Pictured, from left to right, are Bob James, MPI's hydrogen collaboration lead; Chris Nightingale, Maple Controls' director; Nigel Riley, Commercial Maintenance Services UK's senior project manager; and Mark Allen, MPI's group manager - industrial decarbonisation

DR FIONA HILL, FORMER DEPUTY ASSISTANT TO THE US PRESIDENT AND NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL SENIOR DIRECTOR FOR EUROPEAN AND RUSSIAN AFFAIRS



FINDING IDENTITY

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Dr Fiona Hill went from the coalfields of County Durham to the corridors of US power. A miner's daughter turned renowned Russia expert, she acted as a top security advisor to presidents Donald Trump, Barack Obama and George W Bush. Here, she tells Steven Hugill about her journey to the other side of the Atlantic, putting out metaphorical White House fires and how the rise of global populist politics - and its desperate search for identity - rekindles memories of home.

Photography by Christopher Owens





DR FIONA HILL, FORMER DEPUTY ASSISTANT TO THE US PRESIDENT AND NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL SENIOR DIRECTOR FOR EUROPEAN AND RUSSIAN AFFAIRS



Dr Fiona Hill never cleaved the County Durham coal that helped spur the North East's status as an industrial hotbed.

She did, though, inherit the spirit of the region's underground endeavours.

The daughter of a County Durham miner, she carries the same torch of identity and community that burned so fiercely in the hands of her ancestors, and the thousands more cradle-to-grave pitmen that toiled across the North East's plentiful fields.

Too young to experience the heyday of Britain's 'black gold' rush, Fiona instead witnessed the social and economic fractures left behind after the headstocks had made their final turns.

Growing up in and around the once colliery heartland of Bishop Auckland, she saw towns and villages hollowed out, their inhabitants displaced and in dire search of meaning and worth.

She watched too as her father became an NHS porter ("every porter was a former miner; they didn't know what else to do - there was no reskilling back then"), while others did what they could to survive, as centuries of industrial tradition crumbled.

The transposition sparked a curiosity in Fiona, one that began with local landmarks and progressed all the way to the White House.

As deputy assistant to President Donald Trump, and senior director for European and Russian affairs on the US' National Security Council, she was an integral part of Washington's inner power circle, scrutinising international issues and the country's status in an ever-evolving geopolitical picture, while trying to keep its firebrand leader in check and going face-to-face with Vladimir Putin.

Fiona's ties to home, though, were never too far away, and when she was thrust into the spotlight as a key witness in Trump's first impeachment trial, the former Bishop Barrington School pupil peered through the lens of her past to help the US look beyond its 45th president's chaotic reign.

She says: "When you're brought up in an environment where everyone helps everyone else, where there is a real sense of community and a real sense of public service, you are taught to stand up for what is right.

"If your house is on fire, you need to do something - and America's house was on fire.

"I saw people about to destroy a country, and I wasn't going to let it happen," adds Fiona, who shared her story with North East England Chamber of Commerce members at a recent Hardwick Hall Hotel President's Club lunch.

Taking on Trump, of course, meant staring down the combative tycoon-turned-politician, as well as his Republican allies and his baying mob of supporters.

Not that Fiona, who in the past sat across the debating table from Vladimir Putin, was intimidated.

Again, channelling the spirit of her forefathers, she called out Trump's turbulence, her testimony on allegations the president had abused power and obstructed Congress beamed to billions around the world.

"Trump was an enormously flawed personality, and the whole presidency was a tragedy," says Fiona, who returned to a senior fellow role at the Washington-based think tank Brookings Institution after leaving the National Security Council in 2019.

She says: "As witnesses in the impeachment trial, we were attacked for being deep state coup-plotting bureaucrats, and our patriotism and sense of public service was challenged because we were naturalised citizens.

"But I wasn't having that. I said, 'don't try that with me'.

"Most of the people I've worked with in government have come from humble backgrounds and have wanted to serve the country and work with other people on a shared sense of mission.

"Growing up in County Durham, I learned that when you worked down the mine, you stood up for each other, you worked for your marra, and if there was an accident, you left nobody behind.

"And I told the truth about what I saw under Trump," says Fiona, who also served as a security advisor to presidents Barack Obama and George W Bush.

She adds: "The best preparation I had for working with Trump was reading Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, and Through the Looking-Glass, because every day was like the Mad Hatter's Tea Party.



DR FIONA HILL, FORMER DEPUTY ASSISTANT TO THE US PRESIDENT AND NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL
SENIOR DIRECTOR FOR EUROPEAN AND RUSSIAN AFFAIRS



"It also put me in mind of my grandad, who was an air raid warden in Billingham during the Second World War.

"He ran around the ICI plant, sticking incendiary devices into a bucket of sand and putting out fires with a little water pump.

"That is what the job felt like with Trump."

That she found herself caught in the tremors of such a seismic period owes a lot to Fiona's upbringing.

An inquisitive youngster, she enjoyed family walks in the County Durham countryside, local landmarks filling the first spaces of what would become an enormous life jigsaw.

She says: "I've very fond memories of walking along what are now heritage trails with my mum, who worked as a nurse,

pointing out what had been there before.

"Growing up on the edge of Bishop Auckland, we'd regularly walk to Escomb, where there is a Saxon church from the seventh century, and I'd contemplate the nearby Roman fort, thinking about how people had been here for millennia."

Those strolls set in motion a journey into academia, which would eventually wind its way to Washington DC.

Watching as the coalfields disappeared and Cold War tensions left the world on a nuclear knife-edge, Fiona saw education as an escape route.

And she was helped by a relation, who - half-jokingly - suggested she study Russian to understand the rapidly changing world.

She says: "Places where my dad had grown up, like Crook and Roddymoor, and others like Sacriston and Brandon, were gutted; the industries that once brought a sense of knowing who you were had gone.

"And I wanted to know why this Silicon Valley of its day had gone into a massive decline.

"It was starting that search for explanation that led me to where I am now.

"My great-uncle Charlie Crabtree had been in the merchant marine during the Second World War, and he couldn't understand how we'd gone from being allies with the Soviet Union to enemies in such a short period of time.

"So, I thought, 'why not study Russia and figure it all out?'

"Coming from a region that was heavily industrialised, I quickly realised the Soviet Union was a bigger version of the same thing - albeit with a very different ideological slant!

"The same industrialists that built the North East also built up the industries of Imperial Russia - and I became really interested in those ties."

Fiona's voyage of discovery was aided, in no small part, by time in Moscow.

Having participated in a study exchange programme, she was recruited by an American broadcaster to bolster its coverage of Mikhail Gorbachev and Ronald Reagan's signing of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty in the late 1980s.

She says: "NBC News were looking for English speakers, and I got the opportunity to work as a stringer.

"I then met an American professor, who told me all about the fellowships to study at US universities."

From those chats, Fiona embarked on Soviet studies and a doctorate in history at Harvard University, before holding a

DR FIONA HILL, FORMER DEPUTY ASSISTANT TO THE US PRESIDENT AND NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL
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number of positions at the institution's John F. Kennedy School of Government.

She served as national intelligence officer for Russia and Eurasia at The National Intelligence Council during the late 2000s, and has penned books on Vladimir Putin and US socioeconomics and the country's similarities to modern Russia - the latter titled 'There's Nothing For You Here', a play on her father's assessment of her home as a child.

"I've gone full circle," smiles Fiona.

"I find myself talking more and more about that period in the 1980s."

And like so much in her life, a great deal of those conversations centre upon identity.

She says: "During my experiences in the Trump administration, trying to explain why he was elected, I realised it was the story my family and I had lived through in the North East.

"It was all about de-industrialisation, the loss of place and identity, people looking for ways to turn back the clock, and having someone address their grievances and resentments.

"Watching Trump was like an exercise in social anthropology.

"His support base was very similar to Putin; it was people feeling like they'd lost their place in the world."

The latter's quest to revise such apparent social and geographical displacement was further exposed earlier this year when Russia launched its assault on Ukraine.

Fiona describes his attack as "nuclear blackmail" rooted in a desperate bid to overturn a century of history.

She says: "Putin has a big base of support from the old industrial areas of the Soviet Union, the Newcastle and coal mining equivalents, if you will, who are looking to him to turn things around.

"But he's trying to revise 100 years, and the territorial dispositions from the dissolution of the Russian Empire.

"He's doing what Kaiser Wilhelm and the Germans did in the First World War, and what Hitler did in the Second World War - and he's trying to frighten everyone with the idea of a Third World War."

Fiona adds: "He threatened Trump during the G20 Osaka summit, in 2019.

"When the US was pulling out of the INF Treaty, he said, 'Remember the Euromissile Crisis and the Caribbean Crisis (Cuban Missile Crisis); we might come back to that'.

"But the US isn't mobilising nuclear weapons.

"It is one country not liking the

international order and wanting to rupture it."

Fiona says the world must look at Putin's motives with great seriousness, adding leaders, and the global ruling community, must quickly acknowledge Russia's offensive, in terms of the ending of a world order and the fresh identity of another.

She says: "This is someone who uses whatever instruments he can - polonium, Novichok, assassinations, throwing people out of windows. The guy is ruthless.

"And he thought he'd found the best moment to strike in Ukraine, with the US having pulled out of Afghanistan, Angela Merkel's era having ended in Germany, the French elections looming and the UK being at odds with its European neighbours.

"He expected us to crumble.

"But there was a realisation across Europe that this was like conflicts of the past, and that we couldn't just stand by.

"We have to continue to engage in diplomacy and push back against his framing.

"Everything is going to change - we're already in a new world of economic warfare.

"We're not going to be reliant on Russian energy anymore, and we're going to have to go through a lot of pain.

"But when you know what you're up against, you must face your fears - like we have before - and prepare to deal with them, not scare yourself silly."





POSSESSION IS NINE TENTHS OF THE LAW

With international distribution legislation set for significant technological change, Alex Stocks, North East England Chamber of Commerce international trade manager, looks at the major financial benefits of switching from paper documentation to digital alternatives, and what the shift could mean for future cross-continent industry relationships.



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International trade is worth £1.4 trillion to the UK* - and ground-breaking change is afoot to further strengthen industry links.

New measures are being thrashed out to transform international trade procedures, with technology set to replace traditional paper-form methods.

Known as the Electronic Trade Documents Bill, experts** say the legislation could deliver £25 million of new economic growth by 2024 while saving more than £220 million.

The change would mark a watershed moment in trade, where, presently, legislation such as the Bills of Exchange Act 1882 and the Carriage of Goods by Sea Act 1992 relies on paper documentation.

In its existing form, the law doesn't allow electronic credentials, meaning nearly all documents used in international trade come in traditional paper form.

And it is a costly - and time-consuming - process.

Estimates suggest there are 28.5 billion paper trade documents printed and flown around the world every day, with operators sometimes having to allow up to ten

days for the transfer of paper documents between parties.

Electronic transfer, however, would reduce this to seconds worldwide, preventing scenarios where the goods arrive before the paperwork.

Development of technologies over the last decade, including distributed ledger and block chain technology, have created an increasingly feasible opportunity for trade-based documents to become electronic.

For this opportunity to come to fruition, though, reform is required.

Because without change to the law, opportunities in international trade will be restricted, financial and efficiency gains precluded and environmental benefits missed.

Against this backdrop, the Government asked the Law Society to make recommendations to allow for legal recognition of trade documents, such as bills of lading and bills of exchange, in electronic form.

These have led to the drafting of the Electronic Trade Documents Bill, by the



Law Society, which underwent its second reading in the House of Lords in early November.

The bill is technologically neutral and aims to resolve the issue of making a digital document, which is viewed as intangible, possessable and equal to the paper version without various unintended legal and practical consequences.

It is key the bill does not stipulate any particular technology, only necessary criteria, to ensure development is possible.

It will allow digital documents to have the "same legal treatment, effects and functionality" if certain criteria are satisfied.

The various criteria include:

- It must not be possible for more than one person (or persons acting together) to exercise control of the document at any one time
- When the document is transferred, any person who was able to exercise control of the document before the transfer loses the ability to do so
- A reliable system must be used to allow any person who is able to exercise control of the document to "demonstrate that fact, to protect the document from unauthorised interference, and to ensure the document can be distinguished from any copies"

(Lord Holmes; The Electronic Trade Documents Bill: The problem, solution and potential benefits. City A.M)

The bill is expected to gain Royal Assent by the middle of 2023.

It forms part of a three-armed solution, sitting alongside international standards and the right technology to enable access to the benefits of digitalising trade documents.

The bill will not introduce a requirement for electronic trade documentation to be used, but if businesses want - and are able - to use digital trade documents, then they will be able to do so on the same legal basis as paper trade documents.

Many believe the Electronic Trade Documents Bill should be viewed as having the same significance as trade deals with

other nations, with the potential benefits envisaged to be further reaching and more impactful.

The UK could be the first G7 nation to pass legislation of this kind to promote more secure trade that is easier, more cost effective and ultimately faster.

Singapore, along with six other nations, has already adopted in full the UN Model Law on Electronic Transferable Records.

The other G7 nations have agreed to co-operate on its wider adoption, with Germany and the UK advancing furthest.

For further information on the practicalities of the Electronic Trade Documents Bill, contact the Chamber's international team at global@neechamber.co.uk

References:
*UK Government; www.gov.uk/government/news/paperless-trade-for-uk-businesses-to-boost-growth
**International Chamber of Commerce: UK - [Creating a modern digital trade ecosystem; www.dsi.iccwbo.org](https://www.dsi.iccwbo.org)



A FRESH APPROACH IN A CHANGING HR WORLD

HR is no longer just about policies, procedures and legal frameworks. Businesses today must be forward-thinking, strengthening employee engagement and fostering positive culture, while focusing too on creating diverse and inclusive workforces. And one organisation helping them do so is outsourced services partner Shrewd. Here, Steven Hugill speaks to Shrewd's founder and managing director Martin Potts to learn more about the Durham-based company's place within the HR landscape, its unique service offer and his unquenchable desire to see the North East flourish.

Martin Potts has just returned from an early morning gym

appointment, a grey sweatshirt evidencing his efforts to overcome a serious ankle injury.

His strength and conditioning routine, however, isn't just reserved for personal gain.

It sits at the very heart of his commercial focus too.

As founder and managing director of Durham-based Shrewd, Martin operates akin to a coach, instilling greater health into company HR strategies so they carry the right form to thrive in a constantly changing employment landscape.

Launched at the height of the pandemic in July 2020, Shrewd guides organisations across the entire HR spectrum, from ensuring sound legal structures to encouraging cultural models that fit the post-coronavirus working environment.

Martin says: "The pandemic created so much uncertainty; businesses had to adapt and react quickly to the constant challenges thrown their way, and they needed support in areas they'd never needed previously.

"HR played a vital part throughout, and those businesses without an internal HR function were lost in unfamiliar territory.

"I saw this as an opportunity to step in and offer my support.

"Nobody had really heard of furlough and all of a sudden it was being used in every conversation – employers were thinking, 'what on earth do we need to do?'

"There was a lot of support needed throughout that period."

The impact of Shrewd was immediate, with clients including Raby Estates, Gateshead-based occupational health operator Recovery4Life and Wynyard utilities firm Everflow reaching out for Martin's guidance.

The trio remain anchor clients, with many more from right across the North East having been attracted by Martin's specialist experience and expertise, honed from more than a decade at the North East England Chamber of Commerce as a HR advisor and, latterly, its people and performance manager.

He says: "I'm really passionate about seeing our region thrive; I've always had a desire to make positive change.

"I'm from the North East; I've lived, worked and studied in the North East all of my life, and I've always worked hard to see others



Martin Potts, Shrewd founder and managing director



do well," says CIPD-qualified Martin, who sponsors Hylton Colliery Welfare Football Club's under nines' shirts, and is embarking on a regionwide, one-day-a-month, free charity commitment.

He adds: "That desire was further embedded from my time at the Chamber, and the days of accelerating start-ups' growth and helping larger firms excel.

"We've got so much talent in this region and really brilliant businesses, but many of them need support and are not sure where to look.

"The North East is a region full of SMEs, businesses that are not quite big enough to have their own internal resource but big enough to need something.

"That's where Shrewd fits in."

A key element of Shrewd's support is a free HR assessment, wherein Martin evaluates firms' existing practices, policies and systems before offering suitable guidance.

He says: "Businesses often tell me they don't know what they don't know, so we spend a couple of hours reviewing what's currently in place and then advise on any gaps, risks and improvements needed, as well as a route to best practice.

"Most importantly, we listen first, before shaping a plan of action to support the business in overcoming their challenges."

And with the working environment having changed seismically following the pandemic, Martin – who left his Chamber role to run Shrewd full-time at the beginning of September, but remains a consultant for the membership body – says the approach is perfect in ensuring organisations' HR functions pivot too.

He says: "HR is an ever-changing landscape.

"When I first started working in HR, it was very much about personnel management and admin tasks.

"But HR today is so different.

"It's about being forward-thinking, spending time on managing employee engagement and strengthening culture with a focus on creating diverse and inclusive workforces.

"HR isn't just about policies, procedures and legal frameworks.

"Of course, they're essential in providing the foundations to deliver guidance, setting out boundaries and ensuring expectations are clear to protect businesses – you have to support staff with those processes – but the breadth of HR is vast, and it's about adding value to organisations and its people.

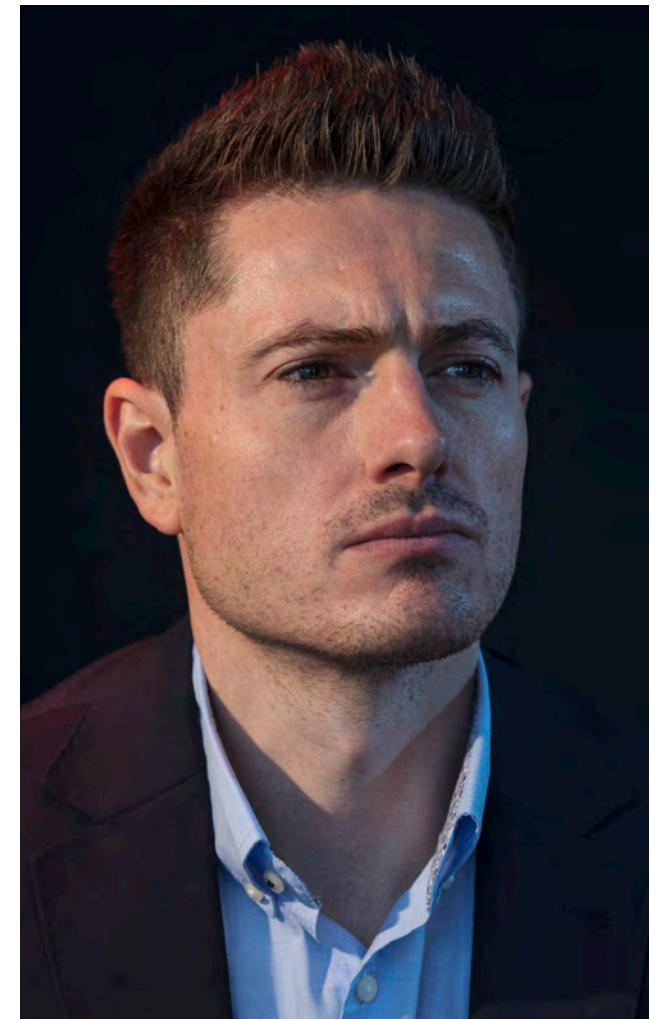
"Topics like culture and flexible working have been around for some time, but they've been pushed right to the forefront by COVID-19.

"Companies must now think outside the box in terms of their recruitment and retention strategies, how they look after their staff, how they get the best out of them and how they support their career progression to retain them," says Martin, who hopes to welcome up to two members of staff in the coming months to maintain Shrewd's momentum.

He adds: "Businesses need to be thinking about what more they can do to attract and retain staff, because if they don't, they'll struggle in the current marketplace.

"Enhancing benefits such as parental leave, supporting internal progression as part of their succession planning and focusing on staff wellbeing are a few examples of how an organisation can improve their recruitment strategies."

And central to helping instigate such watershed change is Martin's approach to HR, which sees him work closely with organisations to understand their respective DNA profiles before applying tailored support packages.



He says: "I like to get under the skin of a business, to find out how it operates and learn about its people.

"Doing so provides an understanding of its ways of working, the issues and obstacles they're facing and what they're looking to achieve, which in turn allows for the delivery of bespoke advice.

"Shrewd is an extension of a business' internal team, we care about them as if we were part of the team.

"We pride ourselves on building trust and rapport with businesses, working with owners and management teams to discuss issues openly, and forming unique, longstanding relationships that build the foundations for better HR processes.

"It's so much more than simply doing a piece of work."

Martin adds: "I'm bringing something new to the market with Shrewd, an outsourced HR consultancy working collaboratively with businesses to provide tailored solutions to their unique situations.

"I love reading stories of North East successes and efforts to give our region a thriving economy, and I'm here to put back into that community, by helping its businesses and people prosper."

Shrewd
www.shrewd-hr.co.uk



VIEWPOINT

In the latest instalment of Viewpoint, Brian Palmer, founder of Tharsus Group, tells Steven Hugill about the organisation's recent successes at the North East England Chamber Business Awards, how humans and robots will continue to work together, and why the company - spawned from football pools success - is primed for international expansion.



Tell us a little about Tharsus Group. What are its origins, what do its various companies do, and how many people does it employ?

Tharsus Group was founded in 1964 as The Tharsus Welding & Sheet Metal Company Limited, by three metal workers who had won some money on the football pools.

Tharsus was a mis-spelling of the intended name, which occurred during the printing of the company's letterhead.

Now, 60 years on from what began as a back street metal bashing business, Tharsus Group comprises Tharsus Ltd and Universal Wolf, with 400 people creating products for some of the world's most significant businesses from facilities in Blyth.

Tharsus Ltd designs and makes game-changing advanced machine and robotic solutions for customers in five core sectors: logistics, agritech, medtech, green energy and electrification.

First-of-kind technology developed and scaled by the business, in partnership with customers, is disrupting markets and delivering exponential commercial success all over the world.

The business has also built a strong digital technology capability to unlock ever more powerful innovation, which is enabling customers to tackle some of the world's steepest challenges.

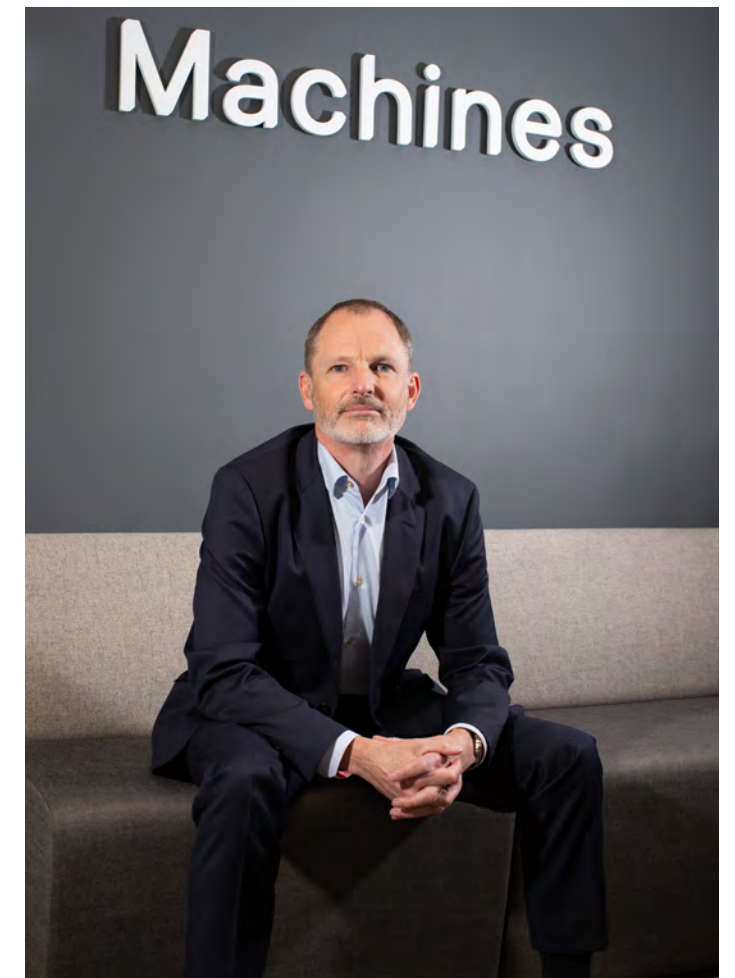
Universal Wolf is a leader in the complex metal fabrication sector.

The business stands out through its ability to onboard first-of-kind products and support them quickly and accurately into scale production for customers.

Universal Wolf works with some of the most important businesses across sectors including security and defence, agriculture and ground care, transport and clean tech.

Tharsus pivoted before the credit crunch to buy an outdoor advertising business. How important was that in making the organisation what it is today?

We created Tharsus Vision just before the financial crisis in 2008, and it completed large-scale projects like illuminated



advertising boxes on the London Underground.

When the outdoor advertising equipment market was severely reduced by the credit crisis, we pivoted, deploying our design and manufacturing capabilities as an integrated service for customers.

And, over time, we have steadily added to our technical capabilities, to become the business we are today.

You're very well known for work with operators like grocery delivery firm Ocado, for whom you have supplied tote handling robots for years. How much does this relationship - and others like it - speak of Tharsus' innovation and manufacturing quality?

Our work with the likes of Ocado - among others - is about supporting them in their pursuit of competitive advantage.

In essence, it is about using machines to solve complex challenges that help



them take giant leaps forward and create significant market capital.

This approach is consistent in our work away from e-commerce, with our deep cross-sector knowledge meaning we are helping to create first-of-kind technologies to revolutionise everything from agritech and healthcare to energy and mobility.

We like to think of ourselves as a team of problem-solvers – designers, engineers and makers all under one roof - working in tandem to deliver excellence and innovation at every stage from concept to manufacture.

What will the future look like? Can we expect to see a continued rise in demand and use of robotics to complete tasks? Will robots take over, or will there be a happy medium of tech and people working together?

Humans are hugely adaptable and capable.

We want to see robotics coming into spaces where we can assist humans, enabling them to move away from repetitive tasks to more complex ones.

Robots will not take over, but rather work in harmony with humans to drive real innovation.

You recently picked up two accolades at the North East England Chamber Business Awards, winning business of the year and larger company of the year. How delighted were you with such recognition, and what does it say about the work you are doing?

We were really thrilled to get the recognition.

We've come a long way since 1964, and have an exciting journey ahead of us.

The sectors we operate in are growing and we are growing with them, delivering economic benefit to our community in the North East.

We've established a strong case, both nationally and internationally, for what the North East and its people have to offer.

You can see this in the calibre of customers turning to us from across the UK, Europe and the US.

This speaks volumes about the quality of our work, and the standards we hold ourselves to.

These awards are for all our colleagues across the group.

How was the first half of 2022, and what progress do you expect to make over the coming months and years?

Our numbers continue to build on our strong performance last year, as existing customer business grows and new customers come on board.

Longer-term, international expansion will be inevitable.

As our list of global customers continues to increase, so too are we building the teams to deliver this.

However, no matter how many countries we have a footprint in, we'll always be rooted in the North East, deeply invested in its strong culture of excellence and innovation.

We are extremely proud to be part of it.



THE IMPORTANCE OF ETHICS

John Devitt, chief executive of leading occupational health expert Recovery4Life, reflects on the recently-held World Mental Health Day, assessing its importance and the vital link between ethical behaviour and employee wellbeing in the workplace.

We live in unstable times.

The global pandemic, Russia's Ukrainian invasion and major domestic political uncertainty and economic strife have all combined to make life tougher for the vast majority.

And, for many of us, it has had a profound effect on our mental health.

The World Health Organisation recognises World Mental Health Day every year, with 2022's edition urging all to 'make mental health and wellbeing for all a global priority'.

Mental health problems exist in our lives, families, workplaces and communities, impacting happiness and causing uncertainty and insecurity.

Yet, despite these challenges, there is much that can be done to make work life, in particular, an enjoyable and fulfilling experience.

Let's face it, we spend a massive proportion of our time working, so it's good to enjoy it.

A proven way to make work life better is for companies to behave in an ethical and responsible manner.

Over the years, we have seen some terrible examples of unethical behaviour, which has caused untold misery and, ultimately, business failure.

The collapse of US commodities and energy services business Enron in the 2000s is a classic example.

Some 20,000 people were employed by the business, with its revenue reaching \$100 billion before its collapse.

It was found to be institutionally fraudulent, with a ruthless and dishonest culture.

Imagine the mental health impact of such an unethical culture on its staff.

Ethics and culture go hand-in-hand; they

are the foundation of workplace health and wellbeing.

Yet, there is much work to be done, as research in the US demonstrates.

According to the 2018 Global Business Ethics Survey, less than one in four US workers thought their company had a 'well-implemented' ethics programme.*

Almost every company now has a business ethics programme.

In part, that's because technology and digital communication have made it easier to identify and publicise ethical mis-steps.

To avoid the negative implications, companies are devoting more resources to business ethics.

In one survey of accountants, for example, 55 per cent said they believed the importance of business ethics would continue to grow over the next three years.

In addition to establishing formal programmes, companies are creating ethical workplaces by hiring the right talent.

High integrity and honesty is the second-most important skill for business leaders, according to another recent survey.

Today's professionals must understand the link between business ethics and business success.

Referring again to the 2018 Global Business Ethics Survey, employees are more likely to apply ethical reasoning when their company clearly demonstrates why business ethics is important, with 99 per cent of US employees who had experienced a strong ethics culture saying they would be prepared to handle ethical issues.

Companies that advocate for business ethics motivate their employees to perform their roles with integrity.

The 'great resignation' and the global skills shortage mean this is no longer a

'tick-box' item to keep shareholders happy, but an essential tool for attracting and retaining talent.

The first step in building this kind of ethical culture is to create an ethics programme.

According to the US Department of Commerce, a complete ethics programme should touch on all business functions, including operations, human resources, marketing and, most importantly, how a company looks after the health and wellbeing of its people.

The global research company Gartner advises companies to integrate their ethics programme with business operations, saying it can maximise a programme's impact by making ethical processes part of employees' workflow.

But it has to go further than this.

Here at Recovery4Life, we often see people whose mental and physical health has been affected by unethical workplace culture and practice.

Quite often, this is not intentional but a reflection of business pressures clouding values and purpose.

The impact, nevertheless, can be stark.

The types of bad behaviour are multivarious – from setting unreasonable targets, to ignoring welfare issues and bullying.

However, without clearly stated visions and values, which are culturally embedded, the potential toll on mental and physical health will always be a concern in any business – and talent will vote with its feet.

Here at Recovery4Life, we look at four key areas when advising clients on their health and wellbeing strategies and programmes – vision, mission, culture and climate.

These four key areas, and the operating principles which underpin them (our



John Devitt, Recovery4Life chief executive

'pillars'), will be different in each company, taking into account their unique cultures and the sectors in which they operate.

But the combination of the four principles and how 'real' they are in operational terms will dictate how a company manages risk and supports its people.

Using such clear guidelines allows us to do the very best for our clients and our people.

If we look at where problems emerge in

any business, and its impact on the health and wellbeing of employees, you will see a disconnect between what a company says it believes/does and the reality.

For us, ethics is not a county in the south of England or a reality TV show, but the guiding principle which allows us to build trust with all our stakeholders.

[@Recovery4LifeNE](http://www.recovery4life.co.uk)

Our vision, mission, culture and climate

Vision: To transform the health and wellbeing of the workplace and the lives of the people who work there

Mission: Managing risk, supporting your people

Our culture:

- Open
- Flexible and friendly
- Supportive and empathetic
- Positive
- Constructive challenge
- We go the extra mile

Our climate:

- Focused
- Supportive
- Driven
- Engaged
- Fearless
- Passionate

These areas are then underpinned by six key pillars for our business, which are:

- Ethics
- Relationships based on trust
- Clinical excellence in all that we do
- Solution focused – however complex
- Continuous improvement through training and supervision
- Integrated governance

Reference: *University of Redlands business and society blog



PLANNING FOR UNCERTAINTY

With the UK having undergone its second Budget in as many months, Rhiannon Bearne, North East England Chamber of Commerce director of policy and representation, lays out priorities for the Government to boost the region's commercial and social environments, and highlights the Chamber's ongoing work to ensure the area prospers in 2023 and beyond.



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Right now

With barely a pause for breath, the Chamber team has moved from assessing one set of Government priorities to analysing a whole new collection.

The November 17 fiscal statement had a tone and tenor that was very different to September's short and sharp iteration.

With that in mind, the Chamber has been working directly with the Government, and alongside the British Chambers of Commerce too, to restate three vital priorities for the North East.

The first is practical, proportionate action to tackle inflation.

It is of no surprise, given the economic headwinds of 2022, that the Chamber's most recent Quarterly Economic Survey shows North East businesses' number one current concern is inflation.

In response, we have asked the Government to adjust business rates to compensate for other cost impacts, such as increased energy bills.

We have also asked the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to consider suspending the planned April 2023 review of business rates for 12 months.

This would allow the UK's inflationary position to settle, and we have also highlighted that any adjustment must not have a detrimental effect on local government returns.

Secondly, we have reinforced the message that action on business must be coupled with action for people and communities.

The cost of living and the cost of doing business crises are two sides of the same coin.

So we have urged the Government to ensure benefits rise with inflation in April 2023, protecting the most vulnerable from the worst effects of inflation.

Crucially, this intervention would help provide support to people on low incomes who are in work, not just those out of work – a priority for the North East.



Finally, supporting an extended devolution settlement for the north of our region would give the whole of the North East greater power and opportunity to act in the country's interests.

The business community in the North East has been united in this call throughout 2022: action by the Government now is the key to unlocking a huge amount of energy and opportunity.

What unites these three priorities is a solid body of economic thought.

Significant numbers of businesses failing and households falling into deeper poverty is a credible fear this winter.

Investing in these drivers of economic resilience now will allow the region and the country to weather the storms ahead.

Looking ahead

At the time of writing, just before the fiscal statement's unveiling, Austerity 2.0 appeared highly likely, as the Chancellor and the Government address the twin challenges of a large deficit and growing inflation.

But with rising child poverty, higher than average levels of economic inactivity and below average levels of health and wealth, the North East risks being particularly exposed by further public sector spending cuts.

Our members tell us this affects them in a range of subtle ways.

It is not simply the obvious – less money for investment or business support – it is also the hidden impacts, such as planning decisions taking longer as departments are under-resourced.

Therefore, we will be advocating to protect the funding of public services wherever possible.

Doing so will shore up the region now, as well as in the long-term.

The North East, and its many businesses, charities and public bodies, is at the forefront of national conversations about creating a more inclusive economy.

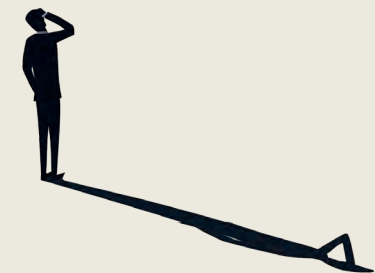
In simple terms, that means an economy which works for all, one where long-standing gaps in the outcomes for businesses and people are identified and addressed.

In our region, there is a clear consensus that social and economic policy cannot be easily separated.

That makes it one of the most progressive places to be in the UK right now, even as we face an unprecedented set of challenges.

Using this optimism, openness and creativity will be one of the most important tools we have to thrive in 2023.

And it will remain the Chamber's main message whatever comes off the back of the fiscal statement.





ACCELERATE YOUR CAREER WITH AN ONLINE MBA

Durham University Business School graduate Robin Hume (pictured, top right) has used his online MBA to accelerate his career progression. Here, he discusses the learning opportunities presented by his studies.

**Robin Hume, Durham University
Business School graduate**
www.durham.ac.uk/online-mba/

Briefly outline your career history to date

While studying for my undergraduate degree at Northumbria University, I completed a placement year at PSA Peugeot-Citroen, which gave me an insight into corporate life.

Upon graduating, I took the position of information systems manager for the national education charity SGOS.

Following this, I moved to Datum360 as a project consultant, working with energy and process companies across Europe, Australia, North America, Asia and the Middle East.

I then moved to US software company Bentley Systems, initially as a senior consultant, and then senior product manager.

I moved to Capgemini Invent last year, as a managing consultant in the energy and utilities team, and I'm very excited about the challenges ahead.

Why did you decide to pursue an online MBA at Durham University Business School?

Durham University's reputation was impossible to ignore when comparing MBA programmes, and it was underlined after I visited DUBS and met the academic and programme staff.

The course struck me as being very well thought out with a view towards mixing traditional management disciplines (such as finance and people management) with forward-looking modules such as technology innovation and business analytics.

The flexibility to study some modules in person was also a key reason for choosing this course over similar programmes.

Why did you decide to study an online MBA over the in-person equivalent?

I was very pleased with my career

progression before joining the MBA, and therefore did not want to pause this while studying.

Completing the online MBA also provides the opportunity to apply the learning into 'live' situations, which enabled it to quickly become part of my everyday work.

I could see tangible and continuous improvements in my own performance.

How did you incorporate the skills you were learning in the online MBA into your career?

Studying the online MBA provides the tools for structuring your thoughts and approaches to tasks and challenges.

And I found this to be something I could quickly incorporate into my day-to-day work.

Being able to structure my strategic thinking in a way which allows me to consider all necessary aspects, as well as communicate my conclusions clearly, has made a big difference.

I have been very fortunate through my MBA journey, and after graduation, to have been able to work for organisations which encourage the asking of questions and challenge convention.

This has made it much easier to put my learnings into practice and continue to grow.

Did you see a noticeable difference in your career after studying the Durham Online MBA?

I was happy with my professional growth from a technical point of view before choosing to pursue the MBA, however, I wanted to progress into management positions in the short and medium-term.

To this end, I believe the MBA has had a marked impact.

It has given me the tools to lead with much greater impact and, as a result, I have



progressed more quickly than I would have otherwise.

The other benefit the MBA provides is confidence.

The structured thinking allows me to understand information more quickly and ask more pointed questions.

Having developed and practiced these skills in the course's safe environment, and tested them incrementally as I studied, I'm now much more comfortable in situations where I do not have in-depth knowledge.

Did you attend any of the Business School's networking events while studying? Did the networking opportunities at the school influence your career?

I attended networking events among cohorts before the pandemic, and the Business School was fantastic with keeping these going virtually through lockdowns.

I found them to be very beneficial and learned a lot from fellow students with varied backgrounds and careers.

When applying to join Capgemini Invent, I contacted a fellow student who had worked there in the past.

His honest and detailed advice convinced me to progress the application and, when I had accepted the offer of a role, he put me in contact with some of his former colleagues who were still at the company.

This helped build my internal Capgemini Invent network before I had even started!

Are there any other ways the Durham Online MBA benefited your career?

Studying the has connected me with people who live all over the world and come from different backgrounds, but share common aims of growth, continuous improvement and business excellence.

This feeds into the culture of encouragement and collaboration the Business School fosters within a cohort, and

between others too.

I feel as though I could work in the US, Australia, Nigeria, China, the UAE and many other countries, and have a network of peers I could call on for advice.

If I needed help, I have built friendships with experts in tech, finance, consulting, engineering and more, and I would be very comfortable calling them if I needed guidance, and would be very happy for them to do the same with me.

Durham University Business School and



my employer Capgemini Invent, have a global mindset - which I value immensely.

To find out more about Durham MBAs or to attend one of their open days visit www.durham.ac.uk/business/events/



HELPING YOUR PEOPLE NOW: PRACTICAL TOOLKITS FOR EMPLOYERS

With many people facing increasing cashflow headaches as autumn turns to winter, Marianne O'Sullivan, North East England Chamber of Commerce policy manager, highlights new measures the member organisation has taken to help businesses support employees' financial wellbeing through the darker months.



Marianne O'Sullivan
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@NEEChamber

Financial wellbeing will be a particularly important issue for employers with the rising cost of living putting increased pressure on organisations.

In our last Quarterly Economic Survey, more than 90 per cent of businesses said inflation and energy prices were of significant concern.

Inflation is also placing increased financial pressure on employees, alongside energy bills, which have grown significantly in 2022.

Data from the Money and Pensions Service shows 48 per cent of people in the North East with bills or credit commitments struggled to keep up, or even fell behind, in 2021.

This was a particularly growing problem for young adults and renters.

Other groups facing financial pressure included people on lower incomes, those experiencing mental health problems, disabled people and those from a minoritised ethnic background.

The Money and Pensions Service also found 53 per cent of the working age population didn't have a plan for retirement, and 30 per cent couldn't pay an unexpected bill of £300 from spare money or affordable borrowing.

Furthermore, it said 13 per cent of people in the region often used a credit card, overdraft or borrowed money to buy food or pay bills, because they had run short of cash.

The North East also saw the UK's largest increase in child poverty from 2014/15 to 2019/20, so the cost of living crisis is likely to have a



further negative impact on children in the region.

Sadly, the number of people struggling is only likely to increase due to the high rates of inflation and other economic pressures this autumn.

This is a particular concern for the North East where, compared with the rest of the UK, there are more people defined as financially 'struggling', and fewer defined as 'cushioned' from financial shocks.

Given these challenges, it is more important than ever that employers take measures to support staff and their financial wellbeing.

That's why the North East England Chamber of Commerce is working with the Money and Pensions Service to put together some easy-to-use resources for businesses to share with employees, to help provide support and access to expert advice.

They include everything from advice sessions for employees through to links, hints and tips to help everyone start to feel a little more financially secure.

You can download the toolkit and find out much more at www.moneyandpensionsservice.org.uk

We have also put together a Good Work toolkit, with examples of best practice around pay and progression, life-long learning and work/life balance.

With nearly seven in ten UK employers believing staff performance is negatively affected when employees are under financial pressure, increasing productivity through Good Work practices can help retain staff, both now and in the future.

At the Chamber, we will continue to work with our members, as well as the British Chambers of Commerce network and the Government, to highlight the importance of these issues.

However, we hope the new addition to our range of employer-friendly toolkits will help businesses in the North East - large and small - take simple, practical steps to support the financial wellbeing of their employees now, and really make a difference in 2023.





THE REGION'S LARGEST INDUSTRIAL PARK JUST GOT BIGGER

County Durham's commercial environment has expanded after work was completed on units at Newton Aycliffe's Station Place. Here, Business Durham, the business support service of Durham County Council, highlights the economic and employment potential of the development.

Work on a £4.8 million County Durham industrial scheme that will create more than 130 jobs is now complete and ready for tenants to move in.

Ten industrial units at Station Place, in Newton Aycliffe, have been built, representing more than 50,500sq ft of space.

Designed to support new and expanding businesses, the units vary in size up to 8,700sq ft, and are available for occupation immediately.

Station Place is part of the wider £90 million Merchant Park industrial scheme – a 65-acre development at Aycliffe Business Park, located off junction 59 of the A1(M).

The park is home to more than 500 companies employing around 10,000 people, including international firms such as Hitachi Rail, Husqvarna, 3M, Gestamp and Lidl.

As the biggest single employment area in the North East, and one of the largest business parks in the UK, Aycliffe Business Park is a strategically important site for economic development within County Durham and the wider North East.

Durham County Council has agreed a 35-year lease to support the development of the industrial units.

Managed by Business Durham, the business support service of the council, the units are part of its extensive industrial property portfolio.

The development was delivered in partnership with Merchant Anglo and Rokeby Developments.

Businesses taking up the units will benefit from the convenience of being in a newly-built facility.

In addition, all units have a 'B' energy efficiency rating, so businesses can enjoy lower utility bills and reduced maintenance costs.

There is also capability to install electric car charging points and superfast fibre optic broadband within all units.

Councillor James Rowlandson, cabinet member for resources, investment and assets at Durham County Council, says: "We're thrilled to see the development of Station Place come to fruition.

"It will add much needed growth space to this strategically important hub, and bring genuine added value to the regional economy.

"Our Business Durham team looks forward to welcoming new tenants to the units and supporting their growth.

"Station Place is part of Durham County Council's £2 billion programme of investment, either planned or underway, and our ambitious ten-year economic strategy, which is helping make the county an ideal location for investment and development."



Geoff Hunton, director at Merchant Anglo, says: "Demand for quality industrial property has remained high in the area, with a renewed focus on expansion and the need to futureproof supply chains in the post-pandemic era.

"There's also continued high demand due to changes in the market caused by COVID-19, growing online demand and Brexit."

Adrian Goodhall, of Rokeby Developments, the development manager for Merchant Anglo, adds: "In addition to having fantastic access to key road, rail, air and sea links, businesses at Station Place will be part of a thriving employment hub that caters for a wide variety of industries.

"We expect to see strong demand for these high-quality units."

To book a viewing or find out more, visit www.stationplace.co.uk

Business Durham
www.businessdurham.co.uk
@_BusinessDurham



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www.stationplace.co.uk

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LEADING LIGHTS

When Chloë Clover and Lou Tonner returned from a once-in-a-lifetime Australasian adventure, they did so with more than memories and photographs. With their trip having exposed tourism businesses lack of marketing focus on the modern-day traveller, the duo brought back with them plans to revolutionise the world of commercial content and social media management. The result was Middlesbrough-based Wander Films, which today employs nearly 20 staff and works with clients from regional operators to those gracing the international stage. Here, Steven Hugill speaks to Chloë to learn more about the business' inception, its game-changing production values and why it is primed to continue its growth.

Anyone who's anyone in the world of skateboarding has an 'Ollie' in their locker. Board and rider connected as one in mid-air, it's the move that, once conquered, paves the way for even greater four-wheeled trickery.

To perform an 'Ollie' is to push off and take a leap of faith that quickly transposes into nervous suspension before the all-important landing.

As a principle, it's not too dissimilar from entering the world of business.

To begin a commercial venture is to take a huge jump into the unknown, where the virtues of perseverance and self-belief are critical tools in overcoming uncertainty and setting the foundations for future development.

Relief then, that Chloë Clover and Lou Tonner are as masterful in the office as they are on their boards.

Today, Wander Films, their content creation and social media management business spawned during an extended trip to Australasia in 2017, is growing rapidly.

Now operating from headquarters on Middlesbrough's Albert Road, having outgrown the Middlehaven-based Boho 5 development, the business lists work with household names such as 'big four' accountancy firm KPMG and the BBC, and has nearly 20 staff.

And, says Chloë - who was last year included in the revered Forbes 30 Under 30 watchlist - it has no intention of slowing down.

"There are some huge plans ahead," says Chloë, a skateboarder - complete with Wander sticker - resting in a unit over her shoulder.

She adds: "We are expanding the team, and there are so many things on the horizon.

"Things are going to explode - and what is fantastic is that we now have our own place for them to do so.

"It's a listed building that's got real art deco vibes to it; it's a really cool space.

"We had almost all of the fourth floor in Boho 5 - we started in one room and got more and more space - but it was never ours.

"We looked for the perfect place for a long time, and now we've found it.



"We've made a big investment to bring our team together, creating a space where we can grow, where there is energy and where our people can collaborate, which is what we're all about.

"This time last year, we had 13 people. "We're now up to 18, and there are more roles we're ready to look for," adds Chloë, who picked up the Emerging Talent Award at the recent Entrepreneurs' Forum North East Entrepreneurial Awards.

The scene is a long way - both physically and metaphorically - from the days of their Australasian adventure when Chloë and Lou, armed with a Panasonic G7 camera, laptop and their Penny skateboards, discovered a market niche that would take them from backpackers to business owners.

After working on a production set in Sydney, the duo moved across Asia, helping tourism businesses produce and promote enlivened video content that replaced the traditional with the trendy and, crucially, resonated with modern-day social media audiences.

And it had a huge impact. Returning from their trip - which also took in Cambodia, Vietnam and Thailand - with plentiful passport stamps and photographs, they came back too laden with plans for a commercial venture, which began in a bedroom in Chloë's parents' Redcar home.

Supported by Teesside University's Launchpad business accelerator programme to secure take-off funding, Chloë and Lou quickly trademarked the 'Beat The Scroll' slogan.

A reflection of their fresher, modern and more edgy production principles, it immediately struck a chord with organisations wanting - and needing - to capture and maintain attention in the instant gratification world.

And with the COVID-19 pandemic having radically altered the working environment, principally the empowerment of employees, Wander's momentum is now increasing further.

Chloë says: "We are really good at culture content.

"Yes, we produce advertisements, intro vids, social management and other things like that, but what we are really good at is showing brands' personalities.

"We are great at reflecting what the big corporates feel like and why people would want to work with them, which are the questions people are asking in what is a

wild business landscape. "It's so difficult to recruit at present; the talent pool is spread so much wider because people can work with a firm based anywhere in the world now. "Employees are no longer limited to choosing between the five firms closest to them, they can work for someone in San Francisco from their front room," says Chloë.

She adds: "And it's not about salary, either. "Companies need to do more to attract people, to show they're a really fun space, that they care about people, that what they do is different, that the life elements they offer are better - and that is where Wander comes in.

"Businesses come to us because we're fun, we're different and we break through; we speak to people on a 'people level'.

"A lot of companies understand business, but they don't necessarily have that same level of connection to people, and that is where we help them."

The art of relationship building to which Chloë refers acts as another crucial element in Wander's success story, with her and Lou's bond a golden thread running through the business.

For many, the prospect of working alongside their life partner would be unsustainable, but, says Chloë, her and Lou's closeness is perpetually sparking "a fire to go out and succeed".

She says: "Every day is definitely a pinch me moment when it comes to the progress we've made, but not because we didn't believe we could do it.

"There are so many reasons why we've got to where we are, and where we want to go.

"And one of the key reasons is that Lou and I have always had this unshakable belief in each other and what we can do together.

"Our relationship is like our secret sauce," laughs Chloë.

She adds: "We live and breathe it - it isn't a business for us, it is our whole life together.

"There are times when we think, 'oh my days, what is going on!?', but we're so focused on where we want to be.

"People say, 'how do you spend that much time together?', and I get where they are coming from.

"But for us, spending time together while growing our future is the absolute dream."

www.wander-films.co.uk
[@WANDER_FILMS_UK](https://www.instagram.com/wander_films_uk)





AD GEFRIN RAISES THE STANDARD

For co-founders Alan and Eileen Ferguson, it seems like a million decisions ago that they revealed their plans to create a world-class Anglo-Saxon museum and whisky distillery in Wooler, Northumberland. But with Táchbora - Ad Gefrin's first whisky blend - now on the market, the dream is very much a tangible reality.

Táchbora - meaning standard bearer in Old English - literally heralds the great things to come from this remarkable venture.

The museum and distillery (with associated bistro, retail, private dining, tours and events) will open to the public next spring.

In the meantime, this inaugural blend is an early emissary for all that Ad Gefrin stands for in ancient Northumbrian hospitality.

The inspiration for Ad Gefrin comes from the summer palace of the seventh century kings and queens of Northumbria.

Unearthed by archaeologists just outside Wooler in the 1950s and 1960s, the find, which included royal buildings and a wooden grandstand, is regarded as one of the most significant of the last century.

This truly was a Golden Age; a time when kings were judged on their generosity not their wealth, where kingdoms were of people not geography, when women were equal and diversity was welcomed.

It was also a time when people travelled from across Europe, Scandinavia and the globe to be present at the royal court - making Northumbria a centre of world culture.

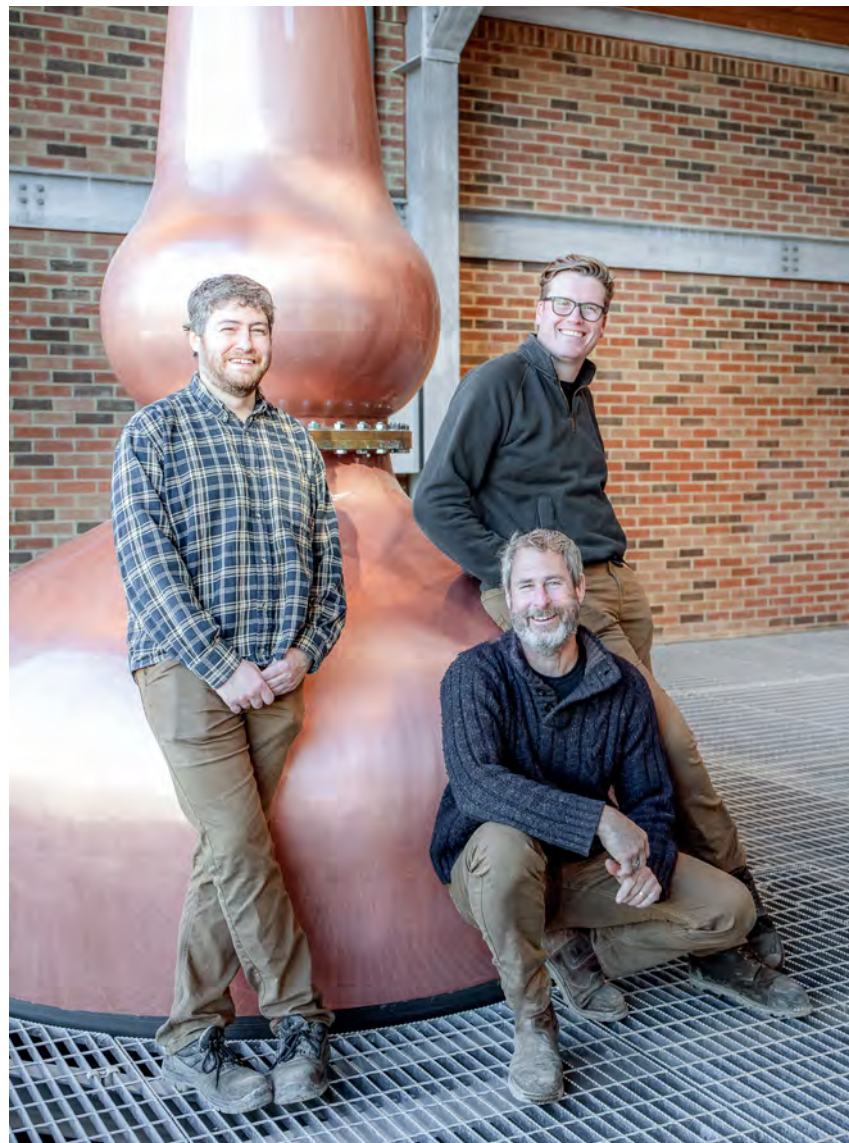
Echoing this coming together of diverse nations, each edition of Táchbora will blend whiskies that represent the peoples of the Kingdom of Northumbria.

While Scottish and Irish whiskies are the signature for this first release, English and Scandinavian whiskies will feature in the future.

The ambition to bring people together, creating memorable moments that matter, is close to the heart of Eileen Ferguson, in particular.

She says: "For me, it's all about community, and celebrating the welcome that only Northumbrians can offer."

Ad Gefrin is a genuine regeneration effort; a catalyst for positive change that aims to revitalise the local community and



Ad Gefrin's distillery team (picture: Sally Ann Norman)

put Wooler on the map.

This personal, multi-million-pound investment is born out of a desire to create a visitor destination that is meaningful,

enduring and creates jobs.

Eileen says: "Our collective ambition is to give something wonderful back to our roots, into an area that has given us so

much, to put the heart back into a community that has almost been forgotten.

"I get quite emotional when I look at the site, because I truly believe we can be a catalyst for change.

"Our aspiration is to build a destination that reawakens pride in our Northumbrian heritage and sparks a new 'golden' age of optimism for the future."

That sense of community and optimism is already in evidence.

The local community, in particular, has offered its heartfelt support, but even those farther afield have been infected by the positive ambition of the project.

Alan and Eileen have been overwhelmed by the response to the launch of their founder membership package Corenkyn, which means chosen family.

They expected it would be primarily whisky drinkers that wished to invest in their journey, but it is clear the majority are investing in so much more, that they too want to be part of building something that leaves a legacy for North Northumberland.

Mark Robson, director of Particularly Good Potatoes, in Wooler, and a Corenkyn member, captures this.

He says: "Being part of the Ad Gefrin journey is a great way to support our community through business growth.

"We've learnt through the lessons of the recent past that we are stronger together."

Laurence Woolford, also an early Corenkyn member, agrees, adding: "This is a great and fun way to put so much back into a community."

Ad Gefrin's first international Corenkyn member was Mark Murray, who lives 10,000 miles away in Australia.

He says: "I am very proud of my Northumbrian roots, and my immediate family are still in the Glendale locality.

"The last time I was home I drove past the derelict yard, so when I returned recently, I was blown away to see how it has been transformed.

"I couldn't miss the chance to become a founding member of the first Northumbrian whisky distillery located in my hometown."

Honouring their values, it was with their Corenkyn and local community that Alan and Eileen, alongside the Ad Gefrin team, shared the first taste of Táchbora before it was publicly launched.

(Early bird offers are just one of the many benefits that Corenkyn enjoy).

And the collective response has been a massive thumbs-up.

What has been created is a highly palatable blend, which is accessible to those new to whisky but also gives the more seasoned whisky drinker something to pique their interest.

Using whiskies that have been aged in Northumberland in Virgin American Oak casks and Oloroso Sherry casks provides a balance of vanilla sweet notes with dried fruit and spice on the finish.

And everyone now has the chance to share the same experience.

Táchbora is available to purchase online, and further details of how to become a Corenkyn member can also be found on Ad Gefrin's website.



Ad Gefrin co-founders Eileen and Alan Ferguson



Ad Gefrin's Táchbora, which means standard bearer in Old English

Ad Gefrin
www.adgefrin.co.uk



10 QUESTIONS

In the latest instalment of CONTACT's 10 Questions feature, Mahmoud Elsaid, managing director of Newcastle-based creative technology agency LamasaTech, talks about his career to date and the success of the company, which earlier this year picked up the exporter of the year accolade at the North East England Chamber Business Awards.

Mahmoud Elsaid
www.lamasatech.com/
LinkedIn: www.linkedin.com/in/elsaid/



What did you want to be growing up?

I wanted to develop a self-driving car.
I find it so exciting to follow companies like Tesla and Google as they push to perfect this technology. I didn't quite go in that direction, but I do develop innovative technology solutions for other industries. I live and breathe technology, and I absolutely love what I do.

What was your first break in business?

There are two pivotal moments that stand out for me.
My first big break was when I was working as a consultant for various large IT and telecommunications companies. My input helped these high-calibre businesses improve their internal operations.
I realised then the true value of what I could offer, and how I could scale this into a successful business.
The other moment was with LamasaTech during the pandemic, which led to us receiving the North East England Chamber of Commerce award.
We ran with an idea for a new product, which was completely unheard of at the time - our temperature measurement kiosk - with the hypothesis that it would be incredibly useful for organisations to mitigate COVID-19 risk.
I remember when online sales started to climb, and we started working with market leaders across the globe, such as Yamaha Motor Corp.
It was a fantastic moment; I knew then we had established LamasaTech as an industry leader.

What has been your career highlight to date?

Building such a great team, which cares about the company vision, has been the biggest highlight.
If you have a team that truly cares about the business and wants to see it succeed, you'll see the benefits.
If you can build a strong team of people you trust, everything else will follow and fall into place.

What has been your biggest challenge in business?

Trust.
The thing I look forward to the most is getting customers to the stage where they trust what you will deliver.
This takes quite a long time to build.
A lot of the success we've had is because we've now achieved a level of trust that goes hand-in-hand with the brand and reputation we've built.
Customers and partners will come to us with orders and won't have any concerns over what is going to be delivered because they trust us.
Reaching this stage is when you will truly become successful.

How do you motivate your team?

As a very goal-oriented organisation, setting SMART targets works really well as a motivator.
When the team can see what their work has delivered, and how it's helped the business to hit its targets, it's a huge boost.
Being able to say that by delivering a certain project, the business has seen a certain result, is tremendously rewarding.
Many incentives provide a short-term boost to motivation, but seeing the results of your work gives the team the ambition to keep driving forward.

MAHMOUD ELSAID



As a businessperson, who or what inspires you?

Success in general, rather than money.
If you succeed in business, then money will come in time.
The biggest motivation for me is focusing on a goal and making sure we hit it.
That often comes in the form of designing the most innovative product in the market.
I get the biggest sense of achievement when customers tell us a product is fantastic, and how it helps them. That inspires and drives me forward.
Rather than being inspired by a particular person, I found that visualising my goals has put me in a better position than I ever dreamed of.

How do you achieve a good work/life balance? Has the pandemic changed your ethos around this?

It may sound cliché, but if you do something you love, it doesn't feel like work.
It's really important to have passions outside of work, whatever they may be.
These hobbies will allow you to show up at work as the best version of yourself, whether that's because you have let off some steam, or because you've chosen to rest and relax.

Tell us about LamasaTech. What are the company's origins, what does it do, and what are its goals and objectives?

We started by developing products that were way ahead of the curve at the time.
We had the first multi-touch table in an era of single-touch screens, and the first mobile ordering app before any of the current big hitters arrived.
We deliver technology solutions that help customers automate and streamline processes, engage customers and increase revenue.
Our current goal is to transform the digital display industry by taking advantage of the gaps we've seen in the market.

As you mention above, the business previously devised temperature measurement kiosks to support the battle against COVID-19. What did this pivot involve, and has it led to further developments across the company?

We've always worked in the visitor sign-in technology market.
When COVID-19 hit, we found taking temperatures was quite a big challenge for many businesses.
We responded by adding temperature measurement and mask detection to our visitor management system.
These updates were implemented into our visitor sign-in kiosks shortly after the pandemic began, and little did we know it seemed like the whole world wanted it.

What did it mean to be named export business of the year at the North East England Chamber Business Awards? And how much did the firm enjoy representing the region in the finals of the British Chamber of Commerce Awards?

Everyone at LamasaTech works incredibly hard, and for that to be recognised is so uplifting.
At the time, we weren't thinking about what it would mean for us in the future, we were simply trying to provide the best product that we could to solve our customers' pain point.
To then be named the export business of the year for the North East was testament to the determination and dedication of the whole team, and it means a lot.
It's given everyone a huge boost.
It was a real honour to take part in the British Chamber of Commerce awards.





CREATING A LANDSCAPE THAT BENEFITS ALL

As the North East England Chamber of Commerce's policy and representation director, Rhiannon Bearne is at the heart of moves to engineer positive change for members. Here, she tells Steven Hugill more about her role, her plans to deliver more opportunities and growth for the region, and what she sees as the headline objectives facing new Prime Minister Rishi Sunak.

Rhiannon Bearne
North East England Chamber of
Commerce policy and representation
director

You were appointed earlier this year as the Chamber's policy and representation director. How have you settled into your position?

I joined in late spring, which was an ideal time as, from week one, I was out and about meeting members from Teesside right up to Northumberland.

I've especially enjoyed meeting members from sectors like engineering and manufacturing, and digital – industries which I've had less experience of in my previous roles.

The Chamber's Policy and Knowledge team also comes with a first-class reputation, and it has been a genuine pleasure to join them.

I've learnt such a lot from my colleagues Rachel, Marianne, Callum and Tom, who all bring their different specialisms, expertise and styles to our work.

Joining such a brilliant bunch has been a great privilege – especially as we deal with some big challenges for our business community, like inflation and the cost of living crisis.

Tell us a little more about your role. What do you do, and how do you help members?

My role combines policy and representation, and that combination is particularly important.

It is only by talking, sharing and learning from the Chamber's nearly 2500 members – across all sizes and scales of business –

that we can influence policy for the benefit of everyone in the North East.

As a policy team, we combine independent research, like our Quarterly Economic Survey, with insight and analysis drawn from a number of geographic and sector forums with our members and wider stakeholders.

We then use this rich mix of views and experiences to influence change nationally – through our wider British Chambers of Commerce network, and relationships with government departments and politicians across all parties, both regionally and nationally.

Of course, we also use media channels – print, broadcast and social – to campaign for the things that matter to our members and the North East.

Your CV features time as an inclusive economy adviser at the North of Tyne Combined Authority, and head of policy at national charity Changing Lives. How are you bringing those experiences to bear at the Chamber?

I firmly believe people are at the heart of great places, strong businesses and thriving economies.

Employers know this intuitively: I'm told time and time again by members how their staff and customers are central to success.

Working with people using services at Changing Lives, I saw how difficult life experiences could have long-term impacts, like unemployment.



This is bad for the individual, their community and the region at large.

The North of Tyne Combined Authority was one of the first mayoral authorities to focus on inclusive growth – addressing the long-standing gaps in learning, earning, jobs and outcomes for women, people from minoritised ethnic backgrounds, deaf or disabled people, or those experiencing poverty.

This is because evidence shows a more inclusive economy is a more successful economy.

So, at the Chamber, I'm using experience and insight to work with members on a plan that delivers just that – more opportunities, for more people, creating more growth.

That's not without obvious challenges in 2022, but I firmly believe – guided by our members – that profit with a purpose is the future for successful, sustainable business in the North East.

The business landscape is in a constant state of flux, with the legacy of Brexit and the pandemic being compounded by inflationary pressures and a cost of living crisis. How are you – and the Chamber more widely – tailoring support to ensure members have the best possible chance to succeed in such an environment?

We start by putting our members' views and voice at the centre of everything we do, so that we properly understand the day-to-day issues and pressures they are facing.

My team then works very closely with the Chamber's brilliant membership directorate, led by Jen Rycroft, on tailored responses.

Recently, these have included practical training events on topics like leading through uncertainty or the value of networking.

Our members have also shaped a number of partner projects, including recent reports exploring business development and the future of work.

We also make sure our conversations with members are broad and deep – involving, for example, members of our new Future Leaders Forum, to provide insights from the next generation of business leaders.

We also work with specialist partners to deliver practical products and services we know can make a difference right now.



You can read more about our recent collaboration with the Money and Pensions Service, to produce a financial wellbeing toolkit helping businesses assist their staff with the cost of living, on pages 36 and 37.

With a new leadership team having now swept into Downing Street, what are the key action points you believe the Prime Minister must prioritise to help the North East – and thereby Chamber members – flourish?

Prime Minister Sunak's appointment brought welcome stability to the markets and wider policy environment.

However, the problems facing his predecessor have not gone away – growing inflation, challenges in the energy markets and an overall cost of living squeeze.

Our most recent Quarterly Economic Survey of business conditions found all three at the top of members' lists of concerns.

The Autumn Statement will be a crucial opportunity to address this, and give people and businesses the certainty they need to plan for the coming months.

What is critical now is that, amid challenging economic conditions nationally and internationally, the Government does not lose sight of the three main priorities for our members and the wider North East.

Firstly, a renewed focus on levelling up – for business, people and place right across the region.

Secondly, funding and support in the foundational policy areas of skills, infrastructure and public investment, which we know are central to a thriving North East economy.

We welcome the Government's commitment to supporting the most vulnerable, and are looking forward to policies which deliver this intent for businesses and households.

Finally, we want to see support to extend and deepen devolution across the region, building on recent developments across the North and Teesside.

The power to do things ourselves is the philosophy that the North East England Chamber of Commerce was founded on – and it is now more important than ever.



A PERFECT PLATFORM FOR PROGRESS

The North East England Chamber of Commerce's engineering and manufacturing forum is helping businesses navigate turbulent times by finding fresh ways to flourish. Here, as the venture celebrates its first anniversary, Steven Hugill speaks to chair - and Clearly Drinks' chief executive - Mick Howard about its progress, how it is creating a bridge to success, and why its influence is set to grow further.

www.neechamber.co.uk
@NEEChamber

Tell us a little about the forum. Why was it founded, and what are its aims and objectives?

There are a lot of common interests, challenges, opportunities and risks out there and, as a region, we can be stronger if we face into them together.

To that end, the forum is a great platform, helping meet strategic aims on a day-to-day basis, from the shop floor upwards, by solving problems collectively.

How does the forum help members?

One of the key benefits is networking.

This region is steeped in industry, so we have excellent knowledge and expertise.

We shouldn't be shy about learning from each other - we should all be an open book, and this forum is just that.

It helps members find solutions to problems and challenges, and take advantage of best practice.

We don't all do the same thing, but ideas are common to us all.

Ultimately, you don't know what you don't know, and multiple heads are always better than one, which is where the forum comes in.

And, crucially, it isn't exclusive - members include AV Dawson and Fujifilm Diosynth Biotechnologies - but everyone is welcome, whether they are a small, medium or large business.

And there are learnings across each level.

The larger, corporate firms have established, structured processes, but you equally learn as much from the smaller

businesses, which are at the grassroots and forcing their way through.

When you look at SMEs, there is a real level of entrepreneurship, and they don't carry the same constraints as a corporate.

There is a real dynamism, which is very inspiring.

What areas does the forum cover?

We have a very broad agenda.

We've covered driver shortages, looking at how companies innovated to address the situation, and worked too to understand how businesses have navigated the pandemic.

And in the post-Brexit world, we've focused on the pressures around recruitment, staff retention and people development, and the importance of offering employees valuable propositions that offset the risk of turnover and attrition.

The latter is certainly an area we can all learn more about.

Another area of focus is how businesses have advanced their capabilities through embracing technological advances, and where that could benefit others.

To what extent is the forum using the Chamber's expert knowledge and insight to further drive member progress?

We see the policy work the Chamber delivers on our behalf, so appreciate what is out there for businesses and how best it can work for them, whether they are domestic or international traders.

Our position allows us to better



understand the cogs that are turning in the Chamber's team, and how we can tap into those to better support members.

Without being part of the forum, companies are missing out on huge opportunities.

With the forum having hit its first anniversary, how do you assess its progress - and what about its future?

The challenge when we launched, owing to the pandemic, was that it was all virtual.

That, of course, limited interaction but we're now back to face-to-face conversations, and the more time we spend together, the more open and free-flowing conversations become.

And I can only see the forum growing in stature.

There is an ever-developing community, and it's definitely a fantastic grounding to flourish upon.

I've worked across the world for corporate companies, and feel very fortunate to have come back to the North East and to be raising the flag for this region.

I'm extremely proud of this area and want to see it thrive, and the forum is a perfect platform for it to do so.

There is never a stupid idea or question, and the more people we can get involved with the forum, the greater the opportunities.

All it takes is for someone to walk away with one key note, or a piece of inspiration, and the forum has made a positive difference.



Mick Howard, Clearly Drinks chair and chief executive



NORTH AND STANDARD – FACING THE FUTURE TOGETHER

As a merger between Newcastle-based international shipping and marine insurer North P&I and London's Standard Club draws closer, Paul Jennings and Jeremy Grose, the organisations' respective leaders, highlight the huge potential of the NorthStandard venture.

A new chapter is set to be written in the history of one of the North East's most established businesses as Newcastle-based shipping and marine insurer North P&I merges with fellow mutual Standard Club.

The combined P&I club – to be called NorthStandard – is due to start life on February 20, 2023, the date on which shipping owners renew their insurance annually.

NorthStandard will be a major force in what is a globally significant industry – 95 per cent of the world's goods are transported by ship.

The newly-merged business will operate jointly from North P&I's Newcastle head office and Standard Club's headquarters in London, as well as the insurers' offices in key locations around the world.

NorthStandard will also have chief executives, with Paul Jennings, from North P&I, and Jeremy Grose, from Standard Club, sharing the leadership function.

It's no surprise the tie-up is being called "a merger of equals", and the connections between 162-year-old North P&I and Standard Club don't stop there.

"While we've been based in London since 1884, there is evidence to suggest Standard Club actually started out in the North East," says Jeremy.

"Early records of the club were damaged in a fire during the First World War, so it is harder to trace its earlier years, but we have seen some evidence to suggest it may have started out in Sunderland.

"It is certainly true that the North East has a fantastic maritime heritage – I've met shipowners from around the world who studied naval architecture at Newcastle University, and many others who have models of North East-built ships in their boardrooms.

"North P&I has a strong and solid foundation in Newcastle, but so does the shipping industry as a whole."

It was this reputation – together with a



Paul Jennings, North P&I chief executive, left, with Jeremy Grose, chief executive at Standard Club

shared set of values – which led Standard Club to consider a merger with North P&I in 2020, at a time when the Newcastle-based insurer was itself looking at Standard Club as a potential partner.

Paul says: "Standard Club was very much at the top of our list.

"We feel there is a similar standard of quality of the kind of risks we will insure, the kind of members which we both have, and the values which we share as organisations." Jeremy adds: "There is compatibility between the type of organisations we are and the kind of people who work for us – there are already a lot of people who know each other across North and Standard, and I think that's reflective of a shared culture."

The latter point is certainly borne out in the two leaders: both Paul and Jeremy studied law at university, and both admit a career in marine insurance wasn't something they had initially planned.

However, the variety of the work and people, the international nature of the industry and its ever-changing challenges, has meant both have clocked up more than 30 years in the marine insurance sector.

Their longevity is mirrored by staff at the two organisations, a number of whom have been in the industry even longer than the two chief executives.

Combining this in-depth experience and

expertise is an advantage both leaders see in the planned merger, alongside greater financial resilience and a wider sharing of risk.

"We will have the greatest concentration of talent and expertise in the industry, which will be of great benefit to our members," says Paul.

As mutual organisations, both North P&I and Standard Club needed the support of their members for the merger to go ahead.

The member vote in May secured a strong mandate and the merger was cleared by competition and regulatory bodies in October.

Both leaders are now eagerly looking ahead to the future for NorthStandard.

Paul adds: "Our vision is to position the combined operation to assist our members through the challenges they have coming up, of which the largest is decarbonisation – not just in terms of what powers the vessels, but also in terms of what they transport.

"We see this as an opportunity, with the skillset we have, to position ourselves to provide not just what shipping needs now, but also in ten, 15, 20 years' time and beyond."

North P&I Club
www.nepia.com
[@NorthPandiClub](https://twitter.com/NorthPandiClub)



INSPIRING FEMALES CONFERENCE

SEPTEMBER 8, RAMSIDE HALL

More than 200 delegates came together to recognise, celebrate and take inspiration from women in business at the 11th North East England Chamber of Commerce Inspiring Females Conference. Held at Durham's Ramside Hall Hotel, speakers and guests shared and applauded stories of personal achievement, business success and incredible entrepreneurship. Guests enjoyed keynote presentations from Jolawn Victor, vice president and UK country manager of Intuit, which also sponsored the event, and Greggs chief executive Roisin Currie.

Liz Mayes, Chair of the Chamber Women's Leadership Forum and Chief Executive of the Common Room of the Great North, opened the conference by outlining the importance of the event. Sophie Laidlaw, electro-mechanical apprentice at robotics pioneer Tharsus, and Melanie Stewart, a welding and fabrication lead at Universal Wolf, shared their experiences.

Other speakers included: Natasha McDonough, Chair of the Sunderland Area for the North East England Chamber of Commerce and founder and CEO of MMC Research & Marketing; Suzanne Barbour, life coach and menopause mentor of Barbour Coaching; Ashleigh King, creative director at Flamingo Heights; and BHP Law Partner, Oluwapelumi Amanda Adeola.





CHAMBER PRESIDENT'S LUNCH WITH FIONA HILL

OCTOBER 5, HARDWICK HALL HOTEL

North East businesspeople heard from British-American foreign affairs specialist and academic Dr Fiona Hill. Fiona shared her unique perspective on Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and what that means for global, national and regional economies, and spoke too about her decision to leave the North East and pursue a career that led to the White House. The President's Club is in association with Learning Curve Group, and the lunch event was sponsored by Middlesbrough College.



INTERNATIONAL TRADE SUMMIT

OCTOBER 20, RADISSON BLU HOTEL

The North East England Chamber of Commerce invited global members to enjoy some fantastic keynote speakers and networking opportunities at the first International Trade Summit. Speakers included Rory Stewart, the former foreign secretary and president of the charity Give Direct; Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles, head of public affairs at HSBC; and Sarah Kenny, chair of Maritime UK. The event was sponsored by Womble Bond Dickinson.





EVENTS: CHAMBER SHOWCASE @ NORTH EAST EXPO

CHAMBER SHOWCASE @ NORTH EAST EXPO

NOVEMBER 3, NEWCASTLE FALCONS

Members enjoyed taking part in the Chamber Showcase @ North East Expo event, in association with Fresh Start Events. As the region's largest one-day business event, it attracts businesspeople from all sectors, and this year included a packed programme of more than 15 seminars, workshops and networking events.



North East England
Chamber of Commerce



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And the winners are...

NOVEMBER 11, NEWCASTLE CIVIC CENTRE

The North East's most inspiring females were given top honours at a special awards ceremony organised by the North East England Chamber of Commerce. The Inspiring Females Awards recognise women across a range of businesses in the region, and took place in front of more than 300 guests at Newcastle Civic Centre. Categories included Apprentice of the Year and Inspiring Female Business Leader of the Year. The award for Outstanding Contribution to the North East was given to the England women's national football team - the North East Lionesses. The overall awards were sponsored by Bernicia, with category awards supported by Esh Construction, Intuit, Hargreaves, North East Times Magazine, Openreach, NRG, NatWest, AIM Group and Teesside University.

Inspiring female (small business)

Kindly sponsored by Intuit

Winner:

Elaine Parker – Safer Date

Inspiring female (medium business)

Kindly sponsored by Hargreaves

Winner:

Melanie Stewart – Universal Wolf

Inspiring female (large business)

Kindly sponsored by Openreach

Winner:

Kerry Patterson – Tharsus

Inspiring female (global business)

Kindly sponsored by NRG Plc

Winner:

Nikki Sayer – Casper Shipping

Most inspiring employer (small business)

Kindly sponsored by Teesside University

Winner:

Steedman and Company

Most inspiring employer (medium business)

Kindly sponsored by North East Times

Winner:

Northumberland National Park Authority

Most inspiring employer (large business)

Kindly sponsored by Openreach

Winner:

Muckle LLP

Most inspiring employer (global business)

Kindly sponsored by NRG Plc

Winner:

XL Precision Technologies

Community and CSR inspiring female of the year

Kindly sponsored by AIM Group

Winner:

Paula McMahon – Sir Robert McAlpine

Inspiring female business leader of the year

Kindly sponsored by NatWest

Winner:

Rebecca Chapman – NEBRC

Apprentice of the year

Kindly sponsored by Esh Construction

Winner:

Jenny Hartnett – Northumbrian Water

Outstanding contribution award

Winner:

The Northeastern Lionesses





MEET YOUR MEMBERSHIP TEAM

Our experienced team are on hand to make sure you have access to the right type of support and services. We'll facilitate introductions across our network, and direct you to the most relevant events, opportunities, and initiatives, to help you achieve your objectives.



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