

# Thrings meets...

Keith Greenfield, CEO of Wightlink



**W**ightlink transports over four million passengers on 45,000 sea crossings in southern England every year. CEO Keith Greenfield talks to Thrings partner Mary Chant about life at one of the UK's largest domestic ferry operators.

#### **Has the sea always been in your blood?**

I was born and raised in Lancashire, where my father was a seaman and my grandfather was in the merchant navy. As a keen yachtsman, I came to Hampshire about 30 years ago, and immediately fell in love with Portsmouth, the Solent and the Isle of Wight. During my career I've worked with planes, trains and now ferries. I'm happy to leave automobiles to others!

#### **When did you join Wightlink?**

It was 2016, and my initial observation was I'd joined a solid business. I have a passion for delivering great customer service, and realised airlines and airports were further advanced. Customers' expectations have increased from 10 years ago; they quite rightly expect every point of contact to be friendly and helpful. I want Wightlink to offer not just a good but an excellent customer experience.

#### **Tell us about Victoria of Wight**

She's our largest and busiest ship, carrying more than a million vehicles from Portsmouth to Fishbourne every year. She's also the first vessel in England to be powered by hybrid energy, which means she's cleaner, smoother and more efficient on fuel. And she's also quieter than many other ferries. I often hear passengers say "I know we're moving but I can't hear the engines".

#### **And your passengers can buy locally-sourced products on board?**

Yes. I was drinking coffee in a café in Seaview on the Isle of Wight. Whenever I taste nice coffee I want to know where it's from. When I was told it was roasted on the island, it struck me as something we should have on our ferries. Now the majority of our produce is island-sourced, from gin and ales to cakes, pickles and garlic. We love supporting the local economy, promoting local producers and literally giving passengers a taste of the island before they arrive.

#### **What are you most proud of?**

Carrying 4.6 million passengers every year means there will inevitably be trips, slips and falls, yet our safety record continues to improve. We've

even had occasions where Wightlink staff have saved people's lives. Last year one of our deck officers jumped into Portsmouth Harbour to save a man from drowning, while the crew of Wight Sky rescued two boys whose dinghy had capsized near Lymington. To have such vigilant and dedicated staff makes me immensely proud.

#### **What's next for Wightlink?**

Technology will play a key role in helping us improve our service delivery. We're the only cross-Solent ferry company to have a fully functional mobile app through which customers can make bookings. We also use automatic number plate recognition, which speeds up boarding and disembarking. Technology which makes things quicker, easier and more personal for passengers has to be a good thing.

#### **How do you relax?**

By spending time on the water! The sea is so absorbing; the moment you're sailing your mind is in a different place. It also gives me an appreciation for what professional seamen are dealing with. Having an understanding of navigation - particularly at sea - has been more useful than I thought. ♦

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