

# Who is Martin Smith?

THE trained chef and former Territorial Army volunteer moved from his native Leicester in 1979 with wife Jill and six-month-old daughter to establish a guest house in Babbacombe.

Hospitality was in the family blood as his father, way back, had converted a coach into a roadside snack van before moving into cafes and opening Leicestershire's first motel in the 1960s.

Martin knew money would be tight in his new venture and held down three jobs – one as a milkman with a 3am start – to pay the bills.

With security firm Chubb he learned about the fire extinguisher business and proved to be an ace salesman.

In 1998 he and two colleagues acquired the fledgling Firewatch and a year later took overall control.

Away from the boardroom Martin, who lives in Aller Park, likes nothing better than playing golf and poker, preferably in Las Vegas where his wife's family lives.

He also travels to the midlands every other weekend to watch his beloved Leicester FC play.

Martin is also a committed Rotarian and supporter of many charities.

'I know it sounds a bit corny but my life's been blessed and I think it's vital that we give something back,' he said.

He has two adult children, a growing number of grandchildren and, aged 56, has no intention of retiring any time soon.

## Three men in a boat

MARTIN Smith said he relied heavily on the skills and friendship of fellow directors Kevin Smith and Max Willey.

Kevin is in charge of Total Event Hire and Vander. He said: 'Total Event is doing particularly well at the moment which is a particular surprise as our business is mainly corporate events and weddings and you'd think the market would be depressed,' he said.

'Our success is down to quality of service, quality of the equipment and us doing exactly what it says on the tin.'

Max looks after Firewatch South West and Brunel Maintenance.

'We're giving quality and value for money and as a result we're keeping clients,' he said.

'Selling a package is one thing, delivering afterwards and maintaining attention to detail is another.'

TJ MACLEOD



FIREWATCH THREE: Chief executive Martin Smith (right) pictured with fellow directors Max Willey (left) and Kevin Smith. Below, the Vander clothing logo.

# Bucking the trend of UK economy



IF the UK economy has been struggling for the last few years it appears no one told Martin Smith, CEO of the Firewatch Group.

Despite tough trading conditions, the company he has headed since 1998 has grown substantially with the number of employees rising from six to almost 60.

Its value and range have also expanded. The small fire safety firm he bought 12 years ago for £69,000 now has a turnover of more than £3 million and several strings to its bow.

Not only is it a leading name in fire prevention and training, the group includes catering equipment firm Total Event Hire, publicity experts A-Signs and waterproof clothing manufacturer Vander, bought earlier this year when closure looked imminent.

'Vander was a bit of bulldog spirit coming out in me and I liked the prospect of keeping British manufacturing alive and saving at least some of the jobs about to be lost from Newton Abbot,' said Martin.

The group's customers include private individuals and major players in the construction industry, local authorities, schools and universities.

Speaking about the early Firewatch days he said: 'It was a bit daunting as there was plenty of competition both from the corporate outfits and local firms too.'

'We were also a bit top heavy with three directors and just three staff. It wasn't working so I sold everything I had, cashed in every insurance policy and bought the other two out.'

'It was a bit of a gamble but that's what life's all about really and yes, it was tough.'

In September Firewatch launched Brunel Maintenance, a firm that carries out property repairs for the area's landlords and estate agents.

The project came about following a discussion at Martin's favourite business venue, a golf course.

'People joke about it but there's a lot of business done on the course and I just got chatting to a client who's a director of Bradley's estate agents who said he was having problems finding people to carry out maintenance,' he explained.

Martin puts the group's growing success down to value for money, customer service and working together.

'Firewatch is very much a team effort,' he said.

'We all have friends and family working here, it's very much a family business.'

'I've got the whacky ideas, one in ten of which is perhaps worth pursuing, and the other directors and the team keep me on the straight and narrow as we try to grow the business and train more people to come up through.'

His commitment to family, firm and the area are evident.

'I'd like to think I'm an adopted Devonian now,' he said.

'I'm really happy with what I'm doing in life and I've no plans to retire any time soon.'

'Although it might make sense to relocate the business, as we're bulging at the seams, while it's under my control it will be staying right here in central Newton Abbot.'



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FIREWATCH GROUP: From left, Bobby Chancellor and Andy Harvey, of A-Signs and Emma Smith (Martin's daughter) and Katherine Eley, of Total Event Hire.

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