

The History of the NCI (Post-1994)



The newly formed National Coastwatch Institution was able to lease the lookout at Bass Point from the National Trust at a peppercorn rent and secured funding from several sources to repair and outfit the station. In October 1994, Capt. Starling Lark and Peter Rayment held a public meeting at the Football Club House on the Lizard, where they outlined their ideas for a lookout at Bass Point and asked for people to volunteer as watchkeepers. There was an exceptionally good response, with one local Fisherman standing up and saying, *"I reckon we've seen history being made here tonight!"*. Soon afterwards, Lynn Briggs was appointed as the NCI's first Station Manager at Bass Point and many of NCI's procedures today evolved from Lynn's pioneering work as Station Manager in those early days at the Bass Point lookout.

NCI Bass Point began operational watch-keeping in November 1994, thanks to several



local volunteers, who with their experience as fishermen or deep-sea sailors, helped with the on the job training of the volunteers. On the 3rd of February 1995, NCI Bass Point was officially opened on a cold, windy and damp day by Jenny Agutter, the well-known actress who had a home nearby. Early in March 1996 the first radar set in NCI became operational at Bass Point, just in time for a group of volunteers to mount a 24-hour watch to monitor the participants in the Fastnet Race as they rounded the Lizard, producing some of the first incidents for the NCI as, following reports from Bass Point, several boats were advised by Falmouth Coastguard that they were heading dangerously close to the Men Hyr rocks just south of Bass Point.

Along with a colleague from the Sea Safety Group (SSG) Captain Starling-Lark visited Swanage to investigate reopening the recently closed lookout. There had been a lookout at Peveril Point since 1830, manned by HM Coastguard since the 1870's until it finally closed in 1994. The Town Council, which owned the land, agreed to allow the new organisation to operate at a peppercorn rent of £1 per annum. Volunteers were sought, and Ian Surface, the Station Officer in charge of the Auxiliary Coastguard team in Swanage was invited to become Station Manager. The Swanage lookout opened as an NCI Station on 15 April 1995. It was the second NCI station to open for business.

Captain Starling-Lark then contacted Master Mariner Richard May with a view to identifying a site for a Coastwatch station in Norfolk. Rising to the challenge, Richard identified a suitable location and on 19th April 1995 he launched the National Coastwatch Institution station at Mundesley in Norfolk. The station had a humble beginning with just a few volunteers and extremely basic equipment, but despite the sparse resources available to them, the volunteers at NCI Mundesley were soon mounting watches 365 days a year.

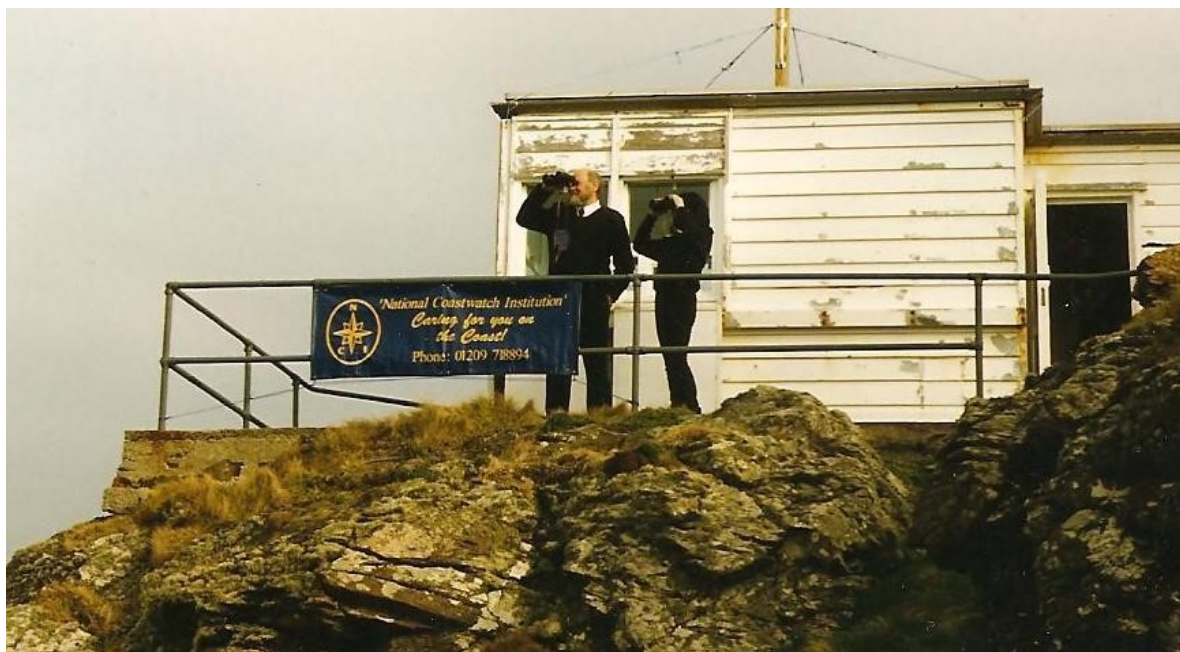
Other NCI stations were quickly established, with stations opening at Felixstowe in Suffolk, and Gorleston in Norfolk later that same year. Thanks largely to the efforts of Graham Roff, a station was also established at St Albans Head, Dorset, by the end of the year as a sub-station of Swanage. The lookout was leased from the Encome Estate for the rent of "one crab per annum if demanded". St Albans Head became an independent station the following year.



With the opening of the stations on the south and south-east coasts, the NCI once again turned its attention to Cornwall and at the end of 1995, representatives of the charity returned to St Just to hold a

Station Manager Dirk Aldous from St Albans presenting Mr James Gaggero, owner of Encome Estates with the annual rent of one crab in 2014. That year the weather had been so bad that crabs were difficult to come by and the Station had to travel many miles to buy one.

public meeting calling for volunteers re-open the old Coastguard watch station at Cape Cornwall. After agreeing the lease with the National Trust in early February 1996, the volunteers set about restoring the old lookout, often working in gale force winds with no electricity, running water or telephone. After much hard work, the old lookout station was restored to a working condition under Station Manager Annie Peacock. The station was formally opened on 6th April 1996 by local MP Andrew George and NCI Cape Cornwall became fully operational as the most westerly station in Britain in late 1996.



The very first watch at NCI Cape Cornwall in 1996 - with Annie Peacock and Peter Breingan. The weather had been too severe to paint the outside of the lookout building before opening.

At the same time that the NCI was negotiating the lease for Cape Cornwall from the National Trust, it was also discussing the lease on the old coastguard station at Gwennap Head in Cornwall. Built around 1905 and extended between the wars, the station had closed in 1994. After some much needed work to the building, NCI Gwennap Head opened on 21st October 1996. NCI continued to expand their operations and in May 1996 a small band of volunteers started the task of refurbishing the disused coastguard station at Portland Bill, led by the first Station Manager Dave Crabb. The initial refurbishment was finally completed after nearly a year's work, and the station was officially declared open on 27th May 1997.

That same month, retired sea Captains John Chapple and Christopher Trinick started looking at restoring the abandoned signal station and lookout at Prawle Point to become the first NCI Station in Devon. This familiar landmark had become semi-derelict and open to the elements after finally closing in 1982. However, with the help of generous funding from local people, companies and organisations it was transformed into a working station. Regular watchkeeping was resumed in August 1997 and in April 1998 NCI Prawle Point was formally opened. Later that year the NCI station at Polruan was also opened in the former Fowey Harbour Pilots lookout by Pete Goss, the round-the-world yachtsman. This was quickly followed by stations being established in locations at Rame Head on the west of Plymouth Sound and above the Victorian Harbour View café at Exmouth in Devon. A station was also opened at Shoebury East Beach near Southend, initially operating from an old caravan with six watchkeepers monitoring the coastline on Sundays and Bank holidays.



The year ended with NCI Folkestone opening at Copt Point in October. Housed in an ex-coastguard lookout on a chalk headland overlooking the English Channel near Martello Tower #3, it was the first NCI station to be established in Kent.



Throughout these early years of National Coastwatch, the charity had cooperated with the Sea Safety Group with both organisations closely supporting each other. In fact, on many occasions the two charities worked together at promotional events, sharing the same promotional trailer and even wearing the same

uniforms as can be seen in the photograph taken at the Royal Cornwall show in 1997 with Annie Peacock (NCI Regional PR and Fund-raising Officer), Captain Starling-Lark (Chairman of the SSG) along with two other (unidentified) members.

Unfortunately, as often happens, the two organisations began to drift apart, largely due to differences in the direction their respective roles were taking them and the last time they publicly worked together was at the Royal Cornwall show in 1998. The photograph shows their joint display at the event.



The NCI continued to open stations and in 1999 a station was opened in the abandoned HM Coastguard lookout at Pendinas Head on the island promontory overlooking the busy port of St Ives (left).

By the end of the year, the NCI had also negotiated a lease with the Port of London Authority and established a lookout in the old Harbour Masters station at Holehaven (below) on Canvey Island. Situated at the end of a jetty in Holehaven Creek, this station was unique as it was the only National Coastwatch Institution station in England that sat over the sea rather than on dry land.



In October 2000, after years raising funds through a local shop selling second-hand furniture, the NCI opened a station at Herne Bay in Kent on the top floor of the Victorian public toilet block known as the Old Bathing Station, which had previously been used as a café.

In 2001 the NCI agreed their first Memorandum of Understanding with the Marine and Coastguard Agency. This was the first document that comprehensively defined the working relationship between the NCI and the MCA, formally declaring how the two organisations were to work together in the future.



The following year, a group of six watchkeepers from NCI Herne Bay, with Eddie Baker as their Committee Chairman, decided to set up an Coastwatch station at Whitstable in Kent. By the end of the year, they had persuaded Canterbury City Council to lend them a beach hut at the western end of Tankerton Slopes and NCI Whitstable was established. However, in spring 2004 Canterbury City Council reclaimed the beach hut, leaving the Station to operate on Sundays only, from a mobile caravan on the grass at Pries.



Returning to 2002, a meeting had taken place at the Queens Hotel, Penzance where it had been decided to try and establish an NCI lookout in the derelict Gunnery Observation Tower at Chyandour, behind Penzance railway station, overlooking Mounts Bay, Penzance Harbour and the beaches at Marazion. After negotiating the lease from the Ministry of Defence, NCI Penzance station (left) opened later in 2002.

While these stations were opening, a team of local volunteers at Padstow were quietly and efficiently refurbishing the old Coastguard lookout at Stepper Point, with the station opening in time for the busy Cornish summer.

Another station that became operational in time for the busy summer months was at Boscastle. The station is housed in the old Willapark Lookout, a picturesque tower built in the early 1800's by the landowner Thomas Avery as a summer house and, it was rumoured, as a place for his drunken parties! It was later leased to the Board of Trade as a lookout to prevent smuggling before being used as a coastguard lookout up to the 1970's, when it came under National Trust ownership and was maintained as a folly. Finally, in the middle of 2002 it was leased by the NCI and NCI Boscastle was opened.

Another Cornish station became operational in the same year when NCI Portscatho opened at Pednvanan Point in Gerrans Bay. This is arguably the charity's smallest lookout and when three people are inside, someone must step outside if the chart needs turning over! NCI Portscatho operates six months a year during the summer months.

In February 2001, a long running saga began when Captain Peter Waters, the NCI Regional Manager, discovered a derelict Auxiliary Coastguard Station from the 1920's buried in dense undergrowth near the Cornish Clay Port of Charlestown and identified the building as a potential location for an NCI station. Negotiations with the landlord were delayed by an outbreak of Foot and Mouth disease, but a lease was finally agreed in late 2001.

Early the following year work began on clearing the undergrowth and it quickly became obvious that the building had significantly deteriorated through neglect and vandalism. Enlisting the help of St Austell College, work started to make the building habitable again and the restoration was finally completed with the installation of a cast iron stairway and landing kindly donated by local company Imerys S.A. NCI Charlestown (above) opened in April 2003.



NCI Southend had been operational since 1998 but in 2003, due to development of the Garrison site into a residential area, there was no longer any space for the station and they were asked to relocate. The station was offered space within the perimeter of the Ministry of Defence site at Shoeburyness, which gave a commanding view over the Thames Estuary, so in March 2004 NCI Southend reopened in their new home. Later that year, one of the quickest station openings took place at Newhaven. The lookout at Newhaven was built in the early 1960s but HM Coastguard reduced the regular watchkeeping and as they were only using the lookout for casualty working, they intended to demolish it. However, at a meeting at the beginning of June the idea of an NCI station received such support from the local community that the station was reprieved. A group of volunteers joined NCI and after a short intensive training program watches commenced at NCI Newhaven by the end of June.



The NCI station at Portland Bill had originally opened in 1997, but despite the initial work carried out to make it usable for Coastwatch purposes, it could only accommodate 2 watchkeepers. In 2004, work started on extending the building to twice its original size and the rebuilt station was opened by HRH The Princess Royal, later in the year.

In March 2003, John Langford, the Station Manager at NCI Exmouth, was in Teignmouth with his family and noticed the closed Coastguard Lookout. He obtained approval from the NCI Trustees to approach the leaseholders, Teignbridge District Council with a proposal to reopen the watch station. The Council had initially leased the building out as a beach hut and later as a store for the Eastcliff Café, whose owner, Ian Palmer, kindly relinquished his lease to the NCI. John then worked with the businesses in Teignmouth to raise funds and support for the proposed station and after two public meetings. NCI Teignmouth was formed with just 9 volunteers. The first watch took place in August 2004 and the station was officially opened in early 2005 by the Mayor of Teignmouth.

At about the same time, NCI Skegness commenced operations from the former Lifeguard station at Ingoldmells Point after securing a ten-year lease. After refurbishment, funded solely by generous public donation from the residents of and visitors to Ingoldmells, the station became operational 7 days a week throughout the year. It was credited with active involvement in potentially saving no less than 23 lives in 2005 alone.

Later in 2005, the NCI opened a station in the disused Brownstone Battery at Froward Point. Built at the beginning of WWII, and decommissioned in 1956, this is one of the few coastal batteries which remain intact in this country. The site has been owned by the National Trust since 1982 and NCI Froward Point commenced watches from the old Battery Observation Post in 2005.

After having to leave their original station building at Whitstable in 2004 the station, had operated, on Sundays only, from a mobile caravan on the grass at the eastern end of Tankerton Slopes. Over the next two years, the station was able to raise £3000 to purchase its own, purpose-built look-out which opened in September 2006, allowing them to operate Saturday and Sunday watches.

Despite the rapid expansion of the charity, there were still no NCI stations along the east coast or north Norfolk coast between Mundesley and Skegness. In 2006, representatives of NCI identified the old Coastguard lookout at Wells-next-the-Sea as a potential site. The small wooden building was not in a good condition but still solidly built. After negotiations with the landlord, NCI Wells-next-the-Sea was born. NCI Mundesley was the nearest station and provided the initial training and assistance until Wells-next-to-the-sea became operational in September 2006.

In 2007, the NCI opened their first station in Wales at Nells Point, on Barry Island, overlooking the Bristol Channel (left). Thanks to funding from the Welsh Assembly and Vale of Glamorgan Council, a derelict Coastguard station was rebuilt to a very high standard. The official opening ceremony took place on the 16th of February with the first watch taking place the following day.



In 1926 the Coastguard constructed a permanent building to replace St Agnes Beacon, which had been in use since 1914. The building was extended in 1940 to encompass an Observer Corps lookout complete with shelters and sleeping quarters. Coastguard



watches continued after the war until 1951 when the watches were reduced to bad weather watches until the station closed in 1990 and was handed to Carrick District Council, who gifted it to the National Trust in 2006. Later that year a lease was granted to the NCI to open a watch station and, after some restoration work NCI St Agnes Head commenced watches in April 2007. The National Trust had agreed to refurbish the building later that year but discovered the building was unsafe and NCI had to leave while they demolished

the old building, replacing it with a new purpose-built station. NCI St Agnes Head were able to resume watchkeeping in early 2009.

Meanwhile, during 2005 the NCI were in discussions with the National Trust about leasing the old Coastguard station at Worms Head on the Gower coast of Wales. A lease was agreed in early 2006 and NCI started a publicity and recruiting campaign with the aim of opening as an operational station in time for the 2007 Easter Weekend. It took more than 1,000 man-hours of work by the 19 volunteers to refurbish and secure the building. A gentleman from the team that operated the Loughor Inshore Lifeboat, made time each week to take the volunteers through the training syllabus. As a result of all this hard work NCI Worms Head was able to open one week ahead of their Easter target.

In 2007 the ex-MOD observation post at Nare Point on the Lizard peninsular was reopened under new management. The building, now owned by the National Trust, had been used to store potatoes prior to NCI taking over the building. The building was derelict but with help from the National Trust Enterprise Neptune Campaign, the MoD Veterans Challenge Fund, the Tanner, the Gannet Foundation, Kerrier District Council and a lot of elbow-grease from the members, the building was completely renovated and the equipment installed. The station was formally opened in July 2007 to watch over the entrance to the Helford and Falmouth Bay from Black Rock to the Manacles.

In 2007 NCI were offered the use of the old tower overlooking Torbay which had provided a Coastal lookout, for over 100 years. However, as the building was deemed to be too small and unsafe for watchkeeping, NCI were granted



NCI Torbay

permission by Torquay Harbour services and Torbay Council to build a new, larger tower on the same site. Over the next year, NCI Torbay raised the funds to build and equip a 36 sq. metre, 3 storey tower to replace the original tower on the same site. At the same time, the station was recruiting and training the volunteer watchkeepers, allowing the station to resume full watchkeeping.



The NCI now looked at establishing a station on the North-West coast near Fleetwood, where the Coastguard had built a lookout station in 1948, overlooking Morecombe Bay. Directly opposite are the many sandbanks where incidents occur almost daily during the holiday season, but despite this, the Coastguard station was closed in July 1994. In 2007, the NCI approached Wyre Bough Council with a view to leasing the building, which was now being used as a storage space. In spring 2008, NCI acquired possession

of the building and work began restoring it back to a lookout station, with help from Fleetwood Nautical Campus. NCI Rossall Point opened later in the year, initially operating at weekends only, but soon expanding their cover to 7 days a week.

In the three years since they opened, watchkeepers at NCI Skegness had kept a lookout over the shoreline, beach and promenade between Chapel St Leonards Point and Butlin's Holiday Camp. Unfortunately, in 2008, the landowners requested NCI to cease operations as the building had become unsafe. Recognising the value of the NCI on their coast, East Lindsey District Council immediately granted a lease on the old Coastguard tower at Winthorpe. The Skegness volunteers were able to quickly move to this new location and the station resumed watches in May 2008.

2008 also saw the opening of a station in Portsmouth. NCI Gosport, based in the 36 foot Signal Tower within Fort Blockhouse, has a commanding position at the entrance to Portsmouth Harbour and being sited on land owned by the MOD, is subject to their security. The station opened on 1st June, initially operating at weekends only, but soon increased watches to 7 days a week.



The year ended with the opening of NCI Shoreham. Originally built as a searchlight base operated by the Home Guard during the Second World War, the building is situated next to the historic Shoreham Fort. It was abandoned at the end of the war and the open frontage was bricked up. NCI acquired the use of the building in early 2008 and, following twelve months of fundraising, recruiting and training, the bricked-up frontage was opened up, this time to receive

new windows and a complete interior and exterior refurbishment. NCI Shoreham was officially opened in December 2008 by NCI Chairman Jon Gifford.