

## Preface: The History of the NCI (Pre-1994)

The National Coastwatch Institution was formed to fill the need for an organisation to provide a visual watch around the UK coast to look out for persons and vessels in distress. This need had arisen due to the reduction in numbers of Coastguard visual watch stations.



By the end of the nineteenth century pressure was increasing to streamline the Coastguard service which, by then, was perceived to be little more than a financial liability. In 1904 the Admiralty, under First Sea Lord Fisher, closed 35 Coastguard stations as part of an economy drive and in 1906 it proposed to close all the remaining Coastguard stations, unless they were required specifically for Admiralty business. A small increase in the number of Customs Officers was proposed, which would allow the Coastguard service to be dispensed with altogether. The Board of Customs and Excise responded by offering to relieve the Admiralty of this responsibility by taking over the duty of coastal protection. The advent of the First World War brought a temporary halt to the debate, but after the war the number of Coastguard stations continued to be reduced. From a high point of 533 stations in 1870, the number of stations was reduced to 322 by 1925 when the Coastguard Act established a specialist force to be *“employed as a coast-watching force for the performance of the duties hitherto performed by the coastguard”* under the control of the Board of Trade.

However, even then, not all the remaining stations were continually manned. When the MY *Islander* sank near Polperro in 1930 with the loss of all onboard, the famous writer Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch publicly criticised the coastguard for leaving the lookout in Lantivet Bay unmanned. The subsequent Board of Enquiry stated:

*“We are of the opinion that with the further development of wireless telegraph and telephone the need for visual watching should be reduced. Unless a station is on an important traffic route or overlooks a navigation danger, the employment costs to the state of full-time personnel on coast watching duties cannot be justified”*

This, of course, did not address the problems of small boats who either did not carry radios or whose radios had failed, nor did it consider the large increase in the numbers of water-based sports, pleasure craft and other coastal users. A 1980's Board of Trade working party observed that “Any person can take a boat out to sea” and noted that the

number of 'incidents' involving pleasure craft had risen tenfold from 426 in 1948 to over 4800 by 1973. As recently as 1986 there were questions being asked in Parliament about the cost of operating manned Coastguard lookout stations.

Concerns over safety at sea were rising steadily. In 1991 the sinking of three fishing vessels, the *Margaret & William II*, *Ocean Hound*, and the *Wilhelmina J*, within a short period and with heavy loss of life, raised serious concerns amongst the maritime industry. To investigate these losses and raise public awareness Captain Tony Starling Lark, a North Sea pilot, took a BBC Film Crew and a fishing boat skipper on a normal Pilotage assignment from Brixham to a Continental port on board a large container vessel. During this passage both Starling Lark and the fishing boat skipper discovered that neither of them had any real understanding of each other's problems in handling their respective vessels or of the different requirements each had when using the same area of water. As a result of this exercise, the Sea Safety Group was formed with the aim of educating and advising all mariners about each other's problems and special requirements at sea, as well as providing a central lobbying body on sea safety.



In his book 'The NCI Story' author Brian French records the following incident:

'In 1994, while he was boarding a ship off Brixham in gale force conditions, Captain Starling Lark jokingly remarked, "*If I fall over the side at least the Coastguard Lookout on Berry Head will see me*". He was horrified to learn from the skipper of the ship he was boarding that the Coastguard lookout was no longer manned following the reorganisation of the Coastguard Service.'

Soon after this, two fishermen were lost at sea when their boat capsized near the closed Coastguard lookout at Bass Point on the Cornish Lizard Peninsula. The station had closed two years earlier, following a Government decision that the Maritime and Coastguard Agency should cease maintaining a visual watch around England's coast.

This prompted Peter Rayment, a Director of the Sea Safety Group, to suggest that the Group acquire the old Bass Point Coastguard lookout, restore it to a usable condition and re-commence watchkeeping manned by volunteers. Some members of the Sea Safety Group disagreed with the proposal, believing that they could best achieve their aims through lobbying and education, and it was decided that the best way forward was to form a separate charity whose mission was to restore a visual watch around the coast. Legend has it that after a day of intense discussions at St Just Rugby Club, the salient points of this new charity were finally agreed by ten o'clock that evening and the National Coastwatch Institution (NCI) was born.

The NCI became operational on 18<sup>th</sup> December 1994 with the opening of their first station at Bass Point on the Lizard peninsula in Cornwall.

## 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 3<sup>rd</sup> 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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 6<sup>th</sup> 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 21<sup>st</sup> 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 27<sup>th</sup> 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 1<sup>st</sup> 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.



Earlier in the year, NCI had engaged the internet design company Cosmic to build and support a website incorporating, for the first time, the details of every NCI watch station in the UK. The website was launched on 1<sup>st</sup> July 2008.

The following year saw the opening of two more stations. The first was at Wooltack Point where a group of local volunteers reopened the derelict lookout situated within the Deer Park at Marloes in Pembrokeshire, which overlooks the approaches to Milford Haven. This was followed shortly by the opening of NCI Mablethorpe in Lincolnshire overlooking North Beach.

In June, NCI Mundesley in Norfolk became the first NCI station to be awarded the prestigious Queens Award for Voluntary Service (QAVS). This award is equivalent to the MBE and is the highest award that can be made to a voluntary group.

In October 2009, NCI opened an office in Exeter to deal with the growing central administration of the charity. This enabled, for the first time, all the administrative records to be housed and managed in one place in a secure environment. The office also housed the NCI Shop which till then had no home.

NCI continued to expand and gain recognition throughout 2010. On 5<sup>th</sup> April NCI Porthdinllaen became the first NCI station to be opened in North Wales. Originally operating as a Coastguard station, the lookout at Porthdinllaen was finally closed in the 1990's. Since its closure, it had fallen into disrepair until, in 2008, the derelict building was identified as an ideal potential station for the NCI. The charity negotiated a lease with the owners of the station, Nefyn Golf Club, and with their support, together with a lottery grant and a lot of hard work by the members, the station was renovated and equipped, ready for opening in 2010.



In June, the UK Border Agency (UKBA) and NCI signed a Memorandum of Understanding that set out the operating procedures agreed between the two organisations. The following month, NCI opened a station overlooking Southampton Water. The 100 foot tower on Calshot Spit, owned by Associated British Ports, was built in 1973 as part of the Southampton VTS radar chain before serving as a Coastguard lookout from 1974 until the 1990s. In 2010, following negotiations with the Crown Estates, Hampshire County Council and ABP, NCI took on a lease for the tower and NCI Calshot Tower commenced watches in July.

For the first time ever, all 13 Cornish NCI stations were represented at a gathering to receive the Queens Award for Voluntary Service. This prestigious award was pre-sented to the individual stations by the Lord Lieutenant of Cornwall, Lady Mary Holborow, at a ceremony at the Burrell Theatre in Truro on 3<sup>rd</sup> August.



Each recipient station received a certificate hand signed by Her Majesty the Queen and a glass trophy to commemorate the award.

2010 ended with the opening of another new station. Thanks to musician Billy Bragg and Mary-Lou Sturridge, of the Burton Cliff Hotel, NCI were able to open their forty-fourth station at Hive Beach, overlooking Lyme Bay. The station overlooks a section of the Jurassic Coast World Heritage site between the existing NCI stations at Exmouth and Portland Bill. After fundraising to equip the station and provide training, NCI Lyme Bay opened in September 2010, with the station president, Air Marshal Sir Christopher Coville becoming a patron of the NCI.

The idea of an NCI station at Caister was first suggested by the Caister Volunteer Lifeboat Service as the two charities shared concerns about the reduction in visual watches along the Norfolk coast. After initial discussions there followed 18 months of trial watches, recruitment and training before the NCI their first operational watch at the Caister Lifeboat Heritage Centre above the lifeboat station. NCI Caister officially opened on June 4th 2011.



Six weeks later, NCI took on the old coastguard station on the small island of Ynys Cybi off the West coast of Anglesey at Rhoscolyn. The building was erected by The Board of Trade in 1914 and operated until it closed in the mid 1990's. On 20th July 2011 NCI Rhoscolyn was officially opened by Susan Davies, the station's Coastguard Liaison Officer, making it the second NCI station to be opened in North Wales.

The year ended with NCI Honorary President, Jon Gifford being recognised in the New Year's Honours List with the award of the Order of the British Empire. Jon travelled to Buckingham Palace on 14th March 2012 where he was presented with his OBE by HM The Queen.

For several years the NCI had been in discussion with the MCA about occupying the Needles Coast Guard station on the Isle of Wight, and in 2012 they were granted a licence to operate. Set over 400 feet up in an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and a SSSI the site is managed by National Trust. After a month of cleaning, painting and equipping the station, NCI Needles stood their first watch on 12<sup>th</sup> August 2012. On 28<sup>th</sup> November, the station was officially opened by Dave Kennet MBE, coxswain of the Yarmouth lifeboat.

At the end of 2011 NCI Rossall Point near Fleetwood had been forced to close temporarily while their lookout was demolished to make way for a new building. Construction of this new building began at the beginning of December 2012 and the team at Rossall Point were able to watch as the unique building began to take shape. NCI watchkeepers were able to gain access to the building in June 2013 and by the end of August the interior of the tower had been fitted out with new equipment and a purposebuilt desk. Several practise watches were conducted to acquaint the

watchkeepers with the new equipment. Because the station had been closed for nearly two years, HM Coastguard also decided that an assessment of both Watchkeepers and equipment was essential to ensure that NCI standards were met and to provide confidence to the Search and Rescue services.

The assessment was scheduled for 28<sup>th</sup> September, concluding with an exercise with Fleetwood RNLI. The assessment was positive and NCI Rossall Point was open for business once more, later renamed NCI Fleetwood in 2019 to celebrate NCI's 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary.



Another station that had to temporarily close in 2012 due to building work was NCI Cape Cornwall. Over 50 years of exposure to the elements had caused significant damage to the largely wooden building, and only a major restoration would enable it to continue operations. The work was a lot quicker than at NCI Rossall Point/Fleetwood and the station was able to reopen after only five weeks. The station was officially reopened in early April 2013 by MP Andrew George who had first opened the station back in 1996.

Despite these temporary closures, the charity continued to expand its operations in Wales with the opening of NCI Point Lynas on the Llanelian promontory in Anglesey, tucked in between the Lighthouse and its disused Fog Station. From here the station has a view that extends from the Great Orme to Amlwch port, and on a good day the mountains of the Isle of Man peep above the horizon.

In March 2013, Olympic Gold Medallist Katherine Grainger CBE agreed to become a Patron of the NCI. At the London Olympics in 2012, Katherine and Anna Watkins broke the Olympic record as they qualified for the Double Sculls final and went on to



win the Gold Medal. Katherine is also a three-times Olympic silver medallist and six-times World Champion.

Awarded the MBE in the 2006 Birthday Honours, she was appointed a CBE in the 2013 New Year's Honours for services to rowing. Alan Richards, Chairman of NCI, commented:

"We are both honoured and delighted that Katherine Grainger has agreed to become a Patron of NCI and I very much look forward to her involvement with, and support for, the Charity as we approach our 20th anniversary in 2014".



2014 started with a disaster when the NCI Lookout at Lyme Bay was destroyed by a storm on the night of 14<sup>th</sup> February. The lookout, in the grounds of the Burton Cliff Hotel, had recently withstood a force 10 storm so station management were not unduly worried by the predicted high winds. However, when the well-known singer Billy Bragg went to check his property later that night, he discovered that the roof of the Lookout had been blown off by the winds, leaving no alternative but for the watchkeepers to complete the dismantling of the Lookout to make it safe. The lookout was rebuilt over the next several months and NCI Lyme Bay was back in operation by the end of the year.

Another station that also had to relocate was NCI Skegness. Having settled into their new home in 2008, NCI Skegness had to vacate these premises in 2014 when the District Council sold the freehold to a private buyer who set about converting the premises to a pub and restaurant. During this refurbishment it became impossible for NCI Skegness to continue operating at this location. However, the Coal Industry Social & Welfare Organisation, who own the Miners' Retreat Hotel, allowed the NCI to park a trailer supplied by the Seafarers Association, in the grounds of the hotel. Thanks to the generosity of these organisations, NCI Skegness was able to continue operations.



NCI celebrated its 20th Anniversary with a lunch at RNAS Culdrose on 28th June. Some 40 members of the NCI were joined by the Chairman of Cornwall Council, members of HM Coastguard Falmouth, HM Coastguard Cliff Rescue Teams from Mullion and Porthoustock and the UK Border Force.

Lunch was taken in the Wardroom of HMS Seahawk where long service certificates were awarded to several NCI Members, including Robbie Wilson who was awarded the first ever 20-year certificate. In his welcoming address, NCI Chairman Alan Richards said:

"Happy Birthday Bass Point and Happy Birthday National Coastwatch Institution. I am ... delighted to see that other family members are here today. Her Majesty's Coastguard, the RNLI, the Royal Navy Search and Rescue teams and the UK Border Force. You are all very welcome and we, as an organisation, are proud to be a supportive part of the national Search and Rescue Organisation".

In August, NCI was allocated a national licence by OFCOM for the use of Marine VHF radio Channel 65. This dedicated channel allows communications between NCI lookouts and seafarers on a variety of routine matters. The channel became operational on 1st October 2014 and Alan Richards, Chairman of the NCI said: "This is a major milestone for us, not least as we celebrate the 20th anniversary of the start of our organisation".

2015 started with NCI changing its status and becoming a Charitable Incorporated Organisation on 16<sup>th</sup> January. A CIO is an incorporated structure designed for charities and is only available to charitable organisations through the Charity Commission. Changing to this status brought many benefits to the NCI.

In April, the Grade 2 listed Victorian Pilot Lookout Tower in the coastal resort of Porthcawl in South Wales became the home to NCI Porthcawl. The building, situated next to the RNLI Station, was built in 1870 and stands at the eastern end of the Esplanade. The Station commenced training in the lookout on 21st April following complete refurbishment of the building, and the official opening took place in May, attended by Carwyn Jones, the First Minister of Wales and many of the groups, organisations and individuals who had helped in the setting up and equipping of the station.



In June, NCI Teignmouth obtained planning permission to replace their small lookout with a larger building and the station took up residence in their new building in September.



NCI Charmouth is housed in a Napoleonic lookout just above the Charmouth Heritage Coast Centre. Built in 1804 by the Customs and Excise Service to counter smuggling and the Napoleonic threat. It was used throughout the 19th century until taken over by the Admiralty in 1856 when it was used as an observation post until 1909. Charmouth Parish Council took over the building in 1945, using it more recently as a beach hut. In June 2016 it was taken over by the NCI as a satellite station of NCI Lyme Bay. All NCI Charmouth watchkeepers also work at the parent site at Hive Beach as a closely-knit team covering the whole of Lyme Bay.

A month later, an NCI station opened in the university town of Aberystwyth in Wales. Using a small transportable unit supplied by the NCI, the station started recruiting and were soon able to stand watches at weekends and bank holidays. The year was rounded off with the relocation of the NCI national office from Exeter to a more suitable location in Liskeard.

NCI Skegness celebrated the official opening of their new watch station in March 2017. In the three years since NCI Skegness had to leave their old coastguard tower they had been able to continue a visual watch thanks to the use of a mobile trailer in the grounds of the Miners Retreat hotel at Winthorpe. During the winter months a bespoke watch station was designed and built by Container King as a demountable building and this was



craned into position in the gardens of the Miners' Retreat in February 2017. The new building was quickly fitted out allowing the station to resume watchkeeping with only a few days break in operations. On 24th March the official reopening of NCI Skegness took place when the building was opened by the High Sheriff of Lincolnshire, accompanied by the Chief Constable of Lincolnshire, the Mayor of Skegness and NCI Chairman Lesley Suddes. The Coastguard helicopter 'Coastguard 912' finished the celebrations with an impromptu flypast.

On 15th May, Lesley Suddes, the Chairman of NCI, delivered a presentation of the plans for the Future Direction of the charity to an audience of invited guests at an evening reception held at Trinity House, overlooking the Tower of London. Mr Jon Gifford, Honorary President, and Dr Dame Katherine Grainger, Patron of the charity, were among the guests from business and the SAR community who enjoyed the presentation. The NCI was grateful to Trinity House for allowing them to host the reception in their magnificent building.



May also saw the first public appearance of the new NCI exhibition trailer at the Poole Harbour Boat Show, manned by volunteers from the NCI stations on the south coast. Although the full range of display equipment was not yet fitted, it provided a distinctive all-weather presentation stand for NCI. The trailer saw further use in June at the Western Boat Show & Bristol Harbour Festival in July and again at the ten-day Southampton Boat Show in September.

On 12<sup>th</sup> August 2017, NCI was informed by Buckingham Palace that "The Princess Royal will be delighted to accept Royal Patronage of the National Coastwatch Institution". This was tremendous news for the Charity and was recognition of the contributions and achievements that NCI makes in ensuring safety around the UK coastline.



Chairman Lesley Suddes said: "It is a huge credit to all the NCI's members and supporters that the Princess Royal feels she can support us in our endeavours. "Her Royal Highness has been a staunch supporter of the NCI for many years, keeping up with our activities and rapid expansion since the early days of the charity". On 27<sup>th</sup> March 2018, in her first official visit in her capacity as Patron of the NCI, Her Royal Highness The Princess Royal visited NCI Skegness, Her Royal Highness was escorted to the station by NCI Chairman Lesley Suddes and Station Manager Paul Woolley, to meet the duty watchkeepers and watch an exercise with the Skegness RNLI Lifeboat. After being given a demonstration of the equipment in the station, Her Royal Highness spent some time in the NCI exhibition trailer with Lesley Suddes and Trustee Ian Whalley, discussing detailed and specific elements of fundraising and public awareness.

Two months later, on 8th May 2018, the NCI Trustees hosted a reception at Trinity House in London in the presence of Her Royal Highness The Princess Royal. The guests included the charity's other patrons, Dr Dame Katherine Grainger and Air Marshal Sir Christopher Colville, along with Sir Alan Massey (CEO of the Maritime and Coastguard Agency) and Rowena Dimond (Director of Intelligence, UK Border Force).



The sixty invited guests included representatives from the Baltic Exchange, Seafarers UK, Lloyds Register, Mercator Marine, Royal Yacht Association, RNLI, the British Marine Federation and Trinity House amongst many others. After being introduced to the Board of Trustees, The Princess Royal met with the guests in the Trinity House Library. Following an introduction by NCI Chairman Lesley Suddes, Her Royal Highness gave a short speech in which she praised the commitment of the NCI and urged the business sector to support the vital work in helping to save lives at sea.

On 1<sup>st</sup> August, the crowds turned out to see Her Royal Highness The Princess Royal officially open NCI Hornsea in the old Foreshore Office on Hornsea's esplanade. Not

only was NCI Hornsea the first station to be opened by NCI's Royal patron, but it is also the first NCI station in Yorkshire. Her Royal Highness was welcomed to the event, held at the station and later at The Marine Hotel, by The Vice Lord Lieutenant who introduced East Riding's High Sheriff and the Mayor of Hornsea. There were displays from HM Coastguard and a tent providing information about the NCI. Her Royal Highness spent some time chatting to the guests and watchkeepers before unveiling a plaque to mark the station's opening.

After several months operating from a temporary lookout, the volunteers from Hengistbury Head finally closed the doors of their lookout on the evening of Monday 6<sup>th</sup> August. In three days of intensive work the team reinstalled their equipment in their new watch station in the disused HM Coastguard station situated on the top of Warren Hill, and NCI Hengistbury Head proudly reopened for business on 10<sup>th</sup> August. Acting Station Manager Brian Roberts said: "Well done to all who helped with the transformation. Thanks to everyone who makes the Station what it is".



There were other changes to the organisation of the charity during the summer with NCI Runtun changing its name to NCI Cromer. There were also internal changes to the way NCI communicated and processed data with the organisational rollout of Microsoft Office 365. This is an online system that provides a seamless integration between electronic communications and data storage while complying with the relevant Data Protection legislation. As NCI is a charity, Microsoft generously provided multiple licences for the charity's use, and the NCI IT team worked tirelessly for several months to ensure the membership were trained in the use of the new systems.

When the Station Manager of NCI Portland Bill was contacted a few weeks before Christmas asking if the Watchkeepers would like to receive a Christmas Hamper he didn't know this phone call would turn the station into international YouTube stars. It turned out to be a major advertising campaign for Vodafone worldwide, and the treats were delivered by the first drone to be controlled by 4G! It was the first ever UK drone delivery made using a 4G mobile network.

2019 saw the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the formation of the National Coastwatch Institution and on Monday 29<sup>th</sup> April the inaugural NCI station at Bass Point in Cornwall was honoured to welcome their patron, HRH The Princess Royal, to launch the anniversary year. HRH was welcomed to the station by NCI Chairman Lesley Suddes, Station Manager Peter Clements and





Edward Bolitho, the Lord Lieutenant of Cornwall, before being given a tour of the station. HRH unveiled a commemorative plaque at the station and signed the visitors' book before travelling to nearby RNAS Cudrose where she was entertained at a reception to celebrate the start of the NCI's 25th Anniversary celebrations. During the reception, Her Royal Highness met many volunteer watchkeepers from Bass Point and other Cornish stations. Before she left, HRH cut a cake made specially to celebrate the event and thanked the Cudrose Military Wives Choir who had provided the entertainment.



NCI Newhaven at the Fish Festival



Our Members



NCI Penzance at Golowan Fair

This was the first of many events held throughout the year to celebrate the first quarter century of the charity. 25th Anniversary celebrations were held both nationally and locally at stations including fetes, garden parties, fairs open days and of course the NCI exhibition trailer attended several major boat shows.



NCI Portland Bill held an open day at Charborough Park

In May 2019, Her Majesty the Queen recognised the work of the National Coastwatch Institution by inviting some of the volunteers to a garden party at Buckingham Palace. Linda Lawrence from the Operations Support Group and Neil Hunt from NCI Shoreham proudly represented NCI.

In response to an increase in demand during the summer, NCI Calshot Tower opened a satellite station at Stone Point in Lepe Country Park using an NCI mobile unit. Originally manned at weekends and Bank Holidays on a trial basis, the station was judged to be a valuable resource and it was decided to provide the volunteers with a more suitable permanent building and to increase the hours of operation.

To celebrate 25 years of the National Coastwatch Institution's contribution towards saving lives at sea, the lights illuminating Weymouth pavilion turned blue and gold for



a week in August. The lights, in NCI's colours, shone out across the Jurassic coast and there was also a display in the foyer manned by NCI Portland Bill.



Weymouth Pavilion illuminated in NCI colours to celebrate the 25th anniversary

On 10th August 2019 NCI expanded its coverage of the Welsh coastline with the opening of NCI Great Orme in North Wales. Housed in an NCI mobile transportable unit situated in the car park of the 'Rest and be Thankful' café on the Great Orme overlooking Llandudno, the station initially only operated at weekends but gradually increased the number of watches as volunteers were recruited and trained. However, the view from the Great Orme was restricted and, following discussions with the Harbour Master, RNLI and HM Coastguard, it was agreed that the station would relocate to a location on the West Shore in Llandudno. NCI Great Orme reopened on their new site in August 2020.

NCI celebrated their first National Coastwatch Day on 14th September 2019 which coincided with the NCI 25th Anniversary. The exhibition trailer was at the Southampton Boat Show on the day and many stations held special events and activities over the weekend to celebrate the first quarter century of the charity.



Southampton Boat Show

The violent storms at the start of 2019 had damaged the old NCI station at Cromer rendering it unsafe to be used so a new station was required. Thanks largely to a generous donation from the inventor Sir James Dyson, the team took delivery of their new bespoke demountable building in September. Further donations from the Sheringham Shoal Wind Farm Community Fund and the Victory Housing Trust allowed the station to be fully fitted out with all the electronic aids that enabled the

station to extend the coverage along the shoreline and beyond. By October, NCI Cromer resumed operations and had extended their opening hours to seven days a week. Along with his generosity, Sir James Dyson also agreed to become NCI Cromer's Honorary Patron.

In October, the Victory Services Club in London hosted a special meeting when NCI's Royal patron, HRH The Princess Royal accepted an invitation to attend the annual Station Managers' meeting. Her Royal Highness was greeted by Chairman Lesley Suddes and introduced to Deputy Chair Ian Whalley, Board Secretary Mike Byrne and patron Sir Christopher Coville. before moving downstairs to meet the assembled Station Managers.



The Princess Royal spoke with each local group and was given a short introduction to each region's operations before Lesley Suddes welcomed her on behalf of the members and invited her to say a few words.



Her Royal Highness expressed her pleasure at meeting so many of the station representatives from around the country and said that in her view, meetings like this were an extremely valuable way of sharing information, discussing best practice and equipment – including which kettles make the best tea at the watch! Her Royal Highness concluded by thanking everyone present for all their hard work which is what makes the charity the success it is today.

After lunch, Sir Christopher Coville addressed the meeting where he praised the actions of the volunteers of the NCI. He ended by saying "When people ask me what the NCI does, I tell them that they do three things. They save lives, they enrich lives and they add resilience to their communities as part of the search and rescue community".

On 15th January 2020, NCI's Anniversary year celebrations were brought to a close with a reception in the presence of NCI's Royal patron, HRH The Princess Royal. The high-profile reception took place in the historic surroundings of Trinity House, overlooking the Tower of London, attended by a group of invited sponsors, supporters





and guests. Her Royal Highness was greeted by Chairman Lesley Suddes, Deputy Chairman Ian Whalley and Captain Ian MacNaught (Deputy Master of Trinity House) before being introduced to the NCI Board of Trustees. The Princess Royal then moved on to the library where the guests had been entertained by representatives from several stations who circulated amongst them enthusiastically explaining what NCI does and how they can support the charity. Guests included representatives from The Yacht Market (who sponsored the reception), The Baltic Exchange, Lloyds Register, Seafarers UK, British Marine, UK Border Force, Seawork International, Sunsail, Icom and many others, as well as representatives from Trinity House, HM Coastguard and the Worshipful Company of Shipwrights.

The North London Military Wives Choir provided musical entertainment with a lively performance. Lesley Suddes welcomed Her Royal Highness and thanked her on behalf of the NCI for her ongoing support for the charity, before introducing The Princess Royal. Her Royal Highness addressed the guests and thanked them for their support which has helped to underpin how far the NCI had come in their first quarter century. Demonstrating her excellent knowledge of NCI's volunteers and their activities, she outlined the need for an evidence-based expansion of NCI stations into vulnerable areas. Her Royal Highness concluded by saying:

*"NCI this is it – you'll have to stop celebrating twenty-five years now and look forward to the next twenty-five".*

Throughout the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, the Trustees had compiled a souvenir yearbook recording the celebration. With the help of several organisations who sponsored the printing and distribution, this yearbook was sent to all serving NCI members.

At the beginning of 2020, the world-wide COVID-19 pandemic caused restrictions to much of the daily life in the UK and a national lockdown was declared by HM Government. In March, the NCI Board of Trustees reluctantly made the decision to suspend all watchkeeping duties and for stations to remain closed until further notice due to the ongoing situation. The Trustees and other groups continued to meet virtually while stations were closed and stations created many innovative ways to continue with a restricted training regime. In May, the Government relaxed the COVID-19 restrictions and the NCI Trustees were able to authorise stations in England to reopen if they wished, subject to restricting themselves to single manning with a strict decontamination procedure. The Welsh Assembly similarly relaxed their restrictions two weeks later. Unfortunately, the eight weeks closure and subsequent restrictions



severely affected NCI's fundraising and recruiting abilities throughout the rest of the year.

By September the Trustees became aware that there were a number of watchkeepers who, for various reasons, were unable to continue watchkeeping but wanted to continue as members of the NCI. Responding to this, the Trustees created a new category of Membership called NCI Veteran.

September also saw the publication of the updated operations manual after several months of rewriting and editing, thanks to The Baltic Exchange, Lloyd's Register and Trinity House who sponsored the production of the manual.

Despite the continuing challenges of the Covid-19 restrictions, NCI was able to hold the annual Station Managers meeting via an online conference. Planning for this meeting had started in early September and included training for the NCI's members, who have a diverse range of equipment and experience. On the morning of 31<sup>st</sup> October, NCI Trustees and National Officers, together with fifty-three Station Managers from England and Wales, met 'virtually'. There were presentations on Fundraising and Operations and the meeting concluded with a discussion of matters raised by the Small Group meetings held around the country. Despite being held on Halloween weekend, the event wasn't scary at all and proved to be a very successful meeting that ran to schedule.



In December 2020 the Board of Trustees regretfully announced the closure of NCI Aberystwyth. The Aberystwyth station had been operational for nearly four years but had not been able to attract sufficient volunteers to remain viable. At the same time, analysis of the of maritime activity and incidents in the area over the four-year period had proved to be much lower than expected when the station was established. The Board of Trustees placed on record their regret at having to take this decision and expressed their thanks to the Aberystwyth team for their dedication and commitment.

As 2021 opened, the NCI was still operating under the government guidelines due to the Covid-19 pandemic but gradually these restrictions eased and stations were once again permitted to have more than one watchkeeper in the building, which allowed training to resume again.



Following discussions with HM Coastguard and the local populace, NCI agreed to deploy one of their demountable trailers at Brancaster in Norfolk at the beginning of May, manned by volunteers from nearby stations, as a seasonal initiative, with a view to creating a more permanent station if there proved to be a demand.

At the same time NCI St Donats Bay began standing training watches in the grounds of the UWC Atlantic College in South Wales. The idea of a NCI Coastwatch station at St Donats Bay had first been discussed in October 2019 when the charity was offered a watch station by the college as part of the Atlantic College Sea Front development project. Unfortunately, the project had been delayed by the Covid pandemic and work was still ongoing some 18 months later. The offer from the college was that they would refurbish and fully equip a watch station in one of the seafront towers and would convert an adjoining tower as a training facility. The only condition was that NCI would fully run the station and that students from the college would be able to join the station as cadets. As there had been delays in the project, Atlantic College agreed to having an NCI mobile unit temporary deployed at the location which would allow the new watchkeepers to be trained at weekends.

The NCI held its Annual General Meeting in Swindon having been prevented from holding one the previous year due to the pandemic. This hybrid meeting took place with half the attendees in person and the other half attending by video link. At this meeting, Lesley Suddes stood down as Chairman and was succeeded by Clive Pouncey who was elected to the role. This meeting also saw NCI Cromer become the first recipient of the Alan Richards Memorial Award.