

The History of NCI Portland Bill QAVS

The Portland Bill station was originally built in 1934 as a visual post to provide information to the Portland Harbour batteries and protect shipping passing the Bill. The station was sited to provide visual protection, being 50 meters above sea level on a bearing of 005° degrees from the Portland Bill lighthouse at a distance of approximately 1Km. This, combined with visual coverage of 290° of sea around Portland, made it an ideal site for keeping a watch over this particularly dangerous stretch of coast and the particularly hazardous 'Portland Race'. The station was in use until 1994 when it was closed by the Coast Guard and in May 1996 it was taken over by a small group of enthusiasts from NCI under the first Station Manager, Dave Crabb. In April 1997 refurbishment was completed and on the 27th May 1997 the station was officially opened.



The Portland Bill station showing the original station below and the 2004 extension which was built on top.

In spite of the initial works undertaken to make the old lookout usable for National Coastwatch purposes it could only accommodate 2 watchkeepers and in 2004 Station Manager Geoff Peters started work on extending the building to twice its original size. The newly rebuilt station was opened on 27th July 2004 with the official opening performed soon after by HRH The Princess Royal.

The station currently supports 65 highly trained volunteers of all ages and from all walks of life, all of whom give their time for free. The station gives 9,417 man-hours to the community every year and stands to provide service out of normal operating hours including Christmas Day.

In 2009 NCI Portland Bill was the winner of the Wessex Charity Award (Volunteers of the Year).

In 2012, the Queen's Diamond Jubilee year, we were presented with the Queen's Award for Voluntary Service (QAVS). This is the highest recognition possible for volunteers, the equivalent of an MBE. We were delighted when, in August, HRH The Princess Royal returned, with her husband, Vice Admiral Sir Tim Laurence, to present us with this prestigious award, whilst at the same time officially opening our recently completed training centre. This was funded entirely by public subscription to provide watchkeeper training, following the closure of HM Coastguard's Weymouth Headquarters and move to NMOC at Farnham.

HRH The Princess Royal and Vice Admiral Sir Tim Laurence have since officially joined the team at Portland Bill by becoming Honorary Watchkeepers, a further endorsement of the importance of the work the volunteers carry out daily at the lookout.



The cliffs at the NCI Portland Bill lookout Station with the Old Upper Lighthouse in the background.

The lookout is equipped with all the very latest technology and optics, state of the art Duplex Radar, AIS (Automatic Identification System) for identifying shipping, up to the minute 100% solid state weather monitoring and very high-power binoculars. We also have a remote-operated high-resolution CCTV camera mounted on the Portland Bill lighthouse which enables us to keep a lookout on the 'Portland Race' and the inshore channel used by smaller vessel to avoid the Race. We also monitor all shipping, leisure and commercial craft using the waters around Portland Bill, and watch out for walkers, climbers, horse riders and all those using the land and sea around the Bill for

recreational purposes. This makes us a very valuable asset in an area that has a low resident population yet is popular with the thousands of tourists that visit every year.



Portland Bill NCI Station on the left with the training centre to the left of centre and the solar panel array to the right



Geoff with the Vodafone drone

Being a watchkeeper can be fun at times and at Christmas 2019 Vodafone brought Santa in a drone together with his video helpers to deliver presents to the dedicated watchkeepers at Portland Bill.

Station Manager Geoff Peters handed out the Christmas crackers that had been delivered by Santa in his drone, together with mince pies for the team.

This intended advertisement for Vodafone did not appear in the UK at Christmas 2019 due to production delays and the beginning of the Covid-19 problems.

Although the advertisement has not yet aired it may be shown in the future, though unfortunately the technology has moved on.



What could be better than to have access to such a beautiful view when coming off watch.