

Eyes along the coast

Tim Colquhoun outlines the work of the National Coastwatch Institution – a voluntary charity dedicated to spotting trouble on British coasts, whether it is a distress flare, a yacht with engine failure, a stranded walker or a swamped kayak

Back in 2014, Sir Robin Knox-Johnston opened the NCI promotional video with the words: “We hear a lot about the ‘Big Society’. Does anyone realise just how much of that big society already exists with our search and rescue services? Does anyone keep a lookout over our shoreline for the rapidly increasing number of leisure users, and of course people who go walking along the shore line? Accidents do happen – whether it’s a child drifting out to sea on a lilo, a yacht or fishing boat with engine trouble, a diver in difficulties, or a car with someone trapped in it on the cliff. On those occasions you need help.

“These days we’ve grown used to relying on electronics to navigate ourselves out of trouble, but let’s not forget the importance of a lookout, the good old eyeball mark 1, when things get really dirty. Let me tell you about one of the best kept secrets in search and rescue.

It’s called the National Coastwatch Institution, or NCI for short.” In 2022, the NCI is more widely known.

When two fishermen lost their lives in 1994 off the Cornish coast near a recently closed HM Coastguard lookout, local people decided to restore the visual watch, and the first NCI station was opened at Bass Point on the Lizard. Others quickly followed and today 57 operational stations keep watch around the coast of England and Wales, as part of a voluntary, charitable trust.

High technology and sophisticated systems have improved safety at sea greatly, but there is no substitute for a watchful pair of eyes. Accidents do happen, and a computer cannot spot a distress flare, an overturned boat, a yacht with engine failure, swamped kayaks or a swimmer in distress. A trained watchkeeper can!



Every NCI lookout station is run by a station manager with a team of deputies responsible for various aspects of its operation, such as training, treasury matters, building maintenance, local publicity, etc. The station manager leads a team of around 50 or so watchkeepers, each of whom is expected to undertake four or five watches per month. Watches consist of two, sometimes three watchkeepers on duty for a period of approximately four hours duration. This varies from station to station depending on the time of year and workload of that particular sector of the coast. Some in more remote areas have fewer, and larger and busier lookouts maintain a larger number. Lookout stations are operational during daylight hours for up to 365 (or 366) days per year.

Each station has to comply with operational standards set by HM Coastguard. On achieving this standard, the lookout is awarded a DFS certificate (Declared Facility Status) – its official HMCG recognition of operational competence. This means that it has been designated as available for maritime search and rescue (SAR) under the direction of HM Coastguard, according to a specific standard and set criteria. Inspections are carried out annually to ensure the proper standard is maintained.

NCI watchkeepers are “the eyes and ears along the coast”, keeping a visual

Radio checks: call National Coastwatch on dedicated VHF Channel 65

HM Coastguard is trying to discourage yachtsmen from using VHF Channel 16 to ascertain whether their radio works, unless it is really essential. A radio check can be carried out by calling anyone on any frequency. Go to VHF Ch65 and call the NCI for a radio check. If an AIS verification is required, call the nearest NCI station.

Caution: Make sure you are using the correct international marine VHF channel. Ch65 is duplex: the ship transmits on 156.275MHz and the shore station on 160.875MHz. The US and Canadian coastguards use a simplex channel, 65A, on 156.275MHz for port operations only; it is not valid outside their waters. Ensure you have the international marine VHF channels set correctly, as some units allow you to switch to US channels.

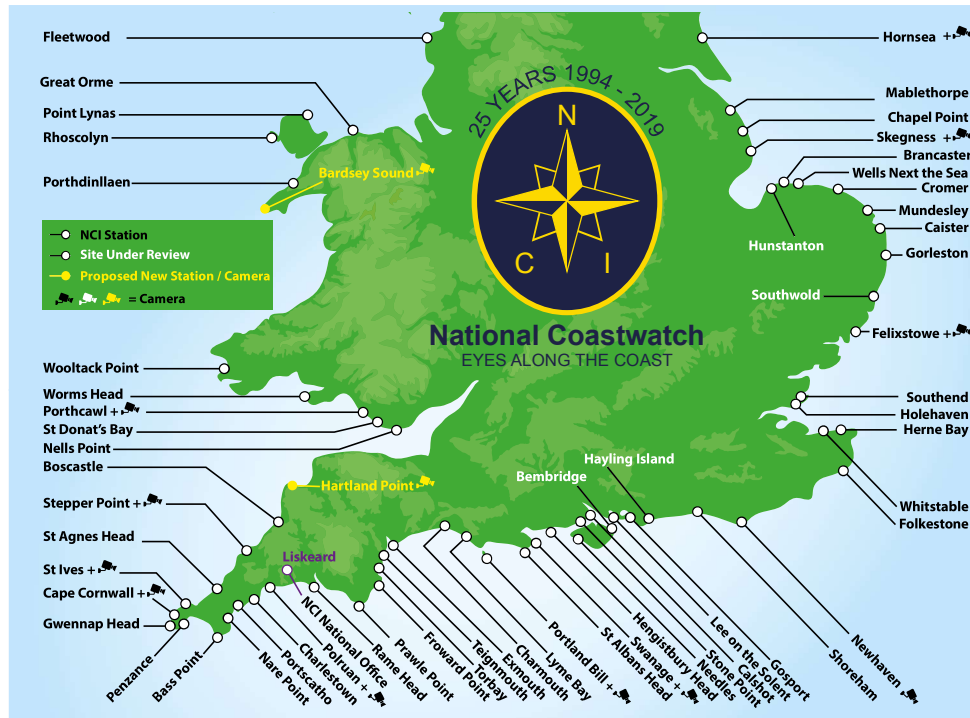


Photo: Guy Brown



Opposite, NCI Rame Head on a quiet day and NCI Porthcawl on a stormy one! Above, a mobile lookout in place. Visitors are welcome at all lookout stations throughout the year (subject to operational restrictions and Covid requirements).

and listening watch. Using VHF radio, radar, powerful optics, remote cameras, ship recognition systems and weather stations, NCI volunteers are trained to act in an emergency, reporting directly to the Coastguard and coordinating with the search and rescue services. Stations monitor local working VHF frequencies, Coastguard broadcast frequencies and Ch16, plus Ch0, the emergency services operating VHF channel, and the NCI dedicated VHF frequency Ch65. A log of all activities and local weather conditions is kept, and vulnerable activities such as kayaking, paddle-boarding, kite-surfing and diving are closely observed, as are walkers and climbers on shore. Fishermen and yachtsmen frequently contact



stations for local weather conditions before setting out, and walkers often call in for advice before tackling hazardous coastal paths.

The training programme therefore covers all aspects of watchkeeping from maintenance of the logbook, reporting of observed incidents, VHF radio communications, basic chart-work, use of AIS, weather and tides, nautical signs and signals, and dealing with public queries.

Some stations also have radar facilities for which their watchkeepers are trained.

Although the task of all lookout stations is the same, there is a vast variety of types and styles of buildings in use. The 57 NCI stations are along the coast from the northwest to the northeast of England, including nine stations in Wales. A programme of new station openings at the request of HMCG is in operation, with projects at various

Could you be an NCI volunteer?

Volunteers come from all walks of life, professions, jobs and employment, and all ages. However, most are retired and looking for a worthwhile and active charity to support, and naturally tend to live somewhere not far from the coast.

Those applying to become watchkeepers (see below for contact information) can indicate which lookout station they would like to join and will be contacted and interviewed by the appropriate station manager. The candidate can sit in during an operational watch to observe what goes on before deciding if this is right for them.

An individual training programme is then set up to suit both the candidate and the station, which can last as long as it takes – within reason! Qualification training is designed to be flexible to fit in with a candidate's other commitments, and the duration can be between three and 12 months, although if it takes over six months one might question the suitability of the candidate for the job.

During the training period the potential watchkeeper has three assessments. These are not exams but formal consideration of progress. Satisfactory completion of the final one results in the achievement of a watchkeeper certificate.

It is not necessary for applicants to have any former nautical experience, merely a desire to be involved in a useful coastal



activity. Full training is provided for everybody and lack of previous experience of marine matters is no hindrance. However, those who have formal RYA or professional qualifications need much less time and effort to progress.

Members of the CA would be most welcome as volunteer watchkeepers. Their knowledge and experience would be a great benefit to the charity, particularly those with nautical qualifications of whatever sort.

It may be that you would like to join the team when not cruising! Find out more by looking at the NCI website: www.nci.org.uk, or drop a line to: National Coastwatch Institution, 17 Dean Street, Liskeard, Cornwall, PL14 4AB. Email: admin01@nci.org.uk; phone 0300 1111202.



Left, HRH The Princess Royal unveils a plaque at St Alban's Head. Right, Lucy Gray, CA General Manager, on the NCI trailer at the 2021 Southampton Boat Show, selecting the NCI draw prizewinner. The show is one of the most important promotional opportunities in the year where visitors can see displays and demonstrations of the NCI's work around the coastline



stages of planning and development. Some stations occupy traditional old coastguard lookouts, some are housed in converted buildings, and others use specifically designed moveable cabins. Specially designed, constructed and fitted trailers are used for any short term requirements such as temporary, summer-only positions or when carrying out trials at a particular location prior to establishing a permanent lookout.

When HMCG (or the RNLI through HMCG) asks the NCI to consider a particular area, a number of criteria have to be investigated before the project can be set in motion: the exact location and

cost of a suitable building or site, equipping the station, the feasibility of recruiting enough volunteers locally to run it, the projected annual running costs, the availability of experienced NCI watchkeepers to set it up, and of course the overall initial capital cost.

The NCI is a national charity and is financed entirely by public donation and commercial sponsorship, with no government funding. It is run by a board of trustees drawn from the membership of the charity, each of whom has a specific business responsibility. The board is assisted by teams overseeing operations, finance, fundraising, public relations, asset management, and general administration. Currently there are no salaried employees, and management relies entirely on volunteers.

The charity is fortunate to have HRH The Princess Royal as the royal patron. She regularly visits stations around the coast and attends the annual receptions held at Trinity House. Her interest in the NCI has helped to generate considerable sponsorship from the City of London and marine-related commerce as a whole.

Following a career in the regular army, Tim was in business in London & Dorset, and a professional yacht skipper and yacht delivery specialist. Now he is a watchkeeper at St Alban's Head and the NCI Trustee responsible for public relations since 2016. He is also a member of the CA.



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