

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 18th December 1994 with the opening of their first station at Bass Point on the Lizard peninsula in Cornwall.