

The History of NCI Calshot Tower QAVS

Calshot Spit is a one-mile long sand and shingle bank situated where Southampton Water joins the Solent. On the far end of the Spit are Calshot Castle built by Henry VIII, now owned by English Heritage, and the large hangars of the former RAF air-sea rescue and flying boat base, which now house the Calshot Activities Centre. Close by the Castle is the Calshot RNLI lifeboat station, and adjoining that the tower lookout occupied by NCI Calshot.



Calshot Spit from the air (photo: John Baker Photography)

The tower is owned by Associated British Ports (ABP). It was built in 1973 as part of the radar chain used by Southampton VTS (Vessel Traffic Services), which controls marine traffic in the approaches to the port. Southampton is one of the country's busiest ports with constant commercial traffic which includes the world's largest cruise ships, container vessels and oil tankers, as well as regular car ferry and high-speed ferry services, all of which pass the tower.

Southampton Water and the Solent also have intensive leisure use with the River Hamble and Cowes sailing centres in the immediate vicinity, and with large numbers of recreational sailing events being regularly scheduled. It is normal for more than 200 leisure vessels to be within sight of the tower on a typical weekend day, and more like 2000 during Cowes Week and for major events such as the



Calshot Tower, and (to left) RNLI Calshot, in September 2009 before NCI moved in.

Round the Island Race. In addition, Calshot Activity Centre and the associated slipways are in regular use.

The Calshot Tower viewing platform is approximately 100 feet above sea level and has a 360° view over Southampton Water and the Solent with a horizon distance of 11 nautical miles to the SE. It served as a Coastguard lookout from 1974 until the 1990s.



Initial meeting at the Waterside Club, January 2010

The formation of NCI Calshot Tower was the result of months of phone calls, letters and hard work carried out by the Trustees of the National Coastwatch Institution during 2009, aided by the generosity of Associated British Ports in allowing NCI free use of the tower.

An initial recruitment meeting at the Waterside Sports & Social Club in January 2010 took everybody by surprise. Rather than the expected twenty to thirty people, the 106 available seats were occupied, and it

became standing room only. As well as enthusiastic local people, representation included ABP, Calshot RNLI, HM Coastguard, Fawley Parish Council, the local Police and Hardley Fire station.

Watchkeeper training commenced in April, and thanks to the generosity of local individuals and businesses, the operations room refit was started in May. Following several weekend “shakedown” watches, the flag was first flown on the tower, and daily training watches commenced, on July 7th 2010.

The new station soon showed its value. The first incident, a capsized catamaran which could not be righted, was observed and reported to HM Coastguard on 9th July. Catamarans featured in further incidents during the station’s first summer including on the official opening day for NCI Calshot Tower, the 25th July 2010, when two separate incidents occurred!

There was much media interest in the re-opening of Calshot Tower. On 2nd July 2010 renowned sailor Sir Robin Knox-Johnston and powerboat champion Shelly Jory-Leigh climbed the tower’s 82 steps to present Radio Solent’s H2O sailing show live from the operations room.



H2O radio programme broadcast from the tower; seated: Sir Robin Knox-Johnston and Shelley Jory-Leigh; standing: Micki Brant, Ryan Sutton and Colin Lewis

NCI Calshot also featured on the 22nd July BBC South Today TV programme with the local weather forecast presented live from the Tower. Reporter Tom Hepworth much

impressed the watchkeepers by sprinting from outside the tower to the operations room in under 2 minutes and then conducting a live interview!

Further media coverage included Nick Girdler's Radio Solent morning show (25th July) and ITV's Simon Parkin's evening weather presentation (4th October). The widespread TV, radio, and local newspaper coverage helped greatly in recruiting more trainee watchkeepers for the Tower.



Snow on Calshot Spit, December 2010

Anthony Cochrane and Colin Lewis acted as joint Chairman during the station development, jointly becoming the first Station Managers. Colin Lewis took over solely during summer 2010 with Ryan Sutton as the Operations and Training Officer and Mikki Brant as Administrative Officer.

In December an unusually heavy snowstorm in southern England resulted in snow drifts inland. Even Calshot Spit received a light layer of snow. Despite the difficult road conditions the station was kept open by watchkeepers who lived locally.



Alternative ways to access the Calshot Tower operations room: (left) Hampshire Fire and Rescue high rise platform; (right) A motorised bosun's chair.

The only access to the Calshot Tower operations room is provided by steep metal stairs within the tower. Concern that this was a potential fire hazard was allayed in August 2011 when Hampshire Fire and Rescue demonstrated the rescue capability of their high-rise platform. The morning watch, together with an old fridge from the ops room kitchen, were lowered down to the ground via the castle moat! A different means of access, a motorised Bosun's chair, was demonstrated in October of that year, but the Calshot watchkeepers decided they much preferred the tower stairs.

Two years of developing station procedures and training watchkeepers were scrutinised by NCI DFS* assessors Jim Bates and Ian Weston, and Solent Coastguard Manager Lee Fisher over two days in May 2012 with a social evening at the Jolly Sailor in picturesque Ashlett Creek on the first evening. The station was congratulated on achieving an outstanding result.

The DFS Certificate was presented to Station Manager Colin Lewis on the 7th August 2012 by the Chief Coastguard Peter Dymond OBE, in the presence of NCI Chairman Alan Richards and Deputy Chairman Blake Holt; Julian Lewis (New Forest Member of Parliament) and Cllr Alexis McEvoy (Chairman of New Forest District Council), both strong supporters of NCI Calshot; NCI/Solent Coastguard liaison Officer Paul Marlow; the Station Manager of RNLi Calshot Ian Weeks; and Worshipful Master of Aldershot Lodge Adam Young.



The Chief Coastguard Peter Dymond OBE during the DFS Certificate presentation

Also present were David Chisnall OBE (Trustee, Hampshire & Isle of Wight Air Ambulance) and the crew of the Air Ambulance which had landed on the Spit directly beneath Calshot Tower to mark the ceremony. The event was reported on the evening's South Today and Meridian News as well as in the local press.



The steep stairs within the tower.

There have been many visitors to the NCI Calshot Tower operations room including local MP Julian Lewis, the yachtsman and raconteur Tom Cunliffe, and more recently the historian and TV presenter Dan Snow. In September 2012 two lecturers and 50 students from

Southampton Solent University visited and were split into groups of 5 to ascend to the ops room. NCI Operations Manager, Alan Bessant, was forced to ascend and descend the Tower stairs no less than six times!

Calshot Watchkeeper Norman Tulip was presented with a Heritage Alliance Heroes Award (2012) by the Government Minister, Ed Vaisey, in recognition of Norman's work and



(right) Senior watchkeeper Peter Cookson dips the flags to honour the SS Shieldhall passing the tower.

* Declared Facility Status (DFS) indicates that the station has met the standard required to be recognised as a Coastguard search and rescue asset.

dedication over 25 years to SS Shieldhall, the largest working steam ship in Northern Europe. It became a tradition to “dip the ensign” whenever SS Shieldhall passed the Tower, receiving an answering blast from the ship’s whistle in return.

With its mission to provide “Eyes along the Coast”, the normal operating hours of NCI Calshot are established as 8am to 8pm in summer and, in winter, 8am to 5pm, or dusk if earlier. However, on the night of 3rd January 2015 Operations Manager Roger Taylor opened up NCI Calshot Tower in the middle of the night to give the Coastguard visual assistance following the grounding of the MV Höegh Osaka. A roll-on/roll-off vehicle carrier, the ship had proved unstable after leaving Southampton and become grounded on the Bramble Bank with a heavy list. The ship remained aground within sight of the Tower until the 7th January and was finally towed back to Southampton on the 22nd.



View from Calshot Tower of the MV Höegh Osaka aground on Bramble Bank.

In October 2017, the NCI Chairman Lesley Suddes addressed the NCI Calshot Tower Annual General Meeting. After successfully guiding the station through its formation years, Colin Lewis retired as Station Manager. Unfortunately, the newly elected Acting Station Manager then attempted to implement major changes to the Station’s organisation and training methods which were not supported by the

watchkeepers. The new manager resigned and senior watchkeeper Phil Bridges stood in as interim Station Manager until, at an Extraordinary General Meeting in December 2017, Diana Roblett was appointed as the new Station Manager. Following this brief period of upheaval, under Di’s guidance the station was returned to normal operation.



Ex-Calshot watchkeepers Brian Roberts, Chris Lloyd-Smith and Ed Essery at the new NCI station on Hengistbury Head

During the summer of 2017 three Calshot watchkeepers, Brian Roberts, Chris Lloyd Smith and Ed Essery, who all lived in the Christchurch area, worked towards re-opening the unmanned Coastguard lookout on

Hengistbury Head as an NCI station.

The new station became operational in March 2018 from a temporary location in Southbourne. NCI Calshot assisted with watchkeeper training and several watchkeepers either transferred to the new station or helped by sharing their expertise. NCI Hengistbury Head opened in the headland Coastguard lookout in August 2018.

There was excitement on Thursday, 25th October 2018 when HRH The Princess Royal, Patron of the National Coastwatch Institution, visited NCI Calshot Tower.



HRH The Princess Royal is welcomed to Calshot by NCI Chairman Lesley Suddes on the 25th October 2018



In the station ops room with watchkeeper John Sapsford and DSM Roger Taylor.

The Princess, who arrived by helicopter, was met by the Deputy Lord Lieutenant for Hampshire, Vice-Admiral Sir David Steel, and introduced to Councillor Elaine Still, leader of Hampshire County Council; Councillor Mel Kendall, Chair of New Forest District Council; Commander Lesley Suddes and Blake Holt, NCI Chair and Deputy Chair; Aldred Drummond of the Cadland Estate, and Stephen Kingdon, Deputy Launching Authority Calshot RNLI, along with Roger Taylor, NCI Calshot Deputy Station Manager and Colin Lewis, senior watchkeeper.

The Princess climbed the ladders to inspect the NCI Calshot operations room with her private detective following, it is rumoured somewhat breathlessly, behind! Then, having met each of the watchkeepers assembled in groups outside the Tower, a short ceremony was held within the RNLI Station. The Princess presented epaulettes to the new Deputy Station Manager, five-year certificates to four watchkeepers, and unveiled a plaque which is now fixed within the tower.

May 2019 saw the establishment of an NCI Calshot satellite station in Lepe Country Park. The aim was to provide coverage for the parts of the western Solent not readily observed from either NCI Calshot or NCI Needles. To avoid confusion with NCI Lee-on-the-Solent (call sign Lee NCI) the station was named "NCI Stone Point" rather than NCI Lepe.



The NCI mobile unit arrives at Lepe to start trials for the NCI Stone Point station.

Initially based in an NCI trailer unit situated above the Country Park lower car park, the Station was staffed at weekends and Bank Holidays during summer 2019. Following participation in a number of Coastguard incidents the trial station was judged worthy of continued operation.



Presentation ceremony for the QAVS Award and the Certificate received.

By 2021 it was being operated every day from 10am to 4pm with plans to install a purpose built station in 2022 at a site with a better view of the Lepe Spit area. The aim would then be to increase the hours of operation.

On June 2nd 2019 it was announced that NCI Calshot Tower was among the proud recipients of the Queens Award for Voluntary Service (QAVS). In a ceremony held in the Kinkead Room of the Calshot Activity Centre on 4th September the Lord Lieutenant of Hampshire, Nigel Atkinson Esq, presented the station with a certificate signed by the Queen and a domed glass crystal in recognition of the award.

Special guests at the event included Deputy Lieutenant the Hon. Hugo Cubitt; Allan Glass, Chair of the New Forest District Council; Cllr. Alexis McEvoy, Hampshire County Councillor for the Fawley District; Waitrose representatives Jo Hobbs, Adam Truscott, and John D'Arcy (ex-Watchkeeper); Alistair Palmer, Calshot Activity Centre; and Jon Dyer-Slade, Countryside Service, Hampshire County Council.

For the first time since watchkeeping had begun nearly ten years earlier, NCI Calshot Tower was forced to close on Sunday 9th February 2020 due to the extreme weather forecast to be associated with Storm Ciara. Access to both NCI Calshot and NCI Stone Point was prevented by the closure of the Calshot Activities Centre and Lepe Country Park respectively.



Yacht aground on Calshot Spit shingle banks, April 2021 (photo Chris Patching)

Unfortunately, further closures were to occur later that year when the covid-19 pandemic forced NCI to close all its stations. NCI Calshot Tower closed from the 19th March and reopened on the 1st June, but only on a two shift per day basis. Initially only one watchkeeper was allowed in the poorly ventilated operations room. For safety, a second "buddy" watchkeeper was stationed at the foot of the tower where a CCTV link allowed the operations room to be monitored.

Three shifts were resumed at Calshot from the 1st October with the tower staffed from 9am to 3pm BST. With the end of British Summer Time, on 25th October the normal winter shift times were re-established with the tower staffed from 8am to 5pm GMT.

Due to the continuing covid-19 pandemic, during 2021 NCI Calshot was still being staffed by only two watchkeepers. As in the previous year, the inability to travel abroad caused many people to flock to UK beaches and inshore waters, resulting in numerous incidents. During the 2021 summer, Solent Coastguard made routine broadcast asking mariners to call NCI on channel 65 for radio checks. While this was a sensible and welcome decision, the work load on the two watchkeepers in the tower was increased still further.

A more positive effect of the increased public awareness of the role of NCI, and very evident at the 2021 Southampton Boat Show, has been a steady stream of new recruits applying to join NCI Calshot as potential watchkeepers. When the covid-19 lock downs curtailed the normal classroom based training sessions, Training Officer Peter Brown created a series of nine training videos. These, and initial training at the NCI Stone Point satellite station have proved very effective in advancing the new recruits towards full watchkeeper status. It has been possible to staff Stone Point on all seven days in the week. In November 2021 the total station compliment stood at 116 of which 25 were watchkeepers in training.

On the 31st October 2021 the morning watch arrived early at Calshot Tower to avoid police road closures in the area. They watched as the 650 feet (~200m) chimney and remaining parts of the decommissioned Fawley Power Station were demolished using explosives. The chimney had been a local landmark visible from much of the New Forest and a navigation aid used by mariners on the Solent both during the day and the night. The landscape looked strange without it!



The view from Calshot Tower before and after the demolition of most of Fawley Power station and its 650 foot chimney.

The covid-19 precautions were eased during spring 2022 but some watchkeepers who had been self-isolating did not return to keeping watches. Together with a continuing occurrence of covid infections, the result was that the station struggled to staff both Calshot Tower and Stone Point. It was not possible to immediately return to having three watchkeepers in the Tower; something which is highly desirable at busy times, when yacht racing in Southampton Water and the Solent mixes with jet-

skis, paddle boards and wind surfers from the beaches, and port traffic to and from Southampton.

A more positive development in July 2022 was the transfer of the NCI Stone Point satellite station in Lepe Country Park into a new, purpose built station. Situated a short distance to the east of the site used for the NCI trailer unit, the new station provides much improved coverage for the waters off Lepe Country Park and the central Solent, as well as allowing continued monitoring of the western Solent.



NCI Stone Point commenced watches in the new station on the 9th July 2022