

The History of NCI Cape Cornwall QAVS

Cape Cornwall is the only Cape in England and until the 18th century it was believed to be the most westerly point in Britain, until accurate surveying found Land's End to be slightly further West. A tin mine operated intermittently at this site between 1838 and 1883 when it finally closed. The mine's iconic 1864 chimney situated at the peak of the cape was retained as an aid to navigation.



Cape Cornwall and mine circa 1850

The Lookout station at Cape Cornwall is a former HM Coastguard lookout station that was built during the 1930s and remained in operation throughout the Second world war manned by the same Coastguard. Eddie Williams was posted to the Cape Cornwall Coastguard station in 1939 where he soon became a familiar figure cycling from the Coastguard houses to the watch station armed with his 'Tuck Stick'.



and rifle as his only means of keeping the German invasion at bay! Although Cape Cornwall was not itself a target it was strafed on several occasions by incoming German planes. But the regular work of the coastguard also continued during the war and Eddie was awarded a medal by the RSPCA for climbing down a 150' cliff to rescue a stranded dog. After the war, Eddie Williams left Cape Cornwall to take up senior posts in Wales and was awarded the MBE for his work in the design of the Rigid Inflatable Boats used by the RNLI.

In 1967, the Coastguard lookout at Cape Cornwall overlooked the sinking of the supertanker Torrey Canyon when it struck the Seven Stones reef and the subsequent unsuccessful attempts to prevent the oil spillage causing massive environmental damage. HM Coastguard continued to operate the watch station at Cape Cornwall until, along with the other visual watch stations in the South-West, it was scheduled for closure in the late 1970s. Cape Cornwall stayed open a little longer than most Coastguard stations as it operated part-time as a Bad Weather Reporting Station, but it too finally closed in 1981. The building was occasionally used as a Dolphin Watch station but was eventually abandoned. In 1987 Cape Cornwall headland was purchased by the H. J. Heinz Company, to commemorate a century of the company's operations in the United Kingdom and donated to the nation. The mine site is now

owned and maintained by the National Trust and Heinz's donation is commemorated by a Heinz Baked Beans label-shaped plaque set into the base of the 1864 chimney at the top of the headland.

In 1994, following a tragic accident off the Lizard peninsular in Cornwall, the National Coastwatch Institution was formed and the following year representatives of the charity visited St Just where they held a public meeting to call for volunteers to help set up a new watch station. In early February 1996 these volunteers set about restoring the old Coastguard lookout, often working in gale force winds with no electricity, running water or telephone. After much hard work, the damp and mildew was cleaned away, the utilities and basic equipment installed and the old Lookout station was restored to a working condition under Station Manager Annie Peacock. The station was formally opened on 6th April 1996 by local MP Andrew George, and NCI Cape Cornwall became fully operational as the most westerly station in late 1996 - although it was a very different Station compared with today.



The very first Cape Cornwall watch in 1996 - with Annie Peacock and Peter Breingan

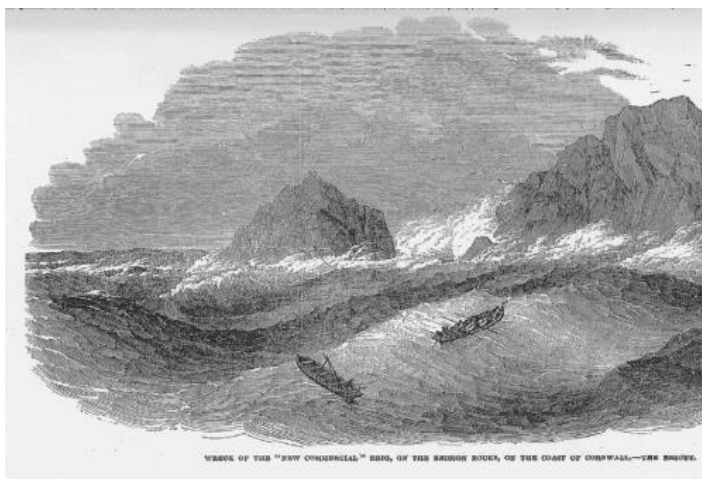
The early watch-keepers managed to do a sterling job with just basic binoculars and very little else, but over the years the station evolved and soon boasted a range of optical equipment including a pair of high power binoculars that had allegedly belonged to the Russian border guards! Other aids to watchkeeping were slowly added until the station was fully equipped with radar, Marine VHF radio, computer, AIS and telephone. The station also has a small galley and visitor centre at the rear of the lookout which houses various displays for visitors wishing to learn more about Cape Cornwall and the more than 200 square miles of sea that it looks over. The visitor centre also contains a range of merchandise which is sold to help fund the day-to-day costs of running the station. Visitors are always welcome at the lookout and the Watchkeepers are more than happy to point things out and answer questions – as long as they are not dealing with an incident.

After establishing the Cape Cornwall station, Annie Peacock stood down as Station Manager in 1996 to concentrate on her role as National PR and Fundraising Officer for the charity and became the station's Honorary President. She was succeeded as Station Manager by Peter Breingan who held the post for a number of years before being succeeded first by Brian Winterbourne and then by Alan Macrae.

In 2010, the Cornish NCI stations, including Cape Cornwall, were awarded the Queens Award for Voluntary Service. This prestigious award was presented to the individual stations by the Lord Lieutenant of Cornwall, Lady Mary Holborow, at a ceremony at the Burrell Theatre in Truro on 3rd August. Each recipient station received a certificate hand signed by Her Majesty the Queen and a glass trophy to commemorate the award. The QAVS is the highest accolade for voluntary organisations and is the MBE for voluntary services, and the Cornish stations were proud to be among the first stations in the NCI to receive this award.



In January 2011, the volunteers at NCI Cape Cornwall adopted the grave of Mary Sanderson on the 160th anniversary of her burial on 19 January 1851. In that year, the brig *New Commercial* struck the Brisons Rocks off Cape Cornwall during a gale. The ship quickly sank and Captain Sanderson and his wife Mary were swept onto the Brisons by the storm, where they were marooned for two days and nights despite several desperate attempts to rescue them. Eventually a rocket line was fired to the couple and Mary, clad only in her nightdress, leapt into the raging waters and was drawn



through them to a rescue boat. Tragically, before the boat could reach the shore, she succumbed to the rigours of her ordeal and died, aged only 34. Her husband Samuel was saved later that day. Mary was buried in Sennen churchyard, far from her home city of Newcastle and over the years, her grave had become dilapidated and overgrown. Cape Cornwall, whose Station looks out over the Brisons, adopted her grave and, with the help of local businesses, laid a new gravestone and agreed to care for the grave in perpetuity. On the 160th anniversary of her burial on 19th January 1851 a short and poignant rededication service took place at Sennen Parish Church near Land's End to commemorate her life as a symbolic gesture for those who have died and those who help to preserve life along the Cornish coastline.



, SM Alan Macrae & WK Pauline Vanderhoff laying the wreath at Mary Sanderson's grave

In 2012, Alan Macrae stood down as Station Manager at the station Annual General Meeting and was succeeded by Jonathan Rothwell. However, there was a serious problem brewing at Cape Cornwall. Over seventy years of exposure to the harsh elements on this exposed part of the coast had taken its toll on the largely wooden building and it was determined that only a major refurbishment could keep the lookout operational. Raising the finances to enable the work to be carried out took nearly a year and the station had to negotiate a new lease from the National Trust but finally, in August 2012, the initial work on rebuilding began.

All of the windows and doors needed replacing and this involved extending the roof and completely replacing the exterior cladding of the building. The interior of the lookout also required extensive work including replacing all of the electrical wiring, the installation of a new toilet, laying a new floor and completely redesigning and rebuilding the fixtures and fittings inside the watch station. Of course, all this work had to be completed before all the technical equipment could be reinstalled and calibrated. The "Two Pete's" (Peter Munday and Peter Winterson, the Deputy Station Managers) also installed the new 33-foot flagstaff.



The station had approached the National Lottery Fund to help with the cost of the refurbishment and they kindly provided the funds for the purchase and installation of a new pair of powerful binoculars.

On 1st April 2013, Mr Andrew George, the Member of Parliament for St Ives, officially re-opened the refurbished Cape Cornwall lookout in a short ceremony. Amongst the guests were representatives from the NCI Trustees, the RNLI lifeboat station at Sennen Cove and the Cornwall Wildlife Trust, as well as the Reverend Alan Rowell from Pendeen. Also amongst the guests was Annie Coak (née Peacock), who as the

original Station Manager, had been instrumental in getting the station up and running seventeen years earlier.



Hon President Annie Coak, DSM Peter Munday, Andrew George MP & SM Jonathan Rothwell with the new binoculars at the Re-opening of the watch

During this period the fundraising team at Cape Cornwall were busy organising collections at many locations throughout Penwith to supplement the funds generously donated at the Annual Boat Cove open air service and the St Just Lafrowda Festival. The team, spear-headed by Elsie Ash, worked tirelessly and quickly added regular gangplank collections at the *Scillonian*, the annual St Buryan Motor Vehicles Rally and the Newlyn Fish Festival to the list of events the station routinely attended. The station was even given a two-page feature in the centre pages of the Seasalt Cornwall mail order clothing catalogue for Autumn/Winter 2014, which is distributed world-wide.



Lafrowda Stall



Seasalt Catalogue



St Buryan Rally

In 2015, Cape Cornwall decided that there should be a Defibrillator unit available at the lookout. After some research, it was decided to approach the Ronnie Richards Memorial charity for assistance. They were able to facilitate the purchase of the defibrillator and cabinet, the cost of which was covered by a second generous grant from the National Lottery Fund, which also covered the cost of training the volunteer watchkeepers in its use. The defibrillator is mounted on the outside of the watch station where it is available 24 hours a day to users of the South West Coastal path.

In 2016, NCI Cape Cornwall hosted a celebration lunch at the St Just Golf Club to celebrate their 20th anniversary. Sharing the festivities were Lesley Suddes, Chairman

of the National Coastwatch Institution, Cllr Stevens, Deputy Mayor of St Just, John Chappell from RNLi Sennen, Cllr Sue James and Mr Andrew George along with representatives from the stations at Gwennap Head, St Ives, Penzance and NCI National Office.



Cape Cornwall 20th Anniversary Lunch at St Just Golf Club

Station Manager Jonathan Rothwell praised the dedication of the volunteers at Cape Cornwall saying “The thing that makes Cape Cornwall a success is the enthusiasm and dedication of the members. Everyone, from the seasoned watch keepers to the newest recruit, works as a team to ensure we keep people safe around our coast”. Mr Andrew George recalled that, as the local MP, he opened the station in 1996 and reopened the station in 2013 after the refurbishment. He said how impressed he had been with the way the station has developed over the years and praised how NCI Cape Cornwall has helped to keep the coast safe, adding that he was proud to be associated with the station.

Following his election to the Board of Trustees, Jonathan Rothwell stood down as Station Manager in 2017 after 5 years in the role and was succeeded by Richard Saynor.



A few weeks later, the station itself was the scene of an emergency when one of the watchkeepers suffered a suspected heart attack while on duty. The emergency services were called and it was decided that the casualty should be evacuated by helicopter to Treliske hospital, where he made a full recovery. Richard Saynor commented “It was unusual to be the subject of an emergency medevac rather than coordinating one. Our thanks go to our colleagues in the Ambulance Service, the Cliff Rescue Team and of course to the crew of the Coastguard helicopter”.

In 2018, following almost a year of planning, Cape Cornwall station was able to install a CCTV camera to overlook the popular tourist spot at Priest Cove near St Just. Priest Cove is busy all year round, being used by both local fishermen and visitors, and before the installation of the camera, watchkeepers had to climb over the cliff to see into the cove, placing them in danger. The purchase and installation was only possible thanks to a generous donation from the Isles of Scilly Steamship Company’s Community Fund. “This very generous donation means so much to us, we can’t thank the Steamship Company enough,” said Station Manager Richard Saynor, “The camera is vital because from the station, we can’t see anything that happens in the Cove. There is no mobile phone signal and the emergency phone has been vandalised, so if anything happens somebody has to run up to the station to tell us. It’s a very vulnerable area. This camera will help save lives”.



In 2019, the National Coastwatch Institution celebrated its 25th Anniversary and representatives from Cape Cornwall attended a reception at RNAS Culdrose where HRH The Princess Royal celebrated the opening of the first station at Bass Point. Throughout the Charity’s anniversary year, the volunteers of Cape Cornwall maintained a daylight watch and continued to promote the charity at many events, including being invited to attend the Gorsedh Kernow Festival of Cornish Culture.

Unfortunately, in 2020 the NCI Board of Trustees were forced to suspend operations nationally in response to the Coronavirus pandemic and Cape Cornwall temporarily closed their doors in March. The station was not able to resume operations until the May, and then only under very restrictive conditions, but even in these challenging times, the dedicated volunteers at Cape Cornwall continued to provide ‘Eyes along the Coast’ in the most westerly NCI station in England.

The landscape at Cape Cornwall may have changed over the years, but the sea remains the same beautiful but potentially dangerous place it always has been – and the volunteers of Cape Cornwall will continue with their mission to save lives along the coast.



Cape Cornwall headland today