

The History of NCI Folkestone



NCI Folkestone officially opened on the 10th October 1998 and was the first National Coastwatch Institution station in Kent. Situated at Copt Point, Wear Bay the station has a commanding view of the Strait of Dover, at the narrowest part of the English Channel, which separates Great Britain and continental Europe.

Most maritime traffic between the Atlantic Ocean and the North Sea and Baltic Sea passes through the Strait of Dover. The Strait is the busiest international seaway in the world, used by over 400 commercial vessels daily, all of which are in full view of NCI Folkestone. The amount and class of shipping has made traffic safety a critical issue, with HM Coastguard and the Maritime Gendarmerie maintaining a 24-hour watch over the strait and enforcing a strict regime in the shipping lanes.

NCI Folkestone operated, until February 2003, from an ex-Coastguard Station lookout situated on a chalk headland, Copt Point, overlooking Folkestone harbour and the town. NCI Folkestone continued to use the lookout until January 2003 when, following a cliff collapse, Shepway District Council, declared the lookout unsafe and gave NCI notice to move out, The lookout was subsequently demolished.

However, NCI continued to maintain watches from the nearby 19th century Martello Tower Number 3.

The Martello tower was far from an ideal watch station, so on the 21st May 2003 NCI moved into a temporary steel portable building which NCI had purchased.

In early 2005, NCI started a series of meetings with Shepway District Council and their legal advisers about the feasibility of NCI taking over a disused World War II, Battery Observation Post. Eventually, after much hard work and the fundraising efforts of our volunteers, building work started in November 2005 and NCI Folkestone Watch Station was formally opened on the 24th April 2007 and remains fully operational to date.

Throughout the years from the beginning in 1998 the Station has had very good help from the local community, local businesses and the fishermen and their families. We are also fortunate to have the support of our local authorities Shepway District Council and Kent County Council.

In 2011 NCI Folkestone received The Queen's Award for Voluntary Service, This is the highest award given to local volunteer groups across the UK to recognise outstanding work done in their own communities. It was created in 2002 to celebrate the anniversary of The Queen's coronation and is regarded as the MBE for volunteer groups.

Local History

Copt Point

The origin of the name of Copt Point is not clear but it is thought that the residents of the nearby Roman villa (AD 75 to about AD 300) would have owned slaves many of whom would have been Copts, are an ethno-religious group indigenous to Northeast Africa. They now inhabit the area of modern Egypt. Thus, Copt Point will have been where the Copts lived.

During World War I, Folkestone harbour became a huge embarkation point for British troops heading to France on the Western Front.

At the beginning of World War II, the port closed to civilian boat usage and 44,000 personnel used the port during the Dunkirk evacuation. Throughout the war the local area was strategically important both for air and sea missions and was heavily fortified and defended.

Copt Point (or Folkestone East) Battery

Construction of the coast defence battery started early in the second world war. The battery covered the Folkestone harbour approaches and Weir Bay and was fitted with two 6-inch Mark XI naval guns. The complex was manned by men of 550 Coastal Regiment Royal Artillery. NCI Folkestone watch station is built in what was the Battery Observation Post. By 1943 the Copt Point area was heavily fortified with barbed wire, slit trenches, a 6 pounder anti-tank gun, searchlights, spigot mortars and two Bofors Guns.

During the 1960s and 70s Folkestone harbour was a popular ferry port and carried over 800,000 passengers a year. However, in later years ferry services declined with

many cars and commercial vehicles preferring to use Dover harbour. In 2001 all ferry services stopped and Folkestone harbour returned to being a fishing port and a home for small leisure craft.

Copt Point Underground Monitoring Post

Close to the Watch Station is a 1960's concrete underground monitoring post. Manned by the Royal Observer Corp it was designed to monitor radioactive fallout in the event of a nuclear attack. The structure is no longer used and is not accessible to the general public.