

The History of NCI Froward Point



Froward Point is situated in South Devon on the Kingswear side of the mouth of the River Dart. During the 2nd World War, Dartmouth was a busy naval port and among other things operated a very active Coast Forces base at the Royal Dart Hotel in Kingswear.

Possibly for that reason and the belief that German E-boats were operating off South Devon, a decision was made in 1940 to build a 2-gun battery at the Point. The Battery consisted of two naval guns of 6-inch calibre with a range of 22,750 metres (25,000 yards). It is said that these came from Hartlepool and had engaged enemy battleships during WW1. The Battery was manned until 1942 by approximately 230 soldiers of the 52nd Bedfordshire Yeomanry Regiment. From then on, it was run by the Home Guard operating under the auspices of 556 Battery of the Coast Defence Regiment, Royal Artillery. Later, men from 363 Battery at Corbyn Head, Torquay were drafted in and other units possibly involved were 391 Battery and 399 Battery (found written on the wall).

The guns enjoyed a wide arc of fire from Start Point to Portland Bill. A new military road had been built from Brownstone Farm down to the coast - a road that is still in use today. At the time of its construction, there was a lot more tree cover with a large part of the area dominated by Monterey and Corsican Pines planted in 1904. A lot of these were blown down in a severe storm in January 1990 and the site was exposed.

The site consists of two gun positions, two searchlight positions and a variety of other buildings including the Battery Observation Post, which serves as the current watch station. It is thought that the guns were never fired in anger, although it is known that they were tested during exercises. Practice shoots were made at a target towed by a Dartmouth boat. In 1956, the Battery was finally decommissioned and it is believed that guns were taken to Plymouth. The area was returned to the Higher Brownstone Estate.

In 1974, the site became the Froward Point Nature Reserve Trust (it had first been leased to the Trust by Major and Mrs Gillmore of Higher Brownstone Farm in 1967) on the small strip of land which stretched from Kelly's Cove to Newfoundland Cove on the southern boundary of Brownstone Farm. The land was then absorbed into the National Trust (NT), which had also acquired the neighbouring Coleton Fishacre estate in 1982.

Froward Point is a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and also an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). It is not only important historically, but it is one of the few coastal batteries which remain largely intact in this country.



NCI was born in 1994, when the first station opened at Bass Point in Cornwall. In 2002, Froward Point was chosen as the potential site of a new lookout and initial contact was made with the NT, who asked NCI to wait until they had decided the future of the site. Negotiations resumed in May 2004 and the first of a two public meetings was held in August of that year. A second public meeting in October elicited a very good response and some forty people volunteered to help the project. A Steering Group was formed, and negotiations started in earnest with the NT, led by Jon Gifford, the Chair of the Board of Trustees.

These proved to be difficult at times because the Trust was anxious to preserve as much of the originality of the site as possible and also because of its SSSI status. Work began on clearing and renovating the site in November 2004. In June 2005, the work was greatly assisted by eleven engineers from Hawke Division of the Britannia Royal Naval College in Dartmouth. In two days, they moved some thirty tons of scalplings to improve the access road; laid on a water supply, which required one hundred and fifty metres of trench; and installed a standby generator complete with underground power cables. Training of the initial fifty volunteer watch-keepers began in April 2005 and the Station formally opened shortly thereafter.

By 2021, the Station had some 60 fully trained volunteers, and is open from 0900 to 1700, seven days a week and three hundred and sixty-five days of the year. It is fully equipped with radar, radios and good quality optics enabling a good lookout to be maintained over the approaches to the River Dart.

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