

# The history of NCI Gosport



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## **Early Beginnings**



Our entire beginnings started with the idea of one man, the late Richard McMinn, who sadly passed away at the end of March 2017 after a long battle with cancer. Richard was the main inspiration for what is today a highly valued operational SAR asset of HM Coastguard. The best description of his early ideas and continued hard work are best explained in this obituary, written by our PR Officer David Russell.

### **Obituary**

After a life-long career as an official Ministry of Defence photographer based in the Naval Dockyard at Portsmouth, Richard joined the National Coastwatch Institution as a volunteer

Watchkeeper in December 2007. He began as a founder member of the team at NCI Lee-on-the-Solent where they initially stood watches from the back of a Volvo Estate Car, but within just a few months he had become personally responsible for setting up and commissioning the NCI Gosport station overlooking the entrance to Portsmouth Harbour.

Even then, this only became possible after a former work colleague offered the use of the redundant naval signal tower perched high on the ancient defensive bastion of the MoD base at Fort Blockhouse. After a mammoth clean-up and refurbishment carried out by a small band of volunteers led by Richard himself, the NCI Gosport finally became operational on 1st June 2008. Initially they could only man the station at weekends due to a shortage of volunteers, but NCI Gosport has nowadays evolved into a full seven days a week operation looking out for the safety of all those using our local inshore waters throughout the year. Even in those early days, Richard's organising ability had already come to the notice of NCI Honorary President Jon Gifford, who asked him to identify suitable locations for additional stations in the Solent Area, and it seemed that nothing was too much trouble for a man who had such a far-reaching, positive vision and unquenchable will to succeed.

Richard's efforts eventually resulted in the acquisition of the former HM Coastguard Observation Deck in the Calshot Radar Tower on Southampton Water, and the use of a site overlooking the Needles on the Isle of Wight, bringing the total number of NCI stations in the Solent Area at that time to four. Inevitably Richard became the first choice for Station Manager at NCI Gosport and he remained in this role for several years, guiding the volunteer watchkeepers with a laid back and knowledgeable style that moulded them into the highly trained Search & Rescue team that we see today. Richard was eventually forced to stand down as Station Manager after he became seriously ill in 2015, but even this did not put him off entirely.

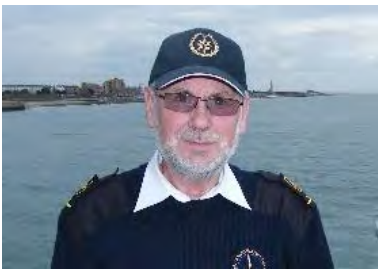
Despite increasingly frequent hospital admissions and extremely uncomfortable and invasive treatment, he still insisted upon supporting NCI Gosport and even managed to hold down the posts of Station Welfare Officer, Health & Safety Officer, Maintenance Officer and Assistant Training Officer at various times during those last few months.

Such dedication, even to a charitable cause, is almost without precedent and an enormous debt of gratitude is owed by all of us to a man who gave so much for the benefit of others in the local seafaring community.

### The 3 Other Founder Members



The late Graham Piggott. A retired Technical Officer with the CAA. Fitted much of the technical equipment and designed chart tables. He was heavily involved in the design of the "Gosport Slider" plotting aid. Station Secretary 2008 - 2015



Bernard Harper. Former Training Officer. Went on to work with NCI at national level as a DFS Inspector

Retired from NCI in 2020



The late Brian Clarke

**Members who joined very soon after the first Station watch 1<sup>st</sup> June 2008**



John Lethbridge  
2009 – 2017  
Former Fundraising  
Officer



Blair Norman  
Former Radio  
Trainer



David Russell  
2009 – Present  
PR Officer Since  
2009



Alan Port  
Former Station Secretary



Mike Crosskey  
Former Roster &  
Maintenance  
Officer



Chris Cant  
Former Station  
Secretary



Peter Buckley  
2009 – 2017  
Station Manager  
2015-2017



George Townsend  
2008 - Present



Graham Dubber  
2009 – 2018  
Former DSM,  
Publications, and  
Training Officer



Keith High  
2009 - 2020



John Sherrington  
2008 - 2020



Bob Hodgson  
2009 - Present



Neil Richardson  
2009 - Present



Ray Alcock  
2009 - 2018



David Loris  
2008 - 2020



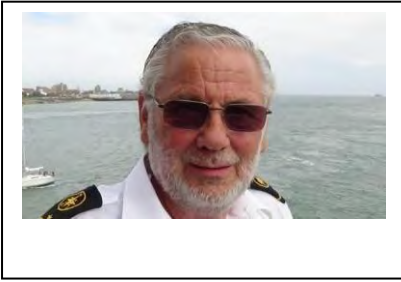
Andy Krasun  
2008 - 2019



## Watchkeeper Recollections

Many watchkeepers have contributed to this Living History Project. These are their personal memories of their time at the station and collectively build our history, especially in our early days. They also include some interesting anecdotes.

### My recollections – By Bernard Harper, Founder Member. Member 2008 – 2019?



I along with Richard McMinn, Graham Piggot and four others previously with NCI Lee-on-the-Solent, for whom I was the training officer, set up the Gosport station in 2008. We can therefore be considered founder members of the station.

Richard had the bright idea and did the hard work liaising with the works manager at Fort Blockhouse supported by the then Trustees of the NCI. The station building was quite decrepit and we spent some months renovating the place. The furnishings were hand made by one of the four and equipment provided by a £500 loan from the NCI coffers and by the six of us chipping in with sealant, paint and nefarious acquisition of other

materials.

Richard took on overall management, Graham took on as treasurer and I as deputy organised training, writing the training manual and the initial constitution. Collectively we established a rapport with QHM and after some resistance on their part, Solent Coastguard.

It was a long and sometimes difficult process, but we eventually gained strength in numbers and recognition.

If memory serves me right we received Declared Facility Status in 2009.

On a personal note, I sometimes felt that the hard work we six put in to establish the station and set the foundation for the subsequent success was overlooked.

### My recollections by Caroline Hildrew. Joined 2011 – Currently DSM Admin, past Training Officer



In April 2011, I attended the Wickham Twinning Association AGM to which a guest speaker had been invited. He introduced himself as Peter Buckley of National Coastwatch Gosport. This was an organisation I had never heard of but hearing his talk and seeing the photos of the station and from the station, I was fascinated and asked if they needed a new volunteer. At the time Peter said he thought they had their full quota but called me a day or so later inviting me to the next monthly meeting.

The meetings in those days were held in the Coastguard station next to the hovercraft slipway in Lee-on-the-Solent. During the meeting I was, quite unexpectedly, introduced as a new volunteer and asked to introduce myself. I had to

admit that, apart from dinghy sailing when younger, I had no previous experience to offer. At this point I was still working full time and had not even visited the station! I was delighted to increase the number of female watch keepers by 50%!

In those days we each had to contribute towards the £25 per member station capitation.

Bernard Harper was the Training Officer and as such was responsible for all the training – no training team in those days. A year or two after my arrival, Blair Norman, an ex-submariner, took over as Training Officer. In the winter of 2011 Bernard arranged night visits to the tower to give watch keepers an opportunity to identify the buoys by their light sequences and to understand the lights on shipping.

Michael Crosskey, who had worked on the police launches in the harbour, was the Roster Officer and at each monthly meeting he would pass around a spreadsheet on which we would indicate our availability for the next but one month. We showed our availability by adding AM, PM or EVE to the date and, at the following monthly meeting, we would get our watches confirmed. This meant that for a month, we had to keep free the dates we had offered!

In February 2014, I believe it was, the Coastguard closed the Lee-on-the-Solent station and the new national centre opened at Kite Croft, Fareham in 2015. Our monthly meetings were moved to the Civil Service Sailing Club in Weevil Lane.

When I joined NCI Gosport the summer watches were 0930-1300; 1300-1630; 1630-2000 and the winter watches were 1000-1400; 1400-1800.

In 2012 these were changed to summer weekdays two four-hour watches with three watches at weekends and bank holidays. In 2013 they were changed again to the system we have today. There were four radios with Ch16, Ch67, CH00 and Ch11 and in those days no shore station was permitted to transmit.

In August 2011 a DF (direction finding) set was installed to pick up emergency transmissions on CH16 and which would give a three figure read-out of the bearing of that signal. Around the same time AIS was installed. Also in the summer of 2011, QHM asked us to log numbers of leisure craft in and out of the harbour. This involved an additional watch keeper who stood outside on the balcony with a clipboard. Over a two week period we logged 6400 movements with 1259 on a Saturday.

I recall being asked to be on watch for our February 2012 DFS inspection and had a revision training session with Bernard Harper prior to this!

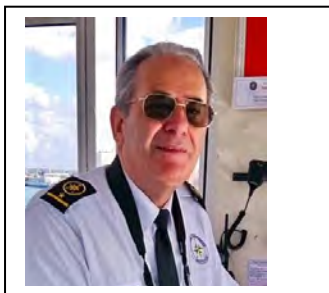
In those days each station produced their own logbook and one recommendation from that DFS inspection was that the logbook should be bound so no alternations or replacements could be made. A new logbook was introduced by NCI Gosport in 2013 and, finally, the universally used NCI logbook was introduced in March 2014.

In 2013 the Needles station opened bringing the total number of stations to 49.

In 2014 the station acquired *Find My Shift* (FMS) for the roster.

I joined the Training Team in 2016.

### My recollection - John Feltham. Joined 2011 – present. Past Maintenance/H&S Officer



I first met members of the NCI when I was Press Officer at Portsmouth Lifeboat Station during an open day in 2010. Blair Norman (SW) was manning the NCI stall and his enthusiasm and professionalism for the work of the newly established NCI Gosport impressed me.

Soon afterwards I met him again when he manned a stall at another RNLI event at the Camber Docks, Old Portsmouth. I took a break from the Tombola stand to meet Blair again to glean further information about the newly established SAR asset.

After applying for membership, I was invited to attend a meeting with a training officer and other prospective members on 20th October 2010. During a briefing

and a visit to the lookout we were invited to ask questions. I ventured to ask if the OSB could be seen from the tower; this brought a grin to Blair's face. It was only after a few months of duties that I realised why. In those early days this South Cardinal Buoy 'hid' behind Spit Sand Fort and was mainly visible during Spring 'ebb' Tides on the West side of the fort. The buoy was repositioned during 2017 and is now visible at all states of the tide!

My earliest recollection of the observation floor of the Signal Tower was that of an orderly but basically equipped room fitted with the necessary telephones, radios, charts and optics; including, of course, the earlier NCI Manuals, reference books, notices and the all-important logbook. The balcony boasted a 12" diameter pelorus covering an unobstructed view in excess of 180 degrees – probably the most important and most used piece of equipment we had.

Richard McMinn (SM), Graham Piggott (DSM) and Neil Richardson (SW-Radio) devoted much time and effort into equipping the tower. Neal even produced a radio device that showed the bearing of the origin of emergency radio transmissions. Unfortunately, this proved to be too sensitive, and the array of miniature light bulbs frequently blew. It was, never-the-less, a brilliant concept at the time!

NCI Gosport's first DFS inspection was conducted on 10th February, 2010. It was with great elation that members learnt we had passed the assessment! After all the studying, the task of operating the station as part of the SAR organisation had now begun in earnest.

Alan Port (SW-Station Secretary) and I were duty watchkeepers during the second of NCI Gosport's DFS inspections on Saturday 4th February, 2012. Richard McMinn and Graham Piggott had prepared a series of radio exercises with the Gosport and Fareham Independent Rescue Service (GAFIRS) lifeboat. I was handed a new handheld radio (with very strict instructions not to drop it whilst on the balcony) and awaited the approach of the lifeboat during the morning mist. Repeated calls to the vessel produced no response but, after a telephone call from a somewhat bemused Solent Coastguard, we realised GAFIRS frequency had not properly 'locked on' and the radio had reverted to Channel 16!

The radio exercises were both interesting and challenging, especially when the lifeboat would suddenly and deliberately steer off the given course away from the 'casualty'. This required a prompt course correction to regain control of the situation.

Joining the EU and metrication had created its own problems for us older 'sea salts' as we were still using cables, yards, etc, no longer in vogue by the rescue services including GAFIRS. The following wash-up meeting with the lifeboat crew was very informative and a number of points raised were adopted.

I shared the third DFS Inspection with Ivor Feist (SW-Trainer) on Saturday 2nd February 2013. We attended a presentation in the Patrolus building, then had to enter the watchtower at the same time as the two assessors - representatives of Solent Coastguard (SCG) and NCI.

Our standard setting-up procedure was observed without much comment. Then a fishing vessel left harbour to eventually merge with 14 others at No-Mans Land Fort some 3.1nm away. But once there, it was no longer possible to confidently identify the moving vessels as neither we, nor local fishing boats, were fitted with AIS equipment at that time.

The second incident was a MAYDAY call with a Latitude and Longitude well outside of our area. I estimated its position to be in the New Haven area, but our charts did not extend that far. The call was cancelled after it was found that the yacht owner's curiosity, with regard to his radio's red button, had got the better of him! Both incidents later led to an interesting debate. The rest of the morning was largely taken up with the usual questions relating to identifying positions of vessels, giving bearings and ranges and determining latitude and longitude information, etc.

Our early training evenings were held at Solent Coastguards' prestigious establishment at Lee-on-the-Solent, which we had to relinquish on 6 June 2012 prior to the MCA moving to its new home at Titchfield.

The following Wednesday we transferred to the Civil Service Offshore Sailing Club at Weevil Lane, Gosport - our current meeting place. Here, news of latest developments, training quizzes and talks on various maritime subjects are presented to a keen assemblage of members.

Watchkeepers soon learnt that however dangerous the actions of water users may be, all they can do is report an incident to SCG, the Queen's Harbourmaster (QHM) or Community Wardens. In the meantime, they had to continue to observe, make notes and prepare for any further developments.

By 2014, it was realised that much of the equipment needed to be upgraded. The building was closed between 17th March and 15th April 2014 to facilitate the first major overhaul.

The planned refurbishment, replacement of much of the original equipment and the installation of a computer (with AIS) proved to be a great success.

In my earlier days I used to struggle with chart-work, especially when using parallel rules, etc. which slipped too readily on the glass chart covers! One day I was approached by Graham Dubber (Training Officer) who, with a sigh of resignation, asked what the solution to my problem was. I informed him that I would provide a solution by the following week! My idea/design was adopted and the 'Gosport Slider' came into being.

Graham Piggott turned the idea into a practical charting tool which, in turn, was further enhanced into a professional looking instrument under the auspices of Chris Aps some years later.

On 2nd July 2014 I was appointed (SW-Building Maintenance/Health and Safety Officer) after the previous post holder, Mike Crosskey, stood down. As the ageing 'Signal Tower' is constantly exposed to a harsh environment, extremes of temperature, wind, damp and wear it requires constant inspection and attention.

The first task was to convert the damp lower storage area into a training room. This is now named 'Richard's Room' in recognition of the tremendous input that the late Richard McMinn not only put into NCI Gosport, but also Calshot, Needles and Lee-on-the-Solent. After a busy two years in this post I, reluctantly, had to stand down due to osteoarthritis in both knees and had to undergo replacement knee surgery. John Mortimer took over the post from me.

The NCI was granted a national radio licence for the use of VHF Channel 65 by OFCOM on 13 August 2014. The next step was to put thousands of watchkeepers through Short Range Radio Courses and, since this would have been such a huge and protracted task for NCI to undertake centrally, NCI Gosport decided to train its own watchkeepers. Guy Sitwell and Ken McKensie volunteered to take the RYA Radio Trainers Course which qualified them to train all members to the RYA SRC standard.

Many of the earlier members of NCI Gosport are greatly indebted to Guy and Ken for their sterling effort, time and patience. It was very much, "Cometh the hour, cometh the man!" My own certificate was dated 11th January 2016.

I have spent many hours watch keeping but had relatively few dramatic incidents to report. These have been mostly kayak capsizes, collisions, dismastings, rigging failures, jammed spinnakers in fresh winds and reporting EPIRB malfunctions (Electronic Position-Indicating Radio Beacons). I have never had to report a vessel on fire or man overboard yet!



The most poignant incident was listening to an elderly gentleman trying to broadcast a PanPan after his catamaran had been dismasted during a squall. He sounded weak from exertion after dragging and securing sheets and sails clear of his propellor. Two other yachts suffered a similar fate at the same time, causing a bit of confusion over the radio. Although he was uncertain of his location, I soon advised SCG and then observed his slow progress towards Southampton until my visual ceased at Gilkicker Point. On a lighter note, one unique distinction that NCI Gosport could claim over several years, was having to issue ear defenders to protect the hearing of its watchkeepers during the firing of saluting guns on the South Bastion - especially during 21 gun salutes! This is now a thing of the past as the gun battery has been moved to South Railway Jetty, HM Naval Base, Portsmouth.

From our vantage point we see newly built warships arrive and, with a fanfare and a ship's parade, commissioned then depart to sea to protect our country's interests. We also see the decommissioned, stripped and rusting remains of these once proud vessels being towed out to sea destined for foreign scrap yards. In ten years of watch-keeping I have seen the departure of ex- *HMS Ark Royal*, *HMS Invincible*, various vessels of the Sheffield Class (Type 42), *RFA Gold Rover* and *RFA Grey Rover* to name but a few. During my ten years at NCI Gosport I could not fail to be impressed by the dedication, professionalism and camaraderie of the men and women of our membership. The work is thoroughly absorbing and the satisfaction, especially when the input is rewarded by the saving of lives, immeasurable.

For information, this is a list of the management committee in 2014:

**Executive Committee** (at July 2014 the committee comprised)

SM	Peter Buckley
DSM (Support)	Rob Herron
DSM (Training & Publications Officer)	Graham Dubber
Secretary	Paul Clarke
Treasurer	Erica Dawtrey
PR Officer	Dave Russell
Roster Officer	Chris Cant
Maintenance/Health & Safety Officer	John Feltham
Technical Officer	Neil Richardson
Fundraising Officer	John Lethbridge
Membership Secretary	Clive Grinyer
Assistant Training Officer	Richard McMinn
“ “ “ (Radio)	Guy Sitwell
“ “ “ (Radio)	Ken MacKensie
“ “ “	Tony Firth
“ “ “	Cliff C Williams

## My recollections – Tony Firth 2011 – 2021. Past Trainer



When I retired in 2007, I went off on a year's sailing trip to visit the various groups of Atlantic Islands strung out from the Azores off Portugal to the Cape Verde Islands off Senegal. Soon after my return, I went to a Port Solent Yacht Club committee meeting at which one agenda item was who should benefit from the money to be raised by the raffle at the forthcoming Christmas Dinner. I had just discovered NCI on the internet while searching for something completely different, so rather than see the cash go yet again to the RNLI I suggested National Coastwatch, which was seen as a good idea after I summarised what they did.

I contacted NCI Gosport, told them that we had around £300 for their use and arranged for Peter Buckley to come to our January meeting to accept the cheque and say a few words about what NCI did. (The Port Solent YC donation paid for the information panel on the seaward side of the balcony).

Chatting after the presentation, I suddenly realised that I could fill some spare time usefully by joining NCI, so Peter suggested that I should turn up at their next monthly meeting.

So, one dark evening I turned up at Solent Coastguard's station and met a group of uniformed people. They said hello but showed no further interest, so I waited for Peter to turn up to rescue me. Meetings at that time had a very lengthy formal agenda but eventually I and another guy were asked to summarise, in

one minute each, what we were doing there. The Training Officer, a former RN gunnery officer, collared us when the meeting broke up and arranged an introductory session at Fort Blockhouse.

Training duly took place on watches manned (the right word – there were no female watchkeepers at that time) by the Training Officer and/or his mates. This training covered a much slimmer range of topics than now, much of the difference being due to the relative absence of technology, our biggest gadget being a huge and heavy wood-and-glass pelorus that had to be mounted on the seaward rail without being dropped a long way onto the sea wall. (For collectors of good words, the bearing-indicating “pelorus” gets its name from Hannibal’s sailing pilot who navigated him, with elephants and army, from Carthage to Europe.)

Various topics were ticked off during each watch, the recurrent one being a plotting exercise for an imaginary vessel following a couple of courses including a stop, with a correction for tidal drift.

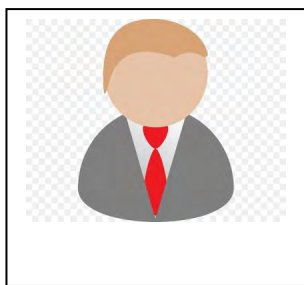
Straightforward enough for an experienced yacht skipper, were it not for the fact that distances had to be measured with dividers, which failed to get any traction on the glass plate covering the chart and, in moments of stress, skidded in all directions.

After about four watches I finished the plotting exercise and received an unexpected pair of epaulettes and a handshake. That was it for assessment – no annual repeats, no continuous assessment, no training sessions at monthly meetings. Probably just as well, as there were also no learning materials other than the assorted books in the Signal Tower. Richard’s Room was full of junk rather than being a learning and assessment resource.

We now have considerably more and better technology, but the most important changes have been in attitudes. The introduction of annual assessment came about five years after I joined. Though many doubted the wisdom of this change and feared that it would lead to large-scale resignations, the few who left were not greatly missed and the rest grew in competence and self-confidence. As a result, the attitude of HMCG to NCI changed immeasurably. For some years after I joined, our use of VHF was restricted to the Station’s “private channel” and very occasional opportunities to do radio checks with Coastguard. As it became clear to all that we are a well-trained asset with eyes along the coast, our use of VHF was allowed to expand, first to recognition of the importance of launching a Mayday Relay in a life-threatening incident, and later to use of Channel 65 as a broadcast service as well as for response to calls from individual vessels.

Attitudes have changed in other ways too. Ten years ago, shortly after I qualified, I shared an afternoon watch with the gunnery officer. Towards the end of a pleasant and peaceful autumn day, we noticed a small yacht stationary just off Fort Monckton. Close inspection showed a slight list – he was firmly aground. “Should we phone Coastguard?”, he asked. I suspected another test. “Nope – he’ll float off in about four hours.” “I agree – let’s close the station down.” Our current caring, safety-first culture is not tolerant of letting people learn from their own mistakes, but it remains the best way.

### **My recollections – Erica Dawtrey. Joined 2010 – present. Treasurer since 2015**



Having moved to Gosport from Buckinghamshire in July 2009, I retired from my job with Oracle Corp in Reading in December 2009 and having read an article in the local Advertiser, applied to join NCI Gosport around Feb 2010.

I had lived in Hong Kong for 25 years with lots of sailing, including representing Hong Kong at an International Event. My love of the water gave me the opportunity to give something back.

Unfortunately, at that time despite one lady, Claire Smart from the Navy, being the first lady member, she went back to sea quite quickly and resigned. My application was held for some 3 months from memory before I was invited to a

monthly meeting at the Coastguard Station in Lee-on-the-Solent. A very daunting initiation, but I was very keen to carry on and start my over 10 year membership of NCI Gosport. I was delighted to receive my 10-year award in February 2020.

Training was given by Bernard Harper in the watchtower, and another lady, Monica, joined around the same time, so often we were on training together. Bernard did an excellent job of teaching what was required with humour and a lot of cakes baked by Monica.

During the monthly meetings a sheet of paper was passed around for people to input their watch availabilities, and eventually this was moved onto an excel spreadsheet run by Mike Cant, Roster Officer at that time. I believe it was Mike that found FMS that we all use today.

Monthly meetings were interesting, in that the head table would always muddle Monica and I up, so John Lethbridge wrote a name sign and put it in front of each of us at one meeting. That worked, however during the break, Monica and I switched our name signs around which caused no end of confusion.

I applied for a couple of roles to join the committee, secretary and membership secretary, but as no woman was on the committee at that stage these were declined, and so I did eventually become the first woman member once I was elected Treasurer in 2015. It is nice to see how far we have come with a number of women on the committee now.

The monthly committee meetings have been held at the Conservative Club in Lee-on-the-Solent for years, initially organised by Graham Piggott, and we have always had a member of the Club on the committee to continue that relationship. We used to meet in the evening there so that we could have a drink or two afterwards. Now we meet in the morning but finishing at 12'ish still allows a drink if the Chairman is available to sign us in!

In April 2012 a change of meeting venue from the Coastguard Station in Lee-on-the-Solent to Portsmouth Offshore Group (POG) of the Civil Service Sailing Association (CSSA) Headquarters at Royal Clarence Yard in Gosport was advised by the Secretary at that time, Alan Port.

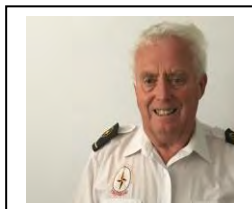
Richard McMinn sent out a questionnaire in 2015 to ask the members what format would we like for monthly meetings moving forward, and what we have today was the outcome of that.

I took over as Treasurer in 2015 from Graham Piggott after his 6 years in that post, and was elected by a large majority at the AGM despite a male contender being put up at the very last minute.

Fund raising was organised by John Lethbridge, who I think may have been one of the very early members, and he was relentless in pursuing opportunities and often did these on his own. Eventually we had a good team together to cover 2 days stints at Morrisons and Asda supermarkets in particular.

Graham Piggott organised a trip to RNLI HQ in Poole in February 2015 which I think about 8 of us attended and which was very educational.

## My recollections - Bob Hodgson Joined 2009 - Present



I joined in 2009 after being invited by Bernard Harper. He telephoned me with the opening comment "I know more about you than you know about me". Still to this day I have failed to find out who was the link between Bernard and myself. Initially we only had dual watches on Saturday mornings and afternoon. This developed into Sundays, followed by public holidays. Training was initially very much in house led by Richard, Bernard, and Neil Richardson, supported later by Blair Norman. Gradually the number of trainers increased as their talents were recognised.

Monthly meetings were held in the old Coastguard house on the front at Lee-on-the-Solent. The meetings had a similar format our present meetings in that they were a mixture of admin, training and talks from outside bodies.

Below is the most prized Certificate of Competence.

**New Bins for Gosport**

NCI - Gosport, which overrode the busy entrance of Portsmouth Harbour achieved a welcome boost to their capacity recently after substantial awards of funding were received from a number of different local sources.

The NCI volunteers had earlier put out an appeal for help towards the cost of replacing their ageing, long-range binoculars which had become defective and were no longer up to the job.

This equipment is essential to the efficient operation of NCI's voluntary safety watch over those using our inshore waters and its failure had added a certain degree of urgency to the need for a replacement.

Fairleigh-based corporate buildings maintenance and logistical support company EMCOR UK was the first to respond with a very generous sponsorship of £500 after employee Gareth Owen, who is also a watchkeeper at NCI Gosport, happened to mention the appeal to his boss Steve Dolen.

The money from EMCOR UK has been added to a further grant of £400 provided by the Community Chest Charity Fund administered by BBC Radio Solent and this has allowed the station to purchase a set of brand new long-range spotting optics.

This new equipment was formally handed over to NCI Gosport in mid-July when Steve Dolen (lower right in photo) and EMCOR UK's PR Manager Kelly Mitchell visited the lookout to make the official presentation to Station Manager Richard Michell and the executive committee.

Thanks to the unstinting support of the local

people of Gosport and the surrounding area, together with the dedication and hard work of Fundraising Officer John Lethbridge and his team, further funds have been raised throughout the summer at various outdoor events and other local venues.

This additional money was added to a very generous donation by the family of the late Brian Huppeler, a Gosport Watchkeeper who sadly passed away in April.

This enabled the purchase of an additional pair of high-powered Myasuchi binoculars to complement the Cyclops unit and these have now been dedicated as a memorial to Brian.

This extra equipment has also enhanced the capability of the station still further by providing clear long-range observation facilities so that both duty watchkeepers can observe different targets at the same time during an emergency.

Our sincere thanks go to all those who helped to support this very worthwhile project.

Ken Foster  
NCI Gosport

**GOSSIP NCI STATION WATCHKEEPER CERTIFICATE OF COMPETENCE**

NAME: BOB CHAS NEW AND GUY DAVID FOSTER TRAINER: HARVEY T. LEACH, ROBERT CHAS KIMBLE

THIS TRAINEE IS ADJUDGED COMPETENT TO BECOME A WATCHKEEPER HAVING COMPLETED THE FOLLOWING ELEMENTS.

1. Understands the background of the NCI and is aware of the Authority structure, the functions of the NCI and the Reporting Authorities to whom reports are to be made.
2. Conducts the opening procedure.
3. Conducts the closing procedure.
4. Reads the phonetic alphabet.
5. Understands of the 24 hour clock and GMT and BST.
6. Can read a compass and understands the descriptors such as NE/SW.
7. Can take a range and bearing and apply them to the chart.
8. Can ascertain the latitude and longitude of four positions on a chart.
9. Can identify the Outer-Side buoy and the main approach channel buoys and describe the purpose of one other buoy of significance in the area.
10. Understands the colour coding and depth markings on a metric chart.
11. Can identify six points from the chart and plot bearings between them.
12. Can extract the times of high and low water and tidal range from tide tables.
13. Can ascertain tidal strength and stream from two tidal diamonds on the chart for two times.
14. Knows the meaning of flags A, R, D, J, and O from the international code of signals. Also is aware of the full code.
15. Understands the meanings of the three principal radio distress alerts and of the two main visual day and night distress signals.
16. Can compile a full and accurate weather observation and complete the log accordingly on three occasions.
17. Can compile a watch log having knowledge of the particulars of the requirement for three complete watches.
18. Understands the basics of a maritime VHF message format.
19. Can competently make a report to a reporting authority using the reporting format.
20. Has completed 12 certified watches.
21. Is identified to operate maritime VHF radio.

\* para 21 is not required until a full training programme is in place. Qualified watch keepers will have priority for qualifications.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_ Training Officer

Signed: PASSED Station Manager

Date: 14/11/2009

The attached article from Watchkeeper issue 22 shows Ken Foster in the Tower and shows the old radio on the wall and a mass of cables. Gradually the Tower has improved with a few licks of paint but still with the leaking roof.

## Members I remember well:

- Richard McMinn.
- Ray Alcock, who maintained and improved the Watch Tower especially the steps and walkway.
- Andre Jezzard, a font of knowledge. He arranged visits to QHM and Solent Coastguard.
- George Townsend was involved with Disabled Veterans in Haslar Hospital gardens, which we as an organisation supported.
- Reg Davis, enthusiastic. Always willing to help and assist others by sharing his nautical knowledge.
- Guy Sitwell, a big link with GAFIRS with whom we set up many practical training links, such as use of radios and conning a lifeboat to an incident.
- Ken Foster, an industrious and skilled member who was responsible for making the chart tables in the Tower and in Richard's room.
- Rob Williams, an enthusiastic watch keeper with always a tale to tell.
- Charlie Hayward organised social events especially Christmas Dinners at Hornet. A submariner with links to the submarine museum.
- Andy Krasun, who provided bottles of wine for the monthly raffle.
- John Lethbridge, our fund raising organiser who seemed to know everyone in Gosport!

## Incidents

Fortunately few in my time as a watch keeper.

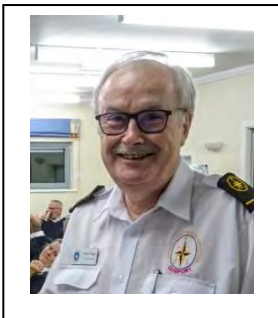
I have copies of the paperwork re 26 July 2012 when a young man lost his life in an incident off the hot walls.

## Humorous times.

Bernard was carrying out a radio exercise in the car park which involved trainees carrying a stick under their arms whilst walk between cars. They were then conned on to an incident. A lot of hilarity and a hilarious way to learn.

NCI Gosport and their partners were invited to take part in a joint exercise with the Wight Link Ferries, Fire Brigade, Ambulance Service, QHM, tugs and lots of oranges. We were all passengers on a ferry and given roles to enact. For example, I was delivering smelly garlic to a restaurant, my wife was meeting her sister from Australia, someone had an urgent need to catch a train and someone was concerned because their dog was locked in a car on the car deck. Tugs sprayed water as if the ferry was on fire. The oranges were supposed to be a substitute for an oil leak.

## My recollections – Keith High Joined 2009 – Retired 2020



I became aware of NCI in mid 2008. My Saturday shopping in the local Co-op (now Waitrose) was interrupted when I came across an NCI stand in the foyer. The stand was manned by Jon Gifford and others. Strange, I thought, Locks Heath is land locked and we will see b\*\*\*\*r all from here!

Fast forward to mid 2009. Finding myself suddenly without gainful employment, I decided to look at NCI as a potential means of filling some of my “free” time. I emailed Gosport and Lee-on-the-Solent stations. Richard McMinn (RIP) from Gosport replied almost immediately inviting me to meet him at Fort Blockhouse for a tour of the station.

That was it for me, caught hook, line and sinker. Gosport station must have the best location of all of NCI's stations...

Supporting Richard were Graham Piggott (RIP) the station's first treasurer (formerly with NATS and very inventive), Peter Buckley, secretary, Neil Richardson, Technical Officer and Bernard (I take no prisoners) Harper ex RN Gunnery Officer. Apologies to those I have omitted.

When I started as a trainee the station was only manned at weekends. Training was “by sitting next to Nelly” (an experienced watch keeper – most of whom were very helpful and keen to pass on their knowledge).

On one weekend, Bernard (I think it was he) organised a training exercise on conning SAR craft onto a casualty at sea. However, we did not have SAR craft or a casualty. Not a problem. Off we march to the Fort Blockhouse car park clutching the two portable radios. We split into two groups: one assigned to the Fort ramparts; the other to line up, line astern, in the car park. From the ramparts, Bernard chose one of the cars in the car park to be the casualty; the watch keepers lined up astern were the SAR craft. Using the



radios, the watch keepers up on the ramparts had to direct their colleagues below on to the casualty, using standard naval commands “forward, back, side, together” (I jest). The two groups would change places and every keeper got a chance to do the conning. I am sure that some of the Base personnel who witnessed this still lie awake at night trying to work out what was going on!

In the early days, relationships with SCG and QHM were “strained”. QHM staffers were a little bemused. They knew we were there but did not really understand why. With SCG officers there was, sometimes, open hostility to NCI. They felt that NCI had displaced many of their colleagues, not realising that NCI only came into existence after closures had severely Coast Guard staffing numbers. Over time, and following a lot of diplomacy from Richard, Graham and Peter healthy relationships were built up with both organisations. That just leaves Harbour Patrol, a story for another time!

In the early days, “Spot, Plot and Report” was largely the mission, although the station maintained a radio listening watch on channels 16, 67 and 11 using just two radios. We had to switch to 23 to take down, verbatim, the maritime inshore weather forecast. No channel 65, no DSC, no AIS. If a yacht wanted a weather forecast they had to contact the station by using a landline, as we did if we needed to talk to SCG or QHM.

Gosport station is responsible for two early major innovations that greatly aided the task of the watch keepers – The Gosport Slider and the Spider’s Web. Both have been widely adopted throughout NCI.



## My recollections – Geoff Quintaba. Joined 2010 – Present. Current Trainer



Much has changed at the station. When I joined NCI Gosport in 2010, the station had only been operational for a couple of years, but under the leadership of Richard McMinn, the station's founding father, we had a fully manned station of watchkeepers. The station had the benefit of an elevated view of the approaches to Portsmouth Harbour as well as the harbour itself.

The Signal Station had been converted into an NCI station by several of the members, including Graham Piggott, the Deputy Station Manager and Neil Richardson, who installed chart tables, VHF radios, telephones and a reference library. Outside we had a heavy pelorus, for taking bearings.

Our radios were only for us to maintain a listening watch, as we were expressly advised not to transmit by VHF. As common sense prevailed, that restriction was relaxed to the situation that we enjoy today.

Originally, our training was informal, with trainee watchkeepers qualifying by a test conducted by the Training Officer, after a minimum of 6 watches. There was limited ongoing training, as there was no training team and monthly meetings spent much time on administration issues. Training has become more organised with encouragement for all watchkeepers to carry out regular training exercises, including how to prepare for situations with the "What If" exercises.

Our relationship with Solent Coastguard was somewhat tenuous (although we did hold our monthly meetings at their Lee-on-the-Solent centre. However, following our achievement of DFS status, we gained the respect as a reliable and professional SAR asset. In fact, Ken Mackenzie, Paul Dowsett and myself were part of the first team to be assessed.

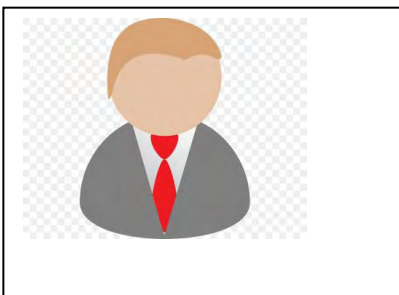
Over the past ten years we have maintained an establishment of around 60 members, with a steady inflow of enthusiastic new watchkeepers to replace those who have retired (of my fellow watchkeepers from 2010, only 15 are still active at NCI Gosport). Through local fundraising and talks given to local organisations we have maintained a good profile.

Rostering for watches used to be by completion of a sheet at the monthly meetings, until we became better organised with the use of the "Find My Shift" program.

Socially, we have always enjoyed Christmas socials, as well as BBQs at times. Many visits have been arranged over the years to SCG, QHM, local MoD establishments and naval vessels, as well as regular talks from SAR assets, such as the Harbour Patrol and GAFIRS.

The changes have been progressive and have turned our station into the well organised, trained and managed operation that we enjoy today. My hope is that we can maintain and build on these achievements in the future.

## My recollections – John Sherrington. Joined 2008 - 2020



NCI Gosport was set up in 2008 and is unique in many ways;

1. It was set up within an active military base, Fort Blockhouse, which is the oldest fortified position in the UK that was then still in active military use. Until 1994 it was a submarine base known as HMS Dolphin after which it became 33 Military Field Hospital used by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Medical Brigade.
2. The look-out tower is positioned on the Gosport side of the entrance to Portsmouth Harbour which comes under the jurisdiction of the Queens Harbourmaster, a naval operation that controls all shipping activities within the 55 square miles of the Eastern Solent.
3. Portsmouth Harbour is one of the busiest harbours in the country with over 3,500 recreational vessels licensed to moor and contributing to over 800,000 movements a year, and vessel movements are carefully controlled with any vessel over 20 metres having to obtain permission to enter the harbour and smaller vessels having to use a dedicated small boats channel.

When Richard McMinn set about establishing the NCI station he was faced with many problems and probably a good deal of scepticism about the merits of the proposal, but with dogged determination he succeeded and proudly became the first Station Manager in 2008. A small team of watchkeepers were recruited with many ex-naval personnel joining to give some experience to the team. Graham Piggott

became Treasurer and the instigator of many of the DIY tasks needed to convert the tower into a workable look-out point.

Bernard Harper a very experienced ex-Naval Officer became Training Officer and set about putting systems and programmes together to get watchkeepers up to scratch for operations. Equipment was limited and basic with the only powerful telescopic being set-up outside on the ramparts and far from convenient. Monthly meetings were held in one of the base's many classrooms, and as numbers grew so did the organisational difficulties such as arranging cover for the seven day a week twice a day watches with the monthly scramble to book your watches by writing your name on the handwritten rota grid. The excitement of the purchase of hand-held radios was followed by the Sunday morning training sessions. One watchkeeper on the ramparts giving radio guidance to the others in the car park below astride a broom, one at the bow and the other at the stern.

Being an active military base meant that entry to the site was restricted and security passes were needed which was a difficulty especially for new recruits and visitors. Also, many a watch was disturbed by the anguished cries of a soldier being treated for his realistically looking horrific wounds covered in artificial blood.

There was also the chilling feeling walking past groups of soldiers stripping and cleaning their rifles with the ominous click of the trigger as you walked away.

The early years were spent building relationships with QHM and the Coastguard and earning their trust that the NCI could be a useful asset in helping to maintain the safety of the waters around the harbour entrance, and it also became clear that we had a role to play in watching over the many bathers and users of the popular hot-walls beach area opposite the tower.

After the first year we were able to hold our monthly meetings at the Lee-on-the-Solent Coastguard Station which was not only more convenient but gave a great sense of belonging to the Coastguard operation.

### **My recollections by Paul Dowsett – Joined 2011 – present. Currently trainer**



I began my time with NCI Gosport in early 2011 and was immediately drawn to the enthusiasm of the volunteers. The fact that most of the people were probably 15 years older than me was really of no consequence. The sense of teamwork and organisation appealed to me, especially as it was on my patch, having sailed in the Solent for the past 25 years.

It seemed appropriate to have our meetings at the Coastguard building overlooking the sea in Lee-on-the-Solent, but you got the feeling that the NCI were not equal partners of the professionals

based on the floor above our meeting room. Anyhow, this was about to change, when we were informed that the Coastguard building would have to be vacated as part of the MCA 'modernisation'.

Luckily one of our members was able to find an alternative monthly meeting venue at the Civil Service Sailing Centre based near Forton Lake in Gosport, which still serves as an ideal base for NCI meetings today.

In 2012 there was a rather serious incident at the harbour entrance which raised issues regarding the partnership between MCA and the NCI. It was clear that as an 'asset' of the Coastguard, NCI would have to play a more inclusive role, and restrictions applied at the time would have to be modified to provide better communication and trust between the partners.

It was inspiring to see how quickly things started to change for the better with new equipment, implementing a formal training scheme and being awarded a dedicated VHF channel (Ch65) to promote our new more professional role in the community. Added to this we included refresher training as part of our monthly meeting and increased the summers watches (per day) from two to three to support the longer days. All this new activity didn't go unnoticed especially during the annual Declared Facility Status (DFS) review that each station receives from NCI assessors. Soon some of our new ideas would be passed on to other NCI stations around the UK.

Due to the dedication of all the NCI Gosport station managers and their strong supporting teams, we now have much stronger links with the Coastguard (NMOC, Titchfield), Portsmouth Queens Harbourmaster, and the Search and Rescue community. The last ten years have been a real challenge, but the journey has provided an enhanced profile and greater rewards for the NCI volunteers who provide their 'eyes along the coast'. We continue to support the Coastguard despite the COVID 19 restrictions with single and "buddy" watchkeepers and also have to thank Fort Blockhouse for their enormous support.

Key memories over the past ten years.

- Richard Baker-Jones recommending the NCI to me.
- Filling in the form and taking it round to NCI Gosport Station Manager, Richard McMinn's address
- My first watch was Sunday March 20, 2011.
- I qualified in July 2011.
- There were about 57 members in 2011.
- Attending coastguard's building in Lee-on-Solent for monthly meeting
- Meeting the membership and new faces
- The monthly meeting involved filling in by hand Mike Crosskey's managed watch roster.
- No formalised training. Just on-watch mentoring, practicing "spot, plot, report".
- NCI Harbour entrance survey was carried out between 4-18 August 2012.
- Incident in the harbour entrance on July 26<sup>th</sup> 2012. Changed many things including our relationship with the MCA.
- Departure of the SCG from Lee on Solent in 2012 with the loss of much experience.
- Initial difficulties from SCG after their job losses.
- Four NCI Gosport station managers; initially Richard McMinn, then Peter Buckley (2013), Rob Herron (2016), and our now currently Chris Aps.
- Remembering Graham Piggot as treasurer and ace DIY man.
- Remembering Bernard Harper's straight talking, wicked sense of humour and wealth of Naval experience.
- March 2013 Peter Buckley initiated the recording of training activities in preparation for our DFS review.
- January 2013; New version of the NCI manual copied to the membership, all 35 files.
- January 2013; ramp up VHF radio training.
- February 11-24 2013, Winter craft survey c/o.
- March 21, 2013, Olympic Gold Medalist Katherine Grainger CBE has agreed to become a Patron of the National Coastwatch Institution (NCI).
- February 2014, Find My Shaft introduced.
- New window installed in the tower during February 2014 refurbishment.
- June 2014, D-Day Anniversary celebrations.
- September 2014, CH65 allocated to NCI.
- VHF training started in January 2015.
- QHM visit on March 12, 2015.
- November 2015, preparations for dredging harbour and approaches.
- January 2016, Start of Training Team meetings.
- January 2016, I volunteered to take on the monthly raffle.
- February 2016, I passed VHF radio course.
- March 2016, NMOC visit.
- March 2016, NCI awarded British Marine Charity of the year.
- September 2016, more emphasis on membership training. New training pack generated.
- May 2017, boat exercise using Chris Aps boat. VHF practice.
- Station documents provided by Dropbox in October 2017.
- New weather Station delivered to NCI Gosport in March 2018.
- Chris Aps become Station manager and Gail Rendle appointed as DSM.
- 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of NCI in 2019
- Training consolidation during 2019 and early 2020.
- COVID 19 restrictions started in March 2020.
- Buddy watches introduced in May-June 2020.
- Losing touch with other watchkeepers due to restrictions imposed from June 2020 to early 2021.
- Video meetings introduced in early 2021 to enable monthly T&A meetings.
- Provided annual assessments via video meetings in March 2021.
-

# NCI GOSPORT LEISURE CRAFT MOVEMENTS STUDY IN/OUT OF PORTSMOUTH HARBOUR

Saturday 4 August – Saturday 18 August 2012

Watchkeeping hours: Weekdays 0900 - 1700, W/E & Bank Holidays 0830 – 1800

Legend: Wind in Kts, SS- Sea State, Vis- Visibility, Temp – Temperature in degrees C

Date	TYPE OF VESSELS											Weather
	Yachts		Motor Boats		Canoes		Jet Skis		Ribs		Total Movements	
August 2012	Out	In	Out	In	Out	In	Out	In	Out	In		
Sat 4th	247	137	43	41	-	-	-	-	38	30	536	O'cast, Wind SW 15-20,, Vis good, SS slight. Temp 18-20
Sun 5th	156	219	80	93	-	-	7	7	35	44	641	Partly Cloudy, Wind S/SSW 10-13, Vis good, SS Calm, Temp 17-20
Mon 6th	110	77	13	13	1	1	1	1	25	23	265	Showers, thunder am, Wind W/SW 10-15, SS slight, Vis mod-good. Temp 19-24
Tues 7th	86	73	17	20	-	-	-	-	8	7	211	O'cast, Wind 4-11, Vis good, SS calm, Temp 18-20
Wed 8th	129	79	36	26	-	-	-	-	18	16	304	O'cast w. rain, Wind W 3-10, Vis good occ. poor, SS calm, Temp 17-23
Thurs 9th	214	120	109	74	-	-	4	1	61	37	620	Fine, fog later, Wind 3-7, Vis good bec. poor, SS calm, Temp 18-23
Fri 10th	263	154	132	107	1	-	-	-	53	72	782	Fine, Wind SSE 8, Vis good, SS calm, temp 21
Sat 11th	262	233	113	130	3	3	9	3	53	49	858	Fine, Wind SE/E 12-18, Vis good, SS slight, Temp 20-24
Sun 12th	215	307	117	154	-	-	3	3	55	62	916	Mainly cloud, Wind WSW 6-7, Vis good, SS calm, temp 20-24
Mon 13th	76	77	19	20	-	-	-	-	20	17	229	O'cast w. rain showers, Wind S/SW 13-15, Vis good, SS calm, Temp 18-21
Tues 14th	115	66	30	34	-	-	-	-	30	27	302	Cloudy, occ.rain, Wind S/SSE 10. Vis good, SS calm, Temp 20-22
Wed 15th	54	28	12	10	-	-	-	-	11	13	128	Rain, clear later, Wind S/SW 15-19, Vis poor bec. good later, SS slight, Temp 18-22

Thur 16th	79	62	31	15	-	1	-	-	23	19	230	O'cast, Wind SW 10-16, Vis mod-good, SS slight, Temp 16-20
Fri 17th	168	76	34	20	-	-	-	-	27	20	345	O'cast bec fine then o'cast again, Wind SSE 5-11, Vis good, SS calm, Temp 22-25
Sat 18th	388	329	195	199	13	-	1	1	68	55	1249	O'cast then bright later, Wind SW/W 5, Vis good, SS calm, Temp 23-28
<b>Grand Totals</b>	<b>2562</b>	<b>2037</b>	<b>981</b>	<b>956</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>525</b>	<b>491</b>	<b>7616</b>	

Average Movements/Day: 2011 - 431 (14 day survey)

2012 - 507 (15 day survey)

NOT included in Study: Naval and Commercial vessels, Cruise Ships, Ferries, Fishing Boats, Pilot and Police vessels, Tugs, Dredgers, Harbour Patrol, RNLI (incl GAFIRS)

## My recollections by Rob Herron – Joined 2012 – present. Past Station Manager



Lease signed between MOD and NCI on 4th March 2008 for use of old signal tower which had been out of use by MOD

since 1995. Fitting out started immediately and watches started with just 6 volunteers on 1st June 2008 but at this stage it was weekends only. Recruitment followed and by the time I joined in

2010 we had a team of around 50 staffing two 4 hour watches per day (0900-1300 and 1300-1700). The decision to introduce an evening watch during “summer time” was taken ??? (the date should be recorded in Management team meeting minutes). at this time we changed to the current 3 and 1/2 hour watches operating 0900-1600 winter and 0900-1930 summer. Pictures below show the tower as it was at time of lease signing and how it was by around 2012. The initial fit-out had a notice board obscuring the north window which was removed during a refurbishment when all the windows were replaced with double glazed units. Removal of the notice board of course improved the view up the harbour which previously had only been available by opening the door.



## My recollections by Peter Buckley – Joined 2008 – 2017. Past Station Manager



I joined NCI Gosport in November 2008. At that stage the station had been open on a part time basis (initially at weekends only, but recently Wednesdays had been included).

There were then about 12 station members, amongst them being Richard McMinn, Graham Piggott, Bernard Harper, Dave Russell and, I think Neil Richardson. Richard McMinn was the Station Manager, Bernard the Deputy, Graham the Ops Officer (or whatever we called it then), and Neil the Technical Officer. There was a Secretary but he wasn't very well so I took over the role.

Richard M, Graham and Bernard had originally been part of NCI Lee, or NCI Solent as it was then known. Richard found the Signal Tower at Fort Blockhouse and negotiated with the RN for permission to convert it to an NCI station. FB was then run by an RN Medic Commander and staff so it was more like a proper RN establishment. I don't think the Army 33 Field Hospital had arrived then though I may be wrong and they could have been away in Afghanistan. Richard always said that the official agreement with FB ran to less than a page of A4 and was signed on behalf of NCO by John Gifford and FB by the medic Commander – this compared with Calshot's agreement that ran to multiple pages (ostensibly over 40) and cost several thousand pounds in legal fees! In my last year as Station Manager (2016/17) I tried to find a copy of Gosport's agreement as at that stage the future of FB was looking uncertain and we might need it one day, but despite searching my records, and Richard searching his, we never found it. I did ask Ian Eggar if he had a copy but don't think he could find it either. So, unless it has come to light since, there isn't an existing formal document to legalise the station's existence if and when FB is ever sold off!

The original idea was that Gosport would be a satellite to NCI Solent, but by the time I arrived the station was very much running independently – much to Solent's annoyance and for the first year or so relations with Solent were a bit frosty! The main conversion of the station was completed throughout the early part of 2008 (I was not involved) and I think the first watches commenced at weekends in June or July of that year. Richard and his team did all the work, with

Graham proving to be an excellent carpenter. The main chart tables and cupboards were all made by him. I think initially there were 3 radio channels monitored - CH 16, QHM, and Ch65, and contact with HMCG was by phone to their HQ which was then based along the seafront at Lee just by the big slipway. Richard had somehow got hold of the big binoculars that fitted on the wooden tripod (do you still have them?) which came from NCI Portland. Other than those, the station purchased 2 pairs of normal binoculars and some watchkeepers had their own.

Initially we did not have AIS but I think Neil fitted that within the first year. At first the rear window looking up the harbour was blanked off and that wall held a bookcase and large noticeboard. This window was opened up during the first refurbishment in, I think about 2012. Before and after photographs, updated to the later standard, are part of the station presentation which I organised after about a year and which I presume are still being given to outside organisations (check with Dave Russell who presumably still gives many of them).

In the beginning, the station still had its original metal framed 'crittall' windows from WW2 which were leaky and draughty. We had an early station member who had a 'friend' in the window business who said he could get a good deal to replace them with double glazed units for, I think £900. This caused an upset with FB who said that they could only be replaced by MoD's facilities management company who had the current contract (was it Amy?) and that as a result MoD would have to pay. Contracting, measuring, manufacturing, fitting etc took about 2 years and I think the bill came to something like £3000! We didn't complain as it cost us nothing!

Until the Coastguard reorganisation and establishment of the NMOC at Titchfield occurred in about 2014 we established a very good working relationship with Solent Coastguard at Lee, and we used their main briefing room for our monthly training meetings. MCA Lee was then run by a very cooperative guy called Lee Fisher and we got on very well with him and his team. After the NMOC opened it became much more impersonal and although the senior (4 stripe level) staff were cooperative and outwardly pro NCI, at watchkeeper level relations were quite difficult and I felt that we were often ignored (or forgotten). Hope it's better now!

By the time I left in March 2017 after nearly 8½ years things were definitely improving with MCA but the expansion of NCI was slowing down. In 2008 new stations were opening on average 3 times a year but by 2017 the total was, I believe



52 and further expansion had reached almost zero. I gather there are now 56 stations so there has been some movement. In 2016 Richard and I had a meeting with one of the NCI Trustees (can't remember his name) and discussed a potential new station at Hayling Island in a beach building owned by the MCA and then used by the Auxiliary Coastguard for vehicle storage and so called training but more of a meeting and rest centre. Richard had been there to look at it and it was in an ideal position on the beach about midway along the south coast of the island. He got a rather hostile reception from the Auxiliary who wanted nothing to do with NCI (it was clear that they saw NCI upsetting their cosy private

arrangement even though there was plenty of space). We concluded that it was an idea site for NCI and in a busy area with lots of incidents offshore but we told the NCI Trustee that progress would only be made at high level between NCI Trustees and top management in the MCA. We heard nothing more and a year later I retired and Richard died. Did anything ever come of it?

That's pretty much a broad summary of what went on in my time but if there are any specific areas about which you need more information, let me know and I'll try and dust off my brain – what's left of it!

### **My recollections by George Townsend – Joined 2008 – Present. Our longest serving active Member**



So I will start with the ad in the paper, September 2008 which my wife Ann had seen. NCI was looking for volunteers

for Coast watch at the Tower in Fort Blockhouse. Ann said in passing why not go and see?

I duly did. Walked in the room must have been 20 people. Sitting at the head of the Table Three people. Richard Mc Minn, Graham Piggot and Bernard Harper.

We were given an overview of what NCI was about etc.

Then round the table John Lethbridge,(army) Tony Powell ( RAF ) Me ( RAF ) Then Bernard said first of all we allow the Pongos to join, but the crabs oh ! my god.

That was the start of a respectful friendship all round. At the end of the meeting we had to fill a large sheet of paper with what shifts we could do. Then Reg Knight would let us know. In those early days. It was duty Wednesday, Saturday, and Sunday 0900 to 1600. Two shifts with two watch keepers. We had one radio ( we could only listen (not use) ) we had a telephone, we had to spend 15mins outside to scan North. It was alleged our T/O ( Bernard ) would watch from the Round Tower to make sure we did our stint outside. We had an old heater which just gave a

little heat on a cold day. The Chart was covered in an old plastic so when we did Spot, plot, then report. It was difficult to clean.

We would log every Boat and Ship including Royal Naval Ships and Ferries.

Training was then quite funny, to wind Bernard up ( as a crab ) The Chart was a MAP, The Log was the book.etc.

We had a lot of funny things. One day a Royal Naval Ship, came in as Reg said dressed in flags ( Reg had been signals in the Navy ) He said the flags are wrong he cannot dock there its too large. When we finished our shift he rang QHM and said the flags were wrong, for were the ship had docked. Reply from QHM. We now have Radar and radio. Sir.

On another occasion I forget who it was but a rib with 5 people in landed next to Victoria Pier 4 men jumped out they had plastic bags in their hands, ran up the beach and over the wall. so he rang QHM. who informed him they had been working on one of the Forts.

We had some very good social things going on Graham Piggot organised a few Christmas dinners at the Fareham Bowling Club, which were well attended. I think the fourth year we were not wanted ??

Then at a meeting it was suggested that maybe I could organise a Bar-B-Q in Haslar Memorial Garden As a volunteer and committee member for Shore Leave Haslar, A word with the chairman date was set. I think it was very successful as I ran two more in the summer months ( we raised quite a bit for the garden )

## Signal Tower History

### History of Fort Blockhouse

NCI Gosport could be said to be the one of only a few station located on a site of historical interest/importance. The station situated at the entrance to Portsmouth Harbour and overlooks the harbour, the approaches to the harbour and the waters of the Eastern Solent. It has provided and still provides a service to mariners both professional, commercial and recreational. But what of its history, let's find out more. In the beginning Following the burning of Portsmouth during the Hundred Years' War funds were authorised by Henry VI in 1417 to provide protection to Portsmouth Harbour.

The first building constructed was a fortification built on the Gosport side of the harbour in 1431 close to the harbour entrance. This was a basic construction to provide early warning of potential threat, and in 1495 the defences were upgraded and armed with five guns. Further improvements were made by Henry VIII in 1539 by replacing the fortification with an eight-gun battery around the time of his divorce with Catherine of Aragon. It is believed that the very first "blockhouse" was constructed on the site in 1552

during the reign of Edward VI to house one end of the “boom defence” the other end being located on the Portsmouth side in the Round Tower. Ironically the first firing of these guns in anger was believed to have occur

during the English Civil War when Parliamentarian forces captured it. Their target was Southsea Castle thankfully their skills were somewhat lacking and the cannonballs landed in St Thomas’ Church in Old Portsmouth. There are still four guns in place today, but these are just the 100 year old 2pdr Saluting Guns which until recently were used for marking the Sovereign’s birthday or for saluting visiting senior foreign naval officers as they entered the harbour

The original Blockhouse is believed to have disappeared by 1667 when Charles II instructed a Dutch military engineer, Sir Bernard de Gomme to install a 21-gun battery on the site. Hence the birth of Fort Blockhouse.

Further improvements were made in 1708 when the fort was rebuilt on an irregular trace or footprint. More upgrading was done at the turn of the 19 th century, and in 1813 the whole fort underwent remodelling and In 1825 the seaward battery was converted to a casement battery with 13 embrasures. In 1845 the bastions were altered and in 1863 the stone parapet was thicken and the terreplein extended to provide guns to the rear. In 1859 a Royal Commission on the UKs’ Defences considered the site to be obsolete, however in 1870 only 11 years later it was resurrected and became the headquarters of the Portsmouth Company of Submarine Mining Engineers.

Change of Ownership In 1905 Fort Blockhouse was taken over by the Admiralty and was commissioned as HMS Dolphin, and became the home of the Royal Navy Submarine Service. After the 1 st World War and before the 2 nd World War the site was expanded beyond the lines of the original Fort; there was further expansion when in the 1950’s when the now decommission Submarine Escape Tower was built.



In 1992, the government announce that the submarine fleet would be leaving HMS Dolphin and would relocate in HMNB Devonport. The last submarine sailed from Dolphin in 1994, although the submarine school remained until 1999 before moving to HMS Raleigh in Cornwall. HMS Dolphin was formally decommissioned in 1998 and the base was reinstated as Fort Blockhouse. Not long

after that in 1999 the Fort was home to the 2nd Medical Brigade and became up until 2020, where 33 military field hospital were based.

Pre 1850







The National Coastwatch Institution's Gosport Lookout Station is one of only two sites within the whole NCI organization to be situated inside a secure Ministry of Defence base area. The watch tower itself stands high up on the South West Bastion of Fort Blockhouse overlooking the main entrance to one of the UK'S busiest natural harbours and provides a 270° uninterrupted view of the Eastern Solent and Portsmouth Harbour itself. It is almost certainly the most historically important location within National Coastwatch. Fort Blockhouse, as it is known today, has the distinction of being the oldest location in continued military occupation in the world and was originally established by King Henry VI after the burning of Portsmouth in 1417 during the Hundred Years' War against the French.



Fort Blockhouse in its heyday, it was Britain's main submarine base HMS Dolphin

## Station Managers





Richard McMinn. Founder Member.  
Station Manager 2008 - 2015



Commander Peter Buckley RN.  
Retired Navy Helicopter Pilot (fast jet)  
Station Manager 2015 – 2016.



Rob Herron  
Station Manager 2016 - 2018



Dr. Chris Aps  
Station Manager 2018 - 2021

## Timeline

- **2007.** Station Signal Tower Aquired

- **2008.** 1<sup>st</sup> June. First NCI Gosport watch
- **2011** The monthly meeting involved filling in by hand Mike Crosskey's managed watch roster.
- **2011.** Approx 57 members
- **2011** £25 per member station capitation
- **2012.** August 4 – 18<sup>th</sup>. NCI Harbour entrance survey was carried out between (see picture in Gallery)
- **2012.** July 26<sup>th</sup>. Incident in the harbour entrance changed many things including our relationship with the MCA.
- **2012** Departure of the SCG from Lee on Solent in with the loss of much experience.
- **2013** March. Peter Buckley initiated the recording of training activities in preparation for our DFS review.
- **2013** New version of the NCI manual copied to the membership, all 35 files.
- **2013** January. Ramp up VHF radio training.
- **2013** February 11<sup>th</sup> – 24<sup>th</sup> Winter craft survey
- **2013** March 21<sup>st</sup> Olympic Gold Medalist Katherine Grainger CBE has agreed to become a Patron of the National Coastwatch Institution (NCI).
- **2013** Needles station opened bringing the total number of stations to 49
- **2014** Find My Shift introduced.
- **2014.** February. New window installed in the tower during refurbishment.
- **2014** Station closed 17<sup>th</sup> March – 15<sup>th</sup> April for refurbishment
- **2014** Introduction of Gosport Slider designed by Graham Piggott
- **2014** June D-Day Anniversary celebrations.
- **2014** September, CH65 allocated to NCI.
- **2015** March 12<sup>th</sup>. QHM visit to station
- **2015** November. preparations for dredging harbour and approaches.
- **2016** January. Start of Training Team meetings.
- **2016** March. NCI awarded British Marine Charity of the year.
- **2016** September, more emphasis on membership training. New training pack generated.
- **2017.** OSB repositioned
- **2017** May, boat exercise using Chris Aps boat. VHF practice.
- **2017** April. Dropbox used for WK access to Station Documents
- **2018** March. New weather Station delivered to NCI Gosport
- **2018** October. Chris Aps become Station manager and Gail Rendle appointed as DSM.
- **2019** 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of NCI
- **2019** and early 2020. Training consolidation
- **2020** March COVID 19 restrictions started
- **2020** May. Buddy watches introduced
- **2021** February. Monthly T&A meetings via video
- **2021** March. Annual assessments via video meetings
- **2021** Caroline Hildrew appointed DSM Admin
- **2021** Colin Church appointed DSM (Ops)



## **10 Years of Service to the Local Maritime Community June 2018**

**Over 25 years voluntary service by NCI across England & Wales!**

**The Station celebrated with a normal monthly Training and Administration meeting, attended by 42 Gosport Watchkeepers and Head Trustee Lesley Suddes**



WK's Caroline Hildrew & Mike Crosskey  
with MP's for Fareham & Gosport Mark  
Hoban and Caroline Dineage



The old Fort Blockhouse signal tower



Ready for operations



## Refurbishment 2014







## More recent. The station evolves





## People



Claire Smart - First female watchkeeper



Early Members



Early Fundraising



Early training using broomsticks and flag Oscar



Watchkeeper visit to the SETT tower HMS Dolphin



Watchkeepers simulating casualties on board the Wightlink Car Ferry "St. Helen" during "Exercise Solfire" which regularly tests local SAR emergency responses



In the early days, classroom training took place in the meeting room of the now redundant Solent Coastguard Station at Lee-on-the-Solent

Meon Valley News September 2012 3

## National Coastwatch Welcomes MPs at Gosport

The National Coastwatch Station on the entrance to Portsmouth Harbour at Gosport hosted a visit by two local MPs on Friday 20th July this year.

Fareham MP and Treasury Minister, Mark Hoban and Caroline Dinanage the MP for Gosport had been invited to visit the Station together so that they could be shown the operational role of the volunteer Watchkeepers and observe at first hand their positive contribution to sea safety in these heavily congested

waters.

Upon arrival at the Conference Centre inside Fort Blockhouse, the visitors were met by NCI Station Manager, Richard McMinn, who then introduced the members of his Management Team. After a short coffee break, a presentation was given about the history of the National Coastwatch Institution and its operational role within the UK Search and Rescue Service. This charted the evolution and development of the charity, from its very modest beginnings at just one location in

Cornwall 18 years ago, to its current position today with 46 Coastal Lookout Stations fully operational in England and Wales. National Coastwatch are also committed to an ambitious expansion programme and this is set to continue as new locations become available. The organisation was originally formed to restore the visual safety watch around our coasts when this facility was withdrawn by HM Coastguard in 1994 due to Government funding cuts. NCI Volunteers now provide the 'Eyes Along the Coast' with

around 2000 trained Watchkeepers giving up their spare time to watch over our inshore waters seven days a week, all at no cost to the nation.

Following their introductory briefing, the MPs were taken up to the Watch Tower itself, where they were able to meet the duty Watchkeepers and see for themselves how everything works. They were shown how NCI

responds to maritime emergencies, immediately reporting the details to the nearest Coastguard Rescue Coordination Centre who would then assume responsibility for managing the incident and tasking appropriate rescue units to the scene. In large busy ports like Portsmouth, NCI Watchkeepers would also simultaneously inform the Port

Authority of the situation.

After spending some time in the Lookout Station where they were highly impressed with

the skill and dedication of the volunteers, Mr Hoban and Ms Dinanage promised to do all that they can to help raise the profile of

the National Coastwatch Institution and promote public awareness of its vital work. [www.nci.org.uk](http://www.nci.org.uk)



NCI Gosport



MPs Visit NCI Gosport