

The History of NCI Gwennap Head QAVS

Gwennap Head, or Tol Pedn (its original Cornish name) as it was known until 1977, is located high on the far south west of Cornwall between Land`s End and Porthcurno. Tol Pedn Penwith (the Holed headland in Penwith) draws its name from a chasm called the Funnel. The name of Gwennap Head probably comes from a family in one of the adjacent parishes as there are records of families with the surname Gwennape. They must have taken the surname from the parish of Gwennap originally and recent research by Craig Weatherall states that this change occurred around 1977. Local people still refer to the headland as Tol Pedn.



Gwennap Head lookout station today

Gwennap has always been a place to look out for on the ships that pass this stormy corner of Britain. There is a reference to a cliff castle which once extended across this headland but little of it is now to be seen. According to a recent curator of the Porthcurno Museum, Mr John Packer, the visual signal station pictured on the plate in the Truro Museum is almost certainly at Gwennap Head and the Union Flag shown flying dates it as pre-1801. Early maps of the area also show a station at Tol Pedn. In line with this there is in existence a photograph showing a two-arm semaphore at Gwennap probably c1900-1910.

Work on the coastguard station began around 1905 and by 1910 it was up and running. Following the wreck of a small French fishing boat (the Vert Prairial) at the foot of the cliffs it was proved that the wreck site was invisible from the Gwennap Head look out which at that time was in the lower part of the present building. As a direct result of the wreck a second floor was added to give extra height to the lookout; this is our present watch room.

In the 1980's a tall wireless mast was erected on the headland. As well as H.F. and V.H.F. ship shore communications there was also a radio telemetry link which received weather reports from an automatic buoy stationed somewhere out in the Western Approaches beyond Wolf and Bishop Rocks

In the 1950-1960s there was a wooden 'mast' rigged on the grassy slope north west of the station - it was meant to represent the mast of a vessel in distress and used by

the cliff rescue team for practising rescue by rocket and breeches buoy. It was removed because helicopters have supplanted rocket lines and also because there was concern that visitors could harm themselves by climbing it.

By 1986 the days of the coastguards at Gwennap Head were numbered with Questions being raised in Parliament about the cost of running coastguard stations. The station was closed in 1994 and taken over by the NCI in 1996.

NCI Gwennap Head was opened on October 21 1996 and we recently celebrated our 20th birthday. From small beginnings by a band of dedicated enthusiasts the station gradually took shape with equipment being begged, borrowed, or 'donated' from a variety of sources. The station achieved Declared Facility Status in 2000 after a thorough inspection by the Maritime & Coastguard Agency, which means that the station is 'fit for purpose'. Today we have over 40 volunteers, men and women of all ages, under Station Manager Ian Vinnicombe, who keep watch 365 days a year helping to make our part of the coastline safer.



In 2003 we were honoured by a visit by Her Royal Highness the Princess Anne who spent some time with us and thoroughly enjoyed her visit.

Our mission is quite simple – we are the ‘Eyes Along the Coast’ and our job is to:
SPOT - we maintain a continuous visual watch from Lizard Point in the East across to Land’s End and the Isles of Scilly in the West, during daylight hours.

PLOT – we identify the location of any incident so it can be quickly plotted on an Admiralty Chart or Ordnance Survey Map, when reporting to the authorities

REPORT – we contact HM Coastguard at Falmouth Operations Centre who will decide on the best course of action to follow.

RESPOND - we then stand ready to act as required by HM Coastguard.

Gwennap Head has held Declared Facility Status (DFS) for many years. This means that it is considered by HM Coastguard as an integral part of the national Search and Rescue organisation, and a resource qualified to assist them as and when required.

To achieve and maintain DFS, a station is subject to regular, external, all-day assessments of its staff, procedures, and training standards, as well as exercises designed to demonstrate competencies in our core tasks of “Spotting, Plotting and Reporting”. This ensures that the highest standards of watch keeping are maintained, and that HM Coastguard can have confidence in the professionalism of any station with DFS



**10th Anniversary Celebrations
21 October 2006**