

The History of NCI Hengistbury Head



Hengistbury Head, jutting out into the English Channel between Bournemouth and Christchurch in Dorset is a site of international importance in terms of archaeology and is scheduled as an Ancient Monument. In 1990 it was declared a Nature Reserve with the Head and its surroundings forming part of the Christchurch Harbour Site of Special Scientific Interest, being an environmentally sensitive area and a Site of Nature Conservation Interest. The various habitats on the Head provide a home for many plants, birds and insects, some of them rare and critically endangered. Hengistbury Head refers to the immediate area; the elevated part, where the current NCI Station is located is called Warren Hill.

There's been human activity on Hengistbury Head since the late Stone Age and as early as the late Iron Age it rapidly developed as an important trading link between southern Britain and the continent due to its good river and sea connections and the fact that it's sheltered and has gently sloping beaches. It was also well protected by a skirt of ironstones until, that is, it was heavily mined in the mid-1800s by George Holloway's Mining Company. Holloway used a small dock to transport the ironstones out of the harbour and onto Southampton where they were transferred to bigger vessels for onward travel to the blast furnaces of South Wales. Holloway's Dock is still a known landmark where Hengistbury Head meets the Mudeford Sandspit.



In 1664 an Act was passed to make the River Avon navigable from Christchurch Harbour to Salisbury. This never happened but cutting through the sandbank did, forming what we know today as Clarendon Rocks. A warning pole still exists, marking the sea end of the rocks. Anyone who regularly uses the local waters is well aware of the hazard of Clarendon Rocks.

Today, of course, tourism is a significant factor on the Head, with over 1 million visitors annually.

Smuggling activities

During the 18th and 19th Centuries smuggling became one of the area's most lucrative industries. The only land approaches to/from Christchurch were often out of use, giving smugglers good escape time and the Run and narrow harbour entrance could only be negotiated with care. The smugglers were usually experienced sailors but for the Revenue Cutters these approaches were often a barrier. From the harbour, river and road links were good for onward transportation of contraband. One of the channels within the harbour is still known by its smuggling association - Mother Sillar's channel. 'Mother Sillar' was the landlady of the Ship In Distress pub at the top of the channel and was known to assist the local smuggling trade by allowing both The Ship and the Haven Inn on Mudeford Quay to be used for the storage of contraband. Both The Ship in Distress and the Haven Inn still exist.

The smuggling industry culminated in what is probably the most famous and well documented local smuggling story - the Battle of Mudeford in 1784 at the entrance to the harbour, between Royal Navy, Customs and Excise and the smugglers. In July of that year 6,000 casks of spirits and 30 tons of tea, the greatest volume of contraband ever managed in a single run, was landed at the Haven in Mudeford. Three hundred

men, one hundred carts and four hundred horses were involved in the dispersal of the cargo. In order to ensure the safe unloading and carriage of their cargo inland, the smugglers erected breastworks to defend The Run and the harbour entrance. They also occupied the Haven House on Mudeford Quay.

The Excise Cutter *Resolution* came on two luggers owned by Streeter of Stanpit unloading the very large cargo. The Cutter sent in a boat which was warned off since the smugglers greatly outnumbered the revenue men. The *Resolution* went into Poole Bay and met the Customs' Cutter *Swan* and a 28-gun Royal Navy Sloop, *HMS Orestes*. The next day the three vessels then approached the harbour entrance and anchored. The Revenue Cutters and *HMS Orestes* launched their boats to mount a landing expedition. As they rowed up The Run the smugglers brought them under fire. They maintained the action for over three hours and at one time sent to Christchurch for more powder and shot. In due course the smugglers got away with all their goods and gear but lost the luggers as prizes to the Crown vessels.

'Lookouts' on the Head

The smuggling industry played a significant part in decisions regarding the positioning of Coastguard Stations in the area with the first Hengistbury Head 'Lookout' being documented around 1759 when a large summer house was constructed on the top of Warren Hill. This summer house 'Lookout' (or Signal House as it is also referred to) helped ships steer clear of the Christchurch Ledge and is detailed on naval maps going back to 1785. The Summer House/Signal House appears to have been used by both the military to monitor invasion risks and the Coastguard Services.

An 1846 map shows a small building marked as "CoGd Watch Ho" on the site of the former Warren Summer House and by 1870 the only building on the top of the Head was described on an OS map as "The Watch House (Coastguard Services)". By 1926 a Coastguard Lookout had replaced the Watch House and stood about 100 meters west of the current building - the area that is now used by many as the place to sit and watch the amazing sunsets we get over the bay or just relax with a good book for a while.

Then, in 1975 consent was given to re-site the Coastguard Station to its current position - and that's the building that we now call home. Our Station was manned by HM Coastguard from 1976 until the mid 1990s when there was a shift in emphasis to coordinating search and rescue operations facilitated by technology from central Maritime and Coastguard Agency hubs, and sadly the lookout became unmanned and remained so until 2018.

There were other Coastguard stations around the area, with one being located on the cliffs just west of Bournemouth Pier, together with a row of Coastguard Cottages which now form an annexe to the Highcliffe Hotel. The earliest mapped reference to this Station that we have found is in 1870. In the 1895 Kelly's Directory of Hampshire and the Isle of Wight, the West Cliff Coastguard Station is noted as having one officer and nine men attached. On that same map is shown a Station and terraced houses at Coastguard Way, Mudeford. The cottages are still there, in private ownership. A Google search also comes up with a photo of a lookout on the cliffs above Branksome Chine in 1910.



Local Wrecks

With vessels being far more at the mercy of the seas in years gone by, it wasn't unusual for a ship to be wrecked anywhere around the UK coast and the waters off Hengistbury Head are the last resting place for several of them.

The book "Hengistbury Head, The Whole Story" by W A Hoodless details several of the local wrecks. The following are brief details taken from the book where the Coastguard was involved:

One such vessel, *Marie Theresa*, ran aground in bad weather in December 1898 near Beer Pan Rocks. The Coastguard rescued all 12 crew by means of firing a line from the top of Warren Hill onto the ship and bringing the crew direct to the top of the hill on a travelling block with a life belt! The army later wired the vessel with explosives and, to the delight of the watching crowd, Lady Meyrick set off the charge (Sir George Meyrick was one of the area's richest land owners and today Meyrick Estates still own large areas around Bournemouth). It is reported that some of the heavy timbers were salvaged and used to build a house in Boscombe.

Another, the sailing vessel *Mary* which was smuggling brandy, capsized off Hengistbury Head in January 1823. It's said that the Coastguard arrived on hearing the cries of the smugglers and managed to recover 80 tubs. There are conflicting reports but one such states that the crew drowned while trying to bring the contraband ashore.

In November 1898 the *Ernst*, a three masted schooner, ended up on the Shingles in a gale. Conditions were so bad that the lifeboat was unable to get alongside. The next day the lifeboat managed to rescue the captain and two crew but as the vessel, broke up, further crew members could not be found. Weather and tides meant that anyone in the water was expected to fetch up at Mudeford and this information was telegraphed



through to the Coastguard who manned the beach for two days before carrying out a dangerous rescue of four crew members. A body was also later spotted by men fishing in the Run.

In November 1903 a ketch was wrecked off the Head with local fishermen and the Coastguard carrying out a successful rescue.

There is still, in Dalmeny Road, a small building which was the original Coastguard store, housing the rescue cart and the Rocket Life Saving Apparatus. When the alarm was sounded the volunteer coastguards would take the cart, attach it to a horse/horses and proceed to the incident. The rocket apparatus used a firing rocket that went over to the vessel in distress and a chain and chair were used to remove crew/passengers from the vessel and onto safe ground.

The Southbourne Coastguard Rescue Team is today located just a few hundred meters from that original store house and in 1963 the first lifeboat was stationed at Mudeford Quay.

For anyone interested in finding out more on the history of Hengistbury Head I would highly recommend reading the book "Hengistbury Head, The Whole Story" by W A Hoodless.

NCI Hengistbury Head

Fast forward to June 2012 when Brian Roberts watched an interview with NCI Calshot on BBC South Today. He applied to join Calshot as a watchkeeper in July of that year but had to wait until October 2013 and subsequently, Brian qualified in January 2014. Living in Christchurch and having been brought up around Hengistbury Head, Brian had long had a dream of seeing the unmanned Coastguard Station on the top of the

Head reopened and in March 2014 he started rooting around to see if it might be at all possible. As luck would have it, the DSM Comms at Calshot had contacts within MCA which proved to be very useful in these initial stages.

In January 2016 Chris Lloyd-Smith joined Calshot as a watchkeeper (a day after retiring as a pilot), having been suitably impressed after visiting the NCI stand at the Southampton Boat Show. Chris was born in Bournemouth, lived in Christchurch and had heard that Brian was wanting to open the Hengistbury Head Station so the two started to talk.

Ed Essery moved to Christchurch in 2014 and got involved with the MVS (Maritime Volunteer service) where he met Chris Lloyd-Smith who was the local training Officer. Ed went on to then join NCI Calshot in November 2016 - and so 'The Hengistbury Three' was born!

There were initially two other Calshot watchkeepers interested in getting the Hengistbury Head Coastguard Station re-opened as an NCI Station but they fell by the way side and so, in April 2017 Brian, Chris and Ed sat down to get the project under way.

That summer, when Brian went to his local polling station, he took the opportunity to speak with his local Councillor, Sally Derham Wilkes, who happened to be there. She was very supportive of the idea and introduced further contacts. Sally Derham Wilkes (she is not currently an elected BCP Councillor) is a relative of Ken Derham, the founder of the Mudeford Lifeboat.

As it happens, Hengistbury Head had long been on the NCI list of possible sites for a Station and, in fact, there had been two previous attempts to open it but there had been objections from MCA/CG relating to MCA's equipment that was in place, the lease on the building, the space inside etc. NCI was also not convinced it would make a good Lookout - one of the reasons being that NCI trustees had been informed in a report that it was too far back from the cliff edge. Not any more it isn't!

However, undeterred, in early 2017 Ed wrote to his Councillors who included Eddie Coope and Bob Lawton. Both were extremely supportive of the idea with Bob Lawton being very keen to see the Station re-opened and were in agreement to a variation on the lease.

The first look inside the Station was by a happy accident. Brian, Ed and Chris were walking on the Head when they met Southbourne CRT who just happened to be there and they were invited in to look around. There were a number of other significant people who were extremely supportive and facilitated/liaised.

Dan Winter, our MCA Liaison Officer has always been supportive of our Station and in the early days was very good at getting hold of the keys to allow access inside the building. Another couple of names to mention here are Katy, Head of MCA Estates and Sally, Head of MCA Security with whom the Hengistbury Three were actively engaged from late 2017 and both of whom were pivotal in the planning stages. One of MCA's arguments was that their radio equipment was in open racks; Katy ensured that it was put into a closed cabinet. MCA had also stated that the building would require electronic shutters on all windows. However, Sally inspected the windows, determined that the glass was, in fact, bullet proof, and so shutters were no longer a requirement.

By May 2017, NCI Calshot were beginning to realise that the Hengistbury Head project was likely to come to fruition in the near future and that, not only were they going to lose Brian, Chris and Ed but, possibly several others. They made the decision to ask who would like to assist in the opening Watches of the new Station and found that eight of their Watchkeepers signed up. To this day we have six ex-NCI Calshot Watchkeepers.

In August 2017 it was agreed that tests could be carried out on Warren Hill during the Air Show. Brian, Chris and Ed bought a telescope, binoculars and a radio and carried out their tests from the back of a car. The very positive test results were followed up by a visit from Lesley Suddes, the then Chairman of NCI, who agreed that the building would be perfect as another NCI Station but further tests needed to be carried out. and in December 2017 Brian, Chris and Ed met with Andrew Brown, the Seafront Manager, to discuss using the Southbourne Beach Office which was deemed the most suitable space to use in the interim, until formal access to the Lookout was agreed.

A lot of time in the autumn of 2017 was spent visiting other Stations (Swanage, Needles, Portland Bill and Lyme Bay) to check lookouts/equipment/procedures etc. Although Brian, Chris and Ed had agreed that they would, if needs be, initially self-fund for telescopes, hand-held radios etc they found that this wasn't necessary as more people and organisations came on board to assist in getting the Station open. In fact, the three biggest worries of access, recruiting and finance quickly became the least of the problems faced.

And so, on March 3rd 2018 the team were all ready to open at 10:00 for the first ever NCI Hengistbury Head Watch from the Southbourne Beach Office. But the Beast from the East had other ideas and, in fact, our first Watch didn't start until noon as no one could actually get to the 'Station'!

Then, on March 30th the Bournemouth Echo ran an article on the opening of Hengistbury Head NCI mentioned that we were recruiting and would need somewhere between 85 90 volunteers to enable us open seven days a week. was inundated with people wanting to become NCI Hengistbury Head watchkeepers, and to this we have a waiting list to join us.



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With the help of NCI Calshot (who released several of their Watchkeepers to assist us) training of recruits began in earnest and on 2nd June. We held our first fund raiser to mark the official opening of NCI Hengistbury Head - a walk from the beach office in Southbourne to the Station on the Head (which was still boarded up) and back again. Over £2000 was raised on that day!

From that point it was a case of all hands on deck to get the Lookout operational while still carrying out watches and training volunteers from the Southbourne beach Office. Having been unmanned for nearly 25 years, it wasn't an insignificant task decorating/repairing/kitting out etc, but on 10th August 2018 the first Watch took place from the Lookout on Hengistbury Head.

It wasn't until January 2019 that we were able to open the Station seven days a week, having enough qualified volunteer Watchkeepers, and we have remained open every day since (with the exception of enforced COVID-19 closures).



In September 2019 we had a change at the helm, with Brian Roberts standing down as Station Manager and Peter Holway, one of our earliest qualified Watchkeepers, taking over the reins. Chris Lloyd-Smith and Ed Essery both continue as Deputy Station

Managers and Brian is now our Honorary President.

In 2018 the Station logged approximately 11,500 vessels and was involved in 10 incidents. By 2020 those numbers had risen to 38,000 (approx.) vessels logged and 52 incidents.