

Some early history of the National Coastwatch Institution on Anglesey

Not many people know that two of the earliest NCI stations in the UK were established on Anglesey at Cemaes (Wylfa) and South Stack in 1996. David Deane, who was, in those early days, the regional manager of the NCI in North Wales, worked hard to set up these stations. This was less than three years after the first NCI lookout was opened in Cornwall, as a response to a tragic accident below an unmanned former coastguard station. These earlier stations also predate the stations at Rhoscolyn and Porth Lynas by 15 years.



David Deane with South Stack lighthouse in the background in 1996.

David had a lifelong love of the sea, growing up in Cork, but sadly his father died when he was a boy. When his mother remarried an Anglesey man the family came to live in Llanfaethlu. By that time David was a teenager and in 1952 was a member of Holyhead Sea Cadets. He then went onto to have a career as a radio officer in the Merchant Navy. After retiring from the Merchant Navy, David worked for Holyhead Coastguard and with another colleague from the Coastguard set up the two NCI stations in Anglesey and quickly established a team of 20 volunteers, men and women, all with military or maritime experience.

David recognised that with the mechanisation of the Coastguard Services, the closure of the sub stations around the coast and automated lighthouses, there was no one actually watching what was going on around the coastline, often the only way of spotting that a vessel or a person is in trouble. During the first year of its operation with only a handful of stations, the NCI handled 73 incidents, making the need for more stations even, more urgent.

The first task David faced was raising funds to establish the stations. An application was made to the national lottery and a letter in the Holyhead Mail in July 1999 from David Deane thanks the local community in Cemaes for a donation of £100 towards their local station. In 1997 David was thrilled to welcome intrepid solo sailor, Joan May, then in her sixties, to Holyhead. Joan was sailing around the British Isles in her tiny 23 foot clinker built boat to raise funds for the NCI.

Very sadly David died aged 64 in 1999 after a short illness, leaving a wife and three daughters. A representative from NCI headquarters in Cornwall came up for his funeral. His widow, Elaine Deane, recalled his total commitment to the NCI and to saving lives around the coastline. The team of volunteers used to have their meetings in a caravan on the field in their farm at LLanfaethlu with refreshments provided by Elaine.

David's daughter, Elizabeth, remembers accompanying her father on visits to the stations and the amount of time and energy he devoted to equipping the stations and making them as comfortable as possible for the volunteer watch keepers. She said he was passionate about improving safety at sea for everyone from commercial vessels to leisure craft and people on holiday. Elizabeth was thrilled when on holiday in Pembroke in 2011 she saw a plaque on the NCI station at Wooltack point (established in 2009) with her father's name and other names from Holyhead. From enquiries with Wooltack point, it seems the plaque is no longer there and the connection between Holyhead and the Pembrokeshire station is something of a mystery although Elizabeth thinks the Anglesey team may have helped in or inspired the establishment of stations in South Wales.

It is not known how or when the stations at Cemaes and South Stack closed. Elizabeth recalled meeting other volunteers sometime after her father died and it seems likely the stations continued to operate for one or two years after that. If anyone reading this was an NCI volunteer in those days or knows anything about those stations or the connection with South Wales we would be very interested to hear from you.

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