

The History of NCI Holehaven

NCI Holehaven is genuinely unique. Canvey has the only National Coastwatch station in the UK that sits over the sea rather than on dry land. Indeed, a watch keeper assures us that in heavy weather their hut at the end of a jetty in Holehaven Creek develops sufficient movement to provoke a degree of empathy with those riding out the storms at sea.

Actually, the station, which is essentially a wooden hut at the end of the jetty, belongs to the Port of London Authority and was a Harbour Master's station until 1999 but before going on with the story of its change of status it is worth quickly outlining the development of National Coastwatch to those not 'in the know'.

The National Coastwatch Institution began life in Cornwall during 1994 as a direct result of a tragedy that took place near an abandoned Coastguard station which had gone the way of most small stations and been closed down. The death of two Cornish fishermen prompted locals to restore a visual watch on the coast and the NCI was born. Today the NCI represents the eyes and ears along the coast, keeping a visual watch, monitoring radio channels, using radar and providing a watch in poor visibility. The role is one of observation and monitoring, alerting the Coastguard when issues arise and working with the RNLI, Customs, Police and Border Force.

One of our Watchkeepers



Back to Canvey, and in 1999 an article in a local newspaper alerted the NCI that the Port of London Authority was giving up occupation of the station in Holehaven Creek. The NCI put a notice in the press that a meeting was to be held in the Lobster Smack for anyone interested in becoming a volunteer watchkeeper. Twelve people came forward as recruits; a few are still active watchkeepers fifteen years later.



The old station before it was burnt down

Equipment was minimal to begin with – a pair of donated binoculars, a note book, pens and pencils, basic navigation equipment and an old marine radio. They also had a bank account with nothing in it; all stations have to be self-funding. A lean start perhaps but on the positive side the PLA left the station furnished with chairs, desk and galley facilities. A low peppercorn rent was agreed with the PLA and a zero council tax band was agreed by the council. The hut itself wasn't that old as it had been built in the 'eighties to replace one that had been there since at least the World War II but had succumbed to a fire.

By November 1999 the station was open, but only at weekends. Two years later it was open every day of the week and now, with around 30 volunteers, Canvey is the only station of the four along The Thames that is working every day thanks to the dedication of the team and lots of local financial support. The ability to attract funds from local businesses and organisations has enabled the station to radically improve its equipment list. Now they have several pairs on binoculars, a large telescope, a compass, two radios to pick up transmissions they have to monitor and use to contact the Coastguard, an automatic identification system (AIS) receiver, a second-hand laptop, printer, charts and navigation instruments. The station achieved Declared Facility Status in 2012, which means it is now fully included in the Search and Rescue operation.

Meantime, after a period of eight years, the PLA has moved back into Holehaven Creek but the Harbour Master has to make do with a hut on the landward side of the sea wall with a view of the fields; his boat is moored a few yards out from the Coastwatch station and, naturally enough, relationships are good.

It's fair to say that the 'big boys' using the Thames shipping lanes and the North Sea can look after themselves. High technology and sophisticated systems have vastly improved safety at sea but there is no substitute for a watchful pair of eyes. A computer cannot spot a distress flare, an overturned boat, or a yachtsman with engine failure.