

The History of NCI Lee-On-The-Solent

In 1992 HM Coastguard undertook a programme to reconstruct their operations to comply with modern marine developments and requirements. As a result of their assessments, it was decided to close the many coastal lookout stations they then operated.

In 1994, there was a serious incident off Bass Point, on the Cornish Lizard peninsular, near a closed-down lookout. As a consequence, Peter Rayment, a Director of the Sea Safety Group suggested that his group should acquire the old lookout, reinstate it to working order and man it with volunteers. The story goes that after a day of intensive discussion, the National Coastwatch Institution was born and on 18th December 1994 NCI Bass Point commenced operations. This was the first of many lookouts springing up around the coast of England and Wales and NCI Lee-on-the-Solent is proud to be one of them.



Lee-on-the-Solent stands on one of the busiest waterways in the United Kingdom and there was a desperate need for an organisation to work alongside and support the other emergency services, to safeguard the users of its beaches and waters. In 2006, Dennis Whyte, who had been a watchkeeper on the coast of East Anglia, suffered a heart attack and as a result had to give up work and move down to Gosport to be near his daughter and her family. When he recovered his health he approached NCI to find out what National Coastwatch Institution facilities there were in the area as he had decided to resume his association with the charity. He was informed that there were none and asked if he would like to form a new operation. He agreed and put an article in the Portsmouth News requesting anyone interested to get together for an initial meeting.

That first meeting, chaired by Dennis Whyte, was held early in 2007 and attended by the eight people who had responded to the announcement in the News. These included Sandy Powell, Richard McMinn, Dennis Suter and Michael Denton names that became synonymous with NCI Lee-on-the-Solent. Dennis's wife Betty was also there and when the organisation became operational, she became Station Secretary. The decision of the meeting was that, as enough enthusiasm and commitment was

exhibited by the attendees, it was decided to pursue the formation of a National Coastwatch Institution station based in or around Lee-on-the-Solent.

The next stage of the operation was to find suitable accommodation, with the necessary views of the Solent area, from which to operate. Various options were tabled and considered, including the takeover of the former Coastguard lookout at Browndown Camp but unfortunately the MOD still needed it to use for training purposes. It was during these deliberations that the Coastwatch station at Ingleberry donated a caravan which everyone felt would meet the immediate requirements, but soon presented more problems than answers. It could not be left on a permanent site and had to be relocated at the start and finish of each daily watch, which was dependant on Sandy Powell as he had the only car big enough to tow it!

Finally, the decision was made to formally commence watches. The first watch took place on 31 March 2007 at Number 2 Battery on the beach near the Bay Café with only a pair of binoculars, a paste table, a mobile phone and Sandy Powell's estate car.



Any shortcomings were, of course, offset by the tremendous enthusiasm shown by the watch keepers.

By now the public were beginning to show an interest and as a result, by early June 2007 the membership started to grow. Some of the new volunteers had specialist skills which further enhanced the operation. Michael Gale was a typical example. He was a radio specialist who implemented a training scheme which led watchkeepers to an RYA qualification. On 11 August 2007 the operation relocated to Elmore car park which had access to the beach where the watches were still conducted from the back

of Sandy's estate car but with the addition of a Gazebo, indeed a major development. The organisation was growing at a rapid pace and one month later, on 13 September, the watch station moved into the old First Aid hut located on the Beach Road carpark in Lee-on-the-Solent as a result of negotiations between Gosport Borough Council and John Gifford, the then Chairman of NCI.

The move brought with it a number of problems, The hut had been abandoned for some time and was in desperate need of repair and maintenance but such was the commitment of the volunteers that many of the watchkeepers became labourers and did what was required to make the building operational. Unfortunately, their efforts did not last too long as the building got flooded in the November storms and the ceiling came down but once again the volunteers came to the rescue! During this period the station was closed for the repairs to be completed, providing an opportunity for both current and future staffing requirements and responsibilities to be assessed.

Prior to the move in September, a National Lottery grant had been applied for and the sum of £9616 had been awarded at the end of October for the laying of hardstanding and a security fence for the caravan. With the agreement of the National Lottery, this grant was reallocated to be used for the refurbishment of the station's 'new home'.

Dennis Whyte retired as Station Manager in Autumn 2007 and was superseded by John Moody who held the position until the summer of 2008 when John Lee was appointed.



A well equipped operations room

By mid-2008 the organisation was becoming much more professional. An excellent lookout location, boasting first class accommodation, a substantial increase in the number of volunteers, both men and women, and new charts and plotting equipment enabled the watchkeepers to undertake their duties, supplying support and information

to Solent Coastguard extremely efficiently. Lee-on-the-Solent, having been refurbished and fitted out to NCI's required standard, became the first NCI watch station to be opened on the Solent. This was the forerunner of a further three Solent stations opened in subsequent years, benefiting both from experience gained from the preparation and opening of the Lee station and working alongside experienced volunteers who transferred from Lee.

The quality and experiences of the volunteers played an enormous part in the rapid development of the station. Many members in the Lee area had retired from service and commercial careers, including the Royal Navy, Police, legal fraternity, engineering, medicine and many others, and their knowledge and skills proved beneficial to the organisation. Also, more and more people were showing an interest in the operation and the purpose of the NCI. The number of visitors to the station increased as people used it as a source of information about the Solent. Their questions often had a humorous side with the regular question "is the land you can see across the water France?", much to the amusement of the watch keepers.

At this time a greater effort was put into fundraising and it is thanks not only to organisations such as Hampshire County Council who donated all-weather patrol clothing, Raymarine who generously donated a AIS system, Fareham Borough Council who contributed to the provision of high-power optics, the architects, Axis Architecture Ltd Who were responsible for the design and development of the old building, but also to the many other companies and individuals who offered continuous support. The fundraising team has been active in the local area getting donations and contributions from local people as well as seeking help with both equipment and funds from local businesses. One of the most successful fundraising schemes is the display and trading of second-hand books from a position on the promenade, adjacent to the station. The idea was the brainchild of one of the watchkeepers and the funds raised represent a substantial contribution to the stations running costs.

From 2008 onwards the Lee-on-the-Solent station established itself as an integral part of the National Coastwatch network and many innovative control systems, introduced at Lee NCI, were put into place and subsequently adopted by the national organisation.



The Lee training manual, based on the original manual issued by NCI, was adapted to the specific requirements of the Lee watch station and proved to be a major step forward, taking all volunteers through a carefully planned programme of development to bring them up to the required national standard. As a result, Lee-on-the-Solent was granted Declared Facility Status in 2009 allowing it to become a recognised part of the HM Coastguard Maritime Search and Rescue service.

Other innovations included a quality audit programme and a new training manual for volunteers, both of which were considered to be 'best practice' by the national assessment team. The quality audit programme was proposed by Allan Thompson who became Station Manager in 2010, after a long career in the RAF and then as a senior manager in an industrial environment. His experience in operational systems and staff resourcing played a major part in the further development of NCI Lee and its quality audit programme. These developments included regular unannounced spot checks on all watchkeepers during their duty time. This became the first such programme to be incorporated into station procedure.

Allan Thompson retired from the position of Station Manager in 2013, after his statutory three years, and handed the reins to Derry Sinclair, a tough Scot with years of maritime experience as a fully qualified ship's captain. His maritime experience of technical issues and human resourcing is fully utilised ensuring the station is keeping up to date with the needs of a modern search and rescue operation.

Lee-on-the-Solent is one of the few NCI stations that has a beach, as well as the sea, within its operational area and provides for the safeguarding of the users of both. To meet these needs, the station introduced a beach patrol system which became a part of the standard watch procedure, not only at Lee but throughout the National Coastwatch Institution. This part of the operation is much appreciated by both local and visiting users of the facilities, particularly with the watch being kept over children who are obviously most at risk in a seashore environment.

NCI Lee-on-the-Solent's defined role is to work closely with Solent Coastguard, and the other emergency services, to safeguard the users of the waters and beaches, in its designated area, by spotting, plotting and reporting any incidents where there is a threat to life. Lee's designated area is on an arc from Ryde to Fawley Power Station, covering some 120 sq. miles of water and some 2 miles of beach. Watches are kept during daylight hours with 2 or 3 watchkeepers working a three-shift system in summer and a two-shift system during the shorter winter days.



NCI Lee-on-the-Solent today