

The History of NCI Mundesley - Supplemental

“The Devil’s throat” is what Daniel Defoe termed the portion of the North Sea that the NCI Mundesley lookout scans. Indeed, owing to the treacherous sandbanks there are at least 53 marked wreck sites where vessels have come to grief. However, far from the paternalistic position of the present 1928 building the Lookout site has, it is believed, had a more aggressive origin.

Capt. De Lafosse, who was appointed by the Revenue Cruisers in the 1820s was having trouble apprehending villains with contraband *. The flat, lonely, sandy beaches were ideal stretches for landing illegal consignments of tobacco and Geneva gin, only 100 passage miles from Holland. Along the North Norfolk coast there were teams of farm labourers who were happy to spend a night unloading vessels for the equivalent of a week’s wage.

The network of concealing and subsequent distribution of the landed goods was widespread. Ditches, wells, cellars and even ploughed fields were involved and the quantities were substantial. In 1822 Lord Suffield, of Gunton Park, Sheringham, discovered, in one of his estate woods, 140 gallons of gin and 8 tonnes of tobacco, imported under the noses of the Customs Officers.

The discreet signal messaging system used by the locals utilising the prolific windmills and windpumps in Norfolk was able to send warnings of any Revenue raids round the county. It is said the news could travel faster than a galloping horse.

In order to monitor this illicit nautical activity, a series of lookouts was built along the cliffs. It is thought the Mundesley lookout was one such station. Towering thirty metres above the North Sea with a visual scope of 180 square miles the site on the cliff top was perfect.

The original building was probably a wooden construction, replaced in time by more permanent structures. The present brick building was erected in 1928 by HM Coastguard, the organisation formed by the amalgamation of the Preventative Water Guard and Riding Officers, and manned by them until the 1980’s . Early in 1995, retired Master Mariner Richard May received a phone call from Captain Tony Starling-Lark, a North Sea pilot, asking if he would consider opening a watching station on the Norfolk Coast similar to the one just opened at Bass Point in Cornwall. “... to offer a 'visual safety lookout' for the local community and for those offshore, to be manned entirely by unpaid volunteers?...”

Determined and resourceful Richard met with three councillors from Mundesley Parish Council which had leased the now redundant Watch House from North Norfolk District Council, and were planning to re-open it as a museum.

They offered Richard the use of the upstairs room for the purpose for which it was originally built. Setting about the task and with approval of HM Coastguard he recruited a team and on 19th May 1995 he manned the first watch in the second NCI Station to open along the British Coastline

Today, vessels monitored from the Lookout include commercial cargo, wind farm traffic and activities around the production rigs on the Hewett Gas Field. Local crab boats have their pots closer to shore and of course leisure craft regularly pass by, all aiming to avoid “the Devil’s throat.”

Graham Bunn 2021

** Norfolk Assizes August 13th 1829*