

The History of NCI Penzance



In 2001 a meeting took place at the Queens Hotel in Penzance where it was decided to open a National Coastwatch Institution lookout in the derelict Gunnery Observation Tower at Chyandour Barracks. The tower is not in a romantic position, being sited just above the railway station, but it has excellent visibility over most of Mounts Bay, particularly Penzance and Newlyn harbours along with the popular windsurfing and kitesurfing beaches towards Marazion and St Michael's Mount. The site also houses the Penzance Army Cadets, who share their toilet facilities with the station, and the Coastguard Rescue Team.

Kevin Sansom was appointed the first Station Manager. Teams of volunteers, led by Dick Brown, completed gutted the interior, "temporarily" repaired the roof, replaced the upstairs joists and floor, and installed double-glazed windows and new electrics. The finishing touches were added to the tower when it was decorated inside and out with paints in a variety of strange colours that had been donated, so cost the station nothing! Once the station was declared operational, a recruiting drive took place, enabling watches to start early in 2002.

Despite the initial work carried out on the tower, refurbishment and repairs continued until June 2008 when the work on the roof and front window was finally completed, making the lookout watertight. The lookout was also given a makeover when it was repainted inside and out. This work was made possible thanks to a grant from the National Lottery. The refurbished tower was formally reopened on July 25 in the presence of NCI Chairman Jon Gifford and Simon Rabett, Head of Falmouth Coastguard.

The number of qualified Watchkeepers had risen impressively while John Hicks was Station Manager during 2007, and the station Management Committee decided to move forward with plans for the station to gain Declared Facility Status (DFS) as their next priority.

On August 11th, 2008 Peter Davey handed over the Chairmanship of the Management Committee to Bryan Jackson and this arrangement was approved at the station AGM

in January 2009, when the decision was also made to push for DFS status. In May 2009 NCI Penzance was assessed by representatives of the local Coastguard and NCI's Assessment and Liaison Team, with Declared Facility Status being approved in June.

In 2010, the Cornish NCI stations were awarded the Queens Award for Voluntary Service and NCI Penzance was among those stations honoured for their contribution to safety at sea.



A few years later, an external staircase was added to the tower to improve the safety of the watchkeepers when accessing the lookout on the top floor. This staircase also has observation platforms so visitors can observe the whole of Mounts Bay.

Today, NCI Penzance has a team of over 40 highly trained volunteer watchkeepers who keep a visual and listening watch on maritime users in and around Mounts Bay 365 days a year. The station also boasts a marine VHF transceiver and a new Automatic Identification System.

In 2018, NCI Penzance received an unexpected but very welcome gift from one of its members. Watchkeeper Vic Elgood surprised his colleagues with the announcement that he had bought a webcam for the station. The camera is installed at the Queens Hotel, providing a live webcam feed covering the full sweep of Mounts Bay from St Michael's Mount and Marazion beach around to the harbours of Newlyn and Mousehole. Although mounted on the Queens Hotel, it is remotely controlled from the Penzance lookout watching over Marazion beach and the vessels entering Newlyn harbour. Mr Elgood paid for the camera and installation himself as a gift to the station and commented that he had originally intended to leave a bequest to the station, but by providing the camera he can enjoy using the equipment himself and, more importantly, it can start saving lives now.

NCI Penzance Station Manager Dave Stevens said "We are overwhelmed by Mr Elgood's generosity, especially as it came as a complete surprise. Vic, on behalf of everyone at NCI Penzance, a very big Thank You."

The team of volunteers at NCI Penzance are active within the local community, giving talks, manning stalls and regularly fundraising. They regularly attend the Golowen Day celebrations and other local events. One of their most recent events was to have a stall at the Great Western Railway open day in 2019.

In 2020, along with the rest of the NCI stations, NCI Penzance was forced to suspend operations due to the Coronavirus pandemic. After a hiatus of two months, watches were able to resume on a single manned basis.