

The History of NCI Rame Head



For over 500 years there has been a history of nautical lookouts at Rame Head in southeast Cornwall. In the eleventh century there was a chapel, dedicated to St Michael, built on the headland and it was granted a licence to act as a place of worship in 1397. It also acted as a watch house and there are records from 1488 showing that payments were made to the "watchmen of Plymouth Corporation" in respect of news of approaching vessels. A hundred years later, in 1588, a beacon was lit on Rame Head as the Spanish Armada was first sighted a few miles offshore. Eventually the chapel became a huer's lookout, watching for the arrival of the herring shoals and a lookout was built inland from the chapel in the eighteenth century, acting as a Lloyds reporting and signal station. It continued in service until it was finally closed in 1992 as part of the reorganisation of the Coastguard service nationally.

In February 1998, a meeting took place in the nearby village of Cawsand to discuss reopening the lookout as a visual watch station as part of the National Coastwatch Institution (NCI). The response was positive and the small team of recruits set to work. Mount Edgcumbe estate provided the building free of charge, and naval recruits from HMS Raleigh at Torpoint renovated and painted the inside of the building. As a result of this assistance, the station commenced watches on 2nd May 1998, although at that time the equipment amounted to little more than a logbook and a pair of binoculars – the absolute bare essentials. After a period of training and building up the equipment, the station was officially opened on 2nd May 1999.

The station overlooks the Rame Peninsular and with an elevation of 102m, commands a view of about 20 nautical miles to seaward and on a very clear day, the dishes of Goonhilly Satellite Earth satellite on the Lizard peninsular can just be seen 44 nautical miles away. But the most notable landmark visible from the station is the Eddystone lighthouse located 8.5nm south of the lookout.



The lighthouse stands on the Eddystone Rocks, a notorious reef. It was to “rid ships of this menace” that the merchant Henry Winstanley built the first lighthouse on this site. This was a wooden structure, completed in 1698, rebuilt a year later and finally destroyed by a storm in 1703, while Winstanley himself was staying there.

The next tower, completed in 1708 by Jon Rudyerd, featured a tapering tower with a ship’s mast up the middle to give it flexibility. Tolls were charged to passing ships until 1755 when it was destroyed by a fire caused by the candles providing the illumination setting fire to the roof. A replacement tower, built by John Smeaton, was constructed with dovetailed granite blocks. It was completed in 1759 and stood for 127 years until cracks were discovered in the cave below the tower. In 1881 the tower was dismantled and re-erected on Plymouth Hoe, where it stands today. The present lighthouse, designed by James Douglas, was completed in 1882 and stands at 72m high. Its original oil-powered lamps were replaced first by electric and then by solar powered lamps. In 1980 a helicopter deck was added and the lighthouse was automated in 1982, removing the need for a lighthouse keeper.,

The lookout at Rame Head is kept busy monitoring the vessels arriving and leaving Port Plymouth and Devonport Naval base. Naval vessels, merchantmen and fishing craft keep the lookout busy in the winter months and in summer there are also leisure craft, jet skis, canoes and dinghies. Many well-known sailing events are also monitored, including the Fastnet Race, and warships from most NATO and other European nations frequently take part in exercises within the visual range of the station.

On 2nd February 2002, the timber carrier Kodima ran aground in Whitsand Bay within sight of the lookout, shedding its cargo of cut timber. The vessel was eventually re-floated and towed to Falmouth for repair. Many garden sheds were constructed locally during this period.

The first artificial reef in Europe was created in March 2004 by the scuttling of HMS Scylla. Her position can be seen from the lookout, marked by a line of buoys. On behalf of the Marine Aquarium in Plymouth, all dive boats visiting the reef are recorded by the watch.



There have long been concerns from the local residents about the dumping of waste from the nearby docks and Tamar estuary into the sea just south-west of Rame Head. NCI Rame Head plots these vessels to reassure the public that waste is only dumped in the designated area and at permitted times, and they inform the relevant agencies if they suspect a transgression.

Rame Head has been designated an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and many walkers join and leave the coastal footpath, which runs some 100m below the lookout. A large car park ensures many visitors linger and admire the scenery in the area. They can also enjoy the varied wildlife in the area.

The once rare Peregrine Falcon can often be seen near the lookout together with Cirl Buntings, Stonechats and Linnets along with a solitary Chough. Throughout the year Dartmoor ponies and their foals graze around the station.