

# The History of NCI Southend

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## Start Up

The history of NCI Southend can be traced to a date sometime in early 1998, when Ron Bright, an ex-police officer who was then Station Manager of NCI Felixstowe, which had opened the previous year, put a short notice in the local press asking for people who might be interested in setting up an NCI station in the Southend area to come forward. About the same time, an advertisement was also inserted in the Leigh Times by Rick Shields asking for volunteers. There were some four or five replies to these notices, resulting in an initial meeting, which was held at Rick Shields' house in Leigh on Sea, attended by Ron Bright, and the applicants from the two advertisements. No minutes for this meeting can be found. A decision was made that this idea had considerable merit and should be pursued and developed. It seems that Rick Shields took charge, assuming the role of station controller, a position which eventually was converted to station manager.

Searches then commenced for a possible location within the Borough of Southend. This is confirmed by a set of plans for a station on the seaward end of Southend Pier which are dated April 1998. This idea was quickly rejected by Southend Borough Council as unsuitable on many counts, but largely because it clashed with the new RNLI Station for Southend which was being developed on the pier.

One of this initial group was also a member of the Alexandra Yacht Club (the "Alex"). He persuaded the then Commodore to allow the group to use a space within the Commodore's Bar to keep a watch. To enable this story to start on a firm basis, however, it is assumed that the station commenced operations on 1<sup>st</sup> June 1998.

## Alexandra Yacht Club

Operations commenced from the Commodore's Bar to keep a visual watch, with access to a VHF set and Channel 16 for listening. This allowed the watchkeeper to hear what was going on and Coastguard to be alerted by telephone in the event of any incident or information. This arrangement did not last for long. The only member of the initial team, who was a member of the "Alex" had left to follow other activities. This left NCI with no connection to the Alex, which generated some friction between the two sides. No dates are available, but it must be assumed that, by the end of the 1998 sailing season, the arrangement came to an end.

NCI Southend then moved to the then vacant St John's Ambulance hut on the Westcliff seafront.

## Western Esplanade

This was located on the Western Esplanade opposite what are known as the Arches, but this cannot be confirmed beyond reasonable doubt.

For most of 1999 and, perhaps, into 2000 NCI Southend had the use of this space. Watches were kept by sitting on a ladder keeping a lookout with a pair of binoculars through a skylight in the roof. It is unclear what additional equipment was available to the watchkeeper at the time, but probably very little when compared with our stations today. It was hoped to establish this hut as a permanent base, with the help of Southend Borough Council. However, once again this proved to be impossible. Property of this sort, on the seafront, commands a high premium, which enables the

Council to charge premium rates for a lease, if the property is suitable for a commercial business, far beyond what NCI could afford. Subsequent investigation shows that this unit was opened in the spring of 2002 as a gift shop/cafe and beach equipment shop (buckets and spades) which still operates to this day.

### Shoeburyness East Beach Project

About this time, the possibility of a building on the roof of the toilet block at East Beach, Shoeburyness emerged and an architect was engaged to investigate.

The minutes of a station meeting dated 25<sup>th</sup> September 2001 refer to such an application. Plans were drawn up by Thames Planning Services in June 2001, which were submitted to Southend Borough Council and NCI were given outline planning approval by the Council. The intention was that this would be the new station building, and permanent home, for NCI Southend. There were issues to be resolved relating to details of the aerials that would be erected on the roof. Apart from NCI aerials, additional aerials would be required by the Pier and Foreshore inspectors and lifeguards, with whom we would be sharing this site. They would be based on the ground floor. It was also thought that the electrical requirements of the upgraded site would be too high for the present equipment which could not handle the additional load. Approval would also be needed for the erection of a radar aerial.

Above: an artist's impression of how the completed station might have looked.



It would have been a great opportunity at the time, giving an excellent view of the estuary over a large arc. However, while we can't confirm this, as the writer has never stood on the roof of the toilet block, it is felt that from the lookout we would not have been able to view the beach at high tide. To our regret, this development opportunity never went very far, as it was costed out at £20,000 a sum far beyond our means.

## The Caravan Era

After lengthy searches, during which no suitable location could be found anywhere along the Southend seafront, it was decided, in February 2001, to move into a caravan at East Beach, Shoeburyness. Locals had suggested that we try for use of the “old Coastguard lookout” on a shared basis. At that time, the station was not used extensively but investigations proved this to be impossible as MCA had advised the space was unavailable. Several attempts have been made subsequently to have access to the site, all of which have been rejected by the MCA, despite it not being used as a regular watch station.

We also have the first mention of portable cabins as an option for the station and it was agreed that the bastion area should be measured with the view to obtaining Council approval to place a portable cabin on that site. This was refused by the Council however, but permissions was granted to put a caravan on the site during the day, but it could not be left overnight.

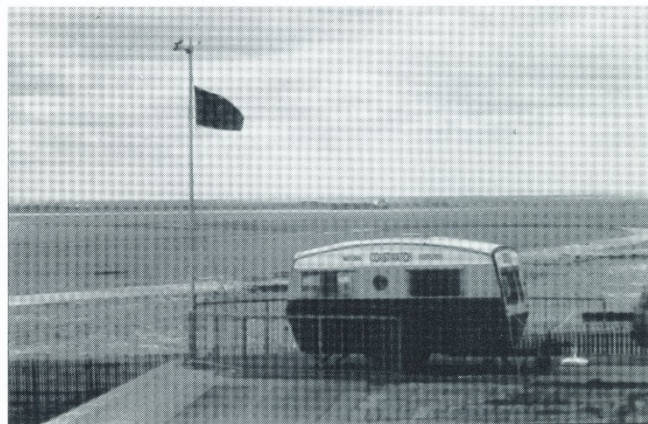
This caravan was donated by a kind person in Danbury and towed into our area by Rick Shields, who had become the station’s first official manager. It was used on the bastion on Saturdays, Sundays and bank holidays, where we already had permission to park it. All valuable items, such as the radios, binoculars, batteries etc had to be removed and taken home for recharging. It had facilities for the essential tea and coffee. There was no toilet, but it was quite close to the council toilet block at the western end of East Beach, so there was no problem on that score. The

photograph, showing the cabin on the bastion, and the accompanying article came from the Autumn 2001 edition of the Charity’s newsletter, *Shorewatch*.

A plus point of this position was that we had good regular contact with the public who walked past all day, every day.

The 2001 AGM marked a change in the management structure of NCI Southend. It was attended by Ted Hale, NCI trustee for the area, and marked the election of Brian Masters, from St John’s Ambulance service, as Station Manager, with Chris Brown as Deputy Manager. Enquiries would continue into the reasons for the departure of Rick Shields, but it was noted that he was now barred from entering the station.

## Southend carries on



Southend station continues to operate from a caravan, towed to and from Shoeburyness East Beach at the start and finish of each watch. There is a picture of the station on the Shorewatch website. Plans are afoot for the erection of a permanent lookout on top of an existing Southend Borough Council building which houses the East Beach pier and Foreshore Inspector’s office, as well as the local Lifeguards.

Efforts to raise funds have intensified with recent successful collections at Asda and Waitrose with Sainsbury’s scheduled for later this month. They have also been active with stalls at the Southend Airshow, Shoebury Fair, Hullbridge Regatta and the Old Leigh Regatta.



Watches continued in the same form as earlier, that is Saturday, Sunday and Bank Holiday, with two people on watch for each period. The caravan was towed to and from the bastion each morning and evening. It was stored at the rear of the Shoeburyness Hotel, which in those days was not the up-market establishment of today, however it served a useful purpose in those early days. The couple who ran it were very helpful and kind to us. We held our monthly station meetings there and our AGMs, when we were given a private room at the rear.

Station minutes dated 26<sup>th</sup> February 2002 marked the first indication that we might get a site within the old Shoeburyness Garrison currently under development by Gladedale, on which we could put a portable cabin. We were given an initial two-year lease, but as there were no plans to develop this particular area, the period might be extended. Sue Howarth-Reading, the then-current trustee, attended this meeting and offered much useful advice as to what would be needed with respect to documentation to satisfy the requirements of National Coastwatch.

### Shoeburyness Garrison Site

We continued with our caravan on the bastion until we received a confirmed offer of the site within the Garrison development. This permission was received in April 2002. It was planned that we would move in with the caravan without delay, indeed in one of the pictures of the cabins arriving at the garrison site a glimpse of the caravan can be seen.

A casual conversation by one of our Watchkeepers, Ernie Bailey, with one of his neighbours led very quickly to the offer of two Portakabins, being donated to us from Thames Water. These were inspected, thought to be ideal for our purpose and the offer was accepted. Transport was arranged and the “new” cabins were brought down from The Thames Water pumping station at Greenwich and delivered to our Garrison site.

The “new” cabins as they were found.





Arriving at the Garrison Site, Shoeburyness

On arrival they were erected and prepared for service by a group of watchkeepers, except for the construction and welding of special supporting steelwork, as the cabins were of different sizes.

At the station meeting held on 28<sup>th</sup> May 2002 it was reported that our two Portakabins were now on site in the Garrison development and were undergoing refurbishment ready for our use.



It was so quick that we never used our caravan at the Garrison, it was taken back to the hotel storage, where it was broken up by a couple of watch keepers. Parts that could be used by others were sold, with the balance taken to the local "tip".

The new station cabins were installed on the higher ground of the Shoeburyness Garrison site that was currently undergoing redevelopment by "Gladedale" This was an excellent position at a high vantage point which offered us a very good view of the estuary, and a reasonable view of parts of East Beach. This offer came at just the right time. Our caravan had seen many years of service and was getting to the point where it was becoming unserviceable and not really fit for purpose.

The first watches carried out from our new site were in June 2002, which was an extremely satisfactory outcome. The site was relatively secure, it being within a closed building site to which the public were not admitted.

### Station Opening Day

A special Opening Ceremony was held on 11<sup>th</sup> August 2002 with guests invited from local rescue organisations. The Station was officially opened by the Mayor of Southend, Dr Alan Crystal.

### Management Change 2002/3

At an earlier Monthly Meeting, held on 26<sup>th</sup> March 2002, Brian Masters raised the issue that some members were concerned as to how the station was run. Under 'Any Other Business' Chris Brown resigned, both as Deputy Station Manager and from NCI, issuing a statement explaining his reasons. After much discussion, he agreed to put the matter in abeyance until the next meeting. This meeting was attended by Ted Hale, the NCI Trustee for the area.

At the AGM held on 5<sup>th</sup> November 2002, again attended by Ted Hale, the position of Station Manager was challenged. After the current Station Manager walked out of the meeting and did not return, Chris Brown was elected as the Station Manager, unopposed.

On 14<sup>th</sup> December 2003, on returning from his watch, Michael Taverner, then Deputy Station Manager, found a package on his front doorstep. The package contained various NCI station papers and a letter from Chris Brown to say that he was resigning from the station and NCI for personal reasons, that he had written to our chairman to this effect and we would not see him again. As it happened, we did see him again and two station members attended his funeral, but that is another, equally intriguing story.

At this point, it must be said that the first five years or so in the life of NCI Southend were unstable and full of ups and downs, few of which were a credit to NCI, but the station survived. From 2004 it has progressed into what is now a very friendly and well-run station with an enthusiastic team of watchkeepers. We have never been able to attract as many volunteers as some of our colleagues, which has meant that the days we have been able to maintain watches are limited. We can say that, apart from Covid-19 restrictions we have never failed to keep a declared watch.

### Shoeburyness East Beach MOD Site

In 2004, owing to the continual development of the Garrison site into a residential area, there was no longer any space for us to remain, and so we were asked to leave the site.

Options for a new position were extremely limited. There was little or nothing anywhere along the Southend shoreline. There was also heavy financial cost for anything which we may have thought suitable. The small huts/cabins available along the seafront were taken up by people wishing to set up small cafés etc. and these were at a cost beyond our wildest dreams.

A letter written to QinetiQ, managers of the Shoeburyness MOD establishment, had resulted in a refusal. The situation for continued operation of NCI Southend, however, was becoming critical and, as options were now extremely limited, it was decided that

a second attempt must be made with QinetiQ and a letter was also sent to our local MP, Sir Teddy Taylor, requesting his help in finding a suitable site along the shore.

This time we had a much more positive response. Nothing happened for a little while then, one Sunday, we had a visit by the head of QinetiQ Shoeburyness who wanted to know more about us, what we did and how we did it. He was on the station for an hour or more, and left apparently satisfied with what he had seen, and advising us that he would be in touch in due course.

He was true to his word because, after some three weeks, we were invited to visit him at his office on the QinetiQ site. This visit took place on 23<sup>rd</sup> February 2004. After introductions we were taken over to a lookout tower, used by the MOD as a spotting/observation tower for plotting shell firings and landings, with other associated activities. It was in a good position with a magnificent view of the estuary however, although there were openings, there were no window frames in the openings, and we should not be allowed to install any. It was also a long way from the public beach, with no chance of contact with anybody. We knew already it was unsuitable but were reluctant to say anything at that stage. We then moved round to the position, where we are now, and told that we could place our two cabins in that area. The location was just inside the MOD boundary, one that had been observed through the fence prior to our visit and considered would suit our needs admirably. We were not shown any further alternatives and, on returning to the office, we talked about our obligations. Not to go through all the points, in the end, we reached an agreement we felt suited us and with which we could comply. MOD then drew up a lease for us to sign. It was some 45 pages long and went into the most intricate detail, but in the end, we had it approved by NCI and it was signed.

Sir John Chisholm, then managing director of QinetiQ, and Sir Teddy Taylor both supported our efforts to find a suitable location for the NCI Southend station which has proved very successful as we are still on the same site today, with a ten-year lease that was renewed quite recently.

We finally moved into our new position the week beginning 5<sup>th</sup> April and we were able to carry out our first watch on Good Friday 9<sup>th</sup> April 2004.

We were extremely fortunate to be given this space within the perimeter of the Ministry of Defence site at Shoeburyness. The position is clearly visible from East Beach and gives us a commanding view over the Thames Estuary, an even better view than we had before. The position did come with some issues though. All watchkeepers must be vetted by the MOD and hold a valid site pass. We have no direct contact with the general public on the beach and surrounding area and people cannot easily visit the station. It is, however, a secure site, compared with others, although we have had a couple of windows broken over the years.





On 25<sup>th</sup> July 2004, the station was opened by Sir Teddy Taylor who at the time was our Member of Parliament, accompanied by Lady Taylor and Mr James Duddridge, the prospective candidate who subsequently took over when Sir Teddy retired.





### Cabin Replacement

After 18 years of use our second-hand cabins, which have served us very well, were showing their age. During a particularly violent storm in the early months of 2019, part of the roof structure was blown off, landing on the beach nearby having damaged some of the aerial poles on the way. As a result, rainwater was leaking into the top cabin requiring emergency temporary repairs. Our efforts were now directed towards replacing both cabins with a new, modern Watch Station.

Investigations commenced in April 2019 by seeking advice from our liaison Trustee, who had had recent extensive experience in a new station, contacting potential suppliers and obtaining quotes. At the same time, we needed to raise the necessary funds, without which the project would never get off the ground. At this time none of us appreciated the task we had taken on, the problems we would encounter or the disappointments that would come our way.

On recommendation, we contacted Portakabin, Wettner Fabrications and Container King, all of whom either visited our site or members of our development team visited them to discuss the project.

Then in January 2020 came the event that gave us the confidence this project could and would come to fruition.

We received a donation of £10,000 from The Provincial Grand Lodge of Essex which was presented at a ceremony held at the Station on 28<sup>th</sup> January 2020 by Paul Reeves, Deputy Provincial Grand Master of Essex, on behalf of the Essex Freemasons Community Fund, to Rodney Hyne-Jones, Station Manager,



Other notable donations were received from:

Phillip Miller MBE of Stockvale £5,000  
The William Demant Foundation, Denmark £2,500

The Worshipful Company of Shipwrights  
ROSCA Trust  
Southend Borough Council  
Tesco  
Each donated £1,000

Essex Freemasons £500

To all of these must go our heartfelt thanks. Without their help we should never have got this project off the ground and we should still be using a cabin where the roof was likely to blow off at the next winter storm. A team was put together to investigate the opportunities and keep the membership informed of progress.



On 18<sup>th</sup> February, a visit was made to Container King at Scunthorpe to meet them and discuss the project. As a result, with the help of a grant from NCI central funds, it was decided to place an order with Container King, subject to final contract.

Then in March 2020 Covid-19 arrived which had a very serious effect on all our lives and, naturally, affected our project. Negotiations with Container King came to a stop as a result of the national lockdown. In May 2020, Container King informed us that they would not be able to supply our cabins, as their sub-contractors had ceased trading and, while they were looking at other options, it was felt that we also needed to look at alternative contractors.

In June 2020 six potential suppliers were contacted, four of the original group plus a further two. Of these, for various reasons, only two could meet our needs and negotiations commenced with them. The quote from Portable Offices (Hire) Ltd at £41,285.00 was within our budget, but we could not afford the VAT which we could reclaim. An additional facility was eventually granted by NCI.

In July 2020, after considerable negotiation with regards to final construction details, an order was placed, and drawings signed off on 16<sup>th</sup> July with delivery scheduled for 3<sup>rd</sup> week of September. This was for removal of the old cabins and stairs, preparation of the site and installation of the new cabins.

In August Portable Offices informed us that they intended to start work on 21<sup>st</sup> September. The last watch in the old cabins was completed on 13<sup>th</sup> September and work commenced to remove them and lay the foundations of the new ones on 22<sup>nd</sup> September. A further issue with the staircase meant that installation of the new cabins was delayed until 13<sup>th</sup> October.



The fitting out process then started, which was somewhat longer than we had originally thought, to get the station ready to resume watchkeeping. We finally re-opened as NCI Southend on Saturday, 24<sup>th</sup> October 2020, albeit with single manning owing to Government restrictions concerning the COVI-19 pandemic. In addition, at the time of writing there had been no official opening of the cabins nor visits from various donors



## Some Notable Dates and Events

- ❖ 1<sup>st</sup> June 1998 - NCI Southend commenced operations at Alexandra Yacht Club.
- ❖ Early 1999 - Move to the disused St John's Ambulance Hut, Western Esplanade.
- ❖ February 2001 - Acquisition of the caravan positioned on a daily basis on the Bastion, East Beach Shoeburyness.
- ❖ Mid 2002 - Retirement of the caravan and installation of the two stacked portable units, acquired from Thames Water, on the Garrison Site.
- ❖ 11<sup>th</sup> August 2002 – Formal Opening Ceremony of the new cabins by the Mayor of Southend, Dr Alan Crystal.
- ❖ April 2004 – Repositioning of the cabins within the MOD site East Beach Shoeburyness.
- ❖ 24<sup>th</sup> May 2005 - Jon Gifford Chairman of NCI and his wife visited the station and were taken to lunch at the Rose Inn Shoeburyness afterwards.
- ❖ 29<sup>th</sup> August 2012 - Assessed for our first DFS Certificate by John James from Felixstowe. Status continuously maintained.
- ❖ 2005/2008 – Despite being no Andrew Lloyd Webber, but in an effort to raise station funds, we promoted four Concerts with Rayleigh Brass Band, the last of which was the very final event to take place in the New Empire Theatre in Southend, before it fell into disrepair and was demolished. We never made a fortune, but neither did we lose any money. The concerts put NCI in the limelight, if only for a limited period. They were very popular, largely through Rayleigh Brass, also great fun and quite exciting being entertainers.
- ❖ Mid 2018 – Donation of £1,200 by Southend Round Table.
- ❖ September 2018 – Visit by Lesley Suddes, Chairman of NCI.
- ❖ October 2018 – Visit by Sir David Amess, MP for Southend West.



- ❖ November 2018 – Visit by Mr James Duddridge, MP for Rochford and Southend East.
  - ❖ 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2019 – Station visit to London Gateway Container Terminal.
  - ❖ 20<sup>th</sup> June 2019 – Station Boat Trip, River Lea.
  - ❖ August 2019 – 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the establishment of NCI commemorated by Chris Taylor, Deputy Station Manager, and his wife, Angela very generously hosting a garden party at their house in Thorpe Bay for station members and their partners. Held in beautiful weather, in addition to the wonderful spread, Angela presented a commemorative cake in the NCI colours.
- A very pleasant afternoon was had by all.














- ❖ 19<sup>th</sup> October 2019 – Station Visit to London VTS Gravesend.
- ❖ 2019/20 – Donations towards cabin replacement received:
  - Phillip Miller MBE, Stockvale Group                    £5,000
  - Southend Borough Council    £2,000
  - Worshipful Company of Shipwrights                    £1,000
  - Tesco 'Bags of Help'    £1,000
  - ROSCA Trust    £1,000
  - Essex Freemasons    £ 500
- ❖ 28<sup>th</sup> January 2020 – Presentation of £10,000 donation by Paul Reeves, Deputy Provincial Grand Master of Essex, on behalf of the Essex Freemasons Community Fund.
- ❖ 18<sup>th</sup> March 2020 – All operations suspended by the Board of Trustees owing to the COVID-19 outbreak.
- ❖ 16<sup>th</sup> May 2020 - The station re-opened for watchkeeping duties but only on a single manning basis.
- ❖ 4<sup>th</sup> July 2020 – Dual manning resumed.
- ❖ 16<sup>th</sup> July 2020 – Order placed with Portable Offices (Hire) Ltd for two new cabins.
- ❖ 13<sup>th</sup> September 2020 – Last watch completed in the old cabins.
- ❖ 13<sup>th</sup> October 2020 – Installation of new cabins.
- ❖ 24<sup>th</sup> October 2020 – First watch in new cabins but under single manning owing to the nationwide increase in cases of the virus.





## Station Managers and Deputies

Years	Station Manager		Deputy Station Manager	
1998 – 2001		Rick Shields		Brian Masters
2001– 2002		Brian Masters		Chris Brown
2002 -2003		Chris Brown		Michael Taverner
2003 -2004		Michael Taverner (Acting)		Ernie Bailey
2004 -2017		Michael Taverner		Ernie Bailey
2017-2018		Michael Taverner		Chris Taylor
2018 – 2019		John Disney		Chris Taylor
2019-2020		Rodney Hyne-Jones		Chris Taylor
2020 -		Rodney Hyne-Jones		Linda Grimmett

Acknowledgements:

Author & Research: Michael Taverner assisted by Ernie Bailey.