

## The History of NCI Stepper Point

Stepper Point stands high on the north coast of Cornwall. Along with Pentire Point opposite, it guards the entrance to the Camel estuary and the port of Padstow.

The lookout commands a spectacular view north to the open sea and Lundy Island, 36 nautical miles away and visible with binoculars on a clear day, west to Trevose lighthouse and the new lifeboat station, taking in the full sweep of the river down to Padstow in the south, and the beaches of Rock, Daymer Bay and Polzeath to the east.

At low water the sand of the 'Doom Bar', destroyer of many ships and crew over the centuries, is visible below Stepper and the quarry. The rocks of Greenaway can still prove hazardous to gale-blown vessels.

### ABOUT OUR STATION

The present lookout at Stepper Point was built in the early 1920s to keep a watching brief over the approaches to Padstow and the Camel Estuary with its notorious Doom Bar. The Doom Bar, a huge sandbank extending from Hawkers Cove eastwards to within about 200 yards of Greenaway Rocks and Daymer Bay, has been a hazard to shipping entering the port since time beyond record. In the period 1800 to the early 1900s records show that over two hundred ships have come to grief in this area, needless to say many lives have been lost, not least amongst them many local men who have served on lifeboats stationed at Hawkers Cove. The "Mariners Friend", one of the earliest lifeboats in the British Isles, was stationed at Hawkers Cove in 1823; this was paid for by local townsfolk who were all too aware of the dangers. Since those days there have been a series of lifeboats stationed here until the cove eventually silted up in the late 1960s, when a new site for the lifeboats was established under the lee of Trevose Head at Mother Ivy's Bay.

HM Coastguard kept regular watches at Stepper Point until 1994 when due to financial constraints and the advance of communication systems, the visual watches from Stepper Point watch house were abandoned. During the following six years it became a target of vandals, along with the adjacent WW2 blockhouse.

In April 2000 Derek Lindsey, the then Station Manager, was approached by the National Coastwatch Institution with a proposal to renovate and reopen the station; this he readily accepted. Derek had previously been the Coastguard responsible for Stepper Point for many years before its closure. He set about the task with vigour. A public meeting was called in April 2000, a committee formed and volunteers enlisted. The challenge was enormous: a derelict watch house out on a remote cliff-top, only accessible via the coastal footpath with a walk of a mile and a quarter from the nearest road. There were no services, the remaining telephone link had long since been blown away by storms and as there was no power, water or sanitation, it was going to be a labour of love.

It was very fortunate that the landowner, Mr Peter Prideaux-Brune, gave the project his wholehearted support and leased us the site for a peppercorn rent and still supports us as a patron of our station. The project was going to be costly but we took onboard a number of supporters, mainly a group of very senior citizens (ladies), who helped to run coffee mornings and open days. This enabled us to make a start on repairing the fabric of the building while we applied for funding from various sources. The summer of 2000 was spent clearing up the site and doing structural repairs. Just when we were getting to the stage of finally making everything wind and watertight the heavens opened and a hundred days of rain fell which meant we could not get materials to the site. Our Station Manager was determined not to be beaten and he, along with the local window expert, carried all the new windows and tools up to the site and managed to seal the building.

The Foot and Mouth crisis was a blow, in that as the lookout was on grazing land we were forbidden to go to the site. Eventually, after months of waiting in September 2001 we were able to restart but having to use disinfectant baths. We set a target for opening on the 28th March 2002 and we were not deterred. With some solid funding in place, we ordered our wind powered generation equipment and sanitation which was only completed two days prior to our opening. Training watches were held at the site during the next three months and we were able to recruit 21 competent watchkeepers who worked a shift rota covering 0900hrs to 1800hrs seven days a week.

The watchkeepers main function was to keep a watching brief over the movements of sea-borne traffic in the approaches to Padstow and the water-related leisure activities around Polzeath, Daymer Bay, Tregirls beach and the estuary, reporting incidents to the MCA at Falmouth. Other duties included keeping a watching brief over the safety of walkers on the coastal path and reporting any unusual activities to the appropriate authorities, and passing weather information to HM Coastguard, Radio Cornwall and anyone requesting the latest situation reports.

It soon became apparent that the small size of the lookout was very restrictive and plans were made to extend it. Further massive funding-efforts meant that by 2005 plans to redevelop the lookout, giving it almost 360 degrees of vision (and more for expanding watchkeepers!) could be realised. The renovated building was up and running by spring 2006 along with the accompanying 'block house' which was converted into a toilet. The building has remained essentially the same until the present day.

## LOCATION

50° 34'.07N 004° 56'.9W, OS grid ref. SW913784

The lookout is accessed by foot from the north Cornwall coastal path – only fit watchkeepers survive here! From Padstow take the B3276 to Newquay. At the 'give way' sign take a very sharp right down the narrow road to Crugmeer. Follow that winding road for about two miles and with Trelizzick Farm on your right, park at the side of the road near the gate to the coast path. On foot, follow the gravel road round the field, and at the gate take the left fork up the hill. You will see the Daymark tower further on your left. Keep to the right-hand path and soon you will see the lookout. The Daymark, a 40ft tower built for ships to identify the entrance to the harbour in 1826, at a cost of £29, is the best guide to the lookout.

## EQUIPMENT

The lookout is equipped with a variety of hand-held and mounted binoculars giving the watchkeepers an excellent view of all the surroundings. The coverage of the designated watch area has been considerably enhanced recently with the addition of two new, high-powered web-cameras which provide views of the estuary previously hidden from view to the lookout. It is hoped this will be improved further with an additional camera mounted on the RNLI station at Mother Ivy's Bay which will give the watchkeepers views back towards the lookout including the waters off Harlyn and Trevone Bays. The cameras are controlled by a large, touch-screen monitor or touch-screen laptop for single watchkeepers.

Communication equipment includes three radios ensuring the watchkeepers can keep an ear on what's happening 'on air' and also broadcast on the dedicated NCI channel 65. The lookout uses a Samsung mobile phone enabling optimum movement around and outside of the lookout as well as enabling the use of WiFi dialling which has proved highly efficient. A Fulmar radar and AIS unit are also installed together with a tablet which also gives access to AIS.

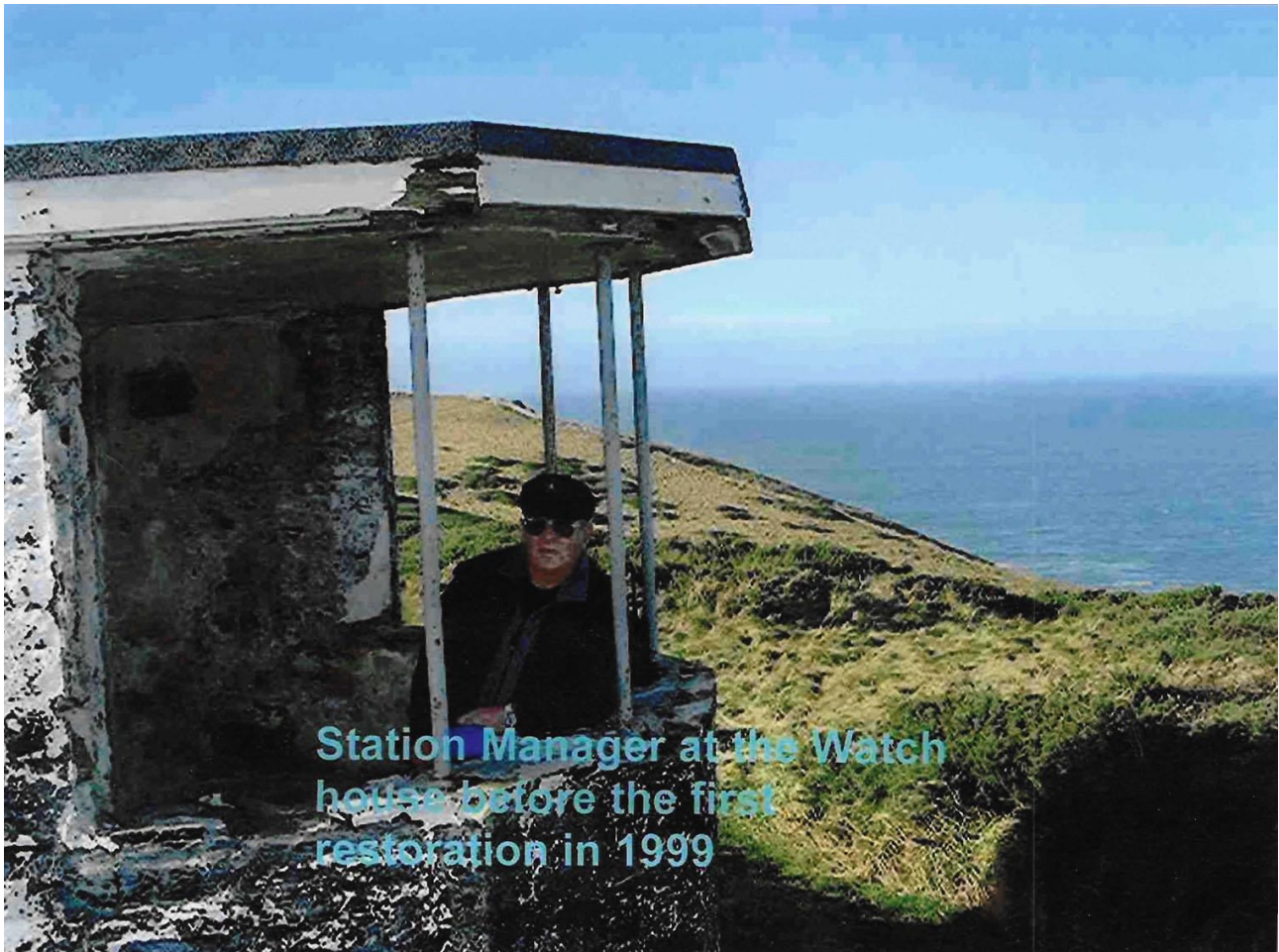
The lookout is run entirely on solar and wind energy and this is backed up by an array of batteries. This system is further enhanced by a yacht re-charging unit powered by a fuel-cell.

The station is also equipped with a Davis weather station which is accessible via the internet.

## THE WATCH: TRAFFIC AND INCIDENTS

While the heyday of Padstow is long since past, it is still a working port with local and foreign trawlers and crabbers using the harbour's facilities all year round. The huge increase in waterborne leisure pursuits has been a great boost to the area, and the summer season sees a continuous passage of cruisers and yachts in and out of Padstow as well as regular excursions on the *Jubilee Queen* and the four speedboats *Jaws II*, *Sea Fury*, *Fireball* and *Thunder*.

Wind and kite surfers skim across the estuary, and the beaches and rocks of Daymer Bay and Polzeath are crowded with holiday-makers, all of which need to be monitored. The rocks which used to be treacherous to ships are equally dangerous to walkers.





*Pictures of the old coastguard lookout prior to 1999*



*Initial restoration of the lookout*



*Opening of the lookout after restoration*



*Completion of second restoration*

## Lookout rededicated after ten years of keeping watch



● **WATCH KEEPERS:** Members of the Stepper Point National Coastwatch Institution celebrate ten years.

THE National Coastwatch Institution (NCI) Station at Stepper Point, Padstow, celebrated its tenth anniversary with a rededication service at the Lookout conducted by Canon Michael Fisher, who is one of the longer-serving watch keepers.

The service was attended by

30 watch keepers and supporters and Friends of Stepper Point NCI.

Alan Richards, chairman of trustees of the NCI, reopened the Lookout.

A reception was held at Prideaux Place, attended by 24 watch keepers, together with previous watch keepers

and many friends and supporters, including all four past and current station managers.

The station manager, Richard Wilson, thanked all those who had helped over the past ten years and those who had attended the reception.

NCI Stepper Point had, over that period, been involved in 94 serious incidents. Of these, 55 had necessitated the launch of one of the local lifeboats.

Other incidents had required either the police, the ambulance service, air ambulance or cliff rescue service.

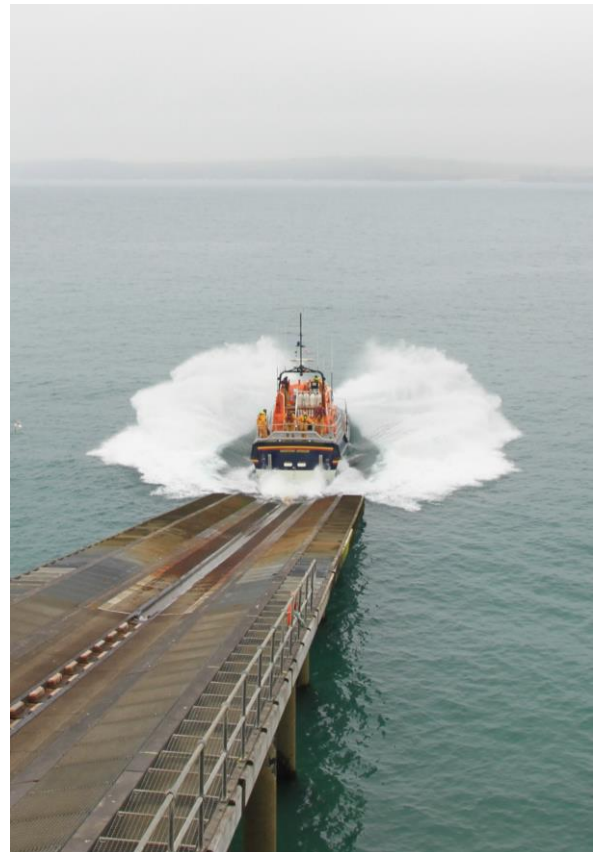
*Local newspaper report of rededication of lookout*



*NCI Stepper Point lookout in 2021*



*The Daymark*



*Launching of the Padstow Lifeboat from Mother Ivy's Bay*



*The famous Doom Bar*