

The History of NCI Swanage

There has been a lookout at Peveril Point, Swanage since 1830, manned by HM Coastguard since the 1870's. The lookout was the last to be closed, finally ceasing operations in September 1994, despite protestations to the Chief Coastguard by the local auxiliary coastguards. A leading light in the early history of the NCI Captain Starling-Lark and a colleague visited Swanage, meeting with local interested parties. Together they proposed and got agreement to try opening up the recently closed lookout. Volunteers were sought, including retired auxiliary coastguards. The Town Council, which owned the land, was approached and agreed to allow the new organisation to operate at a peppercorn rent of £1 per annum.

Ian Surface was invited to take charge. He was at that time also the Station Officer in charge of the Auxiliary Coastguard team in Swanage; and he operated in both capacities until he reached the retirement age laid down by H.M Coastguard. Ian was the first station manager of NCI Swanage.

The Swanage lookout opened as an NCI Station on 15 April 1995. It was the second NCI station to open for business, closely followed by our colleagues at St Albans Head in May of 1965. Since that time, we have been able to keep a visual watch at Peveril Point every day of the year except Christmas Day, now normally from 0900 to 1800 hours, amounting to about 3000 hours every year. The lookout was initially equipped with high quality ex-Royal Navy binoculars, originally donated by the family of an auxiliary coastguard, John Cushing, who unfortunately lost his life on coastguard duty in 1987. The lookout was also equipped with VHF radio so that a watch could be kept on the most important maritime frequencies, particularly CH16, the emergency channel.

Any situations observed or heard on VHF by the trained watchkeepers which indicates danger to life at sea, on the cliffs or coastal paths are reported by telephone to H.M. Coastguard at Solent National Maritime Operations Centre (NMOC). The station has Declared Facility Status which means that it is officially recognised as a member of the UK Search and Rescue facilities, and the information provided to H.M. Coastguard is treated accordingly.

As it stands today the Peveril Point lookout is something to be very proud of; it is an attractive building with its new appearance. It cost £27,000 to replace the old, smaller coastguard lookout originally built in 1964. By the millennium year it was showing serious signs of wear and tear. The work on the new lookout was undertaken under the supervision of Ian Surface the Station Manager, a professional builder. Peveril Point watchkeepers gave day-to-day assistance. The work was completed in June 2001, followed by an official opening and lunch attended by NCI management, locally interested parties and the families of the watchkeepers.

In 2004 the old radar set gave up the ghost and was replaced at a cost of nearly £4,000.

Swanage currently has 62 watchkeepers including 7 trainees with a further 12 volunteers on a waiting list. This operational team is supported by a small team of fundraisers who help at fundraising events throughout the year.