

All along the WATCHTOWER

The National Coastwatch Institution has look-out stations dotted all along the Welsh coastline manned by volunteers who help to keep those at sea or on the coast safe. Join us as we find out more

Words: Sioned Bannister Photography: © Crown copyright (2013) Visit Wales



For the thousands of people who enjoy the beautiful waters of the Welsh coast every year – whether sailing, swimming, surfing, boating or simply enjoying an amble along the beach or the coast path – there’s an organisation they may not even have heard of that is silently but constantly looking after their well-being.

In old coastguard lookout stations along the coastline are the eyes and

ears of coastal safety, who maintain a close watch on events as they unfold and are ready to act in any emergency.

The National Coastwatch Institution (NCI) organises volunteers to keep a visual watch over the coastline and waters of England and Wales during daylight hours, a remit that fell under the responsibility of the Coastguard until 1994, when cutbacks to funding meant that look-out stations up and

The NCI lookout station at Morfa Bychan (inset) has a good view over a busy section of the Glaslyn Estuary (above) near Porthmadog in North Wales

down the coast were closed. However, just months after the closure of the Bass Point lookout on the Lizard Peninsula in Cornwall, two local fishermen drowned just below the abandoned station.

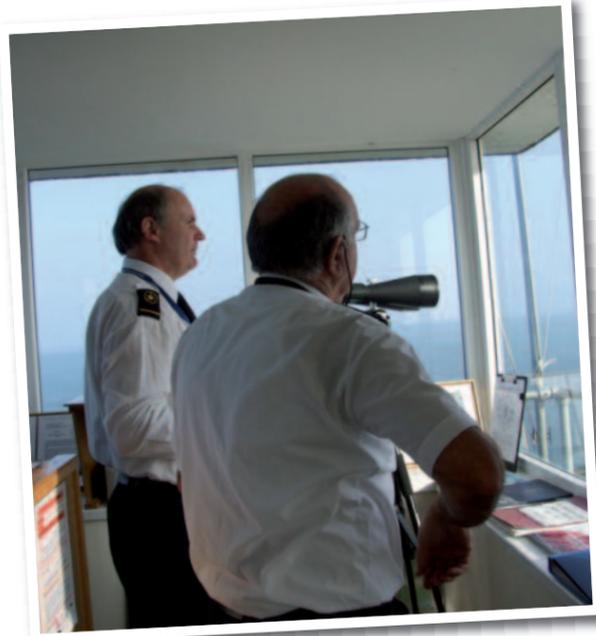
The local community were outraged and decided to re-open the station themselves, manning it with volunteers. The NCI was born and the operation soon spread all along the coast of England and into Wales. Today, the NCI, which is

part of the life-saving Search & Rescue group and works closely with the Coastguard and the RNLI, has 49 stations along the coastline of England and Wales, with six of those on the Welsh coast.

The NCI is a unique organisation because it is staffed and manned entirely by volunteers. Everybody, even those at head office or those who undertake managerial or directorial roles, contributes their time freely for this worthy cause.

David Littlemore is one such volunteer. Living on the Welsh coast near Porthmadog, he is the Wales Representative and it is his hard work and dedication that has seen the opening of three NCI stations in North Wales, with ambitious plans for many more. “I’ve been a sailor all my life virtually,” David tells me as we chat about his work with the NCI. “As a boy I went to sea and I’ve been sailing small boats for about 50 years, so I just love it. But, as I get ▶

“His first project was to transform the abandoned coastguard lookout point at Porthdinllaen”



volunteers to help open stations in North Wales as there weren't any stations up here at the time. Now I look after all six of the stations in Wales, as well as constantly looking out for locations for new stations." David's first project was to transform the abandoned coastguard lookout point at Porthdinllaen on the Llyn Peninsula into a working NCI Station. "I looked around for a suitable location for the first station in North Wales and came across the old lookout at Porthdinllaen, which was all bricked up. I found out who owned it and then we made the arrangements to rent it from them and open it as an NCI station; it opened in 2010. It's taken a long time to be fully operational and we're still low on volunteer numbers, but it's open and running." David then turned his attention to Anglesey. After some searching he found another old coastguard lookout close to the site of RAF Valley at Rhoscolyn. It was opened in 2011 and was followed shortly afterwards by the station at Morfa Bychan, near Porthmadog. Volunteers are crucial to the work of the NCI, in fact, it couldn't

operate without them. There are almost 2,000 regular volunteers manning the 49 stations that are operational across the country, signing up for shifts as watchkeepers at their local station. "Volunteers are vital." David tells me that the NCI stations in Wales are always looking for new recruits. "We want people who love the area and want to spend time here, getting involved and interested and trained up to do the duties," he explains. "And, of course, we'd love younger people to get involved as well." **A MANAGER'S DUTIES** Another NCI volunteer is Clive Wilton, who originally joined in 2006 as the station manager of the Nells Point Station at Barry Island. Clive had plenty of maritime experience – he was once a Marine Pilot – and with his local knowledge he soon took on more responsibilities for training other volunteers. "Apart from watchkeeping I assist with training and other duties, which include running an exhibition centre on the lower floor of our building," says Clive. And if that isn't enough to keep him busy, he also undertakes

the role of assessor, to ensure standards are maintained to criteria agreed with the Coastguard throughout all stations. Most volunteers begin their duties as watchkeepers. These are the people who man the stations and provide a visual watch out along the coast. "Common sense is really the main thing," says David when I ask him what skills are needed to become a volunteer with the NCI. "And good eyesight, of course. It's not essential to have experience of being at sea because you can learn that; you develop a sixth sense when you're watching to see who could get into trouble." Both David and Clive agree that there's a huge amount to be gained from their volunteering work. "I get personal satisfaction from using my knowledge of the sea and coast in helping to keep safe watch on our coastline," says Clive, "and it's very difficult not to take pleasure in being situated in a lookout with panoramic views over the area. It's a pleasure to meet and work with very dedicated volunteers. "Simply put," Clive continues, "no volunteers, no station! They are

needed not only to maintain the station-manning rotas but also to help with fundraising work. Recruiting is an on-going process and volunteers are sourced from all walks of life." For David, it's the challenge of busy days and new projects that motivates him. "Well, it has more or less turned into a full-time job," he laughs. "But I do love the challenge. And not wanting to sound trite, it is a great feeling to know that I'm giving something back and contributing to the community – especially as I have had a lifetime at sea; there have

been some hairy moments when I've been worried and frightened. It would have been great to know that other people are watching out and would give a helping hand if you needed it." All the NCI stations are situated on the coast and are now on or close to the Wales Coast Path. The stunning location of all of the stations means that a shift as a watchkeeper is no hardship for David. "You're always in a beautiful place – Rhoscolyn is magical, Porthdinllaen is beautiful and Morfa Bychan is stunning, too, of course. All the stations are in lovely places and all

The station at Porthdinllaen (above left) – which looks out across the bay (above) was opened in 2010. Watchkeepers (left) man the station daily during the summer. Below: the opening of Rhoscolyn station in 2011





are on the Wales Coast Path. So you spend your time looking at wonderful views, chatting to people who are walking by and helping people when something goes wrong. What better way to spend a Sunday afternoon?" smiles David.

RAPID RESCUES

The NCI stations across the Welsh coast are all unique in terms of their positioning and outlook, but they share a common goal: to keep a watch over the local coast. Clive explains what a day might be like for a watchkeeper on duty.

"A day at Nells Point starts with preparing the station with binoculars, charts, plotting equipment, marine radios and recording logs. Watchkeepers then settle into a routine, observing the local sea area, coastal paths and beaches for any persons or craft getting into difficulty or requiring assistance. Any sightings or incidents are reported to the coastguard, who may instigate the necessary Search & Rescue response. The priority for watchkeepers is to maintain a good lookout at all times," says Clive.

There's no such thing as a typical day. When dramatic events occur they happen quickly and without warning. David can relate numerous accounts of dramatic rescues – children on inflatable craft, groups

kayaking, dinghies getting into trouble and even the weird and whacky. "One day from the Rhoscolyn station we saw what looked like a giant hamster wheel walking over the water, and it turned out to be a young man practising for a charity walk in a water wheel all the way across the Irish Sea! That's not something you see every day."

Both David and Clive agree that the work of the NCI is vital to the safety and enjoyment of the vast numbers of people who use the sea and coastlines of Wales every day, for pleasure and business. "So many visitors enjoy our Welsh coastline but many are unaware of the hazards, like our strong tides. That's where local observers, like us at the NCI, can provide advice, assistance and at least a watchful presence."

And all NCI stations welcome visitors and observers to their coastal stations. "Oh yes," exclaims David, "they're all open to the public and we enjoy meeting people who come in to see us."

So why not head down to your local NCI station today and find out more about the work of this fascinating organisation? You never know, you might be inspired to begin a new volunteering career! ✨

To find out more about the work of the NCI or to donate to the charity visit www.nci.org.uk

Nells Point station on Barry Island (above left) is open all year round. Above: Audrey Frank, the station manager of Worm's Head NCI station, Rhossili, with deputy station manager George Mobbs

For more details about the NCI in North Wales visit www.nci-northwales.org The NCI are always keen to hear from anyone who's interested in volunteering. They offer full training so don't be put off if you have no previous maritime experience. Contact your local station (details on the website) for more information.

AROUND THE COAST...

Why not visit your local station to find out more about the work of the NCI?

- Morfa Bychan, nr Porthmadog, Gwynedd LL49 9UU. Open Saturday, Sunday and school holidays, 10am to 5pm (Easter to October only).
- Nells Point, Barry Island, Cardiff CF62 5AJ. Open daily from 9am to 5pm (4pm during winter months).
- Porthdinllaen, near Nefyn, Llyn Peninsula, Gwynedd LL53 6DB. Open daily 11am to 4pm during summer months and 10am to 3pm during winter months.
- Rhoscolyn, Anglesey LL65 2NX. Open Monday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday, 10am to 6pm (3pm during winter months).
- Wooltack Point, Pembrokeshire SA62 3BJ. Open Saturday and Sunday and Bank Holidays, 9.30am to 5pm (3.30pm during winter months).
- Worm's Head, Rhossili, Swansea SA3 1PP. Open daily, from 10am to 6pm (4pm during winter months).