



## NCI Gwennap Head – Incidents and News 2018

### Jan-Feb

- The storms which hit Cornwall during the first week of the new year brought gusts of up to 97 mph (see below) and big waves causing flooding, damage to harbour walls, cliff falls and travel disruption. However, the stormy weather also caused problems for Cornish wildlife, with dozens of seal pups found injured along Cornwall's coastline after being battered by the atrocious weather.

A passer-by reported to our watchkeeper that a seal pup was lying on the slipway of Porthgarra Cove and 'looked poorly'. In this case, the passer-by had done the correct thing and not tried to approach or interfere with the pup. Instead, our watchkeeper was able to contact British Divers Marine Life Rescue (BDMLR) hotline and report the stranding.

BDMLR is an organisation dedicated to the rescue and well-being of all marine animals in distress around the UK. They are a voluntary network of trained marine mammal medics who respond to call outs from the general public, HM Coastguard, Police, RSPCA and SSPCA and are the only marine animal rescue organisation operating across England, Wales and Scotland. If you find a live stranded marine mammal, BDMLR should be contacted on their hotline (01825 765546 - Office Hours; 07787 433412 - Out of Hours) with the relevant information and they will then advise you on what to do, and will get a trained medic out as soon as possible

- The New Year started 'excitingly' with visits from several big storms. Not too unusual for winter in Cornwall but Storm Eleanor has to get a special mention after our weather station registered a gust of 97mph when the storm hit, at 3am. Things had calmed down a bit by the time our watchkeeper went on duty at 7.30am; the wind speed had reduced to a mere 90mph....

### Mar-Apr

- Seemingly, 'tis the season for testing your Automatic Identification System (AIS) distress beacons! Recently, our watchkeepers have experienced several AIS distress alerts popping-up on their AIS screen. Naturally, whenever these occur, they immediately contact Falmouth Coastguard, who then radio the vessel in question. To-date all these alerts have resulted in the vessel replying that they were just testing their distress beacons and thank you for confirming that they were working! Testing emergency beacons is always a good idea but, maybe, a quick 'heads-up' to the local Coastguard, first....
- Just before lunchtime, a frantic knocking on the station's front-door heralded the start of a major rescue operation involving most of our local SAR services. A climber reported that one of his companions had fallen approximately 5 metres onto a ledge whilst attempting a route on the nearby Carn Barra cliff. She was understood to be conscious and "complaining of back pain" and was believed to have sustained lower back and hip injuries. An additional cause for concern was that there was thought to be a 30-metre drop below the ledge onto which she had fallen! Our watchkeeper immediately contacted Falmouth Coastguard and a full-scale rescue operation swung into action.

Coastguard cliff-rescue teams from Penzance and Land's End, the South West Ambulance Service, both Sennen Cove RNLI lifeboats and the Newquay-based Coastguard search and rescue helicopter ("Rescue 924") were all tasked to attend the scene for what proved to be a complex and highly technical rescue operation. Coastguard Rope Rescue Technicians climbed down to the casualty's location to assess her condition and to provide immediate first aid, whilst



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Rescue 924 lowered a Paramedic Winchman to help prepare her for evacuation. After the casualty had been stabilised and put into a helicopter stretcher (not a quick or simple job given her location and the potential seriousness of her injuries), with both lifeboats providing safety cover, she and the Winchman were then winched up to Rescue 924 which immediately departed for hospital. Falmouth then stood all teams down and, after collecting up all their gear, everyone returned to their respective stations for, no doubt, a well-earned cup of tea.

I'm told that there is excellent climbing on our local cliffs. However, please take care and remember that these rocks are exposed to the full-blast of our local weather. Strong wind gusts are common and can (and do!) occur unexpectedly. Moreover, even granite can suffer under the attentions of wind and rain so that handhold might not be quite as secure as you expect it to be! Lastly, as you will notice, the cliffs are also home to large numbers of seabirds and even the mildest gull can get a bit tetchy if a climber tries to share its nest....

- Following an incident where a local trawler had to cut away its gear after a tanker came within 30 metres (a significant expense which no skipper would care to incur), our watchkeeper monitored an 'intense' complaint between the trawler skipper and Falmouth Coastguard (FCG). The skipper stated that there had been prior no radio contact from the tanker and that a warn-off to the tanker on VHF Channel 16 (the standard VHF radio Distress, Safety and Calling channel) had met with no response. Because we maintain a local VHF radio listening watch, our watchkeeper was then able to contact FCG and state that, although they heard the tanker call the trawler several times before the incident (with no response), the calls all appeared to be made on VHF channel 0. This is a private channel, specifically designated for use by UK Search and Rescue organisations, and certainly not one that a trawler would be expected to monitor. Whilst our watchkeeper hadn't heard the trawler transmit the channel 16 warn-off, FCG confirmed that they did hear this. Thus, it would appear that the incident was caused, at least in part, by the tanker using an incorrect radio channel for ship-to-ship communications...one assumes that the tanker owners will shortly be receiving a significant bill!
- In a rough sea, with driving rain and gusting force 7/8 winds (honestly, not typical for Cornwall in the Spring!), a yacht in close vicinity to Gwennap Head, unable to make any headway, made a distress call to Falmouth Coastguard. Our watchkeeper, who had a visual on the yacht, contacted Falmouth to provide them with updated information on the situation, including details of logged vessels in the area which might be able to render immediate assistance. Falmouth then tasked the Sennen Cove all-weather lifeboat "City of London III" and the Coastguard rescue helicopter to the scene, whilst our watchkeeper monitored the situation and provided updates, as necessary. The lifeboat then escorted the yacht to safety in Newlyn harbour, and our watchkeeper and the helicopter were stood down. By maintaining a log of all vessels in our sector (especially those without AIS transponders), our watchkeepers are always able to provide rescue services with the details of any nearby vessel which might be able to render aid to a casualty should the situation demand it.
- Being on a very exposed headland, our watchkeepers are no strangers to the extremes of weather. Nevertheless, on the first day of spring, with a clear-blue morning sky, it was still quite a surprise for our duty watchkeeper (along with most of the UK) to receive a visit from 'The Beast'....no, not the one from Bodmin but a howling blizzard from the Russian steppes! Whilst snow is, obviously, very common in the rest of the country (albeit, maybe not quite as late), down here in the far West of Cornwall, it is almost unheard of. In fact, my colleagues tell me that the last time we had any significant snowfall was around 30 years ago! Be that as it may, within a very short space of time, temperatures were well below zero and the local roads were becoming treacherous. Since there was a real danger of becoming stranded in the watch, our watchkeeper instituted the emergency procedure, closed the watch and attempted to get back home to a nice warm fire. Unfortunately, even in that short space of time, the road up the hill



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from Porthgarra Cove had become impassable and our poor watchkeeper was forced to abandon his car and walk through the snowstorm to a [fairly!] nearby farm, where they took pity and offered him shelter, warmth and a cup of tea. Since the snow was still falling heavily a couple of hours later, they then – very kindly – drove him home in one of their four-wheel drive farm vehicles....where he discovered that the rest of Cornwall (not to say most of the rest of UK) was also in chaos. Any prospective watchkeepers will be relieved to know that a repeat of this most unusual (to put it mildly) occurrence is not expected for another 30 years 😊

## May-Jun

- The watch was contacted by a member of the public who reported 3 dogs running loose on the cliffs above Pendower Cove, and who – somewhat ominously - “were showing great interest in the edge of the cliff”! Our watchkeeper immediately contacted Falmouth Coastguard who, in turn called out the Sennen All-Weather and Inshore Lifeboats, plus a Coastguard mobile unit, to search the cliffs for a possible faller. Happily, after 30 minutes or so, Land’s End mobile was able to report that the dogs actually belonged to a local farmer who was on his way to collect them. All’s well that ends well (although doggie treats might be in short supply for a couple of days!)
- Congratulations to our latest trainee who has just passed his final assessment and is now a fully-qualified watchkeeper. Just as he was being told that he’d qualified, the Coastguard Rescue helicopter (Rescue 924 -see below) flew in and landed right next to the watch. Although they were actually there for a professional photoshoot, our new watchkeeper is convinced that we organised this as a ‘graduation’ surprise....



If you're interested in becoming a watchkeeper and want to know more about it, please [click here](#) go to our 'Becoming a Watchkeeper' page

- First reported unattended dogs of the season! A lady called into the watch to report two lone dogs running around, near the watch, in Folly Cove. No owner was visible so our watchkeeper reported the situation to Falmouth Coastguard. No doubt, someone will be in the doghouse...

## Jul-Aug

- A walker arrived at the watch and reported that his wife had tripped on rocks near Roskestal Cliffs and had suffered a suspected broken ankle! Normal procedure would be for our watchkeeper to contact Falmouth Coastguard who would then deploy the Cliff Rescue Team in



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order to carry out a medical assessment and evacuate the casualty. However, the walker reported that they'd been with several companions, all of whom were doctors! Consequently, the rescue team were not needed since casualty had already been assessed and appropriate first-aid had already been rendered. Our wildlife officer (who was also present) gave the gentleman a lift to his car, in the cove, and he then drove it up to the watch. In the meantime, the doctors had helped his wife to the watch and then they all drove off – presumably for a spot of plastering. Normally we would have automatically contacted the Coastguard but the doctors said the rescue team wasn't needed and they would look after the casualty ....have you ever tried arguing with a group of doctors?

- A motor cruiser off Minack Point radioed Falmouth Coastguard (FCG) that it had lost a blade off one of its two propellers. Since it could still make headway (albeit, at reduced speed and manoeuvrability) and was accompanied by a companion craft, FCG agreed that a lifeboat launch was unnecessary and that the vessel would make its way to the nearest port, for repairs. Our watchkeeper agreed with FCG to maintain a precautionary visual watch on the vessel as it limped towards Newlyn harbour.
- A report was received at the watch of a male suffering chest pains on the path between Porthgwarra Cove and our station. As an off-duty colleague was also present, whilst our watchkeeper contacted Falmouth Coastguard (FCG), they took one of the mobile VHF radios and walked down to the casualty's location where, via radio, they were able to report back to the watch, who then relayed the information to FCG. FCG called out the Coastguard Cliff Rescue Team and, initially, the Coastguard Rescue Helicopter. However, this latter tasking was cancelled by the Cliff Rescue Team who transferred the casualty to an ambulance in the Cove. The Air Ambulance also attended and landed besides the watch.
- A 999 call from a member of the public to Falmouth Coastguard (FCG) reported an unidentified vessel in Mounts Bay which appeared to be emitting clouds of smoke (raising the possibility of an on-board fire). Our watchkeeper then monitored a radio transmission from FCG, trying to ascertain which one of several vessels anchored in the Bay was the one referred to in the original call. Conducting a visual sweep of the area through the watch's high-power spotting scope, our watchkeeper was able to identify the vessel in question and determine that, from the colour and nature of the smoke, the vessel was likely starting an on-board generator or its engines, rather than experiencing difficulties. This information was then phoned through to FCG who confirmed it with the vessel's master. Nevertheless, the original caller did exactly the right thing when they **Dialled 999 And Asked For The Coastguard** – it's always better to be safe than sorry when dealing with potential emergencies at sea.

### Sept-Oct

- A slight baptism of fire for one of our trainees! On a nice sunny afternoon, during a training session at the watch, a knocking on the front door heralded the end of our Training Officer's 'lesson plan'. The leader of a group of walkers reported that one of his group had fallen 100 yards west of the watch station and suspected that he'd either broken or dislocated his shoulder (ouch!). Our watchkeeper immediately contacted Falmouth Coastguard who then dispatched members of the Land's End Cliff Rescue Team to assess the casualty. As a result of this, an ambulance was requested and the casualty was then safely evacuated to West Cornwall Hospital, in Penzance. One thing's for sure....in their forthcoming final assessment, our trainee will certainly be well 'genned-up' on our procedures relating to medical emergencies!
- A group of three people, walking to Porthcurno, arrived at the watch with one of their number suffering from extreme breathlessness (much more than could be explained by the relatively gentle coastal footpath walk, from Land's End). Our watchkeeper immediately sat the walker



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down and offered to call for an ambulance but the gentleman explained that he was taking medication for high blood pressure and just needed to “rest for a while”! However, our watchkeeper persuaded him that, if an ambulance wasn’t needed, the most sensible thing would be to call for a taxi which could come up to the watch and take him directly to Porthcurno (where he was staying for the night). He agreed to this and a local taxi firm was immediately contacted to come and take him to his destination whilst his friends continued their walk to meet him there.

- A walker rang the front door bell and reported to our watchkeeper that they’d seen (and heard) an injured seal in the nearby Porth Loe Cove. At that time, the watch was single-manned so our watchkeeper couldn’t leave to confirm this observation. However, they told the walker to contact the British Divers Marine Life Rescue (BDMLR) hotline (01825 765546 Mon-Fri 9am-5pm, 07787 433412 outside office hours and Bank holidays) who would then send out a volunteer to check on the state of the seal.

Founded in 1988, BDMLR is a registered charity, dedicated to the rescue and well-being of all marine animals in distress around the UK, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. If you need to contact them about an injured animal, please note the place (grid reference, if possible), the state of the tide and any injuries you can see (without getting close to the animal) and call them on the number, above. They will then advise you on what to do and will get a trained medic out as soon as possible.

- Bad Mouse!.....as any regular reader of this page will know, the Northbound and Southbound ‘lanes’ of the Land’s End/Isles of Scilly Traffic Separation Scheme are there to maintain separation between the large amounts of commercial traffic which use this corridor. As such (and just like on a motorway), the authorities take rather a dim view of large vessels trying to cut across the lanes rather than entering or exiting at either end of the scheme. When our watchkeepers observe such infringements, they are always reported to Falmouth Coastguard (FCG) for further action. Generally, infringing vessels are usually smaller cargo vessels so our watchkeeper was very surprised to see the [very big] cruise ship Disney Magic (950 crew and 2700 passengers!) making a 90-degree turn, straight across the Southbound separation lane. Our duty watchkeeper immediately informed FCG of the infringement so....no cheese for the mouse, that night

## Nov - Dec

- On the 19th of December 1981, in hurricane force winds, the coaster Union Star ran into serious danger, eight miles east of the Wolf Rock. Her engines had failed due to sea water contaminating their fuel supply and, as a result, she was quickly being swept towards the southern coast of Cornwall. Because of the truly awful weather, helicopters scrambled from RNAS Culdrose could do little to help, and, consequently, it was left to the Penlee lifeboat - the Solomon Browne – to try an effect a rescue. The lifeboat was launched from Mousehole at 20.12 and struggled through forty-foot waves to reach the Union Star where, in appalling conditions, she managed to rescue four people. Then, at 21.21, she radioed her intention to go in again and recover the rest of the crew.....all radio contact was then lost and never regained.

On that terrible night, six days before Christmas, both vessels were wrecked, losing all hands; in total sixteen people lost their lives that night including the eight volunteer crew of the Penlee Lifeboat, who were:

**Coxswain Treveleyan Richards,  
Second Coxswain/Mechanic Stephen Madron,  
Assistant Mechanic Nigel Brockman,  
Emergency Mechanic John Blewett,**



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**Crewman Charlie Greenhaugh,  
Crewman Kevin Smith,  
Crewman Barrie Torrie.  
Crewman Gary Wallis**

On this day, as on every 19th December, the watchkeepers of Gwennap Head NCI remember the crew of the Solomon Brown as well as their current colleagues, all volunteers, from RNLI Penlee Lifeboat Station

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