



NCI Gwennap Head – Incidents and News 2019

Jan-Feb

- On a very calm day, our watchkeeper monitored a VHF radio distress call between Falmouth Coastguard (FCG) and a yacht which had lost engine power and was, consequently, making little headway against the tidal race. The reported position of the vessel put it one and a half miles off Gwennap Head and our watchkeeper was able to contact FCG, report that they had a visual sighting on the vessel and provide them with updated position and tidal information. FCG then requested that our watchkeeper maintain observation of the yacht until the Penlee Severn-class lifeboat “Ivan Ellen” arrived to take the vessel in tow, back to Newlyn harbour.
- In testing conditions (Wind; Force 7/8, Sea State; Rough/Very Rough), when most smaller vessels had run for cover, our watchkeeper was somewhat surprised to see a yacht making its way (under full sail, no less!) across Mounts Bay past the Runnel Stone, towards the Longships Lighthouse and Land’s End. Due to the prevailing conditions, the vessels progress was slow, erratic and, judging by the way it was being tossed around - from a crew’s point of view – likely, extremely uncomfortable! Even more alarming was the fact that it was steering a course around Land’s End, landwards of the Longships Lighthouse. As any local sailor will know, this is a passage which can be ‘bumpy’(!) even at the best of times (which these certainly weren’t) and, consequently, our watchkeeper maintained careful observation on the yacht until it approached Land’s End. At that point, since it would soon be out of sight of Gwennap Head, our watchkeeper then contacted their opposite number at Cape Cornwall NCI watch station to ‘hand over’ monitoring of the vessel, with the hope that it might be putting in to Sennen harbour to wait for slightly better sailing conditions. Unfortunately, Cape Cornwall watch then reported that the yacht had by-passed Sennen and was heading towards Cape Cornwall and the Brisons rocks. At that point, the Cape Cornwall watchkeeper contacted Falmouth Coastguard (FCG) to report the situation and FCG then made several repeated attempts to contact the yacht, via VHF radio. No reply was received and the yacht proceeded on its journey, without further incident. Nevertheless, the failure to respond to hails from FCG was worrying and suggested that the vessel either had no VHF radio or wasn’t monitoring it.

These days, mobile phones are fairly ubiquitous but they are not a reliable method of ship-shore communication, especially when conditions are bad. Making sure that you have a working VHF radio and that you know how to use it is a sensible precaution whenever you’re intending a to make any voyage longer than a ‘quick trip round the bay’!

Mar-Apr

- In near-gale conditions (gusting to 35mph), our watchkeeper monitored a VHF radio distress call between Falmouth Coastguard (FCG) and a yacht which had been attempting to sail round Land’s End. Conditions were such that they had abandoned the attempt and had turned back to Newlyn. Unfortunately, their engine had failed and they were making little or no headway, 8.5 miles off Land’s End. The supplied Latitude and Longitude were garbled but our watchkeeper was able to contact FCG, report that they had a visual sighting on the vessel and provide them with an accurate position and tidal information report. FCG were then able to task the Penlee Severn-class lifeboat “Ivan Ellen” to take the yacht in tow, back to Newlyn harbour, whilst our watchkeeper monitored the situation until the Coxswain Patch Harvey and his crew arrived on the scene. Another good day for “Eyes Along the Coast”!
- Gwennap Head is now social! Of course, visitors are always welcome at the watch (although, when an incident is ongoing, depending on its severity, our watchkeeper may ask them to call



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back later) but, just recently, we've gone one step further....yes, Gwennap Head now has its own Facebook page which is regularly updated and will faithfully (well, fairly faithfully!) chronicle the doings of the station and it's watchkeepers. Also, plenty of photos showing the stunning scenery which we are lucky enough to work in, the highs (and lows) of watchkeeping in our ever-changing climate and, of course, the wide range of wildlife which comes to visit (HINT; keep an eye out for the 'Monarch of the Cliffs!'). Just go to Facebook and search for "NCI Gwennap Head" and, of course, we'd be thrilled if you want to 'Like' or 'Follow' our posts

- We're always happy to welcome visitors to the watch but Freya (or Storm Freya, if you want to be formal) brought Force 11 (Violent Storm) wind speeds, with Force 12 ((Hurricane force) gusts to Gwennap Head. Since, more or less, every vessel had run for cover (and, unaccountably, no walkers or rock climbers were to be seen!), our watchkeeper was having a very quiet time of it when the phone suddenly rang and Radio Cornwall requested a live interview about the storm's progress. Even though Media Training isn't part of the normal NCI curriculum, our watchkeeper rose to the challenge and was able to give Radio Cornwall listeners a live, concise, on-the-spot report which left no one in any doubt that a gentle walk along the cliffs was probably best postponed until another day! Interview over, our watchkeeper returned to their lonely watch. Meanwhile, from now on, maybe all our watchkeepers will need to be ready to receive a phone call from Radio Cornwall, whenever the weather is bad?
- A mile offshore from the watch, and just below the surface, lies The Runnel Stone, a hazardous rock pinnacle. At low water, it used to show above the surface until struck by a steamship in 1923! However, the Stone and surrounding reef are still considered extremely treacherous to navigation and records show that, between 1880 and 1923, over thirty identified vessels were wrecked, stranded or sunk in the area (and, probably, many more unrecorded incidents, as well!). That being the case, on a day when heavy fog had reduced visibility to less than 25 yards (!), our watchkeeper was alarmed to see AIS and radar reporting a dredger less than $\frac{3}{4}$ mile from the Stone, on a course which, at best (!) would put it in very close vicinity to the rock (at less than 90 minutes before low tide). Our watchkeeper immediately put in a call to Falmouth Coastguard alerting them to the situation (especially the zero visibility) and suggesting that an urgent warning should be transmitted to the vessel in question. Shortly afterwards, our instruments showed the dredger making a sharp turn thereby putting plenty of sea room between them and the hazard

May-June

- Our watchkeeper immediately contacted Falmouth Coastguard when our Automatic Identification System (AIS) popped-up a distress alert. Since these are transmitted by VHF radio, their range is not as great as the more powerful Emergency Position-Indicating Radio Beacons (EPIRB's). Consequently, even though we can see an AIS Distress Alert, there is no guarantee that Coastguard can see it, as well. However, after investigating, Falmouth identified the vessel in question and a quick radio message resulted in the vessel replying that they were just testing their distress beacon and thank you for confirming that it was working! Testing emergency beacons is always a good idea but, maybe, a quick 'heads-up' to the local Coastguard, first....
- I am told that the Chair Ladder (the sea cliff in front of the watch) is "one of Cornwall's and indeed the UK's premier crags. Something for everyone with classic multi-pitch routes, on impeccable quality sea cliff granite, in a situation oozing with atmosphere and character." (don't ask me...I get a nose bleed standing on a step ladder!). That being the case, when a member of the public knocked on our front door to report that there were two unattended rucksacks, under a ledge near the clifftop, and that they'd called out but with no responses, our watchkeeper experienced a certain amount of anxiety as to the possible fate of their owners. One of the rucksacks was open and contained climbing equipment so, in the absence of any other alarm



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indications, our watchkeeper decided to keep an eye on the area for a while, before escalating the situation. About an hour later, two climbers popped up from some cliffs a bit further west, came over to retrieve their rucksacks and then wandered off back to Porthgwarra Cove.

Apparently, it is not at all uncommon for climbers to dump unneeded gear at the top of their first climb and then wander off to other climbs, retrieving their gear, as necessary, or at the end of the day. However, as can be seen from this incident, it can lead to a certain amount of anxiety if passers-by spot unattended gear. If you're climbing in the immediate area of Gwennap Head and let us know where you'll be, we're always happy to make a note of it, just in case any queries crop up during the day.

Finally, if you are intending to 'take a wander' up and down our various cliff faces, 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.

- As [hopefully], everybody knows, a “Mayday” call is issued by a vessel requiring immediate assistance, due to it being in grave and imminent danger, where the situation is life-threatening. In these days of modern technology, such calls are normally (but not always) issued by VHF radio, on channels monitored by UK Coastguard (and, indeed, most other vessels). Under normal circumstances, coastguard operators will immediately respond to a Mayday message and initiate appropriate Search-and-Rescue procedures. However, there can be several reasons (weather, extreme range, failing transmitters etc) why a Mayday might not be received by Coastguard. Thus, on the basis of “Better Safe Than Sorry”, all VHF radio users are expected to immediately contact their local Coastguard Operations Centre if they monitor Mayday messages and do not hear responses from coastguard operators within a very short period of time (NCI procedures specify 15 seconds from receipt of the initial Mayday call).

Just such a situation occurred recently when our watchkeeper monitored a Mayday call from a yacht, without hearing any response. However, the situation was complicated by the fact that, due to weather conditions, our VHF radio was pulling in messages from the French coast (normally, well out of our range) and, as [bad] luck would have it, the Mayday was both garbled and all in French!

Fortunately, our watchkeeper was in the middle of a training session with a new recruit. Even more fortunately, said recruit, had studied French (and Russian!) at college so was able to translate enough of the message for our watchkeeper to immediately contact Falmouth Coastguard with a suitable Mayday Relay message, which could then be passed on to their French colleagues. As it happens, the French coastguard had already been made aware of the situation but, when you hear a Mayday call, you don't take any chances about it not being heard! In the meantime, our trainee is well on the way to passing her final assessment and we know who to call if we get any more French (or Russian!) distress calls

July-Aug

- The sea area immediately in front of the watch is particularly hazardous for small vessels since, depending on where they are in the tidal cycle, the current can speed up 500% and change direction 180 degrees! Consequently, our watchkeeper was alarmed to see a small inflatable with three people on board (only two of whom were wearing lifejackets!), going West, on a fairly fast tidal stream, and only having two small paddles for propulsion/control. Our watchkeeper was even more alarmed when a short while later (after the westerly tidal stream speed had increased to near its maximum 5 knots), they observed the occupants of the inflatable making



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very slow headway, whilst trying to paddle back East, against the current. Our watchkeeper immediately contacted Falmouth Coastguard and was requested to keep observing the situation. Fortunately, a local trip boat was in the area and took the inflatable in tow, back to Porthcurno beach. The skipper questioned the three occupants (all visitors) and established that they knew nothing about the currents which can make the seas around Gwennap Head so treacherous.

Strong tides which quickly change direction are a feature of our part of West Cornwall. This incident might have had a very different ending since the strong westerly current could have easily swept the craft along the coast and out past Lands End, into the Celtic Sea! Small inflatable craft of all types (including unicorns, watermelons, dinosaurs and just about anything else you can think of) are great fun in a pool but pose a serious danger when up against strong currents and wind, intent on sweeping you out to sea.

- At around 3.25 yesterday afternoon, our watchkeeper spotted a huge plume of smoke approximately 4 nautical miles SE of the watch. He immediately dialled 999, asked for Coastguard and passed a 'Mayday Relay' of a suspected vessel on fire, along with relevant location information. At about the same time, Shearwater II, a wildlife trip boat operated by Marine Discovery Penzance, was in the area and passed a similar message by VHF radio (in fact, the plume of smoke was so large that Falmouth Coastguard (FCG) then started receiving multiple 999 calls from many different places along the coast).

FCG requested our watchkeeper to monitor the situation and keep them informed of any developments whilst they tasked the Sennen and Penlee all-weather lifeboats to the stricken vessel's aid. In the meantime, Shearwater II had spotted two crewmen abandoning their 11-metre trawler to a life raft. Since the vessel was blazing fiercely, Shearwater II took the life raft in a tow and moved it away to a safe distance, a wise precaution since the flames caused at least one on-board canister to explode. Whilst this was ongoing, our watchkeeper ensured that FCG were kept updated. The two fishermen were then transferred to the Penlee lifeboat and taken ashore in Newlyn, (thankfully unharmed) whilst FCG declared a ½ nautical mile exclusion zone around the still-blazing vessel (which later sank). Both the Sennen and Newlyn lifeboats then remained on scene for a period of time to monitor the situation and warn off any other vessels.

The loss of any vessel is always sad, having both emotional and financial implications. However, the good news here is that both men are safe and unharmed. This was a very serious incident which could have had a very different outcome

Sept-Oct

- A MOO-ving Morning! Our watchkeepers are used to members of the public arriving at the watch and reporting worries about various things which they've seen whilst out and about, in our area. However, a recent first was when someone knocked on our front door and reported a nearby cow, in labour, apparently having difficulties with the birth! Whilst NCI training is comprehensive, it doesn't include veterinary midwifery! However, as a matter of course, we hold contact details for the farmer who grazes his cows on the clifftops and so our watchkeeper was able to phone and inform him of the report. In turn, the farmer said that he'd checked on the expectant mother a couple of hours previous and was just about to go out, again.

This isn't the first occasion that Gwennap Head Coastwatch has been involved in a bovine emergency (see <https://www.nci.org.uk/stations/national-cow-watch-institute> for a thrilling tale of 'The Great Bovine Hoist') but, this time, in recognition of their part in this event, maybe our watchkeeper should become the god-parent!



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Nov-Dec

- The somewhat inclement (OK pretty damn awful!) weather over the last two months of the year has generally meant a very quiet time for our watchkeepers. Most smaller vessels were stuck in port and a lot of the medium-size vessels were similarly keeping their heads down. The few large vessels capable of braving the big seas and gale-force winds mostly kept far out, over the horizon and, on land, walkers were few and [very] far between.

Sadly, a side-effect of this unusually bad winter weather has been an increase in animal strandings and fatalities. Consequently, our watchkeeper wasn't totally surprised when a passer-by knocked on our door and reported a dead seal with a live pup at the nearby Porth Loe cove. In West Cornwall, dead strandings are reported to the Cornwall Wildlife Trust Marine Strandings Network (0345 201 2626) and live strandings are reported to British Divers Marine Life Rescue (01825 765546, office hours, 07787 433412, other times), a voluntary network of trained marine mammal medics who respond to call outs from the general public, HM Coastguard, Police, RSPCA and SSPCA. In this case, our watchkeeper contacted the Wildlife Trust who could then take the appropriate action.

Finding a live stranded animal can be distressing. Though your first instinct may be to try to help it back into the water, you should never attempt to do this - they have stranded for a reason and require urgent professional medical attention. So, keep your distance, and try to keep other people, dogs, and gulls away. They are wild animals so contact with, or proximity to, humans can add additional stress to an already distressing situation. Moreover, you can put yourself at risk of injury if the animal thrashes or tries to move. Also, direct contact can also transmit disease. Please contact the relevant organisation as soon as possible using the details above. Note your location, the state of the tide, and any obvious injuries you can see.