



Prawle Point

No: 47

'eyes along the coast'

Spring 2014

PILOTAGE WITHIN TORBAY

Ten years as Captain of coastal vessels around the UK gave Captain Bob Curtis sufficient experience to be approachable, by Trinity House Committee, when the current Brixham Pilot suffered a broken leg.

Bob was on leave at the time so was able to leap at the prospect, his first task being to steer the Isles of Scilly ferry *Scillonian* into Torquay Harbour while on one of her annual coastal cruises, now no longer scheduled, and two days later a 150,000 ton tanker asked for assistance in anchoring for engine repairs. Following news of his predecessor's emigration to Australia, official appointment as Brixham Pilot launched Bob, at the age of 36, into a profession he enjoyed for 25 years. Most pilots attached to large ports serve apprenticeships for several months, Bob was self-taught and, due to the rapid increase in the oil transfer business, soon became an experienced pilot. Torbay Council licensed him within Harbour limits, Trinity House appointed him to operate up to six miles offshore.

It was around this time that the traffic of small coasters was largely being replaced by super tankers, up to quarter million tons, carrying so much oil their deep draft prohibited passage through the Dover Straits. Ship to ship operations began whereby these tankers anchored in deep water off Torbay while smaller vessels came alongside for off-loading thus reducing the draft by up to thirty feet enabling continued passage to Euro-ports at Rotterdam, Bremen or Hamburg for discharging. After off-loading from big tankers, the smaller ships would deliver their cargo of oil to various UK ports. Around two hundred such operations per year required oversight by the Brixham Pilot, while deep sea pilots from continental ports were responsible for taking the super tankers on to the above destinations or into the Baltic.

Assignments for piloting came through via the Coastguard service (using Ch.9 after the initial call-up on Ch.16) or through Torbay and Brixham Shipping Agents



Captain Bob Curtis, Brixham Pilot

where Bob, the one and only pilot, had an office desk. In the world of shipping, reputation travels and Torbay soon became noted. Piloting mainly involved bringing ships to the jetties of Brixham and Torquay for bunkering, discharging and occasional engine repairs, crew change or medical services. Ships piloted to anchor in Torbay or Lyme Bay were needing transfer of oil, repairs or were awaiting orders. Up to ninety piloting tasks have been undertaken within a month. The pilot boat rendezvous position is normally 1½ miles east of Berry Head for boarding by rope ladder - a preferred method, as lifts on modern passenger vessels often fail. The technique sounds hazardous. As the pilot tender must keep a distance of two feet from the vessel to be boarded, the pilot needs to leap across and grab at the right moment; in any swell, the exact

moment when the merchant vessel begins its roll away, not towards you, is finely judged by experience. A deckhand stands in readiness but Bob has only once been submerged while clinging on, fortunately without injury. Legally a pilot is engaged purely to advise the master on navigational hazards in the channel but will take over steering if required and, in practice, most captains wisely hand over; there are several unmarked wrecks in Lyme Bay which need to be avoided. The pilot rendezvous for large ships wishing to anchor is three miles south of Berry Head from whence Bob would take them to deep anchorage six miles east of Hopes Nose using shore features for navigating rather than radar.

Within Torbay Harbour, Bob's detailed local knowledge enabled him to navigate using hotels, rocks, so many different land features affording various applications for guidance. The submerged rock 'Morris Rogue', for instance, can be avoided by keeping daylight astern between Thatcher Rock and the Orestone. A pilot keeping on course by continually looking aft rather than forward can cause consternation among captains unfamiliar with the area!

After long voyages a ship's captain may tend to slow down on entering the English Channel due to exhaustion,

mental fatigue or the need for extra care in unfamiliar waters and, since most ships are on charter, further time at sea means further expense- the services of a pilot come cheaper and, in fact, may be compulsorily directed by the Coastguard. If port facilities are to be used, pilotage in and out is mandatory while Torbay also benefits financially from harbour dues and business with local stores, services and hotels. In bad weather no charge is made for anchoring while sheltering out in the bay. The most seen years ago at anchor were 52, now only five or six are more commonly seen sheltering.

Sensing and adapting to the differing peculiarities of each ship took Bob around fifteen minutes on a confined zig-zag course to feel the helm and judge time of response. On passage up channel a super-tanker at 8 knots will take ten minutes of full-astern to stop. The largest recalled was the French Shell tanker *Batillus* of half a million tons, drawing ninety feet which needed five discharges of oil before continuing towards Dover.

Given an average turnover of twelve callouts per week, emergencies are inevitable. One such occurred when in 1971, *Trinity Navigator*, approaching Berry Head to take on the pilot, grounded on Penny Rock. On coming aboard at 5am, Bob met a Chinese captain speaking no English and an apprentice able to serve as very limited translator. The cargo, 32,000 tons of crude oil, threatened a huge pollution catastrophe so anti-pollution groups patrolled the nearby beaches and a ship to ship transfer team stood in readiness. Gradual release took two hours and initially entailed steering towards Berry Head not to seaward so the poor captain, who already envisaged certain jail, was agonisingly fearful for his ship. Miraculously, the rock had pierced the only empty tank!

Captain Curtis retired in 1995 and was succeeded by a pilot from Teignmouth who travels in by car. Indicative of the reduction in shipping, he was called out only twelve times last year.

LONDON BOAT SHOW 2014

When our Station Manager contacted us with a request for volunteers to help man the NCI stand at London Boat Show, Excel, in January, I offered to represent NCI Prawle Point.

I was contacted by Richard Hews, NCI national PRO, who gave me an excellent briefing, before introducing me to two fellow watchkeepers from NCI Polruan, Tessa and Tony. We were later joined by two watchkeepers from a local station, who assisted Richard to pack away the stand at the end of this last day.

I took the train up to London, and stayed for two nights at Tower Hill, perfectly placed for the DLR line to Excel, and for excellent sight seeing around Tower Bridge.

My journey took me through the Somerset levels, where I saw the extent of the devastating floods.

This was my first time at Excel. The NCI stand was well placed, with an eye catching screen showing the NCI video, in which NCI Polruan & Prawle, and Salcombe RNLI feature.

The other central attraction was the free prize draw for a £500 Force 4 Chandlery voucher. Visitors were



left to right Roger Goodey, Chris Hutchinson, (both from Folkstone), Ann Cormack (Prawle Point), Tessa Skola and Tony King (both from Polruan) photo taken by Richard Hews (Polruan)

encouraged to enter their answers to a picture quiz. The draw took place in the afternoon, as this was the last show day, and was drawn by the National Boat Shows organiser.

Although the day was not as busy as I would have expected, no doubt due to the difficulty of travel throughout early January, there was considerable interest in the work we do, and several potential volunteers, who were signposted to

their nearest lookout. One of the major exhibitors, who currently raise funds for another voluntary organisation, expressed their intention to redirect their support towards the NCI in future years.

I enjoyed talking to my fellow watchkeepers, sharing experiences. I shall be visiting NCI Polruan once the weather improves. We had a large map on the wall, so could indicate lookouts to visitors who sailed in particular areas. Many did not know of our existence, or did not know the full extent of our role.

Hopefully this has raised the profile of the NCI, and will continue to do so. The Boat Show coordinator is keen for us to maintain a presence. Next stop Southampton.

Anne Cormack

FROWARD POINT NCI STATION

An Observation Post for the WW2 Coastal Defence Battery on Froward Point was transformed in 2004/5 from dereliction to the 32nd National Coastwatch Station to be opened around the shores of England, thanks to initiation by NCI President, Jon Gifford.

The area of surveillance, from Start Point in the west to the Eastern Blackstone, includes the whole of Start Bay, the busy entrance of the river Dart and, below the lookout, south cardinal buoys mark the treacherous areas from Western Rock, the barely submerged Bear's Tail, the sharp Meg Rocks and the Mewstone Flats, much frequented by seals at low tide. Hazards continue right across to Dancing Beggars off Stoke Fleming. A distinct change of water colour denotes the extent of dangers within which vessels could stray to their peril; the strategic importance of this station is obvious.

Local volunteers were joined by cadets from Britannia Royal Naval College in establishing this highly efficient station, 209 feet above sea-level. The ¾ mile lane from Brownstone car park needed resurfacing, mains water, a generator and solar panels were installed and the lookout, as well as being refurbished, required reinforced glass in the seaward apertures, formerly open to the elements. The armour plated shutters are retained and operated by a complex system of pulleys. Annual costs of maintenance total around £8500, £6000 of which buys diesel for the generator - the only source of power; such a range of equipment necessitates complex opening and closing checklists. As with Prawle Point, the area and buildings are owned by the National Trust, responsibilities of upkeep rest with the NCI station.

Radio channels 67, 16 and 0 are monitored and an arrangement with Brixham Coastguard enables the checking of one radio per week in rotation. The mobile phone has a microwave link to one of the nearby cottages for patching into landline and Broadband and both weather station and webcam are accessible on the Froward website. Eyes along the coast are aided by two telescopes mounted on swing brackets at either end of the long, narrow lookout plus binoculars cleverly mounted on a chart complete with pelorus and range rings. All vessels are logged during the quiet winter months but in summer attention focuses on small craft, yachts and fishing vessels, two thousand of which may be sighted per month within an operational four nautical mile range; merchant vessels further out being already well monitored electronically. Divers are attracted by the 250 odd wrecks in the area and kayakers are watched during sorties to and from the Dart estuary. Cooperation between Froward and its western flanking station at Prawle occurred last July when an eastgoing, single manned dory appeared vulnerable in the race off Start Point; no longer within range from Prawle. The search was handed on until the identified vessel reached safety. Since 2006, dolphin sightings have been recorded in a separate logbook of particular interest to



Inside the Froward lookout

Lindy Hingley, from Brixham Seawatch, who calls in periodically to monitor entries. Communications, regarding the passage of dolphins are also made between NCI stations.

Station Manager, Mervyn Balson and four Deputy Managers share overall responsibility of the station by becoming duty manager for one month in rotation. Armed with the phone, a spare set of keys and the emergency call-out list, the designated manager becomes the one to call for all station emergencies and needs. Currently there are

67 watchkeepers from varied walks of life, both marine and land based, plus 4 in training, so single-manned watches are infrequent. Bi-monthly meetings are held at the Royal Dart Yacht Club, the committee also meets bi-monthly, in addition informal social evenings are held every month at a local pub. The training team is made up of a Training Manager and six Training Officers, two of whom are Assessors. Close relations are maintained with Brixham Coastguard, associated rescue teams and Dart ILB with whom exercises are conducted. To make DFS exercises more realistic, harbour patrol vessels have dropped the 'casualty' buoy at a location unknown to the lifeboat thus increasing dependence on 'conning' directions from the lookout. Mervyn's confidence in the watchkeepers at Froward is exemplified by his emphasis that the station would run without him, he stresses the basics of watchkeeping - if there's too much going on, he says, just stop logging and watch. Recorded incidents numbered just six last year - one entailed fire on a fishing vessel 13 miles off when watchkeepers, listening to conversation between the skipper and a nearby fellow fisherman, thought the situation too serious for delay. Froward informed the Coastguard who called for lifeboat assistance and three lives were saved.

Walkers are welcomed to the lookout by duty watchkeepers, they have also been helped in cases of illness or occasionally given a lift inland if over-exerted by ventures along the coast path. The Visitor Centre, which displays illustrated information on the history of the Battery Site, the resurrection and working of the lookout as an NCI station and charts of the coast path, is due for upgrading shortly.

An interesting new watchkeeping initiative at Berry Head is a current development from Froward particularly as several watchkeepers reside in Brixham. Trial foot-patrol watches around the headland have been undertaken using hand radios, binoculars and small rigid chart adaptations; looking not logging and close liaison with Brixham Coastguards is the remit in this venture. Acquisition of base premises at Berry Head is anticipated in the not too distant future. Meanwhile Mervyn is encouraging watchkeepers at Froward, when safe and on two and three person watches, to consider one leaving the station, with hand-held VHF radio, to walk the immediate area not easily visible from the lookout thereby also gaining a better view of the coast path.

Historically, patrolling by Coastguards founded the coast path around our shores - who knows where future vigilance may lead?

THE GREEN FLASH

This phenomenon is occasionally visible from the Lookout. Terry Martins and I saw it one December afternoon after a cold front had banished rain and left a clear horizon for sunset.

Lesley Austin and I have also seen it under similar circumstances. I have seen it several times from home where in summer the sun sets at a clear horizon about 21 miles away.

What is it? As the very last of the sun dips below the horizon an emerald green light shows for a second or two. It is a 'flash' not for its extent but for its brevity.

Why is it? The earth's atmosphere refracts light, acting as a weak prism. The different colours of visible light have slightly different wave lengths so are slightly differently bent. At sunset the blue end of the spectrum is more bent towards the earth's surface and its light dispersed. The red end of the spectrum is less bent so

travelling upwards away from the observer. There is a brief moment when neither blue nor red light is visible, only the green wavelength. It occurs every night but rarely has the quiet atmospheric conditions allowing it to be seen. A similar effect can be seen at dawn as the sun rises but I would not know about that!

What conditions are required? A distant uncluttered horizon such as the sea, no clouds or haze at the horizon and cold air overlying a warmer surface.

WARNING I am sure you all know that it is dangerous to your sight to stare at the sun. You must NEVER look at the sun through binoculars or a telescope. It is only safe to look at the sun as it is just disappearing. I expect you have all experienced looking at the sun briefly and having an after image that is a yellow green. This is not to be confused with the real thing.

*Val Turner
February 2014*



Friends Of Prawle Point



Many thanks are due to FOPP, who organised a Christmas Party for all watchkeepers and partners on December 10th which proved a great success.

Plans for money raising events this year are currently afoot, among them a concert on October 11th by the Carrivick Sisters, one of the UK's most talented blue grass and folk performers whose worldwide tours are bringing them ever-increasing

acclaim for original music and lyrics. They will be joined for this event by double bass player, John Breese.

The Station is also grateful to FOPP for their generosity in funding a replacement window, roof tiles and repairs to the radar. Our recent acquisition of a webcam, which surveys the area west of the Lookout and into Salcombe Harbour, was purchased from contributions kindly given by Bantham Sailing Club, Kingsbridge Estuary Boatclub and FOPP.

SOME COMMON SAYINGS OF A NAUTICAL ORIGIN

<i>To fall foul of someone</i>	Yardarms & rigging could become entangled by sailing too near another vessel. Hence falling into a quarrel.
<i>At large</i>	Describes a ship running under full sail & therefore appearing large. From this was derived the expression of criminals running free from prison.
<i>At a loose end</i>	Repairing frayed or damaged ropes was a job given to the crew when there was little else to do, thus having no tasks of importance.
<i>Bottle it up</i> <i>Feeling groggy</i>	It was against ship's rules to save alcoholic rations (or grog) in a bottle to drink all at once. A sailor thus becoming drunk would later feel groggy.
<i>Dog watch</i>	The short 2-hour watches between 4pm & 8pm, occurring when the crew was beginning to relax and including tea & dinner, were named after the Roman phrase for lazy, hot 'dog days' of summer.



Please help us to maintain this valuable service by making a donation and becoming a supporter of NCI Prawle Point or becoming a watchkeeper.

Please contact: The Secretary, PO Box 58, Kingsbridge TQ7 2QZ

Station tel. no. 01548 511259 www.nci-prawlepoint.org Cheques to NCI Prawle Point