



Prawle Point

Watchkeeper
SPOTLIGHT

spotlight image: vecteszy.com

November 2024

A conversation with Sue J



From Horsewoman to Watchkeeper

I talked to Sue on a lovely autumn day and she talked a little about why she decided to become a watchkeeper at Prawle Point NCI.

This is Sue, riding her beautiful Arab who gloried in the name of Zichy Thyssen Shaknamar. Quickly he became known simply as 'Shak' (or 'Shed' to the farrier who tended her with a logic known only to



National Coastwatch Institution
Prawle Point
WATCHKEEPER'S HANDBOOK
ELEVENTH EDITION

Including all updates since 1st September 2023
This update issued on 8 September 2024

him!). This essay tells a little of the story from Horsewoman to Watchkeeper.

Sue qualified in 2021, at a time when Prawle Point (hereafter known by its codename at 'PQ') was very short of watchkeepers. PQ was not the only one: the country and the world were still reeling from the aftermath of the Covid epidemic with many watchkeepers not yet ready or, in some cases, able to return to duty.

Sue had recently returned to Devon and was looking for something for which she could volunteer and by coincidence was listening to the regional news programme - BBC Spotlight - just as there was an urgent appeal for new watchkeeper volunteers.

She contacted the station manager at the time and asked him:

"What do you need? What do you have to do?"

In the usual course of events prospective watchkeepers begin their journey by coming up the Lookout for an Observation Watch: experiencing a watch, even in the depths of winter, is a far better way to get a sense of what is involved than words on reams of paper. Once again, Covid got in the way as it was not allowed at this time to have more than one person in the Lookout. Sue continues:

"...and he said, like I've heard a previous Station Manager say, he said: 'if you can walk up the hill to the Lookout, if you can see out of the window and can hear the telephone then we'd love to have you!'. So I thought I'd better find out where this Prawle Point place was because I'd never been there. So off I go and I walk up the hill and [realised I'd] managed it. I stood by the Lookout. I think Jean was on watch - it was only single-manned watches at that time - and she gave me a cheery wave and whatnot. [Of course] I couldn't go in [but I thought] well, gosh, there's no chance of me doing this, there they are in their uniforms and radios and everything like that..."

Unlike a fair percentage of watchkeepers, Sue has limited experience on the water but knew she loved the water and she was at a stage in her life when she wanted to give something back as well as discovering something new.

"So Brian [the Station Manager] rung me back and then he emailed me a copy of the [Prawle Point] Watchkeeper's Handbook and he said 'could you read through that and tell me if it's the sort of thing



you could learn online?’ “

The Watchkeeper’s Handbook (WKH), produced not by NCI but by, and specific to, the Prawle Point NCI station, is 216 pages long. It is, not to put too fine a point on it, rather detailed! Which of course it needs to be as it contains all the essential background knowledge required as well as going into operational depth.

Sue told me that while she had been a dinghy sailor in her earlier life it was not long before she discovered that a love of the sea was not matched by a strong stomach. There’s nothing much worse to run a day’s fun on the water than seasickness! Despite the long gap in time Sue told me: *“Every so often I surprise myself with what I do remember...and my bookcase...is full of books by people like Chay Blyth, Ellen MacArthur, Francis Chichester...people like that...But [despite my early sailing experience] when I read through the WKH I thought, no chance, absolutely no chance. I know when I go down to the beach I [need to] know what the tide’s doing - is it coming in or going out - and can I get back along this path, and that sort of thing. And I’d heard of Spring Tides (which I thought happened once a year in the Spring) but neap tides, well, what’s that?...My ignorance was deep.”*

This is not particularly unusual for a prospective watchkeeper. What is needed (in addition to the ability to walk up the hill!) is a love of the sea and a desire to help others. The rest can be learnt. Each NCI station offers a different training regime and as long as each meets the goals and requirements of the organisation, that’s as it should be. At PQ the training season happens in the Autumn and early Spring when the Lookout is relatively quiet and trainees can learn, largely, on the job. Those with little or no background knowledge will take a little longer to qualify than those with years of sailing experience, but the essential knowledge required to be a watchkeeper is learnt by all. Being in a land-based station is different than being in a boat on the water: of course, one set of knowledge can feed the other, but it definitely not a requirement for new watchkeepers to have any (let alone years) experience of sailing.

Sue, despite the base knowledge that she could draw on said “the learning curve was...stratospheric!”

“Even now” Sue tells me with a few years’ watchkeeping behind her “there are things that confuse us. Even for people who have been doing it for a long time” but on the whole the excellent training stands everyone in good stead to tackle the broad array of incidents that can happen in this sometimes dangerous piece of water.

The training is there to build confidence, but sometimes there are key things that cement a decision to become a watchkeeper. In Sue’s case this was a Mayday that occurred while she was on a training watch. Here’s what she told me about this:

“Doing the Coastwatch is so out of my comfort zone...unbelievable...and I’m totally convinced that had I not had a real Mayday when I was training...It was with Anne C and Dee W who was my instructor who had decided it was time for me to deal with a Mayday scenario. I had been allowed to take the Log on and I had just written ‘1300’ in the log [when I heard] ‘Mayday Mayday Mayday’...and it unfolded during the rest of the afternoon. It should have been a PAN PAN, it shouldn’t have been a Mayday. I know all



this now but I didn’t know it then. Finally we got everything sent off...and we were walking back down the hill and Dee said to me ‘you’re not going to believe this, but I’d decided today you needed to deal with a Mayday and the scenario I had come up with was there would be a fishing boat that had lost its engine just off Start Point.’ And what was the Mayday? A fishing boat that had lost its engine just off Start Point!”

It was that real live experience, Sue told me, that convinced her that yes, she could really do this, and the rest is history!

“Lizzie [who qualified at the same time as Sue] discussed this [various things, particularly complex things like tidal and wind drift] at length as we’re the newbies...and [ultimately] we thought, well, we’re not stupid. We know what we’re looking at, we know what is a problem and what isn’t a problem and we know...what we need to keep a close eye on.”

This is the kind of confidence in your ability to make decisions as a watchkeeper - so much is about judgement rather than rules - that builds during the extensive training period and then during the first year or two as a watchkeeper.

Sue has now been a qualified watchkeeper for a number of years and is beginning to feel like an old-timer as she has seen a number of training cohorts come through. She is no longer the ‘newbie’. Sue wanted to share this PQ experience with everyone to prove that anyone with a bit of nous, with a real dedication, and a real desire to help can become a watchkeeper. You do not have to have sailed across the Atlantic three times to know a problem when you see it emerging in front of you. The picture on the left is Sue in the Lookout with a visitor.

Richard Povall, December 2024

The Watchkeeper Spotlights are here to tell a bit of a story about the people who are the excellent team of Watchkeepers at Prawle Point (similar of course to the stories behind watchkeepers at the 59 other NCI stations around the coast). The main story they tell is that anyone, whatever their background or history, can become a watchkeeper if they so choose. The Spotlights will take a number of forms: they may, like this one, be an essay, or they may be a podcast or a short video. Whatever the format we hope you will find them of interest. For more information about becoming a watchkeeper at Prawle Point or any other NCI station visit the websites of [Prawle Point NCI](#) or [National Coastwatch Institution](#).

