

## The Coast Guard and the Watch House

Before the development of Donaghadee harbour, Groomsport was used by cargo ships, operating both legally and illegally. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century it is believed that a customs office was based at Groomsport.

In the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Groomsport area was one of the places along the County Down coast that was used for smuggling American tobacco from the Netherlands. People could purchase a ticket for a half bale of unmanufactured tobacco leaf, either, privately, from the smuggler's agent, or, openly, in the village store. They had to collect the tobacco from the smuggler's boat, in a cove or inlet, and replace its weight with stones from the seashore.

### The Water Guard and the Coast Guard

Denis Mayne, in his history of Islet Hill farm, states that the Commissioners of Customs leased a half acre of land from John Agnew in 1820. By 1821, they had built a Watch House for the Preventative Water Guard. When the Coast Guard was established in 1822 it replaced a number of organisations, including the Water Guard. At that time the Coast Guard's main purposes were to combat smuggling and to render assistance to ship wrecks. In the latter role it was to attempt to save lives, take charge of the vessel and protect property.

In 1829, Lieutenant John Alphonso Henry (probably the Officer-in Charge in Groomsport) was awarded the RNLI Silver Medal for a rescue on Cockle Island. (At that time, the RNLI awarded medals to those who had saved life from the sea whether or not they were lifeboat crew.)

**HENRY, JOHN ALPHONSO.** *Lt. Coast Guard, Groomsport Co. Down. Silver Medal 18 March 1829*

*On the 26<sup>th</sup> January 1829 the sloop 'Friends' was wrecked in bad weather on Cockle Island, off Groomsport. Hearing cries Lt. Henry put off with his seven man crew. As the ridge of rocks completely encircling the vessel made it impossible to reach her, he landed on the island and burned two blue lights. The night was very dark with snow showers, but he went from rock to rock with waves breaking over them until he reached a point 15 to 20 yards from the survivors. He persuaded the crew – the Master, mate and two seamen – to get into their own boat but as it reached the spot where Lt. Henry waited, it upset, and the men were then dragged on to the rocks and saved.*

From: [https://www.coastguardsofyesteryear.org/articles.php?article\\_id=14](https://www.coastguardsofyesteryear.org/articles.php?article_id=14)

The Watch House had a boat house on the ground floor and a watch room above. The Officer-in-Charge and his family also lived in the Watch House. Initially, there were eight crew members who were billeted in the village. Later, a row of cottages was built for the crew beside the Watch House.

Every night, some of the men on duty patrolled the sea in a four-oared gig and others patrolled the nearby coast on foot. Each night, a different crew member had the, reasonably easy, job of acting as "look-out" from the watch room.

The crew were usually English and often ex-Royal Navy. They were discouraged from courting local girls. In 1846, the following was noted about a member of the Groomsport crew:  
*"Frederick Foot, Boatman, removed to Portaferry – married a native."*

The Coast Guard station closed about 1908 and cottages were demolished in the 1960s.



**The Watch House and Coast Guard cottages in the 1890s**

Photograph from PRONI (D3244/E/42)

### The Watch House

The original Watch House was a rectangular two-storey building. On the ground floor, at the north-east end (facing out to sea), there was a boathouse, where the gig was housed, in front of which was a slipway. The watch room was above the boathouse.

By 1908 the Watch House was a private dwelling. The photograph, below, which was taken in 1944, shows that bay windows had been added to the north-eastern side. Later, a two-storey extension was added to the south-eastern side, facing the harbour.



**Watch House and cottages in 1944**

Photograph taken by Sgt John S Blankenhorn of 166<sup>th</sup> Signal Photography Company, US Army

The current owners purchased the house in 2015. They have added a two-storey building, as large as the original house, which is clad in black wood. It is connected to the Watch House, but has been positioned so that it is almost invisible when viewed from the harbour.

The photograph, below, shows the modern extension. It also shows the earlier extension, to the left, the bay windows which were added and the remains of the slipway.



**The Watch House**

Donal McCann Photography for Bradley McClure Architects

Peter Gibson  
January 2023

Sources:

“Tides and Times at the Port” by Rev Dr David Irwin

“Fifty-seven acres and a Rood” by Denis Mayne

Coastguards of Yesteryear: <https://www.coastguardsofyesteryear.org/news.php>

Note: The name Coast Guard had two words until the Coastguard Act of 1925 used the one word version of the name. It has been suggested that the change was inadvertent.