

# The Watch House and the Coast Guard

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The Watch House and Coast Guard  
Cottages in the 1890s  
Photograph: PRONI (D3244/E/42)



A little bit of Groomsport history from



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# The Preventive Water Guard and the Coast Guard

In the late 1700s and early 1800s, the Groomsport area was one of the places along the County Down coast that was used for smuggling brandy, tobacco and other goods to avoid customs dues.

In 1821 the Watch House was built for the Preventive Water Guard, which was replaced, in 1822, by the Coast Guard. 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 A Hall, the officer-in-charge of the Coast Guard station, was awarded the RNLI silver medal for bravery for saving the lives of the four crew members of the sloop Friends . It had run aground on Cockle Island during a snowstorm and was breaking up.



RNLI Silver Medal  
1824-1857

The Watch House was a simple rectangular building with 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, the eight crew members 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, Frederick Foot, a member of the Coast Guard at Groomsport, was transferred to Portaferry. The reason for the transfer was recorded as: – “Married a native.” In the early 1900s Groomsport Coast Guard station was replaced by a new station at nearby Orlock Head. The Coast Guard cottages became homes for local fishermen and their families until they were demolished in the 1960s.

## The Watch House

By 1908 the Watch House was a private dwelling. We know, from photographs that, by 1944, bay windows had replaced the entrance to the boathouse and the watch room look out.

This photograph was taken when the house was on the market in 1982. It shows the bay windows, but the two storey extension, on the south-eastern side of the house, facing the harbour, had not been added by that date.



The Watch House, 1982

# The Watch House today

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



Donal McCann Photography for Bradley McClure Architects

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

Find out more about the history of the village and  
Groomsport Digital Archive at:  
[www.discovergroomsport.com](http://www.discovergroomsport.com).

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