



History of Cape Clear Bird Observatory

In the early days of 1959 J.T.R. Sharrock received some advice from Kenneth Williamson 'to go to Cape Clear' in the autumn and when four pupils from Leighton Park School, Reading were given the same advice a few months later, the five met and the seeds of Cape Clear Bird Observatory were sown. So, on 19th August 1959, Lin Cornwallis, Brian Dickinson, Humphrey Dobinson and Mike Seddon arrived on Cape Clear armed with not only food and clothing, but ringing equipment and a collection of skins supplied on loan by the British Trust for Ornithology.

A large building in South Harbour, which is now used as the Youth Hostel, was rented for the sum of five shillings – or 25 pence a week. The house is set in a superb position, at the head of a large inlet, roughly in the centre of the island and having the benefit of an excellent garden for ringing and finding migrants. That first season of the Cape Clear Bird Observatory recorded 17 species that were regarded as major Irish rarities in just eleven weeks. The original Committee must have been gutted when, after just one season, they were informed that the building was being put up for sale. In fairness, they were offered first refusal for the building for the now paltry sum of £300 and were unable to raise the "vast sum" of money and the building was sold to An Oige – the Irish Youth Hostel Association.

The Observatory was now faced with the major problem of having nowhere to house itself until the building called Stroma was offered to them. Stroma could not be more different from the South Harbour site, but it was a base! Set at the top of the A1, the hilly link road that runs up towards the east end of the island from North Harbour, Stroma was an experience that most would like to forget, as it was just too far from the major birding areas on the Island to be covered more than once a day although it did offer superb views across Roaringwater Bay.

During 1961 and 1962 the Observatory began negotiations for the purchase of Harbour House in North Harbour – a mere 100 meters from the ferry berth. With the help of an anonymous donation and free legal help, the Committee was successful in completing a purchase, taking possession of the building on 22nd March 1963 and the Observatory has existed there ever since. As with many Observatories in their early years of existence, the lack of funds made it impossible to keep a full time Warden and Cape Clear had to rely heavily on the voluntary services of visiting birders to keep the place running and without whom many observatories would have failed. Indeed, for a short time, there were four Observatories in Ireland, all on islands, Cape Clear in the southwest, Tory Island in the northwest, Copeland Island in the northeast, and Great Saltee Island in the southeast and of these, only Cape Clear is manned full time to 2013, with Copeland part-time, the other two no longer in existence.



In 1999, after a period of decline in general standards and a lack of funding to employ a warden, at the request of the then Cape Clear Committee, BirdWatch Ireland took over the running of the observatory and in the process, secured its future. After a successful appeal to the membership of BirdWatch Ireland, a sum of Approx Ir£25,000 was raised from its membership base, to fund major renovations of the Observatory building. These were undertaken in 1999/2000 and the renovated building provides comfortable accommodation for up to seven guests on a self-catering, hostel type basis. The Observatory now had the benefit of a central heating system and extended indoor bathroom facilities, plus a redesigned kitchen.

In January 2000 the Charities Section of Revenue formerly accepted the transfer of CCBO (CHY 8433) to the control of BirdWatch Ireland (CHY 5703). The charitable exemption held by CCBO under CHY 8433 was thus withdrawn and the company limited by guarantee ceased to trade.

The major asset of CCBO, the building on the North Harbour, was transferred at no cost to BirdWatch Ireland by the CCBO Committee led by Chairman Clive D Hutchinson and Secretary Oran O'Sullivan. This was undertaken on the basis that the observatory would be renovated by BirdWatch Ireland from funds raised under its auspices.

The Observatory thus flourished in its new renovated condition, a warden appointed as per previous years and a number of Courses organized for visitors. However, numbers of visitors declined through the 2000s as birdwatchers became much more mobile in their approach to bird watching and numbers of visitors fell away as folk tried other locations and in many cases found easier options for study of migration at other locations around Ireland. Business has for a number of years been restricted to the autumn passage months, indeed a sub set of that season as the market became more fickle and Cape declined as a destination of choice.



In 2014, the emergency engineering works to the North Harbour made the decision to close the house to visitors a necessity. We were fortunate enough however to let the house for the period of works (winter 2013 to May 2015) to the Consultant engineers to the project who have paid us a rent. The heating system in the observatory was completely overhauled at this time, the cost (ca. €2,500) borne out of our temporary rental income.

As of June 2015, the house is once again available and open to visitors.