The history of Warren Cottage and the Warren area. Part 2

The Yorkshire Wildlife Trust buys Spurn

The complex story of how the Spurn peninsula became a nature reserve, and how the Yorkshire Naturalists’ Trust (later the Yorkshire Wildlife Trust) bought it, is covered at length in Chapter 8 of my book, so a brief summary must suffice here. Visitors to the Observatory had long realised Spurn’s value for wildlife and they were supported in 1952 by the Yorkshire Evening Post which carried correspondence suggesting that Spurn be declared a nature reserve under the provisions of recent Planning Acts. The Little Terns were still being disturbed by visitors – ‘18 eggs were found in a heap on one day’ by people checking the ternery. Spurn is relatively remote from any large centre of population but private cars became more common after the War. The right of way down the peninsula meant that the public could not be excluded, and there was concern that the area would become too popular with ‘day-trippers’.

Ralph Chislett cited Spurn’s unique ecological and biological interest for scientists. Students of marine natural science – marine biology, marine botany, ecology, ornithology, geology and entomology all visited the place and took advantage of the facilities offered by the bird observatory. With the sea to one side, and a great estuary to the other, the peninsula was unique in Britain; and possessed a very unusual flora and fauna of its own, due to its position, and the twice-washed daily estuarial mudflats and salt marsh. Because of its geographical position, it was also one of the best places for the study of migrating birds in Europe.

In 1955 the Nature Conservancy declared an interest in the Spurn Peninsula and stated it would give full support to any proposal to declare it a nature reserve ‘under Section 21 of the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act. 1949’. It was well known that some local businessmen were interested in buying Spurn for leisure activities, such as a holiday camp. The document also stated that the county council was anxious to reach some settlement, satisfactory to all concerned. The area was under a distinct threat of exploitation.

In March 1957 troops were moving out of the peninsula. A flurry of letters passed between the interested parties, and it is at that point that the Yorkshire Naturalists’ Trust (now the Yorkshire Wildlife Trust) is mentioned in the correspondence, though they were involved well before that time; many of the same individuals being represented on both the YNU and the YNT. The correspondence between Dr Evans of Nature Conservancy and various military personnel, demonstrates the close links between them. Those negotiations proceeded outside the public domain and, when local people in Easington and district complained after Spurn was bought by the YNT that they were never given the opportunity to purchase it themselves, they clearly had a point.

The matter was first discussed at a meeting of the YNT council on 23 March 1957. At that stage prospective purchasers were given to understand that the coast protection works necessary to preserve the peninsula had cost £17,000 per annum. It was stated at the time that between 1945 and 1960 12 men were engaged in the full-time maintenance of the defences at Spurn. Obviously local authorities would not or could not take on such a burden on behalf of their ratepayers. Later the Holderness Gazette asserted that prospective buyers were not informed that this responsibility was to be waived.
In early April 1959 it was reported that the War Office was to sell Spurn to the YNT for £1,500. Mr Clifford J. Smith, the secretary of the Trust, assured the Gazette ‘We have no intention of closing the peninsula to the general public. Our intention is to run it as a nature reserve. There will be one or two minor regulations to keep people off areas where birds are breeding, but if the public co-operate with us there will be no restriction other than that.’ The Observatory secretary, George Ainsworth, said ‘We are not keeping the Point for the few – we get hundreds of people from all over the world. If we do let the public in we may have a man with a white armband taking admission and car-parking fees.’ The Hull firm of Messrs Todd & Thorpe was chosen as valuers and it was agreed that both parties should make an independent valuation. Messrs Todd & Thorpe based their valuation upon the fact that all work on the sea defences would shortly cease. They estimated the probable life of the promontory thereafter as five years and, as they had been informed that the rents were £180 p.a., they simply multiplied those two figures together and obtained a final figure of £900. The Trust then instructed Messrs Todd and Thorpe to negotiate with Col Gillingham, who indicated that the War Department’s valuation was £2,000. A price of £1,500 was finally agreed and on 2 April 1959 a deposit of £150 was paid. Taylor stated that members of the council had undertaken to raise £850, the Spurn Bird Observatory £250 (giving it a one-eighth interest) and the Rowntree Village Trust had promised £500. The Society for the Promotion of Nature Reserves also contributed £375.

The Yorkshire Naturalists’ Trust set about finding a warden and also requested volunteers to help with patrols of the ternery. Spurn Bird Observatory accepted some responsibility for that role and a local farmer, Mr J.R.P. (Redvers) Clubley ‘kept a watchful eye over the peninsula’. On 1 March 1960 Peter Mountford became the Trust’s warden, living in one of the bungalows (now the ‘Annexe’) that had been built for the caretakers of the anti-aircraft guns. For the first few years Spurn Bird Observatory paid half of the warden’s salary (at that time and for years to come the Trust depended very much upon the Observatory and its members). Moreover Mountford’s presence meant that ‘blank days were avoided for the log’. Visitors were also able to make use of his bungalow as extra accommodation and 350 visitors stayed overnight at the Observatory in 1960. The YNT and the Observatory worked together closely.

Hut at Spurn gate, 1964 (two shillings in winter, but five in summer)

At first charging visitors to drive down Spurn was highly contentious, even though the charge was intended to deter visitors and protect the nature reserve from too much disturbance. In fact the popularity of the peninsula with its sand dunes and unspoilt beaches meant that in the summertime hundreds of people drove down, and at the height of its popularity in the late 70s and early 80s the numbers even approached 60,000 per annum! Indeed the income derived from Spurn was a substantial part of the Trust’s income, causing some opposition from people who asserted that more money went out of Spurn than was spent there; this was certainly true for many years.

In 1963 Peter Mountford, having served as warden for the reserve’s first three years, took a job with the Nature Conservancy Council (now English Nature). In his time Spurn had begun to attract visitors on a large scale. 1964 brought a period of stability of management to Spurn. In that year John Cudworth (who had been a regular at Spurn since October 1949) became the chairman of the Observatory, and the Trust appointed a new warden, Barry Spence, to replace Peter Mountford. John Cudworth was to remain chairman until 1999, a period of 35 years. Barry Spence was to remain warden until 2002, a period of 38 and a half years. Spurn itself experienced many changes in those years, but at least its management was stable.

Barry started work on 1 February 1964, and was given accommodation in the bungalow that had been the quarters of Thomas Jardine, the caretaker of the military buildings. Part of it was used as a rest room for trust members for a few years, and part became Barry’s home. Later, having married and with a growing family, he used the whole bungalow.
Back of warden’s bungalow from trap, 1967

The ‘Annexe’ had become part of the accommodation for the Observatory, thus increasing the capacity to 17 and improving toilet facilities. People no longer had to sleep in the Common Room.

The Annexe, 2009

A small hut was erected at Spurn gate, and every weekend and Bank Holidays from Easter to August Redvers Clubley collected the car money, releasing Barry for more important duties.
And they were many duties! The Trust was the landlord of the RNLI, for the Coastguards, for the Pilots, as well as the Bird Observatory. Because the groynes and concrete defences were no longer maintained, the peninsula became more vulnerable to tidal damage. Sand often covered the road and had to be removed by Barry. In years of very big tides parts of the road were damaged, and were repaired (the tenants, RNLI and ABP paid the costs). As the man on the spot for 24 hours of the day Barry worked closely with Spurn Observatory, taking the bookings, keeping the accommodation in good order, keeping the financial records. Apart from liaising with the Spurn Management Committee, Barry was given almost complete independence in day-to-day tasks. He had the duty of liaising with the tenants, as well as the normal duties of a reserve warden. The Trust had few full-time staff in those early days, and York was some distance away. Barry was left to manage the peninsula alone. By that time most of the military buildings and gun stores at the Warren had been removed. What was left were Warren Cottage itself; the warden’s bungalow; a semi-derelict brick-built structure near the Cottage; the Annexe; a block-house and a large Nissen-type hut which became a garage for the tractor. In his spare time Barry began to run a moth trap from 1970. Spurn now stands as one of the most important sites for continuous moth recording in Yorkshire.
The sea-watching huts
The recording activities of the Observatory were much helped when in 1965 a sea-watching hut was erected NE of the Warren beyond the line of the former railway track. It was built by Dave Standring, a long-time birder and qualified joiner. It stood the test of time, and lasted for 45 years, though not on the same site!
It was erected on a platform. Of interest in the above photo is the line of the railway line. Beyond that it is possible to see that the ridge and furrow was still visible. All this land has now been taken by the sea. In late 1974 the hut was moved back, but by December 1977 it was again threatened, and moved back once again.

At that time a clay bank was built across the field to prevent the flooding of arable land by wind-blown sea water, but on 11th January 1978 Spurn suffered its worst flooding ever, when a storm-force 10 north-easterly wind combined with a spring tide. In late 1981 due to extensive construction works at Easington a large quantity of boulder clay became available and this was used to build up and extend the bank across Clubley’s Field, south towards the north end of the Narrows and north beyond Big Hedge to join up with an existing bank (which had been built in 1974) behind the scrape. In 1982 the sea-watching hut was repositioned on top of this bank (by crane by the contractors) where it remained until the bank itself was washed away in the early 1990s.
The sea-watching hut stands somewhat precariously on the bank, and of interest also is the house-trap, erected in the compound in 1974, and the position of the Heligoland trap, tucked into the bushes, but now (2017) almost on the beach.
As it does, the sea continued to advance on the land, and by 1989 the hut was in a very vulnerable situation.

It was moved back again, and in 1993 was joined by another sea-watching hut, erected for the public by the Spurn Heritage Coast Project.

Two sea-watching huts, January 1994
For a few years two huts remained, but the larger and more comfortable hut was felt to be sufficient and the original was dismantled in 1999. Since then the hut has been moved again, it still remains a very well-used and much appreciated asset to the Warren area.

The buildings from 1960
Warren Cottage itself was the hub of Spurn Bird Observatory’s activities from 1946. SBO was fortunate that so many supporters were prepared to put time into painting and renovation. Over the years considerable attention had to be paid to its condition, and to practical matters like electrical wiring. The Warren buildings only had a 5 amp connection until 1969, but in that year electricity came to Spurn south of Warren. This allowed electric cookers to be installed to replace the Calor gas stoves. By that year the birders staying at Spurn had access to two WCs and a bathroom, because the Annexe now provided those modern necessities.

The Annexe from NW, 2009 The Annexe and building later Dun Birdin’,1978

The Annexe (of fond memory to many visiting birders!) comprised a common room/cum bedroom, Room A, on the southern side, which had two double bunks and a single bed. Just off Room A was the kitchen. A corridor led to a bathroom and WC (Room B), and three more bedrooms – Room E with two beds, Room D with bunks and two single beds, and Room C with two beds. Thanks to John Law, we have photos from 2009, though there may be many more.

Room E, 2009 Room A, 2009
Warren Cottage was composed of the kitchen, the Common Room, and two bedrooms, one called ‘the Ice-Box’ because of its ill-fitting window, the other traditionally called ‘Cuddy’s Room’ because John Cudworth always stayed there. In 2010, when sadly the Annexe was taken from Spurn Bird Observatory by the YWT, the Common Room was subdivided, to make a new bedroom on the northern side.
In the early years of Spurn Bird Observatory there was a ringing hut at the entrance to the Warren Trap in the bushes near the Annexe.

It was not an ideal arrangement, because it blocked the entrance to the Heligoland trap and made flushing the area difficult, so in 1971 the ringing lab was moved into the northern half of a derelict army cookhouse at the Warren.
The Warren area in 1970, showing Warren Cottage and two army buildings

The photo above shows the building to the right just before half of it was converted to a ringing lab in 1971. The other half was used for a time as a field station by Leeds University. It had kitchen facilities and two beds. In 1988 Spurn Bird Observatory added it to their accommodation and its nickname, Dun Birdin’, bestowed upon it by Ian Crowther, was widely used!

Building which later became Dun Birdin’, 1985

Dun Birdin’, 2009
The Trust, from the time it took over the peninsula in 1960, had managed the reserve from the Warden’s house and from the little hut at Spurn gate. In 1973 the management committee discussed providing the warden with a new house ‘in a style suitable to its setting … and upgrading the whole entrance area’. However financial restraints prevented their rather ambitious designs coming about, and instead, in 1974 a rather more modest establishment was opened in a former army building described as ‘a dilapidated old shed’ just in front of Warren Cottage.

Warren Cottage and the Information Centre, 1976

This building was used very successfully for almost 40 years. Barry Spence sold books, postcards, leaflets, pencils, notebooks and many more goods. The displays included photographs, maps and other items of interest. So that visitors, especially children, could have hands-on experience, Barry had collected fossils, stones and bones. A board was updated regularly with birds and other wildlife sightings. The Information Centre became the first port-of-call for birders and other visitors. Portaloo toilets (paid for with a grant from the Countryside Commission) were placed outside from c. 1976 until removed by Barry’s successor in 2004.

Crowd around Blyth’s Reed Warbler, 27th May 1984

Before the short-wave radios (which became available from the mid-1990s), this was where birders got up-to-date gen. Barry took very few holidays so was available for six days a week (his day off being Friday), and the shop was open from Spring through to Autumn, and at weekends in Winter. In 1975 (based upon 3 people per car), it was estimated that a record 62,000 people went down Spurn, a very high figure indeed, but which needs to be set into context. This was a time when fewer people went abroad for holidays, and Spurn, with its attractive sand dunes, unspoilt landscape and no expensive amusements (!) was a very popular place for families. Few of them stopped at Kilnsea.
The photograph above gives a useful perspective of the area from a helicopter. It shows the cluster of buildings at that time — Warren Cottage, the Information Centre, the Ringing Laboratory, the warden’s house, the Annexe and the garage (a Nissan/Tarran hut). To the south is another military building dubbed the Blockhouse. Note a structure south of the sea-watching hut in the south east of Clubley’s Field: this was an Associated British Ports navigational transmitter which was erected there in 1970 and remained for many years. At least half of the width of this part of the peninsula has eroded since this photo was taken.

Another view of the Warren area in 1983 (note the extra clay banks from Easington gas site)

Flooding and erosion
This was a time when efforts were being made to protect the Warren area by the construction of a clay bank stretching from the Narrow Neck north towards Easington (see the lorry). The clay for this bank was
fortuitously available from excavations at BP's Easington Gas Terminal. Mr Maurice Nethercoat, Clerk of Works for the YWT, estimated that more than 700,000 tons of clay were dumped, graded and consolidated over this period.

Nevertheless, despite this bank, on February 1st 1983 a severe storm and storm surge coupled with a rising tide inflicted considerable damage on the northern parts of the peninsula. ‘In places, at Narrow Neck, ripping half its height away, hurling clay over the top onto the roadway. At the northern end of the peninsula, behind the warden’s house and information centre the damage was more serious. The sea had come within two feet of severing the bank; over 30 feet of coast disappeared in one night’. (YWT report). In the same report it was stated ‘The Trust Council has now accepted here is no way it can prevent the sea from ultimately breaking through the neck of the peninsula’.
This photo above shows a different view to that in 1983. These two raise the interesting question of the rates of erosion in the Warren area. Barry Spence remembers that in the 1960s the matter was of little concern, that being a fairly quiet period for wild weather and high tides. It was also recorded that between 1949 and 1974, only 10 yards eroded behind Warren Cottage. However, from the mid-1970s rapid coastal erosion along the edge of the Warren was causing great concern. In 1976 on 3rd January winds reached 70 mph to 105 mph over the whole country, and a surge tide conceded with spring tides. Bushes were torn up by what remained of Warren marsh, sand stripped of beach, and the flooding was the worst since 1953.

In 1978 on 11th January, with 80 mph onshore winds, Spurn was once again cut off by flooding, and the road south of the Warren was partly swept away. Water reached the top step of Barry Spence’s house and the threshold of Annexe and came within 4-5 yards of Warren Cottage. The ringing lab and Information Centre were flooded. Part of a new bank across Clubley’s field was washed away. It was calculated in 1979 that in the 14 years since the sea-watching hut was built (1965) about 75 yards has been lost, including a rough grass field with a varied flora and a bomb crater pond with smooth newts. Set against the earlier calculation (see above) much of this had happened in five years! Indeed Barry Spence remembers an occasion in the late 1970s when 25 yards went in 6 weeks!
If one just focusses upon the shape of Clubley’s field one can get a good idea of the loss between these dates. In the 1966 photo the track of the railway line can be seen. By 1984 the land where it was is completely gone.

Barry Spence and his family were forced to vacate their house for a short time in 1978, being given refuge in Tharplesthorpe, in Kilnsea (now the new home of Spurn Bird Observatory Trust). The rabbits, after which the Warren area had been named, declined dramatically in the late 1970s, through myxamatosis.
In the early 1970s the Humber Pilots began using Spurn as their base, so the regular traffic past the Warren increased, and the number of the Trust’s tenants grew. Barry Spence, as the YWT’s single representative, was the first port-of-call for any emergencies on the peninsula, and he worked closely with the RNLI and Associated British Ports (ABP), and the Coastguards, who were in the ABP tower from 1976 to 1989 when they moved to Bridlington.

**Land loss!**
A sequence of photographs shows better than any words how much land has been lost in the Warren area over the last 40-50 years. One of the areas to focus on is the former Warren Marsh, the compound and the so-called Towhee patch. The Warren marsh in the earlier years is described above. It had been a fantastic habitat for migrant birds; for salt-loving plants, and for insects.

![South of the Warren, May 1967](image1)
![Remains of Warren Marsh, 1970](image2)

The stability of this area began to come to an end in the second half of the 1970s.

![Sea breaking into Warren Marsh, Oct.1974](image3)
![Remains of Warren Marsh, Oct. 1977](image4)

Note the sea-watching hut in the above photos. By the 1980s despite the protection of the new clay banks this area was under constant threat.
The house trap in the compound, 1984  The compound with house trap on right, 1987

At the time the photos above were taken the compound was still well-protected, as this 1987 view from the Annexe shows.

View of house trap from Annexe, 1987

A little further south of the compound was a rather attractive sheltered area dubbed the Towhee Patch after an American bird, a Rufous-sided Towhee, which was caught at the Warren in September 1975, lingered in this spot until January.

Towhee Patch looking south, 1985  Towhee Patch looking north, 1985

Over the years the clay bank became eroded, threatening the compound. The compound became progressively sandier. The house trap had to be removed in 1994. A clay protuberance nicknamed the ‘Old Man of Spurn’ was a feature for some time, because it was based upon a concrete gun emplacement.
The years of the Spurn Heritage Coast Project

In October 1988 Spurn was officially designated as a Heritage Coast. At the same time the Spurn Heritage Coast Project, composed of the Countryside Commission, the Nature Conservancy Council, Humberside County Council, Holderness Borough Council, Easington Parish Council and the Yorkshire Wildlife Trust, was established. The partners agreed to fund a three-year project and employ an officer to devise and implement a programme of development in the Heritage Coast area, which was to cover the whole Spurn
and Kilnsea area, to extend north as far as Long Bank. The first Project Officer, appointed in the winter of 1988/9, was Tim Collins. The Project initiated a mainly happy time for Spurn, with volunteers, both birders and local people, working together. What did this mean for the Warren area? It became even busier, a positive hub of activity, with new blood being brought in to work with local organisations.

The Project brought some much-needed money to Spurn, and was responsible for many new initiatives including: fencing; tree-planting; the creation of new ponds; the construction of new birdwatching hides on the Chalk Bank and near the Canal and the improvement of grassland at Chalk Bank via the use of sheep-grazing. To improve facilities for visitors a car park was constructed on a small field just north of the entrance to the reserve, and the car park at the Crown and Anchor was enlarged and planted with trees and bushes. In 1989, land east of Long Bank was bought by the South Holderness Countryside Society, and the Project worked in conjunction with that Society to excavate a series of linked scrapes at Beacon Ponds and build a new hide there with an adjoining bank. Beacon Ponds was only a small part of the Society’s reserve, as it also included the whole area northwards, right up to the northern end of Easington Lagoon, hence the reserve’s name Beacon Ponds. Most of the work done in making scrapes was actually to the north of the original Beacon Pond, which was actually quite small.

The early to mid-1990s were to be the most fruitful years for the Spurn Heritage Coast Project. In 1993 Jeremy Seeley was employed as a Heritage Coast Ranger on a three-year contract, so that the Project now had two full-time staff, together with others employed on short-term contracts. In 1993 the Blue Bell, which had closed as a shop, came on the market and was purchased by the Trust and leased for the use of the Project. It was completely gutted and then refurbished. On 9 October 1995 the Blue Bell Visitor Centre officially opened. It included a tea room, with an adjoining exhibition of displays on the history of the area. Also on the ground floor were the offices of the Project while on the first floor the rooms had been converted to a self-contained flat to provide accommodation for the Yorkshire Wildlife Trust’s warden, should his bungalow at the Warren be washed away! In 1996 when Humberside County Council was abolished, and the East Riding of Yorkshire Council, covering rural East Yorkshire, replaced it, the funding for the Spurn Heritage Coast Project was much reduced. Tim Collins left in 1996 to take a job with English Nature, and his replacement was Chris Berry, who was also responsible for the Flamborough Heritage Coast. Unfortunately running two Heritage Coasts from Beverley, where the Officer was mainly centred, was not very practical, and since that date many of the initiatives begun by the Project were allowed to lapse, owing to lack of both personnel and funds. By 1999 the Spurn Heritage Coast Project had finished.

In 1996 the fiftieth anniversary of Spurn Bird Observatory was celebrated with a barbecue, held in front of the Annex in clear view of the beach. When the Observatory was established in 1946 the sea was quite a distance away and separated by a marsh (see below). Now the complex of buildings which were the Observatory’s base are all uncomfortably close to the sea.

**Barbecue at Warren for 50th Anniversary of Spurn Bird Observatory**

Although various improvements were made regularly to the furniture and fittings, such as the addition of fridge/freezers and carpets in the bedrooms, it was clear to the Committee that they were living on borrowed
time. Plans needed to be put in hand to move into new premises before they were washed out. In 1998 Spurn Bird Observatory Committee, having been left a substantial legacy by John Weston, a long-time Committee member, purchased a wooden bungalow (Kew Villa) and its adjoining field near the church. It was hoped that this building would eventually form the nucleus of a new observatory, and in the meantime it became the accommodation for the Observatory’s full time warden.

**The People of the Warren Area**
The Warren area was at times a place of great activity, Being the home of Spurn Bird Observatory, especially during migration periods in spring and autumn, many people, often from far afield, congregated there. These photos just give a flavour of them over the decades.

*Birders in the 1950s, John Cudworth, centre in right-hand photo*

*John Cudworth and others, near old Ringing Lab, 1950s*
Outside Warren Cottage, 1952

John Cudworth taking the Log in the Common Room, 1970s
1980 BTO ringing course with Angela Rippon, who came down to film it

Bird Observatories Council Meeting from Spurn, Gibraltar Point, Dungeness, Bardsey, and Sandy Bay, January, 1983

Spurn Bird Observatory Committee at retirement of Bob Spencer, founder of BTO ringing courses, August 1983
It is hard to overstate the importance of the Warren area to so many people over so many years, indeed this is the main reason I decided to write this history, having known and loved it since the early 1980s. It was the first place birders called in to check ‘what’s about’. It was the gateway to the peninsula. Warren Cottage and its associated buildings, was where people stayed; socialised; attended the log; trapped and ringed birds; rolled back to after a ‘few’ drinks at the Crown, and often just sat on the bench in front of the Information Centre when things were slow, just chatting. The number of people who have loved and cherished it over the decades runs into thousands. Ralph Chislett, the first Chairman of Spurn Bird Observatory from its inception in 1946, stepped down in 1962, and died in 1964. His natural successor, John Cudworth, took over, remaining in that role until 1999. George Ainsworth, joint founder of SBO, died in 1980. The Committee too, has been notable for its continuity of membership. Many people have given their time, knowledge and expertise freely. Barry Spence, as warden of the YWT, provided a bridge between the two organisations, and his input in looking after the Obs, taking bookings, keeping records, was recognised by his having an honorarium from SBO. Some of Barry’s summer wardens are still well known to present-day birders. Dave Boyle began that way in 1991/2 and later became the Observatory’s first full-time warden. Andy Mason, now working for the YWT as their Heritage Officer, was once Barry’s summer warden.

**New regime for Spurn: Barry Spence retires, 2002**

In 2002 Barry Spence retired, having been YWT warden for almost 40 years. Barry’s retirement was commemorated by Spurn Bird Observatory with a barbecue at Kew Villa, at which he was presented with gifts. He had also received honorary life membership of the YWT and YNU, and a camera. Having been such a fixture at Spurn for so many years, his steadying hand and unstinting support, not only for his employers, the Yorkshire Wildlife Trust, but also for Spurn Bird Observatory, were going to leave quite a hole. However, he stayed on in his bungalow at the Warren, until the YWT told him to vacate in 2008.
The job was advertised (at half as much again as Barry received), and Andy Gibson, who had been a regular at Spurn for many years, was the successful candidate, being allocated the flat above the Blue Bell as his accommodation.

New Reserves Officer: Andy Gibson

One of the changes Andy Gibson brought in was to make entrance charge to the reserve the same throughout the year (previously it was half price from October to Easter), and remove the free Friday access. The YWT gave him a van, and an assistant. Previously Barry had only been supplied with a summer warden, but the new one worked all the year round. Unlike Barry, Andy did not have a farming background, but soon found his duties included the care of stock, which included highland cattle (at Chalk Bank), and Hebridean sheep.
Spurn Ranger, 2002-2012
A very welcome amenity to Spurn, in 2002, was a single-decker bus, the Spurn Ranger. This enabled people to travel, in the summer months, from Withernsea, via Patrington right down to the Point. It was tremendously popular, and many people took advantage of it to walk one way and take the bus the other.
For a time people were given audio devices!
The Spurn Ranger, Point car park, 2005
The Spurn Ranger was very popular
A busy summer Sunday on Spurn Point
Decline and demolition: the recent years
The years since the millennium have been principally ones of decline and loss for the Warren area, as the sea has taken more and more land, and the buildings have suffered neglect. Sections of the road south of the Warren have been washed away and had to be rebuilt (but that is another story!). The road, being so crucial to the RNLI and to ABP, was replaced at their cost many times over, whilst these bodies were stationed at the Point.

Barry Spence’s house, December, 2005  Information Centre, December 2005

A road barrier was placed at the Warren in 2005, so that the public could be prevented from driving down the peninsula when conditions were too dangerous. The RNLI and ABP had keys. But, while there was still road access Spurn remained, in the summer months, a great attraction to visitors. Birders too, of course, continued to visit, and bird-ringing was carried out at the Warren and down on the Point. But nothing could stop the sea, and inexorably it gained more and more land at the northern end of the peninsula.

The first sign that things were changing for ever came in 2009, when Spurn Bird Observatory was told by its landlords the YWT, that the Annexe and Dunbirdin’ were to be condemned. At a stroke the Observatory lost accommodation for 15 people. And Barry Spence was given notice too, and moved to Easington, though continuing to run two moth traps at the Warren. The buildings remained however, until 2016.

Condemned! The Annexe, Dun Birdin and Barry’s house, 2009

On a more positive note, in 2010 Warren Cottage was refurbished, at the expense of the YWT and SBO, with the Common Room being subdivided so that a new bedroom could be created at the northern end. A new toilet and show unit was erected on the site of the coal house. And in 2012 new kitchen units were put in by SBO. The Information Centre, unlike the condemned buildings, was brick-built, and was looking in good condition in 2010.
In 2010 the Yorkshire Wildlife Trust applied for a grant from the Lottery Heritage Fund. The grant was to be applied to the restoration of Spurn lighthouse, to composting toilets at Warren Cottage and on the Point, to the assessment of the military buildings to improve their long-term management and interpretation, and improvements to the reserve entrance area. Also in that year the YWT received a grant from LEADER (a rural development fund), and some work was carried out on the lighthouse. The entrance doors were refurbished, along with the ground floor windows. This work was done by local joiner and farmer, Jeff Stothard. New sturdy gates and post and rail fencing were made by Jeff at the entrance to the reserve, using washed-out and reclaimed groynes.

More changes in 2012
In 2012 a Spurn Heritage Officer, Harry Watkins, was appointed, initially for 9 months. His job was to oversee the application to renovate the lighthouse and develop events to promote Spurn. Subsequently the YWT received £470,000 from the Lottery Heritage Fund, for their plans to improve the reserve and restore the lighthouse, and Harry’s job was extended. Harry left in 2014 and Andrew Mason replaced him. These staff changes did not have much impact upon the Warren area, where Spurn Bird Observatory continued with its HQ at Warren Cottage.

Sadly, in 2012 the RNLI had to accept that the families of crew could no longer live on Spurn, because road access was becoming increasingly difficult and uncertain. Accordingly, a new regime had to be put in place. From that year the RNLI Humber lifeboat station was run with two shifts of five full-time crews, creating
four new full-time jobs. But the unique life style carried on here for so many years came to an end. A sad day. The Spurn lifeboat had been run from the peninsula since 1810, and since 1819 the lifeboat crew had lived with their families on the Point.

Also in 2012, after ten years, the Spurn Ranger no longer went down the peninsula, dropping people off at Kilnsea instead. However, after a year funding for this service was withdrawn completely. Spurn was becoming more inaccessible by the year. Next year was to be Spurn’s *annus horribilis!*

**The tidal surge of 2013**

2013 was a memorable year for Spurn and Kilnsea. Problems began early. The road was closed for a day or two after big tides in January and February, and then suffered further damage on 12th/13th March, when sections where completely washed away. The only way to drive to the Point was by four-wheel drives, over the sand. The lifeboat crew and the pilots used this method for several months, whilst the general public had to walk or cycle. Moreover, several of the posts carrying electricity to the Point had to be relocated or replaced. Whilst repairs by EDL were carried out a generator was used to provide power to the lifeboat men, the pilots and the ABP control tower.

![Damage to road, February 2013](image1) ![YEDL repairing the poles, March 2013](image2)

The road reopened in the summer, but high tides and unfavourable winds destroyed more sections around posts 23 to 25 in mid-October, and this time an announcement was made that the road would not be renewed until 2014. This was the beginning of a new and very uncertain period. To quote: ‘The profile of the peninsula has also been significantly changed and ABP have decided to wait to see what happens to this profile over the winter and evaluate the relaying of the road and its route in the spring. This profile change has seen a movement of the sand and silt estuarine shore edge 35 metres to the west’. A car park for the pilots was made near the Warren, and the pilots and RNLI crew used four-wheel drives to get down to the Point. Because of the increasing narrowness of the peninsula between posts 23 and 28 and the likelihood of wash-overs, the Yorkshire Wildlife Trust placed signs warning visitors that they should be aware of tide times, lest they be cut off on the peninsula for a time.

In an article in *Spurn Wildlife 23*, I have described in detail what happened on 5th December 2013 and thereafter. This section will concentrate primarily upon how the tidal surge affected the Warren area. What has been described as the biggest tidal surge to hit the East Coast since 1953 happened on the late afternoon and evening of Thursday, 5th December. The Met Office had been putting out tidal warnings for the East coast since Wednesday, warning people and organisations all along the coast to prepare for serious problems at the high tides on Thursday evening. Because of the warnings the lifeboat left Spurn on Wednesday evening at about 10 pm and went across to Grimsby.

High tide at Spurn was due at 18.54 GMT. It was predicted to be a 7.3 metre tide, one of the highest of the year. By late afternoon it was already clear that Spurn and Kilnsea were in trouble. Fortunately the gales had died down somewhat by the time the surge hit, but nevertheless the sea level was almost two metres higher than the prediction. Two hours before the high tide the surge arrived, impacting first on the sea-ward side of Kilnsea and the peninsula.
Flooding was widespread. The sea threw boulders and rubble onto Clubley's Field, though fortunately only a few metres of the field were affected and the sea-watching hide was not damaged. However the corner of Clubley's Field, just south of the hide, where it had always been possibly to step down onto the compound, was washed away, and the sea ran into the compound and covered it with sand. The Heligoland trap was now uncomfortably close to the beach. From Spurn gate southwards the waters covered the road and the little sheep field.

The YWT Information Centre and the warden’s old bungalow were flooded. The Ringing Lab, where fortunately all important paper work had been removed to a higher level, was over a foot deep in water.
Daylight on 6th December revealed a scene of devastation. The tarmac road, which goes from the Warren area over an old gun emplacement and along the Humber side down to electricity post 19 remained intact,
but from there, as far as post 31 the peninsula was unrecognisable. A large area, where the road had been, was rendered a virtually featureless beach. The sand dunes had entirely disappeared. Several electricity poles had been knocked over, so that again, there was no power going down to the Point. Moreover, the water pipes were exposed and damaged, which meant that the people on the Point had lost their mains water too. Dave Steenvoorden, Coxswain/Station Manager of the Humber Lifeboat, was one of the first on the scene and his photographs show the blue water pipes intertwined around the electrical wires and electricity poles, with fragments of the Armorflex (made of concrete blocks connected by wires) road scattered all around. It was very difficult to orientate oneself, as the points of reference, like the electricity poles, the road, and the wooden posts which edged the Armorflex road along the Humber foreshore were all either gone or covered with sand. The narrow dunes on the seaward side had also been washed away. For a long time the sea and the river were meeting at most high tides.

Further south there was more damage, and the saddest scene was at Chalk Bank. Here, as at Middle Camp, the attack came from the Humber as the surge rounded the Point and moved up river. The tidal surge over-topped the bank, and flooded the whole area of Wire Dump and Chalk Bank. Even the chalk ridge down the centre (the second chalk bank built in 1870, the first being along the river) was covered with water. Sadly a flock of 39 Hebridean sheep that were grazing on Chalk Bank area were drowned. The waters also went over onto the road, remaining there for some time.

North of Spurn gate the surge in the Humber did yet more damage. It flooded the Triangle; Spurn Road was covered with water along most of its length between the Blue Bell and the gate, and many properties in Kilnsea were badly affected (16 of 29 properties). There was also considerable damage to Sandy Beaches Caravan site. Spurn and Kilnsea are particularly unusual (and unfortunate) because during a storm surge they are attacked from two sides — from the sea and from the river. A double-whammy! And especially because the surge struck at night, it was quite difficult to be sure from where the waters came at certain points.

The aftermath, 2014-15

The tidal surge changed many things for Spurn, with repercussions for years to come. The Yorkshire Wildlife Trust lost a significant income, because people could no longer be charged to drive down the peninsula. The only vehicles allowed were those belonging to the YWT, ABP and the RNLI. The pilots began working from Grimsby instead of Spurn, and ABP began to plan a new tower at Grimsby. In March the YWT revealed plans for a new visitors’ centre which it was hoping to build near Canal Scrape. Originally there had been plans to build it just south of Spurn gate, but after the YWT received a grant of £900,000 from the Humber Gateway Community Fund the trust chose a small meadow near Canal Scrape. The subsequent planning applications and debate about the appropriateness of this decision are outside the scope of this article, though their impact upon the Warren area are not. To enable people to get down the peninsula a large vehicle called a Unimog was purchased, and a charge of £10 per person was levied (now £12). In July Andy Mason was appointed Heritage Officer.

Work began on the renovation of the lighthouse in 2015, and plans were revealed to demolish the former military buildings at the Warren. The warden’s bungalow, the annexe, Dun Birdin’ and the ringing lab were due to be demolished in March. Because they contained asbestos they had to be taken down by specialists. However, on the day that the contractors arrived to do the work, evidence of bats was found and the work abandoned for some time. It was clear that the centre of the YWT’s operations had moved from the Warren area. That same year the YWT took over the management of the Blue Bell Tea Room, from Petra van der Zande, who had been running it for some years. They put in their own manager, Emma Milsom, with the title of Catering Manager (though she resigned after a year in post). The appointment of Peter Waddingham as Gateway Manager in 2015 also changed the staffing structure at Spurn (though he resigned in January 2017). Andy Gibson had moved over some time before to become Living Landscape Officer for the Outer Humber. Adam Stoyle was Spurn Development Officer. All a long way from the old system which operated until Barry Spence retired in 2002 as Spurn Warden after almost 40 years!!
The demolition of buildings at the Warren area, 2016

This was the year when the landscape of the Warren area was changed drastically, by large-scale demolition. The rationale for the demolition was that the buildings contained asbestos and were subject to flooding. The planning application for the new Visitor Centre stated that the plans incorporated the intention to allow the re-wilding of the area, and the re-formation of sand dunes. The nearest sand dunes are now far away across the breach, so this may be a fond hope. The Information Centre and Ringing Lab/Dun Birdin’ were brick-built, and substantial. Nevertheless, in February 2016 all the buildings at the Warren, with the exception of Warren Cottage itself, were demolished.
A few months later a Portacabin to replace the brick-built Information Centre, was placed on the site of the former garage/Nissen hut. It was only open at certain times during weekends, and bicycles were for hire at £10 per half a day and £15 for a full day.
The present situation (2018)

The YWT’s original application to construct a Visitor Centre on a meadow in Kilnsea had been refused by the East Riding of Yorkshire Council. However, to general surprise (and dismay from many) a second planning application was passed in January 2017. Construction in Triangle Meadow, near Canal Scrape began in April 2017 and the Centre opened as the Spurn Discovery Centre (albeit in Kilnsea!) in Spring 2018. Spurn Bird Observatory no longer rents Warren Cottage, but fortunately has a new Observatory in Kilnsea. A large house, Tharlesthorpe, came on the market in 2014, and has been converted for use by Spurn Bird Observatory to general acclaim. The Warren area is still of course, very important for SBO, with ringing and sea-watching still taking place there. Spurn’s reputation as one of the most important areas for wildlife observation is safe whilst Spurn Bird Observatory remains.

In such a changing situation this history of the Warren area can never be called complete. In 2017 bulldozers dug out parts of Clubley’s Field, apparently for habitat creation. The concrete bases where the military buildings stood near Warren Cottage have been take away, as have those in the little field near the gate. Several very high tides have meant even more land loss in the area formerly called the compound. No sign of sand dune creation, sadly!!!

A note on Warren Cottage itself

Warren Cottage is built of cobble, with a pan-tiled roof. It is a late example of that vernacular style of building in the East Riding, but must have seemed a natural choice for a humble cottage on Spurn, being so close to the beach – the source of the cobblestones. Until the later 19th century cobble was a common building material in the coastal communities of the East Riding, even for churches. Warren Cottage was built for the bailiff whose job it was to control, for the Constable family, the gravel and cobble trade on Spurn. It seems fitting therefore, that the house was constructed of that material.


‘A beautiful example [of tilting cobbles by reversing them for alternate courses to give a herring-bone effect] is to be seen at Warren Cottage, Kilnsea. Here the front elevation is constructed of selected long thin cobbles, all of which are inclined in alternate courses and have neat brick galletting [small pieces set into mortar between cobbles]. The ends and rear of the building are in rounded cobbles unselected as they ‘came to hand’ and tilted as necessary. The cottage predates the 1855 Ordnance Survey map upon which it is shown. This was probably cobble building at its best.’
Mr. Lazenby draws attention to the large squared stones at the corners, which bond with the brick quoins. I suggest that this stone, which looks more like dressed limestone than cobble from the beach, came from St. Helen’s Church, Kilnsea, which had fallen over the cliff in the 1820s. Other buildings in Kilnsea also made use of this stone, so this is not a fanciful view.

![Warren Cottage, 1994](image1)
![Wall, showing squared stones, 1994](image2)

Personally, I’d like this building to be listed. Certainly it must be cherished as a lovely example of building in cobble. Yorkshire Wildlife Trust — please note!

Sources
To be added.