

New Tahitian Wreck Dive's Dundee Origins

by LAWSON WOOD

We continue our occasional series of Scottish-built ships that have been wrecked around the world. Lawson Wood takes us to the South Seas for this story of the *Nordby*. Built in Dundee the *Nordby* came to grief in Tahiti, where Lawson pieced together its short but adventurous career



The Nordby is an enticing wreck with lots of interest and in this photograph Lawson gets a good look round the interior

BUILT BY Brown & Simpson of Dundee in 1873, the *Glenearn*, as she was christened, had a gross weight of 624 metric tonnes and a net weight of 547 metric tonnes. Originally owned by W.P.Taylor of Dundee, she had a length of 52.8m (173.3ft), a draft of 5.3m (17ft) and a beam of 8m (28ft), with only one deck with two tiers of beams and a cement bulkhead. Her last Lloyds' inspection was in August 1890 and she was classed 100A1, her Lloyds' registration number was 422. She was a three masted barque with the front two masts square-rigged and the rear or mizzenmast, fore and aft rigged carrying roughly triangular shaped gaff-sails (called a spanker) and a gaff-topsail to allow for sailing with as few men before the mast as the law would permit.

She had three shipmasters whilst under Scottish ownership and these were J.F.Webster; P.F.H.Hastie and Captain Johnstone. The *Glenearn* was sold in Le Harve, after her Lloyds' inspection in 1890, to Danish ship owners P.N.Withers for 90,000 crowns, her name was changed to *Nordby* (pronounced Nor-bu) after the main town of Nordby on the Danish island of Fano, which became her new port of registration.

Her new captain was Shipmaster H.

Christiansen. Her illustrious career took her to all of the 'Seven Seas' with her passage traced to Ceylon; Valparaiso in Mexico; Buenos Aires; New York, Santiago in Chile and Cape Town. She set sail on her last fateful voyage from Hamburg on August 21, 1899 bound for Auckland, New Zealand which she reached in May 1900 by travelling around Cape Horn. Onboard was a cargo of sawn softwood. Her return voyage was to take her back to Liverpool via Tahiti, then to the twin island destination of Taha'a and Raiatea to load copra.

At the turn of the last century, Utoroa, on the island of Raiatea, was much more important than Papeete, (now the capital of French Polynesia) which used to have a city tax levied onto all port traffic. Utoroa had a free-port statute and SCO (Société Commerciale d' Océanie), a German shipping company from Hamburg had offices and a copra factory in Utoroa and were the handling agents for the *Nordby*.

The entry into Utoroa through the Taevapti Pass is quite difficult and a description of the pass was first penned by Paul Huguenin in 1896. "The main pass is no more than 100 metres wide, so it was a matter of really manoeuvring well for a ship of

80 metres ... also, the captain had to raise the black flag with a white square in the middle: 'Requesting Guidance'. He came upon a big whaleboat manned by strong young men. They only spoke their native language, but the old salt made himself perfectly clear with left-handed signals from the helmsman, aligning the ship with shore markers and a peak. We made a first class entrance into the pass".

The *Nordby* cast her anchor in the sheltered lagoon in front of Teavapti Pass on May 20,1900, to get rid of her ballast in order to take on more cargo. Her cargo at that time was as follows: copra - 111 tonnes; yellow copper - 4 boxes & 12 bundles; bees wax - 14 barrels; cotton- 4 bundles; loose mother of pearl - 5 boxes; turtle shells - 3.

In Captain Christiansen's transcript at the inquiry into her sinking, a sudden storm or 'mara amu' arose behind the rocky islets or 'motu' that usually protected the lagoon. Her 12 man crew were almost at the end of their routine task of unloading the ballast, when the wind shifted, the *Nordby* dragged her anchor and the stern swung around and she hit the shallow fringing reef in a place called Tupua.

The hull was ripped at the rear and the hand pumps were unable to bail her out. On advice from the Administrator of the Leeward Islands (which were under French control from 1898), the captain was authorised to sell off the armaments, provisions and cargo. Her whaleboat and contents were sold to James Brooding and the rest of the cargo was sold to local islanders Albert Brothers, Pete Brotherson and Théophile Gilloux. The auction raised 2210 francs in the day's currency.

Thankfully the cargo and effects were offloaded before conditions worsened. The wind force increased and the ship keeled over onto her port side, slid down the reef wall and settled onto the muddy bottom of the lagoon. The company received 80,000 crowns in insurance money for her total loss.

There she lay, forgotten for almost 100 years until the Hawaiki Nui Pearl Beach Resort Hotel decided to upgrade her facilities with a small dive shop. A swimming platform for dive access was built between the rooms perched at the edge of the reef and 'Hemisphere Sub' duly opened its doors, managed by Hubert Clot.

You can imagine their surprise when they did their first dive directly in front of the hotel on the house reef to find the long lost remains of an iron sailing ship. Local archives were scoured and slowly the details of the ship appeared. Now after extensive research in the Greenwich Maritime Museum, her glory days and history have come to light.

Now resting in 18-30m (60-100ft), the *Nordby* is largely intact. Her two main masts now point towards the Teavapti Pass. Her hull, rudder, main-masts, bowsprit and all other metal parts are



Visibility is generally poor because of the mud produced by a nearby river however the wreck itself is well-preserved and there is some interesting coral growth

largely intact. The hatches are open, but her wooden decks are now rotted through, leaving a jagged effect along each of the beams. Her hold is completely open and you are able to swim through the entire ship in safety, although lights are recommended, as it is generally quite dark in its interior.

Visibility is generally poor due to the proximity of a river nearby which has deposited a layer of fine mud over most of the surfaces. Whilst this has undoubtedly caused problems for coral growth, the mud has largely protected the inevitable deterioration of the ship. Her decks are vertical and face out to sea and have therefore not been protected by the mud, rendering the dive really quite spectacular, as light filters through the open decks into the shadowy interior.

There are over 30 species of nudibranch recorded on the ship as well as small cup corals, lionfish, colonial anemones, grouper, hawkfish,

bigeye snapper, Moorish idols and a couple of moray eels. Equally spectacular at night, snails, clams and sleeping parrotfish can be found and, of course, the tubastrea cup corals literally sparkle in your torchlight. The *Nordby* is a superb easy dive; perfect for exploring and the muddy bottom and house reef adjacent to the wreck are superb rummage dives with great photographic potential.

Lesley and Lawson Wood were hosted by BGB Communications; Tahiti Tourisme; Air Tahiti; British Airways; Tahiti Intercontinental Beechcomber Resort; Tahiti Sofitel Maeva Beach Resort; Pension La Vague Bleue; Rangiroa Beach Resort; Paradise Tours; Pension Temerama, Rurutu; Hawaiki Nui Pearl Resort, Raiatea; Taha'a Private Island and Spa; Raie Manta Club, Rangiroa; Raie Manta Club Rurutu; Iti Diving International, Tahiti Iti; Taha'a Blue Nui, Taha'a; Hemisphere-Sub Plongee, Raiatea and Aquatica Dive Centre on Tahiti Nui. Holidays and dive travel from the UK can be booked through the following:
www.harlequindiving.com;
www.hayesandjarvis.co.uk;
www.divequest.co.uk;
www.dreamtraveltahiti.com;
www.diving-tahiti.com;
www.tahiti-tourisme.co.uk;
www.aggressorfleet.com



The Nordby in its Victorian pomp

Depth: 18–30m (60–100ft)
Conditions: Visibility is low due to the location near the mouth of a river.
Location: Just west of the Hawaiki Nui Pearl Beach Resort on the island of Raiatea, French Polynesia.
Access: Directly from the dive platform of Hemisphere Sub, Club de Plongee .
Experience: Suitable for all levels of diver.