



Stones of Stenness

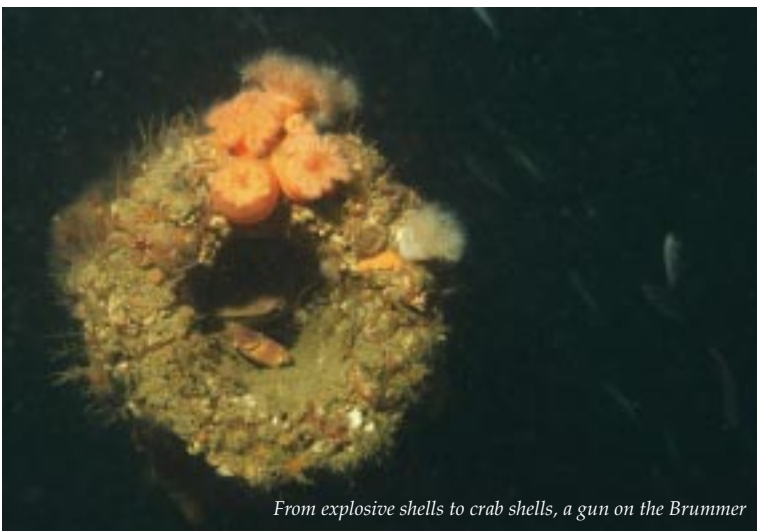


A whelk exploring the spotting top of the Kaiser

words &
pictures
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Plumose anemone and hermit crab on the mast of the Kaiser



From explosive shells to crab shells, a gun on the Brummer

Obliging Orkney

One of the first assignments Alison Fish undertook as the new editor of SCOTTISH DIVER was a trip to Orkney to see what that famous destination could offer to divers other than grizzily veterans ...

THE FIRST time I dipped an inexperienced, but drysuted, toe in the Firth of Forth I was told by my instructor that Scottish waters are especially challenging. A statement followed closely by the time honoured phrase - 'if you can dive in Scotland, you can dive anywhere!' So when I qualified as a Sport Diver I was proud of achieving the award, but particularly for doing it here in Scotland where the cold water and occasionally (!) poor vis add to the ordeal.

About the time I qualified, my club ran a trip to Scapa Flow, it was advertised in our club rag as 'Experienced Sport Diver and above'. It was the first trip away that I could've taken part in as a qualified diver, so I was pretty disappointed to hear the BDO say that I wasn't a suitable candidate. 'It's just too deep for you at the moment, you don't have enough experi-

ence' was the explanation.

A few years later and I'm driving up to Scrabster in a snow storm. It's mid March and winter has no intention of releasing its glacial grip on the north of Scotland. During the previous week, schools and colleges were closed across the country, flights were grounded and only the most determined scuba divers had been seen braving the chilly depths of sheltered, west coast sea lochs. More sensible folk had curled up in front of the fire or nipped down the pub for a warming dram.

I've been invited to join a handful of divers aboard the [Jean Elaine](#) for her first trip of the year. Skipper Andy Cuthbertson has chosen the 'Battleships' as his opening salvo and weather permitting it will be a week of unadulterated heavy metal in Scapa Flow. I'm intrigued to see whether a trip like this

has anything to offer newly qualified divers – Andy has skippered a dive boat in the Flow for many years so if anyone has a view on the subject I feel sure he will have.

Jean Elaine, and her sister *Sharon Rose*, are berthed 200m from the Northlink Ferry Terminal in Stromness, and less than five minutes walk from at least three pubs. Andy is onboard to welcome us and give us a guided tour of our home for the week. *Jean Elaine* is a good size boat providing liveaboard, bunkhouse-style accommodation for up to twelve divers in one 4-berth, three twin and two single cabins.

Access to the 4-berth aft cabin is through the saloon. The remaining accommodation is forward, with access from the main deck. On either side of the saloon are covered areas; to port are the toilets and shower and on the starboard side is a changing and drying room with space to hang drysuits. For this trip we had three divers living aboard and one day boat diver, so space wasn't an issue.

The holiday really got started on Sunday morning when my shore-based buddy, George Hendry, arrived on board. George had recently been released from internment on Papa Westray, one of the most northerly of the Orkney Islands. His incarceration was brought about by heavy snowfalls and he was feeling a bit light headed at being released, particularly in the metropolis of Stromness. I hadn't met George before so naturally I was a wee bit apprehensive of diving with him – in fact he turned out to be an absolute gentleman and a pleasure to dive with.

We quickly settled into a routine, our early morning call was the ferry siren as it prepared to leave Stromness, followed by a rocking sensation as the wash hit us. The second call was Ronnie landing on the deck and heading to the galley to make breakfast. The third was Andy arriving and starting up the engines followed closely by the compressor. Anyone still sleeping after all that had clearly been enjoying the delights of Stromness a bit too much the night before.

Ronnie provides a light breakfast of cereal and toast before the first dive, then a humungous full Scottish afterwards. I'm not quite sure how he manages it but he does the breakfast, fills cylinders, and is on hand to answer any questions about the dive all at the same time; a nifty trick. For our first day we head out to the *Kronprinz Wilhelm*, which settled upside-down in 38m of water. She is gigantic, so the top of the hull rests at 15m and is well within the capabilities of less experienced sport divers.

This first dive was of the 'getting to know you' type for me and George. Before we went in we agreed a dive plan which was to descend the shotline slowly, orientate ourselves at the bottom and head off towards the bow. A short time later, fully kitted, we waddle our way into a neat queue of four divers, ready to go at the skippers' signal. Entering the water from *Jean Elaine* is like falling off a log, one giant stride and you're in. Andy is one of the most experienced skippers in the Flow and it shows; he dropped us inches from the marker buoy and

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disappeared for a second run before we noticed he'd gone.

George starts off down the shotline, a brief pause at 5m for a bubble check, then on with our planned stately descent. The vis looks promising and I can see the rope for at least 10m below us as I peer over George's right shoulder. On the seabed the water is clear and light – perhaps because the temperature is only just dragging itself passed the 5°C mark. The shotline is attached to the crow's nest so we follow the mast over to the main body of the wreck. The *Kronprinz Wilhelm* towers over us; a sheer 20m wall, a man-made cliff. Then we had a choice, was it left or right to the bow?

A pleasant meander along the seabed brings us alongside the casement guns where they peep out from the upturned deck. I'm distracted by the abundance of marine life. Hanging back slightly I watch as shoals of juvenile saithe stream by in a silvery line. Glinting in the subdued light, they hug the contours of the wreck sweeping up towards the surface. A few metres further along they fly passed me again on their journey to the seabed.

A belligerent velvet swimming crab takes a swipe at my glove as I swim over him; nothing escapes his beady, red eyes. A bright orange pincushion star stands out in vivid colour against the dull, brown of the wreck. A combination of good visibility and light is seductive, but after 20 minutes at 38m deco penalties start to clock up.

In this cold water the thought of hanging around doing loads of decompression is less than attractive, and we start our ascent to the top of the hull. George rounds off the dive nicely by sending up an SMB, with more poise and finesse than I ever managed in my life.

Andy has us in his sights as soon as we surface. Getting back onboard *Jean Elaine* is easy, the ladder is straight forward and Ronnie helps by lassoing my kit and taking some of the weight – nice man! A quick change and we're back in the saloon for a debrief over Ronnie's special cooked breakfast, and the outcome - we pretty much stuck to the plan except we went to

the wrong end – well, we all make mistakes.

Later in the week we visited the battleships *Markgraff* and *Konig* and the light cruisers *Dresden*, *Koln* and *Brummer*. Andy accommodated the different diving interests of our group by staggering the dives, putting George and I in at one site, and the others in on another. It makes for a bit longer day but keeps everyone happy, and it's great for mixed ability or mixed interest groups.

Our dives varied in depth from less than 20m to over 40m. On the battleships the depth to the seabed is between 35m and 42m. Less experienced divers can get onto the hull of the *Kronprinz Wilhelm* at about 15m whereas the *Konig* and *Markgraff* are slightly deeper at 20m and 24m respectively. Granted an upturned hull is probably not the most interesting part of a wreck. By comparison, each of the cruisers settled on her side, depth to the rail on the *Koln* and *Brummer* is 20m with the *Dresden* at 18m and the *Karlsruhe* at 12m; putting these wrecks well within the range of a newly qualified Sport Diver and with much more to see.

I'll certainly remember this trip, there were lots of little things that made it special. For instance, it was the first time I've dived the Flow for pleasure (previous visits were taken up with training). Alastair Ness, a *Jean Elaine* recidivist, completed his 1000th dive during the week and Ronnie baked him a cake to celebrate!

Surfacing into a snow shower for the first time and diving with snow on the deck, another first, were memorable for obvious reasons. With encouragement from George, I swam the length of the *Koln*, inside the wreck; an achievement for me because I'm none too keen on overhead environments.

It was a beautiful dive with daylight streaming in from outside. Hundreds of young saithe, gleaming like quicksilver, wove their way in and out of the rays in a constantly changing underwater display. But the dive I enjoyed most was a shallow guddle around the spotting top of the *Kaiser*.

The battleship *Kaiser* was raised in 1929 and eventually towed to Rosyth, on the Firth of Forth, to be broken up. During a mammoth salvage operation the ships' lookout masts somehow ended up in the Flow. They lie now as they fell, on the white, sand and shell seabed in just over 20m of water - and make a very pleasant dive.

Andy placed the shot halfway along the mast, with pinpoint accuracy. Dropping through the water column I see the outline of the crow's nest almost from the surface, as we get closer the mast itself comes into view. It's a tube of metal, less than 2m wide with a closed entry hatch at the base and the crow's nest, or spotting top, at the tip.

Along its considerable length marine life has colonised the wreckage. Plumose anemones and hermit crabs are the most common residents, closely followed by nudibranchs, starfish and whelks. An elderly lobster, judging by its size, has moved into a crevice under the spotting top and is patrolling his patch with claws



Above: foredeck of the Jean Elaine, moored at Lyness; & left: Batman - alias George Hendry - on the deco stop.



Above: Alastair Ness and his 1000th dive celebration cake; & left: Ronnie, crewman on the Jean Elaine, famous for breakfasts, cakes and practical jokes

at the ready, his antennae twitch in an interested fashion as we pass by.

Hermit crabs race one another up and down an improvised race track, one eye on the finish line and one eye on their opponents shell. This insignificant piece of wreckage is a delight now, a hive of activity, full of marine life, and covered in colourful encrusting algae. At the same time it's a stark reminder of the ship's prime function. The spotting top is tiny and vulnerable, in its original location it would have floated high above the deck, commanding an awesome view of any engagement.

Chatting with Andy and Ingrid over dinner, at the end of the week, I mention the 'experienced Sport Divers only' view of Scapa Flow. Andy rejects the idea: "Scapa can be deep, dark and scary if you want it to be, but there are plenty of sites here for less experienced divers. We had a group recently who spent the week building up to a dive on the *Karlsruhe*, which lies in 24m. They did it at the end of their holiday and it gave them all a real sense of achievement."

Ingrid, who looks after the office and booking side of the business, agrees with Andy: "That group were all relatively new divers, but we can cater for mixed ability groups too. Andy is happy to put more experienced divers in at one site and less experienced divers in somewhere else." I agree, we'd dived on this system for part of the week and it did keep everyone happy.

"Some of the best diving in Orkney is outside the Flow," Andy went on "but few people ever make it out there, they're drawn to the wrecks, which is what we're famous for. But there's some cracking scenic and wreck diving to be had all around Orkney - and the vis is usually better in the northern isles."

Ingrid was keen to point out the potential for family holidays and groups with mixed interests. Apart from the diving, there's a huge variety of activities for non-divers in the area. Orkney is an archaeologists' and ornithologists' playground, walking, cycling, sailing and sea kayaking are popular, or you can coax

your non-diving friends into a try dive beside the historic Churchil Barriers. For anyone who just wants to relax, there are gently rolling hills and beautiful sandy beaches. It seems whatever you want to do Orkney obliges!

During my stay it became increasingly apparent that Andy and Ingrid have built their business on a passion for diving and a genuine desire to keep their customers happy. With that in mind they make the diving as flexible as possible, divers can liveaboard or stay ashore, they offer wreck or scenic dives, inside or outside Scapa Flow, group or buddy pair bookings, half-board or self catering, specialist mixed gas trips, full weeks or long weekends, and if there's something you particularly want to do, they will try very hard to accommodate you. It's a strategy that works; the majority of their customers come back again and again.

Many thanks to Andy and Ingrid at Scapa Flow Charters for an excellent week, and to Ronnie for looking after us all so well. Thanks also to George Hendry for an enjoyable week of stress-free diving and the guided tour of Lyness Interpretation Centre and the Royal Naval Cemetery - your company was greatly appreciated.

ABOUT THE TRIP

I drove to Scrabster and took the North Link Ferry (www.northlinkferries.co.uk) to Stromness, a single foot passenger fare costs in the region of £15 at high season and the crossing takes about 90 minutes - it's a big, modern ferry with plenty of comfortable seating. Luggage trolleys are available for dive kit, you can drive your car to the trolley to load it before parking up, while at Stromness Andy collects the trolley from the ferry - there's no need to lug kit aboard with you.

I decided to take my car over to Stromness so I could see a bit more of the Mainland, and it was well worth the extra, a single fare at high season is £45. I left the *Jean Elaine* a day earlier than the other divers and booked an overnight cabin on the ferry, rather than wake up everyone up at 5am on the morning of departure. Premium cabins cost £38 at high season,

have twin beds, an en suite shower and television. Passengers may board between 21:30 and 23:30 the night before sailing.

On board the *Jean Elaine* the individual and twin cabins are quite small so if you tend to pack the kitchen sink when you go on holiday you may need to rethink. The accommodation is bunkhouse style and the food is plentiful if you chose that option. Access to the toilets and showers from the forward cabins is across the open deck, no problem in summer but a bit chilly when I visited in March.

When diving in Scapa Flow the *Jean Elaine* ties up in Stromness each night. There are plenty of options for evening meals in the town (chip shop, pubs, restaurants and cafes) all within easy walking distance of the berth, or you can cook onboard. For trips outside the Flow, Andy ties up close to a pub and/or shop each night.



Inside the oil drum at the Lyness interpretation centre

Jean Elaine has air and nitrox onboard, other gasses are available by arrangement. A 240v electricity supply for charging equipment is available when in harbour. A four-way is a sensible addition to your luggage allowance if you have cameras, strobes and torches to charge!

Lonely Planet recently described Orkney as Scotland's hidden gem and it certainly is a special place; world class wrecks, fantastic marine life, friendly people, plenty of places to eat and drink, a World Heritage Site and the best ice-cream in Scotland - what more could you possibly want?