



Moray Firth's Underwater Secrets

Mike Clark

Mike Clark headed north to the Moray Firth and a day trip with Bill Ruck on the *Topcat*. A short trip but one that provided varied diving ...

IT WAS NOT long after leaving Lossiemouth Harbour in Bill Ruck's hardboat *Top Cat* that the first porpoise was spotted leaping off the port bow. These beautiful creatures turned out to be common sights and were seen on every journey. More surprising however, was the massive Minkie Whale that was also sighted on both days, surfacing very close to the boat. I had seen distant glimpses in the past but these closer encounters at a distance of around 100 metres, certainly gave a sense of scale to this huge creature.

The Moray Firth is famous for its large population of resident dolphins but surprisingly we saw none. Twitchers would be in their thoughts, as we saw guillemots, gannet, razorbill, puffin and cormorants. This area really is a haven for wildlife and all this action was encountered before the site of the first shipwreck was reached.

HMV Verona

HMV Verona (previously the *Imogen*) was a luxury yacht built by Messrs Fleming and Ferguson of Paisley in 1890. From sketches and pictures that I have seen she was a beautiful ship with racing lines and a large bowsprit. So there was plenty of excitement in advance of our first foray below Moray waters.

Descending down the shotline the water turned dark although relatively clear with vis of around six metres. We landed on the single large boiler near the centre of the wreck. The hull is broken here and the wreck has a slight list either side of the break.

Finning forward, a gun was noted on the sea floor. Further forward the bow formed and the remains of the bowsprit could be seen. Until recently this feature still pointed out proudly ahead of the wreck, but within the last year it has collapsed

onto the sea floor.

At 42 metres, time is limited so the tour continued back along the deck, passed that massive boiler to the stern area of the wreck, viewing various brass fittings on the way.

The stern is now fairly broken but the bronze prop can still be seen and rounding the stern another gun comes into view on the sea floor. It is here on the deck at the stern that my favourite feature of the wreck is found. Ornamental toilet bowls with blue ink drawings decorating them reflect brightly in the torch light. The seamen of this ship must have marvelled at the opulence of this yacht when it was pressed into service by the Navy for use in the First World War.

Back on the port side of the wreck, we headed back to the shotline passing intact brass portholes in the hull on the way. These will remain there to remember the four officers and 19 men who lost their lives when this beautiful ship hit a mine on February 24, 1917. The *Verona* is a war grave and this status should ensure sport divers can enjoy these fascinating fittings in situ for years to come.

The Unity

The Unity was the second dive of the day. Resting upright in 24 to 28 metres of water, she makes a relatively easy dive and is used extensively for novices' first wreck dives. She was a Peterhead registered trawler, around 28 metres in length. Whilst being stripped, she sprang a leak in Lossiemouth harbour.

Those great foresighted guys thinking of the future pleasure of divers (I'm sure), decided to try and tow the vessel to the scrap yard. Thankfully (for divers at least), she sank under tow. Nowadays she makes a great little dive and was ideal for the second dive of the day.

Descending onto the bow railings, large sections of the wreck could be viewed in the bright conditions of this shallower site. The vis was still around six metres.

Dropping over the forecastle, two entrances appear to the fish holds. If you fancy entering the wreck it's easy enough here, but watch out for the silt. Inside these holds though, there is little to see.

Back out on deck the sunlit water brightened up the perspective once more as we finned to the stern area where most of the superstructure remains. The engine had been removed prior to her sinking so access to this area of the wreck is very easy.

Over the stern the prop has now fully settled into the sandy sea floor and I finned along the starboard side of the wreck to the base of the bow. Here I found a monster Edible Crab out from its residence under the bow. I thought it was quite nice that the previous prey of this vessel was now living comfortably on it. Another diver on the trip noted a wolffish under the hull as well.

In all the *Unity* is a nice little dive providing many points of interest. You can probably fin around her half a dozen times on your dive. Bill is correct in stating that this little wreck makes a fantastic site for an introduction to wreck diving and he finds it one of his most popular dives.

SS San Tiburcio

Built in Shooters Island, New York the *San Tiburcio* was one of the fleet of tankers of the Eagle Shipping Co. Ltd. This company suffered many wartime losses and the *San Tiburcio* was lost on May 4, 1940 after hitting a mine. The cargo was 2193 tonnes of flammable fuel oil and floats for Sunderland seaplanes.

The *Tiburcio* was huge with a gross tonnage of 5995gt and 125 metres in length. This was confirmed to me as I descended the line noting that everything was double



Marine life is fantastic on San Tiburcio and the green water and colourful soft corals make it very photogenic.



normal size. A winch of monstrous proportions sat upon the deck aft of the forecastle and the *Tiburcio* certainly had mooring bollards fit for an oil tanker.

After a quick look at the starboard anchor five metres below deck level, we headed aft along the starboard side of the deck. Here a torpedo shaped device which turned out to be the mine sweeping gear was noted. The flying walkway runs the whole length of the bow section, four metres above the level of the deck. This walkway was used to connect the essential areas of the ship. When she was fully laden with cargo the deck would be awash and only the bow, bridge and stern would be above water.

The ship split in two on sinking but both sections can be explored in a single dive, if you don't mind a fair bit of deco. A rope connects the sections with a ten metre gap in-between. The bow section which is intact to the bridge area, is generally accepted as the more interesting part of the wreck.

Marine life is fantastic on this wreck and the green water and colourful soft corals make the wreck very photogenic. There is also plenty to see as we passed empty holds with ladders leading down into their bowels.

Finally we reached the bridge area and dodged a large Lions Mane Jellyfish. We entered the structure and found what we were looking for. The white enamel of the captain's bath partially covered by weed, could be clearly seen in his cabin. From the port side of the wreck here the line leads to the stern section. This area has suffered much more damage and is less intact. Pipes are visible as is engine equipment and boilers. The gun platform at the very stern of the ship is the most impressive feature of this part of the wreck

and the gun lies on the sea floor near by.

Valentine Tank

Findhorn Bay was the site for top secret D-Day landing trials. It is believed that 8 tanks were lost in total here. Due to the secrecy that surrounded the operations only two have been found. It is believed that one man lost his life in the Findhorn tank and therefore it should be respected as a war grave.

As the *Top Cat* moored above the site, the dark tank shaped object could easily be identified on the sea floor 10 metres below us. The clean sand on which the vehicle rests adds light to the scene.

It's all there - the turret, wheels and tracks. I even noted a part of the canvas skirt still survived. This was the device, which enabled this Duplex Drive tank to float. This thin skirt displaced enough water to enable a 14 ton tank to float whilst also disguising the fact that a tank was coming ashore.

Unfortunately for this one and some more like her in the area, the system failed and the tank now lies just off its intended mock invasion beach. The propeller that drove the vehicle in the water has now gone and the track on the port side is damaged but apart from that, this little wreck is in an amazing state of preservation.

It's a small site but for photographers it's a must. After I had taken all my tank shots I noted loads of marine life including pipe fish, Edible Crab and lobster inhabiting the wreck. This turned out to be my third and last dive of the day and it certainly maintained the high standard set by the earlier ones.

Moray Diving Fact File overpage

Left: Valentine tank; above: Diver on the Unity and main picture on P14: Diver in Unity doorway



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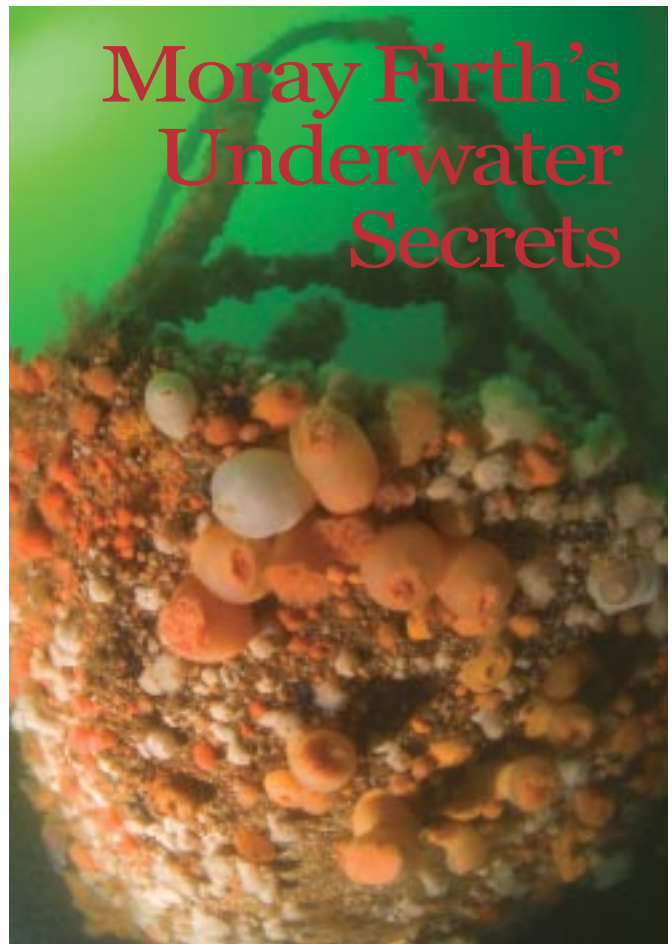
Hydro-lock Seal System
Minimum water ingress



Thermoflex Construction

Hydro-lock Seal System

Plasma seams



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The bow of the Unity

FACT FILE

<i>Verona</i>	5751.64N 00338.61W	depth 39-42 metres
<i>San Tiburcio</i>	5746.53N 00345.60W	depth on deck 26-29 metres
<i>Valentine tank</i>	5741.69N 00331.31W	depth 10 metres
<i>Unity</i>	no gps pos. available	25 metres

air/nitrox available on *Top Cat*
accommodation available at nearby caravan site (highly recommended) > take A9 to north of Avimore and branch off to Elgin. Lossiemouth is 4 miles further on.

PROS

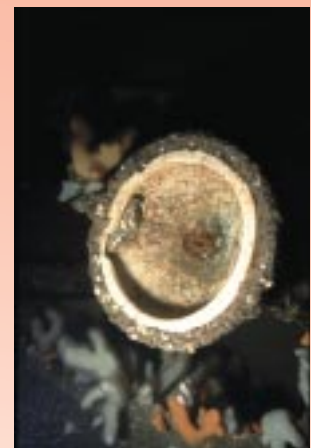
- ✓ Bill Ruck is an excellent skipper and the *Top Cat* is a first class boat fantastic wreck diving;
- ✓ majestic marine life including frequent surface sightings of cetaceans beautiful scenery;
- ✓ not over dived.

CONS

- ✗ The A9 road is a bind as it only has sections of dual carriageway. Give yourself extra time - 4 hrs from Edinburgh. Far away from most folk (can be a very big plus)

SLIPWAYS

Slipways are Lossiemouth, Burghead, Findhorn (very tidal) but free public slip, or Nairn (tidal) but free. Burghead tends to be the more popular slip for RIBs as fairly easy to launch, about £7 a day, fresh water tap at slip, local free toilets, and well positioned for the tank, *Verona* and *San Tiburcio*.



Ornate toilet bowl on the Verona

CONTACTS

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