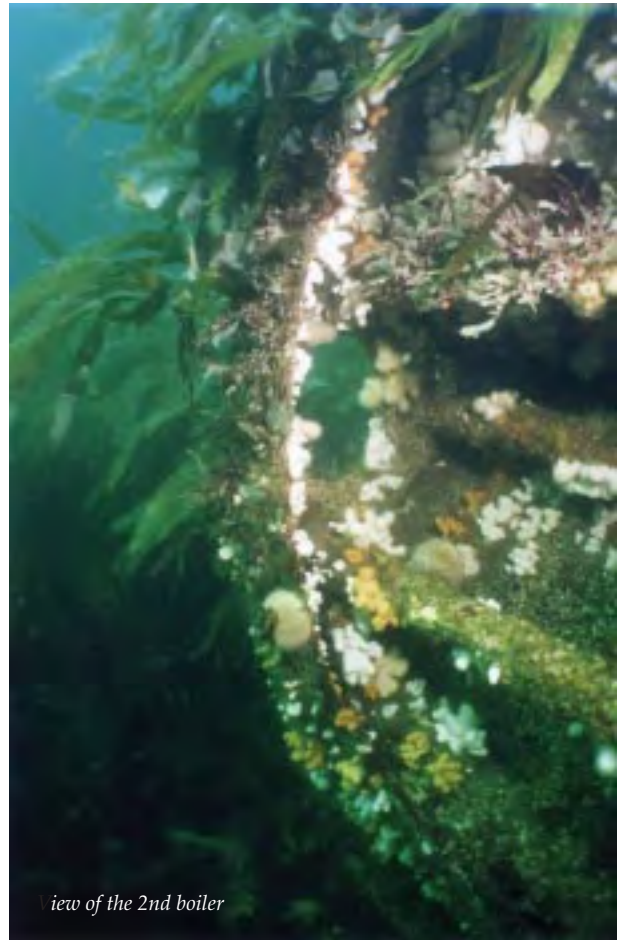


# The Wreck of the Alfred Erlandsen

The story of the Alfred Erlandsen is a poignant one. However the tragedy of 1907 galvanised the St. Abbs community into funding its own lifeboat. Here is the story of the demise of the Danish steamer and the details of how you can dive the wreck ...

Alison Fuller-Shapcott



View of the 2nd boiler

ANY VISITOR to the small fishing village of St Abbs on the Berwickshire Coast can't fail to notice the dominant feature of the lifeboat station in the centre of the harbour. The RNLI lifeboat station was established at St Abbs in 1911 as a direct result of the sinking in 1907 of the Danish steamer the *Alfred Erlandsen* with the loss of all hands. The only survivor was reported to be the ship's dog, a Great Dane, which was found wondering on the shore shortly after the disaster.

The *Alfred Erlandsen*, a two masted steam ship (registered tonnage 954) was on route from the port of Riga to Grangemouth with a cargo of timber pit-props for Messrs Kirkwood and Co., Glasgow. On board was the captain of the vessel, J Larsen, 17 crew and a woman passenger.

It's not entirely clear why the *Alfred Erlandsen* hit the rocks of Ebb Carrs reef, just off St Abbs, on Thursday, October 17, 1907, as she was well off her proper course. A newspaper report of the sinking stated that there was a heavy easterly sea and a fog which came down about 7 o'clock that evening. It was thought that the captain was trying to hug the coast because of the fog, but came too far inland as the reef, which was to cause her demise, lies only about 600 metres from the harbour wall.

Because of the fog, the first the people of St Abbs knew about the disaster was the sounding of the ship's horn, which

was reported to have continued to sound until water got into her boiler. Soon after this the sound of the vessel grating against the rocks could be heard by people on shore.

When the fog lifted at about 9 o'clock that night, the vessel could be seen lying on the rocks. The Eyemouth coastguard was alerted and by half past 10, rockets were fired from Castle Rock Villa in St Abbs, to the vessel, but these failed to reach the ship.

Both the Eyemouth and Skateraw (Dunbar) lifeboats were also called out to assist. The Eyemouth lifeboat reached the scene at about midnight. A newspaper report on the wrecking gives the following account from the Eyemouth coxwain:

"About 10.30 we left with a land crew and arrived at the scene of the disaster about midnight. The sea was running high and waves were breaking over the deck and funnel of the vessel, which were half submerged. Signal lights were sent up, but there was no response from the wrecked vessel. At considerable risk the lifeboat made a circuit of the scene of the disaster as far as it was possible and, seeing no evidence of life aboard, she returned to the harbour about two o'clock on Friday morning."

The Dunbar lifeboat had a distance of 10 miles to cover to reach the scene, and when they arrived between 2 and 3 o'clock on Friday morning, they found it difficult and dangerous to reach the

wreck due to the cargo of pit-props, now floating free on the surface of the water. However they stayed and searched the wreckage until it was clear that there were no survivors and their services were no longer required.

Walter Fairbairn, the cox of the Dunbar lifeboat reported that he and his men had had a terrible night, the weather was very bad, and he could not remember being out in, or seeing a heavier sea. They (the crew) had had to pull almost all the way, though the sail was also up.

The loss of the *Alfred Erlandsen* and all on board provoked great sadness within the community of St Abbs, especially as those who perished were in sight of land, and the community could do little but look on from the shore. Miss Jane Hay, of the Haven, St Abbs, wrote to the Edinburgh Evening News on the matter:

"As one of those who witnessed the tragedy which occurred at St Abb's on Thursday night I write to say that while personally I shall never rest content till we have a lifeboat and rocket apparatus of our own at St Abb's. There are certain smaller things which might be attended to at once.

"For instance, had it been possible, by means of a small suspension bridge from the mainland to Castle Rock, to get the rocket apparatus on to the rock itself, some lives might have been saved. Instead of which we watched the magnificently aimed rockets fall short of the vessel by just about that distance."



Above and above right: Hard Hat divers  
(images courtesy of the John Wood Photographic Collection)

So it was that the St Abbs lifeboat was established four years later in 1911, funded mostly by the Usher brewery family who were local residents. The first lifeboat was the *Helen Smitten* and in recognition of her efforts Miss Jane Hay became the honorary secretary of the new station. Today's lifeboat, the *Dorothy and Katherine Barr II*, is an inshore B class Atlantic 75 lifeboat for which this small community provides 15 crewman, 4 winchmen, 4 deputy launching authorities (DLA), 1 lifeboat operations manager (LOM) and 10 committee members.

The wreck of the *Alfred Erlandsen*, apart from her engine which was salvaged shortly after the wrecking by local hard hat divers Peter Ray and George 'Coco' Wilson, now lies well broken up within the gullies of Ebb Carrs reef. The wreckage is well covered in growth, and provides an extremely scenic dive.

The reef is partially submerged during high tide, so any boat operator needs to exhibit care when dropping off and

picking up divers. Although slack water is needed to dive the site, the maximum depth of 15 metres makes it accessible to all but complete beginners.

There are three main gullies in the reef, with the gully that contains most of the remains of the *Alfred Erlandsen* runs approximately south east (120°). The entrance to the gully is hard to locate from the north west, but if you find an upstanding boiler amongst the kelp, then this marks the start of it.

Follow the gully into the reef where more wreckage including a second boiler is found lodged between the rocks. The second boiler has most of its tubes exposed and is well decorated with deadmans fingers. According to Lloyds Register of Steamers (1907-8, Vol. 1) the *Alfred Erlandsen* only had one boiler, so the second boiler could indicate that there is wreckage from more than one steam ship on the reef, although there appears to be no record of another wreck.

If you carry on along the gully you will

find more wreckage including what appears to be a winch. At the end of the gully, the reef ends and there is a slight drop off. Turn left and go back on yourself into another smaller gully. Here there is more wreckage, but this is probably the remains of the *Vigilant*, a small motor fishing vessel which sank in 1977. Alternatively turning right at the drop off takes you to another gully which is much larger, steep sided with a pebble floor, a dead end and has almost no wreckage.

If you choose to circumnavigate the reef to the western side, you may come across a huge propeller (about 4m across), lying on the sea bed. Whether this is from the *Alfred Erlandsen*, I don't know. Every dive on this site turns up something different and with two or possibly three wrecks on the same site; it's difficult to be sure what comes from each wreck. However, whatever you find when you dive here, it is a rewarding site with a strong historical link to St Abbs.

## DIVING THE WRECK

Location 55.53.45N 02.07.15W

Slack water occurs roughly 3 hours before and 3 hours after high water at Eyemouth. However this varies depending on whether it is a spring or neap tide, and so it is always worth checking with the local hard boat operators.

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The current St Abbs' lifeboat



St Abbs' RNLI Station