

Retracing Our Marine Past



Fig 1. The Evelyn Rose (courtesy of Richard Barton)

The Sound of Mull has been an important seaway for centuries and the recent work of Scotland's marine archeologists has shed further light on its past. Philip Robertson reviews that work ...

A DECADE OF hard graft in the Sound of Mull by some 200 recreational divers has resulted in the recent publication of a record of the underwater heritage of this nodal 32km-long sheltered sea route, linking north and south. Under the auspices of the Sound of Mull Archaeological Project (SOMAP) and in return only for a holiday (of sorts), their efforts have helped to record in detail well known wreck sites. These include the Belfast-built steamship *SS Thesis* and the Welsh slate schooner *John Preston*; while previously unknown sites have been brought to light and catalogued for posterity.

And for the 1000 or more divers whose preference is only to visit and enjoy the area's underwater heritage, the SOMAP project has facilitated access to protected historic wreck sites hitherto out of bounds to all but the very few.

The brochs, cairns, castles, boat houses, harbours, and fish traps that mark the coastline of the Sound of Mull hint at the importance of the sea throughout 10,000 years of human settlement. The attention of nautical archaeologists turned to the Sound of Mull following the discov-

ery in 1973 by Bristol University of the fifth rate frigate *HMS Dartmouth*, lost in 1690 while mounting an attack against the Maclean stronghold of Duart castle.

The subsequent discovery of the similarly well preserved historic wreck of the small warship *Swan*, below Duart Castle, prompted extensive investigations by the University of St Andrews that have brought to light much new information about naval activity in the Western Isles and illustrated how the introduction of seaborne artillery rendered castle fortifications, once impregnable, vulnerable to attack from the sea.

History records intense activity by the Royal Navy in the Sound of Mull during the 1745 Jacobite Rebellion, with naval ships collecting intelligence, harassing inhabitants and preventing assistance from reaching the rebels loyal to Bonny Prince Charlie.

The inaugural Sound of Mull Archaeo-

logical Project (SOMAP) field school took place in 1994, the brainchild of Martin Dean, head of St Andrews University's then Archaeological Diving Unit (ADU) and Chris Underwood (Nautical Archaeology Society). They perceived that, by harnessing the enthusiasm of the many recreational divers that visit this area and by providing training opportunities to develop skills, it might be possible to develop over time a greater understanding of the numerous other underwater sites thought to exist.

While the fundamental principles of archaeology on land extend to the sea, recording complex 3D structures using tape measures, drawing boards and photography (the basic tools of archaeological survey) at up to 30 metres depth, presents considerable challenges. Mistakes have been made and lessons learned but through enthusiasm, skill,

Richard Barton's father served as a crewman on board the Evelyn Rose, lost at Ardtornish Point in 1954. 10 of her 12 man crew died in the accident. Richard's quest to locate his father's grave reached a satisfactory conclusion when remote sensing identified an intact vessel, lying at a seabed depth of 115m below chart datum, 330m south of Ardtornish Point ...



Fig 2. Recording keelson structure at western end of site (Peter Pritchard)



Fig 3. Cannon underwater (Philip Robertson)

and perseverance, the efforts of SOMAP participants have succeeded in significantly adding knowledge.

They have been assisted by contributions from Historic Scotland, academia, and private industry, most notably in the undertaking in 2004, of a major remote sensing project to record all known sites using high resolution multibeam and side scan sonar.

Readers of **SCOTTISH DIVER** will be well acquainted with the wrecks of the *Rondo*, *Hispania*, *Shuna*, and *Pelican* but perhaps the sonar maps of these sites will help visitors to better understand these important wrecks on the seabed. Many of the other sites recorded will be less well known.

Richard Barton's father served as a crewman on board the Fleetwood-based steam trawler *Evelyn Rose*, lost at Ardtornish Point December 31, 1954 (see fig 1). Ten of her 12 man crew died in the accident. Richard's quest to locate his father's grave reached a satisfactory conclusion when remote sensing identified an intact vessel, lying at a seabed depth of 115m below chart datum, 330m south of Ardtornish Point.

Also deep is the wreck of the puffer *Logan*, lost off Lochaline Pier on December 15, 1961 on route from Troon to Skye with a cargo of coal. Fife-based rebreather diver David Greig verified remote sensing records and confirmed that the *Logan* is lying upright on the seabed, providing a welcome reminder of the contribution made by puffers as a vital cog in the economy of rural areas in the West of Scotland.

Certainly, the Sound of Mull was known to the captain of the Tobermory galleon in 1588 and the cartographer Joseph Huddart in 1794 confirms that the 'track for sailing from the west coast of Britain to Norway' involved a passage through the Sound of Mull, avoiding the exposed western side of Mull where shallows, currents and rocky outcrops were hazardous to mariners.

The two-masted Welsh slate schooner *John Preston*, built in 1855 at Port Dinorwic, North Wales and registered in Caernarfon, was one of six such vessels that foundered in the Sound of Mull

between 1869 and 1896, bound for harbours in the north and north east of Scotland.

A dive on the 'Slate Wreck' is only a short RIB-trip from Lochaline. To many who visit her, she is only a scattered pile of slate, rotting wood and corroded metal, but detailed analysis of the remains indicates that substantial sections of hull structure are partially buried (fig 2). The remains of an anchor windlass, bilge pump fittings and the ships stove can also be found down slope. There is also evidence of substantial repairs over 27 years of coastal trading in slate, iron and coal, with occasional cross-channel and North Sea voyages.

Areas such as Scallastle Bay are recorded as known anchorage areas, and the seabed is littered with anchorage debris. Lochaline-based scallop diver George Foster identified a collection of cast iron guns in Scallastle Bay around 1991. SOMAP surveys confirmed six guns, a clay pipe dating to around 1830, and a lead apron cover. The enigmatic presentation of the guns is hard to interpret (fig 3), but it seems most likely that this site is not a shipwreck but a jettisoning of material within a busy anchorage area.

The loss of the *SS Thesis* around midnight on October 16, 1889, less than two years after entry into service, has bequeathed to Scottish archaeology the substantially intact remains of a largely unaltered example of the typical, unsophisticated steamship which formed the basis of the British merchant fleet at the height of its worldwide presence and during a period of heavy and expanding coastal trade around the UK. Today, 'the skeleton wreck' as she was nicknamed

when discovered during the 1980s, is one of Scotland's most popular diving wrecks.

Academic reasoning would have it that archaeology can add little by way of knowledge to the study of post-industrial maritime history, given the extent of available documentary evidence. Yet, as SOMAP research showed, the principal historical accounts relating to the loss of the *SS Thesis* (Lloyds List and *Oban Times*) contradict one another: Belfast to Middlesbrough or vice versa, and with a cargo consignment of pottery and pig iron, or iron ore.

Scientific analysis of the contents of the forward hold suggests an ore as opposed to a pig iron. The position of the wreck strongly indicating too that the ship originated in Belfast, most likely carrying iron ore mined in the Antrim hills, and bound for the smelting industrial heartlands around Middlesbrough.

The tentative reconstruction (fig 4) is based on extensive surveys, documentary research and a photograph of a sister ship *Theme*, also built by the Belfast yard of MacIlwaine and Lewis, for the Belfast shipowner William Grainger.

In common with many other industrial period wrecks in British waters, evidence from the *John Preston* and *Thesis* indicates the pace at which these sites are evolving. Many commentators believe that, within a hundred years or so, the wrecks of iron-built ships will exist as little more than a pile of iron ore on the seabed. This is most likely due to a complex interplay of natural and, in some cases, man-made drivers of change.

We know less about marine historic sites than we do for those on land. It is therefore clear from the SOMAP project that recreational divers hold an important key to unlocking the potential of the marine historic environment, whether through enjoying and respecting marine historic sites so that current and future generations can continue to benefit from these, or through recording, to help improve knowledge about what marine historic sites exist where on the seabed of Scotland.

The work of the Sound of Mull Archaeological Project continues into the future. For more information about SOMAP, please contact Mark and Annabel Lawrence at Lochaline Dive Centre (01967 421627).

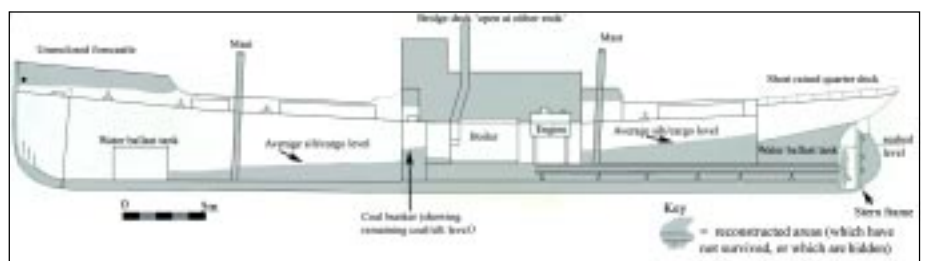


Fig 4. General arrangement and tentative reconstruction of *SS Thesis* (Philip Robertson)