



The Far Mulberry

From time to time

Alison Fuller-

Shapcott leaves her

St Abbs base and

returns to the south

coast and a chance to

revisit favourite dive

sites with a

fascinating history ...

EACH SUMMER I head down to the south coast of England; partly to give my young son the chance to be spoilt rotten by his grandparents, and partly because it gives me the chance to dive some of the more unusual underwater locations on the West Sussex coast. Although I originally hail from Hampshire, West Sussex is only a short journey along the M27 from my parents' home and has some lovely beaches and excellent dive opportunities.

Two of the numerous dive sites on offer along this coast are amongst my top 10 favourite dive sites. These sites are slightly different from my usual diving around St Abbs because they are both essentially man-made reefs. Both are shallow and undemanding dives, but very rewarding as they provide a good opportunity to see marine life not normally encountered further north.

The first of these sites is called the Far Mulberry. Before I tell you about the dive, I would like to give you a little bit of the historical background to the site, and you might then see why I am so interested by it.

I spent much of my childhood playing on the beaches of Hampshire, the Isle of Wight, and during family camping holidays, the beaches of Normandy. And it wasn't uncommon for my brothers and I to clamber and play amongst the relics of a very important period of British history, namely World War II and more specifically the D Day Landings (code named Operation Overlord).

During WWII the English Channel played an important part in defending Britain against enemy attack, but later in 1944, when allied forces planned an invasion of northwest Europe, via the beaches of Normandy, that same stretch of water became a problem. The Germans had fortified all the Channel ports on the French side and so any invasion attempt by the allies would fail

due to the lack of a suitable supply route. They needed a landing area where millions of tons of supplies could be off loaded to support the allied troops.

The solution came in the form of two huge artificial harbours which were prefabricated in secret in Britain, assembled and then towed across the channel. The harbours were code named 'Mulberries'. One harbour was to support the American sector beaches at Omaha; the other harbour was to support the British and Canadian forces at Arromanches.

The Mulberry harbours were made up of many individual prefabricated sections of steel and concrete. When assembled the sections (given the code names Phoenixes, Spuds, Beetles, Whales and Gooseberries) made up ports, breakwaters and pontoons, where supply ships could moor up and unload their cargo.

The largest sections were the huge, multi compartment, hollow blocks of reinforced concrete known as caissons (code named Phoenixes). 147 caissons were constructed in six different sizes; the largest of these, the A1 Phoenix, measured approximately 70 metres long by 15 metres wide and 20 metres high, and weighed up to 6,000 tons.

They were to be part of a protective breakwater around the Mulberry harbour. Many of these were constructed at Lepe Beach on the edge of the New Forest close to my parents' home.



The shoals of bib can be quite hypnotic



A friendly tompot blennie

When completed they were winched down the beach and launched at high tide. They were then towed to a parking area at either Selsey or Dungeness, where they were sunk in shallow water out of sight. When required for Operation Overlord, they could be re-floated and towed across the channel to Normandy.

Not all the sections of the Mulberry harbour made it across the channel for various reasons, and one A1 type Phoenix caisson remains sunk in 12 metres of water, 2 miles to the east of Selsey Bill, West Sussex. The caisson is well broken up and sits, partly buried, on the mud and shingle seabed. The surrounding seabed is fairly featureless, so the 'Far Mulberry', as the site is now called, has become an artificial reef which attracts a huge diversity of fish.

The caisson is broken up - it was used as a bombing target in 1945 - and the inner compartments have been torn open. The remains of the caisson are now only a few metres high and a distorted mass of concrete and metal. It's well covered in various weeds and growths and home to a great diversity of marine life.

The dive is extremely popular and it is not unusual to see at least half a dozen dive boats on the site at one time. It is best dived at slack water, otherwise you spend most of your dive sheltering on one side of the wreckage from the current. The Far Mulberry is marked with a buoy, and it's normal to start the dive by descending the chain beneath the buoy down to the sea bed.

At the bottom of the chain, a rope has been laid out which you follow on to the site. This layout is slightly complicated by the fact that there are two other ropes leading off from the Mulberry to two other dive sites which also remains for WW II; a landing craft and what is known as a cuckoo.

The cuckoos were air-sea rescue floats, moored off the English coast. These offered refuge to returning air crew who may have been forced to ditch in the sea

before reaching land. Having these other ropes leading off from the Mulberry, means that at the end of the dive it is advisable to remember which rope is the correct one to follow back to the chain and buoy for your ascent.

The dive on the Mulberry is extremely simple. It seems to be the convention that all divers circumnavigate the remaining structure in a clockwise direction. It is possible to swim over the middle of the Mulberry, and poke about in the internal compartments, but be aware that there are plenty of bits of sharp metal to snag equipment.

Essentially this is a relaxing, bimbly sort of dive where at a maximum depth of 12 metre, you have plenty of time to observe the life, of which there is plenty. One friend of mine described it as swimming in an aquarium. To start with, the shoals of bib are fascinating, almost hypnotic to watch. I have in the past, sat motionless on the bottom, allowing the bib to flow past me; their silver and black vertical stripes, rippling and glinting as they move. It is a wonderful sight.

I have also seen ballan wrasse, cuckoo wrasse, corkwing wrasse, pollack, cuttlefish, goldsinny and hundreds of tompot blennies. I have been assured that there are congers, but never seen one yet despite looking.

There are also lobsters hiding under the overhangs, and large spiny spider crabs which are rarely seen up on the east coast of Scotland. These large long legged crabs apparently make good eating. A very long time ago Dave, a diving friend of mine, was determined to catch one of these crabs for his tea. He eventually did net a rather old, barnacle covered specimen off the Dorset coast. We were never sure if the crab didn't see it as a form of euthanasia and gladly crawled into his goody bag.

However he took it home, cooked it, and invited his friends round to share the treat. Unfortunately the resulting tablespoon full of crab meat didn't stretch very far, and it made us all realise

that its far better to leave these crabs in the sea.

As well as the fish, the whole structure of the caisson is covered with short weed (hornwrack), a huge variety of sponges, jewel anemones, Devonshire cup-coral, dead men's fingers and on the shingle seabed, snakelocks anemones. The range of life is so great on this site, that the Marine Conservation Society made it the focus of a special survey in 1995.

You can easily spend an hour on this site; gently drifting around the edges, poking amongst the collapsed compartments. Most of the caisson is a jumbled mess, but occasionally you can pick out a mooring bollard or pipe flange to remind you what this structure once was. However, it hard to believe that this 'reef' was designed and built to aid the landing of thousands of troops and hundreds of tons of supplies on the beaches of Normandy. But because it never made across the channel, it now has a second life as a great weekend attraction to divers and home to a huge number of fish.

Main image on overpage: Another part of the Mulberry harbour on Alldwick Beach, W. Sussex

FACTFILE

Several dive operators run boats out to the Far Mulberry. For more information contact:

> Mulberry Divers, Selsey
Tel 0143 601000

www.mulberrydivers.co.uk

> Wittering Divers, East Wittering
Tel 01243 672031

www.witteringdivers.co.uk

> A Divers Guide to West Sussex by Kendall McDonald
Underwater World Publications

For more information on the part the Mulberry Harbour played in the D-Day Landings see:

www.24hourmuseum.org.uk/trout/TRA22190.html



Tubeworms hiding in a crevis



Some fittings are still recognisable amongst the twisted wreckage