

Paddlin On The Clyde

The Clyde is one of Mike Clark's favourite places for wreck diving and in this article he bypasses the usual suspects to explore two less well-known wrecks. Did he enjoy the experience ...

I KNOW I will never tire of diving the popular wrecks in the Clyde such as the *Akka* and the *Wallacia*, but when the opportunity to dive a couple of different wrecks presented itself, I felt the spirit of adventure return to me. The chance of exploring something new had me counting off the days on the calendar until the date of the trip.

These wrecks are by no means new, in fact, both sank in the 19th century. They have two things in common - both were paddle steamers and both now lie on the Clyde's sea floor a few miles from each other.

The first vessel was long, sleek, beautiful to look at and very fast for her time. The second vessel was a paddle tug all brute force, short and squat. Two very different vessels powered by the paddle wheel.

As we cruised up the Clyde on the Charter boat *Clutha* (which means spirit of the Clyde), I hoped for a view of the *Waverley* which is the only surviving sea going paddle steamer left in the world. She still plies the Clyde on occasions. That said, no matter how mild this January morning was, there would be very little use for her services as the summer tourist season was still a long way off.

That day the sea was reasonably calm although a storm warning had been issued. The race was on to take advantage of the calm before the storm and enjoy the wonders of this sheltered estuary before things got a bit uncivilised.

The Iona

I was intrigued by the *Iona's* history and that of many of the Clyde built paddle steamers. In the 1860s they were in great demand but not in Scotland. The American Civil war had erupted. In 1861 President Lincoln demanded that all the Southern Confederate ports be blockaded. This created the need for blockade runners and the Clyde paddle steamers being very fast and with a very shallow draught of only three metres as in the case of the *Iona*, were ideally suited for this very risky but potentially profitable business.

As you can imagine there was a great demand for these vessels and Confederate agents in Scotland were paying top dollar, using fronts and fictitious companies to disguise their activities. The *Iona* was purchased, painted grey and stripped of most of her fittings before she set out on her final journey on October 2, 1862. Disaster would strike almost before the journey was properly underway. The *Iona* would not even pass the prominent landmark of the Cloch Lighthouse.

The cause of *Iona's* sinking is disputed. The other vessel involved was the newly launched steam ship *Chanticleer*. She had been undertaking sea trials at the measured mile at Skelmorlie. Just before

7pm and after darkness had fallen, the *Chanticleer* was heading past the Cloch light and heading straight for the *Iona* at a rate of 8 knots.

The *Iona* was very nearly sliced in two, being hit just aft of the paddle wheel box. The crew of the mortally wounded *Iona* all escaped on to the *Chanticleer*. It was said by *Chanticleer* crew that some of these men who were not local were drunk. The biggest surprise however, was that of a stowaway scrambling from his hideaway to the safety of the *Chanticleer*.

Iona crew would state that the *Chanticleer* displayed no lights and came out of nowhere. The *Chanticleer* tried to push the *Iona* ashore but the attempt was futile and the *Iona* disappeared below the waves very quickly to her resting place in 28 metres of tidal water. The captain of the *Iona* even refused assistance and a line from another vessel, until he received confirmation that the *Chanticleer* would accept responsibility for the collision. It was never granted and the *Iona* missed her opportunity to be saved.

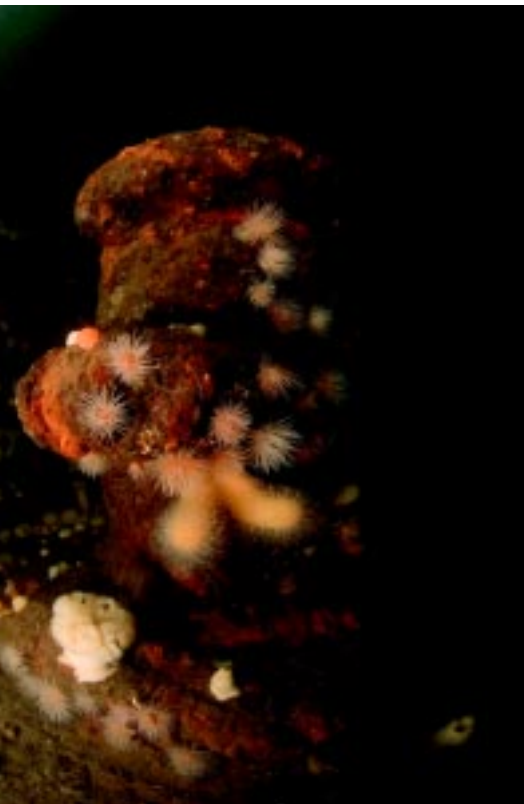
She now lies on the muddy sea floor off Gourock. The river is quite narrow here and you may experience strong tidal movement. This usually disappears once you are on the wreck. Before you can dive her though, you will have to seek permission from the Clyde shipping authorities as the *Iona* lies just inside the shipping lanes at around 100 metres south east of the Whiteforeland buoy.

Diving at high tide provides the best conditions as this ensures the maximum amount of clearer water from downstream displaces the more murky water found here. We found the vis to be around three metres which isn't bad. At 17 metres though the green water turned darker but the vis was maintained.

The strong tidal movement abated as we landed on the wreck just forward of the front funnel. I had expected to discover the usual hole in the deck but was surprised to see the internal remains of the funnel rising a good couple of metres out of the deck.

Further forward was a bulkhead, the sea floor was now a field of large pieces of coal. Fuel for the long Atlantic crossing. The hull disintegrates here and the bow is fairly broken. Retracing our steps and passing the funnel again, two of the *Iona's* four boilers were noted in their horizontal position, side by side.

The most impressive feature of the wreck was now noted, as the engine workings, the massive brass counter weights and the drive shaft which is connected to the two paddlewheels was viewed. I followed the shaft across the wreck.



Colourful growth on a mooring bollard off the *Iona*

This felt a bit strange as I am accustomed to following a prop shaft along the length of a wreck and eventually arriving at a prop. This time though, I moved out over the hull of the wreck and I felt the tide catch me at this point but there before me was the starboard paddle wheel. The housing has gone but the wheel is in a fairly good state of preservation. This was exactly the area I had come to explore and I certainly was not disappointed.

The *Iona* had more to offer though, and as we finned further aft, the second pair of horizontal boilers came into view and just behind these the aft stack was noted also rising a good two metres out of the deck. After a small hold, the severely damaged stern section is completely collapsed either under the mud, or there is a good argument that the stern was completely severed in the collision that sunk the *Iona*. All that remains visible now is another huge carpet of coal. The hull of the ship has broken off at deck level and now lies under the mud.

Over the years the wreck has been well pillaged and no brass work remains. There have in the past been interesting finds though, and these included jars of preserved fruit and a pair of binoculars. All too soon though the shot line had to be found and our brief visit to this vessel was over.

Whilst I hung on the line, my thoughts turned to those brave men that were about to cross the mighty Atlantic in this small craft. Her three metre draught would certainly have provided an exciting journey had she made it out of the Clyde.

The Champion

With that name you could be forgiven for thinking that this was the sleek, beautiful, fast paddle steamer but in fact the *Champion* is our squat little paddle tug. Originally named the *Flying Javelin*, the *Champion* now lies quarter of a mile south of the Gantocks rocks only 300 metres offshore from Dunoon, lying in general depths of 36 to 38 metres.

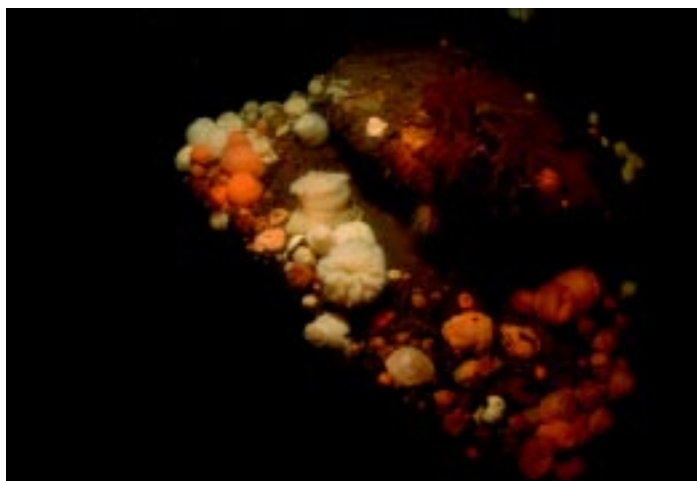
Built by J & T Eltringham of South Shields and launched in 1882, it was only five years later in 1887 when she made her first visit to the Clyde after being purchased by the Clyde Shipping Company. Her name was changed and from now on she would be known as the *Champion*.

Looking at an old black and white photo of her I now think my short squat description of her is slightly unfair. It is true that she is nowhere as graceful as the *Iona* but in the picture she is at full speed. White water is breaking at her bow and churning in a white frenzy under her port paddle wheel. Black smoke belches from her single tall stack. Three men can be seen standing in Victorian poses on her scant, little wooden bridge, which is open to the elements. She does look utilitarian; spartan with a lack of superstructure - all very Presbyterian. But then looking more closely at the photo, in the shadow under the bow *Champion* is emblazoned in large letters and her name also flies high from her single mast on a huge flag, which appears to be slightly bigger than her aforementioned bridge. A small ship with a big name and a big heart, which was obviously a source of immense pride to her new owners.

For 9 years she plied the Clyde, delivering mail to the small villages situated on the banks of the Clyde estuary. At this time, in this area, travel on land was difficult and the *Champion's* service was much valued by the surrounding communities. You can therefore understand their shock and despair as news filtered through on that foggy Wednesday morning of December 12, 1896 of the *Champion's* demise.

Another paddle steamer *Caledonia* was the culprit. Steaming at her usual speed, as if oblivious and unconcerned about the foggy conditions, she ploughed straight into the *Champion*. This was in spite of the victim's regular soundings of her steam whistle. The crew all survived by jumping onto the *Caledonia* but then there was an act of immense bravery. Captain Carsell returned to the now drowning *Champion* to rescue the mail. He made it out alive.

Diving the wreck, we planned for a bottom time of around 15 minutes. Long enough to view her remains at this depth. Our line took us straight onto the large boiler and I immediately noted the remains of the Port Paddle wheel. In the



Anemone colony on the Champion

torch light provided by other divers, I could clearly see the circular wooden remains of the wheel illuminated from behind. Each wheel's width is almost as wide as the ship. They look impressively large. The starboard one does though require a bit more imagination to visualise, as its in a less well preserved state.

Further aft is the base of the stack. A few circular openings here revealed a monster of a conger hiding out of our bright lights. The little wooden bridge having now completely disappeared, I saw only the metal boiler and engine workings remain here and a toiled bowl was discovered partially buried in the collapsed structure.

The hull does protrude around 0.5 metres out of the mud and the bow is visible. The stern was assumed to be the most intact area of the wreck from drawings that I had viewed. This has however collapsed into the seafloor. The very intact section of the heart of the ship and those remaining paddle wheels will quite easily keep a diver happy, providing a great dive in the limited dive time available at this depth.

The wrecks of the *Champion* and the *Iona* are there for divers to enjoy, giving us a last look at another method of propulsion now almost extinct. Both the *Champion's* and the *Iona's* engines and paddle wheels are well worth the time and effort to visit.

Many thanks to Elaine, Drew and Neil for a great time and for all the help given.

FACTFILE



Mike Clark dived with
Clyde Diving Charters
01475 522930
www.clyde-diving.co.uk
Excellent purpose
built hardboat *Clutha* with
skipper Elaine
- 20 years of
experience
diving
the Clyde.



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