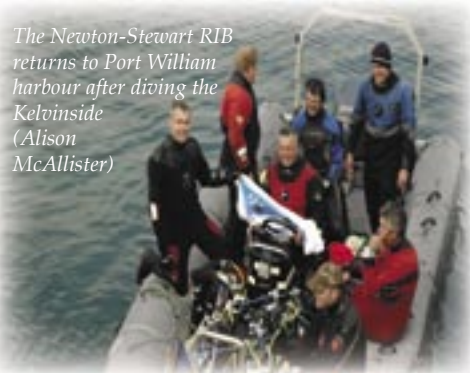




Off The Beaten Track

Calum Duncan and his band of trusty Seasearchers have been exploring new areas in their quest for that elusive sighting. From Galloway to the north-east coast, there's been lots happening this summer ...

The Newton-Stewart RIB returns to Port William harbour after diving the Kelvinside (Alison McAllister)



UPON RETURNING to the Newton-Stewart club RIB the general consensus was that the dive had been scenic but not as good as the previous day's wreck dive. But the Scare rocks (pronounced 'scar') in outer Luce Bay was my favourite of the weekend, encapsulating what Seasearch is all about, recording remoter sites because they are there.

Following the Seasearch Observation Course run for Newton-Stewart SAC in May, Solway Firth Partnership (SFP) invited me to return in June to help the club get Seasearch records for Luce Bay, a European Marine Site. Club lore confirmed the weather rarely plays ball and so most club diving is on known good dive sites sheltered in Wigtown Bay to the east. However, they moved their RIB from its usual Isle of Whithorn mooring to launch at Port William and were rewarded with calm seas during the final weekend of the SFP World Oceans Week.

Bay of plenty

Thanks to the club's experienced divers and skippers, Saturday worked like clockwork. 7 of us on the club RIB planed in good conditions to outer Luce Bay, the largest of its kind in Europe so I'm told, and the wreck of the *MV Kelvinside*, lying in 27m on clean tideswept shell and gravel seabed with lush hornwrack and dahlia anemones. Soft corals and plumose anemones clung to the wreck itself whilst shoals of bib and numerous wrasse added life and motion to a scene resplendent through 12m visibility.

Later that afternoon, a few hundred metres off the Port William slipway, a few of us dived a shallow sunlit site luxuriant with seaweed, sheltering small wrasse and snake pipefish. A chunky lone barrel

jellyfish (*Rhizostoma octopus*), silhouetted against the westerling sun, drifting serenely by and a swarm of sea gooseberries refracting tiny rainbows in the surface waters ended a dream diving day. To cap it all, the club had pitched tents and got a barbecue going at the Port William campsite – rarely has a beer and burger tasted so good!

Misty island dip

Sunday dawned flat calm, sun glinting on the bay and the Scare rocks solid on the horizon. After manning the stalls in a marquee for the Sunday arranged by SFP, that included MCS, Newton-Stewart club and the Scottish Sea Anglers Conservation Network, running their successful 'Shark-a-Tag' event, the RIB set off for the 'Scars' as the mist closed in. Luckily it kept sufficient distance to allow safe diving, but added prehistoric atmosphere as the notorious rock islets loomed into view.

After appreciating the ancient hub-bub of roosting gannets, we dived over tideswept rock and boulder reefs with hornwrack, soft corals and one wall of white *Sagartia anmones*, eventually ascending into rich, dense kelp forests in the shallows, a clean amber canopy of leathery blades. Perhaps not as dramatic as the *Kelvinside* for some on board, but undoubtedly wild and little explored! Thanks to Jim, Phil, Frank, Mel and all at Newton-Stewart Sub-Aqua Club; Pam and Sue at SFP; and to SNH for supporting the weekend. I look forward to future collaboration to help the club become local Seasearch experts for their patch and contribute toward managing this unique European marine Special Area of Conservation.



Kelp understorey at Scare rocks (Calum Duncan)



*Lesser-spotted dogfish (*Scyliorhinus canicula*) at Scare rocks (Calum Duncan)*

Elsewhere, the Seasearch season continues apace with over 100 records from Eye-mouth to Shetland, Loch Fyne to Aberdeenshire. Interesting records include flame shells in the breakwater at the Furnace quarry tea room site from Owen Paisley, groups of sea cucumber in the shallows at Lunnakirk Shetland from Linda Davis and more fireworks anemones and tall sea pens in upper Loch Fyne. The more we find out about our wild underwater landscapes, the more we can help protect them. Also, Chris Rickard reports from the opposite end of the country!

Solstice Action

FOR THE past few years, local divers and clubs have gathered at picturesque Millshore, by Pennan on the north Aberdeenshire coast for a weekend of diving and socialising. The simple aim is to celebrate and make use of the summer solstice – long days of balmy sunshine (possibly!). At first, only a handful of the most dedicated would show up, however this has now grown into a ‘proper’ event. Unfortunately, poor sea weather has rather stunted the numbers over the last couple of years, but I am pleased to say that around 20 divers, mainly from Aberdeen University club (AUSAC) and Ellon BSAC branch, made an appearance on June 20/21 this year. I tagged along with both and received some excellent diving in the process.

I have dived Millshore as a shore dive many times before, and although almost ridiculously shallow (a max depth of 7m is a ‘deep dive’ here!), it is one of my favourite local scenic dives. It has kelp forest with all the usual associated life, sandy bed and some very narrow swim-throughs and tunnels that meander amongst the jagged black rocks at the base of the cliff heading round to Cullykhan Bay. I have seen baby cuttlefish and swimming guillemots, as well as shoaling mackerel and weever fish.

Washing up at Lions Head
On this occasion, the weather was poor offshore, but the hardy AUSAC vaulted into the boat despite this and even found room for me. We headed west past Cullykhan to the next headland, known as Lion’s Head. We discovered a likely looking arch and plopped into 11m on a sandy



Above: Plumose anemone at Lion’s Head; main image on p.20: Lobster at Lion’s Head (both images - Chris Rickard)

bed in front of a gaping cave entrance. The arch above water is almost closed beneath, with just a foot or so gap separating two huge slabs of bedrock which make up the ceiling. A huge shoal of juvenile saithe flitted around us as we made our way into the cave. Thankfully, there was ‘light at the end of the tunnel’, a large pool near the surface approximately 20 metres inside the cave. The cave itself was stacked with life – Dead Men’s Fingers and plumose anemones littered the wall, while seabird eggshells gathered in eddies at the wall’s base. The pool at the back of the tunnel appears to be just that – no apparent way through to the other side of the headland, but close enough to the surface to allow waves to come crashing over the rocks and into the cave. Having finned to within 3m of the surface, I have now dubbed this site ‘The Washing Machine’, so proceed carefully here!

This was one of five dives this weekend. With seas calm-

ing on Sunday, I was able to pay my way onto the ESAC rib ‘The High Vis’ and dive a beautiful wall at Collieston Head, rounding off the weekend with another trip to the Washing Machine.

Living close by, I didn’t stay and camp but I have it on good authority that jolly japes were enjoyed by all on the Saturday night: barbecues, a glass or two of beer and even a stir-fry! It is so well organised there were even portaloos – I have no idea who arranged them, but they have become a fixture at Millshore Summer Solstice weekends ... thankfully!

Thanks to those who dived with me and allowed me onto their boats. I would recommend and encourage all divers to come and enjoy the Solstice weekend next year – it’s free and enjoyable – what a combination!

Chris Rickard
Northeast Scotland
Seasearch Co-ordinator



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MCS is grateful to Scottish Natural Heritage for support of the Seasearch project in Scotland.

FURTHER INFORMATION

[MCS in Scotland](http://www.mcsuk.org)
www.mcsuk.org

[Marine Reserves](http://www.marinereservesnow.org.uk)
www.marinereservesnow.org.uk

www.yourseasyourvoice.com

[Newton-Stewart SAC](http://www.nsdivers.co.uk)
www.nsdivers.co.uk

[Solway Firth Partnership](http://www.solwayfirthpartnership.co.uk)
www.solwayfirthpartnership.co.uk

[Luce Bay Marine Special Area of Conservation](http://www.lucebayandsandssac.co.uk)
www.lucebayandsandssac.co.uk

www.ssacn.org/sharkatag