



Portland
18-20th June 2004

The Technical Perspective

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Trip Report by Iain Smith

Divers:

- John Kendall (JK)
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The first rule of technical diving is to do everything you can to ensure that your kit and your mental state are optimised to give you every change of things going well. Actually, it's not. Rule Number One is something a bit different, as those who have investigated DIR in any detail will know. But the point I'm trying to make is this, before a big dive (or, indeed, any dive): don't drink and dive; give yourself time to put your kit together; don't rush; be well hydrated; be well rested.

Don't, whatever you do, spend the week before a diving weekend by working as the orthopaedic Senior House Officer on-take, so that you're rushed off your feet all day, every day, not eating properly, not drinking much, late home every night (and turning round and going straight out again to blend gas) and finishing up on the Friday night by doing revision hip surgery when your boss hijacks the first half of the afternoon list, so you can't get started on the major case (which you had the entire list set aside for) until after 1530 on a Friday afternoon.

(And if, by any chance, my boss happens to read this at any point, I did actually enjoy it - it's surgery I'm probably not going to get to see again for a few years and I'm glad I stuck around in the evening to do it. The above is purely for dramatic effect, as it makes a nice introduction!)

So some time after the combined group was supposed to meet up in Cambridge, I finally left hospital in Huntingdon and headed for home... and got a message that a good friend was in hospital and that it was fairly serious.

Three hours later, I finally picked Rosie up, loaded kit and headed south.

Too far south.

Unlike a previous occasion, I realised that I had missed the M3 junction well before the Gatwick turn-off from the M25, but that didn't make it any less frustrating. I maintain that it's the fault of the extensive road-works and miserable signposting, anticlockwise on the eastern part of the M25. Grrrr...

Coffee is good stuff: I was still awake when we arrived in Portland. Which, given that I was driving, is probably to be considered a good thing.

David was remarkably sanguine about being woken at 0430 to let us into the hotel... this might be due to the preceeding therapeutic faffage which he and John had taken the chance to do, fiddling both with their own kit and the eight new club reels needed by the recreational faction on the trip. Unfortunately by 0200, they had run out of things to do, so accepted the inevitability of a disturbed night's sleep.

Three hours later, it was time to get up. The combination of sleep deprivation and caffeine was, um, interesting. It wouldn't surprise me if the incredible drive to rush around and get things done is how it feels to have a mild form of mania. Fortunately, this wore off after a few hours...

Anyway, the diving. As often, off Top Gun...

Salsette

Depth: 45m

Bottom Time: 22 minutes

Mix: 21/35 + 50%

Deco: 1@24, 5@21, 1@18, 1@15, 4@9, 10@6, 1m/min to surface.

Refs:

- A. [Diver Wreck Tour 11](#)
- B. [Trimix Course dive](#)

Blazing sunshine on the way out to the wreck put us all in a good mood for this dive. Slack, however, was sufficiently rude to be 15-to-30 minutes late - resulting in an extended period in full kit, gradually becoming parboiled. Many thanks to the skipper for the buckets of seawater tipped over us!

Perhaps not quite in the same "shoving-the-fish-out-of-the-way-to-see-the-wreck" league as John and David's previous visit (See trip report 26-27 July 2003), it was still a very enjoyable dive with plenty of life, finishing with an enormous conger eel, who was considerably in excess of 6" in diameter.

The "Salsette" lies on her port side. We "landed" on her deck, aft of midships, with something of a current still running. As per the plan, we turned right and headed further aft, noting a number of possible penetrations. Some very picturesque swim throughs, nicely backlit by the sunlight that managed to penetrate this far down.

Shortly before we had to leave the bottom we reached a fairly broken area. I'm not sure if this was the stern, or if it was a broken area further forward.

This wreck is absolutely enormous and it's going to take me a few more dives to get a feel for where I actually am. Strangely, she is apparently about 25% shorter than the Scapa Flow battleships, yet I've swum the full length of them on one dive, which I certainly didn't on "Salsette". At some point, (and probably far sooner than I would like or can afford!) Diver Propulsion Vehicles are going to become essential pieces of equipment...

Ascent drills (DSMB and gas switches) rather more co-ordinated than on previous dives, probably because we had a specified order in which to deploy. However, we took rather longer than planned at 24m, so I think we need to consider whether we do all want to deploy at 24m (and if so, we need to make the 27m->24m step faster, to give us time to do so) or whether we can delay the DSMB deployment until after the switch at 21m.

My new pocket was still stuck to my leg when I came out - always comforting to find that one's home-modified drysuit stays together!

However, there was bad news on surfacing. A diver from another boat had surfaced unconscious shortly after we went down and had been airlifted to the recompression chamber. The initial information seemed to indicate an extremely poor prognosis and we set off back to Portland in a sombre mood. Seeing the Police and Coastguard boats waiting to receive the boat in question on its return was depressing. However we later heard that the diver had survived and was expected to make a good recovery.

As we were only doing one dive each day, the afternoon was spent doing what tekkies seem to like doing best after diving... playing with kit. The obligatory "new toys" were purchased from [Underwater Explorers](#), kit was fiddled with, and gas blended, much to the amusement of passers by, as long decanting hoses snaked from the back of various cars to twinsets. Iain finally got round to completing his blending course, some two years after starting it, though had a bit of a shock when, despite exact blending, one of the 50% bottles analysed out over 6% out... fortunately, by the following morning, it had settled down to 49.9% - which is good enough.

As a party of twelve, the Portland restaurants were always going to struggle to accommodate us without warning and as the feeling on recent trips has been that the Ferrybridge's food has gone down hill (especially since the demise of their unforgettable "Death by White Chocolate") and so we headed into Weymouth, where we had an enjoyable meal at one of the town centre pubs - huge portions and sensible prices, unfortunately let down by the slow service and the enforced viewing of the football.

However, on the more impressive side, we were all stunned by Rosie's attempts to consume her entire bodyweight in food... and still to be hungry at the end of it!

Buccanneer

Depth: 46m

Bottom Time: 28 minutes

Mix: 21/35 + 50% (+O2)

Deco: 1@27, 1@24, 5@21, 1@18, 2@15, 2@12, 5@9, 15@6, 1m/min to surface

Ref: [Diver Wreck Tour 58](#)

After our successful confirmation dive on the Saturday, we decided to continue our workup training by carrying oxygen stages for this dive. As well as the additional embuggerance of carrying the a second 7L cylinder, we also had to execute the correct drills in order to select the correct decompression mix. As this dive did not require the use of oxygen for decompression, we decided to dive it using a decompression schedule which assumed the oxygen was not available (i.e. using considerably more than half of the 50%). However, in the event of a deco gas failure, the 50% + oxygen schedule would be dived, as we each had more than twice the required deco gas for this.

Our confidence in our gas planning was put to the test almost immediately. At the 6m descent check, John's kit gremlin struck again and he found himself unable to inflate his suit (?leaking inflation cylinder). He therefore aborted and, in doing so, took away the "J-factor" in our rock-bottom gas calculations. At some point, however, one has to start trusting one's ability to add up, so David and I continued with the planned timings.

Descending rapidly in a "head down, freefall" position, I discovered that the speed of wing inflation is markedly slower at five atmospheres than it is at the surface. Fortunately, I (just) avoided the embarrassment of piling head-first into the seabed!

Also lying on her port side, the "Buccanneer" is a lovely wreck and, in our opinion, better than the Salsette. This may be because she's small enough that we were able to see all round the outside in a single dive. We initially dropped over the hull, but quickly changed our minds and came back over onto the decks.

Aft, where we started, there is a "garden hut"-like structure, which are engine room ventilation hatches. (In design, they are not dissimilar to those found on Stoney Cove's "Stanegarh") Wreck surrounded by fish, including some of the biggest I have seen in UK waters.

Moving forward, just above the seabed, we finned past the wheelhouse, and arrived at the 3" gun which dominates the bow. Liddiard's article in "Diver" describes how even the adjustment handwheels are still present on this weapon, but I was unable to find them. There were no

obvious areas of recent disruption to the encrustations, so I have no reason to believe that they have been "salvaged" by anyone. I felt also that the barrel is somewhat shorter than is suggested by the Diver sketch.

Both anchors are in situ on the bow, which one can get in underneath - large numbers of fish were hiding here.

Heading aft along the starboard gunwale, we noted a number of potential entry points for penetration, but would probably want to use 18/45 for such dives, as the beginnings of narcosis were perceptible, even with the limited FN2 of our breathing mixes. After the dive, looking at the twin 12s, two stages and suit inflation cylinder, it was amusing to think that once upon a time I thought it acceptable to do similar depths with a 15L of air with a 3L pony as backup.

Left the wreck on time and made a good ascent to 24m. At this point, I got rather confused with my DSMBs (which I was, for the first time, carrying three of in my right pocket) and ended up with all three DSMBs attached to my right chest D-ring. I think David thought I was trying to represent that brightly coloured baubles on a technical Christmas tree! Once I'd worked out what I wanted connected to where, deployment of my Halcyon DSMB was a dream. It's of a sufficiently small volume that it can be adequately inflated by exhaling into the non-locking connector, yet still be full on the surface, thus saving the need to fiddle with drysuit connectors (and the resulting jet of cold water into the chest when one connects back up again). David, of course, was feeling rather smug at this point, having been using one for some time and having finally convinced me of its virtues.

Remainder of the ascent relatively uneventful, though the constant trickle of water in through my left leg got me sufficiently cold and wet that I was giving serious consideration to cutting the final stop. It's never a good sign to start shivering at deco. David, meanwhile, was struggling with his trim, having reweighted to allow for his gucci DUI undersuit, but not having quite sorted out exactly where he wanted the weight to be. As we kept banging heads, he was yet again reminded of the need to polish up on his back-kicking, as once the DSMBs get tangled, it's the only way to avoid being swung together.

On our way back to shore, there was some lively radio traffic between the our boat and the boat carrying the recreational party... who initially completely ignored our waves. Apparently they "never liked us anyway"... which was quite a brave statement, given that they still need us around to marshal trips for them... :-)

Finally left Portland around 1930 for the long drive home... then sod all sleep and back to work for a twenty-four hour on-call shift on the Monday. Who needs rest?

Our next planned technical weekend is in five weeks time, in July, when we'll hopefully be diving some deep submarines. First dive leaves at 0730 on the Saturday.

My firm is on take for the week beforehand... uggghh!