



Swanage
21 st-23 rd April 2006

Trip organised by David Martin

Trip report by Matthew Watson

The line up:

- Rowena "Creme Egg" Crawford
- Edvin "Gas Guzzler" Deadman
- Joakim Eriksson
- Rich van der Hoff
- Mark "Conger Hunter" Jones
- Rachael Macdonald
- David "The Plan" Martin
- Karin Müller
- Holly "but we thought David had seen the rock coming" Standing
- Matthew "The Muppet" Watson

Boat: Swanage Diver

Accommodation: The Oxford Lodge, 3 Park Road , Swanage , BH19 2AA (01929422805) and The Oxford Hotel, 5 Park Road , Swanage , BH19 2AA (01929422247)

Gas Fills: Divers Down (<http://www.diversdownswanage.co.uk/>)

Day 1: Friday 21 st April 2006

The plan was clear (as mud)! Those of us leaving from Cambridge on Friday evening: Mark, Karin, Joakim, Rachael, Holly and myself met at the kit-store at 6 pm to sign out kit, load up the cars and drive down to Swanage where we would meet up with Rich and Rowena. Very little of the famed C.U.U.E.G. faff™ was apparent - all the items of kit remaining in one piece and the toolkit remaining firmly closed throughout the whole affair. However, in order to make up for the lack of faff, and hence restore balance to the universe, David's rather convoluted travel arrangements came into play. David would drive up to Cambridge late Friday evening, pick up the remainder of the kit and, after a few hours sleep, set off on the journey to Swanage at 5 am !!! with Edvin.

For those of us who made it to Swanage on Friday evening much fun was had. The journey went without incident and we arrived at the B&B a little under three hours after leaving Cambridge . It transpired that The Oxford was in fact two guest houses: the Oxford Lodge and The Oxford Hotel - Mark and myself were in the Oxford Hotel while everyone else was in The Oxford Lodge (do we smell or something?). After dumping our stuff in the rooms, it was time to hit the town. Swanage was quite lively for a small seaside town. A surprisingly large number of chavs had descended upon the town and driving around in sopped-up Ford Escort XR2is and Vauxhall Novas with wide-bore exhausts and under-lighters... We started out in a pub called The Ship, which was a little quiet for our tastes. We then moved across the road to The Anchor which was a much more "lively" pub, where we spent the rest of the evening.

Day 2: Saturday 22 nd April 2006

We arose bright and early to move the cars and the kit down to the pier before breakfast (in order to bag the best parking spaces). Everybody rushed back to grab breakfast with the exception of Mark and myself (not only did we end up in a different B&B to everyone else, but the proprietor's idea of an early breakfast was more akin to lunch than breakfast). We sauntered back to the B&B for breakfast, which was conveniently served approximately 5 minutes before we were supposed to meet David and Edvin at the pier – needless to say we were late...

Anyhow, onto the reason for the trip: The Diving

After minimal faff (well, to be fair, Mark and myself were 30 minutes late and people were only just starting to build kit, so we may have missed most of it) we trudged down the pier to meet our boat. The Swanage Diver, as the website says, is a RIB that thinks it's a hard boat, and at 40' long and 14' 6" wide with a diver lift!!! I can see why.

Dive 1: Old Harry Rocks

Old Harry is the name given to the chalk stack that can be found below the cliffs at Ballard Point, northeast of Swanage Bay. We were not actually diving around the rocks, but had a slow drift somewhere close by. The conditions couldn't have been better, the sun was shining and there was very little in the way of swell. I went in with Rich, Mark and Holly, but after stopping with Rich on the way down to clear my ears we ended losing Mark and Holly. How this is possible with 10 m + visibility is a mystery to me, but given we had conveniently separated into OD + DL and OD + AD pairs, Rich decided to put up another SMB and we continued the dive. For my first "real" open-water fun dive this was an excellent site. The bottom was at about 12 m, the current not too strong and the visibility amazing (compared to my previous experience in Porthkerris). The bottom was a mixture of sand and rocks with many anemones and a few dead men's fingers. We even saw three dogfish dozing? (or whatever it is that dogfish do) on the bottom. I had heard stories from a certain Ian Gregory about picking them up by their tail and waving them at your buddy, but given Rich seemed to be giving them a wide berth I decided against the idea (especially given he had prodded just about every other marine animal we had come across to see what it did). After about 35 minutes on the bottom, which went by all too quickly, it was time to surface and get my first experience of the diver lift, which was much more civilized affair than trying to get back onto the RIB for the first time in Porthkerris.

After returning to the pier and putting our cylinders in to be filled we were treated to the usual C.U.U.E.G. feast, which consisted of thin sliced ham or turkey, plastic cheese, crisps, apples and bananas. As we enjoyed lunch, we watched another group of divers exploring the wonders of the pier. At a depth of about 3-4 m the pier would have made a great third dive at the end of the day, but none of the DLs and instructors seemed particularly enthusiastic about the idea.

Dive 2: The Fleur de Lys

The second dive of the day was my first wreck dive. The Fleur de Lys was a small oak fishing boat built in Brittany in 1969 and brought over to British waters in 1989. The Fleur sank in 2000 after an explosion in the hot water system damaged the hull. Attempts were made to re-float the ship as she was towed to Poole harbour but proved unsuccessful, so the boat was abandoned in her current location on the north side of Swanage Bay. I was buddied with Rich for this dive, and due to our remarkable lack of faff (was I diving with the same club?), we were the first in. We swam over to the buoy fighting a slight current then headed down the line to the wreck. The first thing I noticed was the once again amazing vis. the wreck, which lies in about 13 m, was visible from about 3 m under the surface (the Skipper had said that due to the silty bottom the site was prone to low vis.) The wreck was in quite a bad way considering it had only sunk in 2000, the hull was starting to break up and there were several large holes where the superstructure had started in. We did a quick circuit of the wreck – Rich's canister light proved useful for spotting critters hiding in the wreck. We saw two huge ballan wrasse hiding in one of the larger holes. There was also a large shoal of bib swimming around the wreck. It was at this point that a diver plummeted from above straight through the middle of the shoal scattering them in all directions and sending up a huge plume of silt. It was at this point that I discovered the perils of laughing underwater. Your mask tends to flood and it's pretty much impossible to clear it until you manage to stop. After about 15 minutes and three circuits of the wreck we decided to drift off the wreck and I took a leaf out of Rich's book and molest the many blennies and gobies in the area by prodding them and stealing the scallop shells that many of them had set up home in. It was then over to me to launch my first blob (which went remarkably well) followed by a controlled ascent with a two-minute safety stop at 6 m. The only disappointment was that Mark and Holly had found a huge conger eel under the wreck, which Rich and myself, despite thoroughly investigating all the holes, didn't manage to find (though according to Holly that was a good thing).

After a quick shower back we headed out to a pub called The Red Lion on the recommendation of the B&B owner. The Red Lion won East Dorset CAMRA pub of the year, so it must be good. A chalkboard next to the door proudly announced that 4 real ales and 11 ciders were on tap. I started out on the ciders, but after a couple of pints at 9-10% switched onto the beers in order to survive the evening (and be in a fit state for diving the next day). The pub was a little shabby and unless you're going there for the real ale/cider I would stick to The Anchor just down the road.

Sunday 23 rd April 2006

Given the slightly earlier start this morning, rather than trying to break the world record for wolfing down breakfast and possibly incur the wrath of the skipper, Mark and myself decided to skip our lard fix and head down to the pier.

Dive 1: The Mussel Beds

The Mussel Beds is an area near the lighthouse, which rather ironically contains no mussels. Apparently, mussel beds used to extend about 400m out from the cliffs but over the last few years they have disappeared (or was the skipper just having a laugh...). I was buddied with Mark in order to get some SD boxes ticked off. The plan was a Mark Jones uber-training dive - we would descend, I would launch a DSMB from the bottom and tow it throughout the dive, then do a simulated deco stop on the ascent. David later pointed out that you couldn't role half the

SD syllabus into one dive, but that didn't stop us from trying. The drift was slightly deeper and significantly faster than the previous drift at Old Harry rocks and the bottom was slightly more interesting, rocky with a few small gullies and ledges. There was the usual assortment of anemones and seaweeds, as well as starfish and a large number of small wrasse that seemed unperturbed by the divers drifting by and actually swam over to investigate us. About half way through the dive I found a small screwdriver on the bottom and handed it over to Mark to look at. Mark duly adopted a maniacal expression and wielded the screwdriver a la Psycho shower scene. Why on earth I knowingly gave a sharp object to Mark underwater still perplexes me (perhaps nitrogen narcosis as still significant at about 14 m), but fortunately no marine life was harmed and my dive kit remained intact. The ascent and simulated deco stop went well and all too soon we were back on the boat. I think everyone had a good dive at this site, with the possible exception of David who was explaining the concept of buddy awareness to Holly and Rowena - Holly and Rowena had seen the ledge coming, unfortunately, David (who was drifting backwards at the time to keep an eye on them) hadn't. Apparently, they thought he must have seen it, so didn't bother to inform him of his imminent high-speed collision.

We enjoyed another C.U.U.E.G. style lunch, which went down a treat given I had missed breakfast and people generally fuffed with kit (or in Rich's case his car) while we waited for our second dive.

Dive 2: Perveil ledges

Peveil Ledges are a series of rocky ledges and gullies extending about a mile off shore from Durlston Head. We were dropped on the inner ledges where the depth varied between about 12-18 m. I was diving with Mark again and, having decided I wasn't too much of a liability underwater, he brought his video camera along. I towed the SMB and Mark "zoomed" around thoroughly documenting all the marine life that I failed to spot. I was especially embarrassed about not spotting the huge lobster sitting in a crack under one of the ledges (though to be fair Mark did have the advantage of a torch, and I was distracted by a pretty snakelocks anemone). The geology underwater was spectacular, with lots of rocky ledges and overhangs, but made for a lot of ups and downs, which after about 20 minutes got the better of Mark's sinuses, so we canned the dive and ascended.

After returning to the pier it was time to dismantle the kit and pack it away for the trip home. All in all we had a good weekend's diving.

There were plenty of sites in the 10-20 m range and the vis. was excellent. There are also a number of decent wrecks in the 25-30 m range like the Kyarra and the Betsy Anna if you want to run an SD trip. The Swanage Diver was a decent boat, but given the cost I would rather be on a hard boat for the day (though for those with a lack of sea legs the shuttle service may be preferred).