

Scapa Flow, 27th July - 3rd August

Trip Organised by Ruth Charles.

Trip report by Ruth Charles

Divers

- > Clemens Chaskel (AD)
- > Ian Gregory (AD)
- > Jan Lellmann (AD)
- > Simon Morley (AD)
- > Stephan Beiskan (DL)
- > Rowena Crawford (DL)
- > Stuart Moore (DL)
- > Adrian Carr (SD)
- > Ruth Charles (SD)
- > Greg Steele (SD)
- > Tanya Murphy (guest; CFT/CMAS Moniteur 1)

Organisation and Logistics

Scapa Flow is a natural harbour created by the surrounding Orcadian islands of Mainland, Hoy, Lambs Holm, Glims Holm, Burray, and South Ronaldsay. It has been used as a harbour since at least Viking times, and is perhaps most famously home to the sunken German Fleet which was scuttled there on 21st June 1919. We came intending to dive as much of the sunken fleet as possible, and were not disappointed.

Planning for the trip started in 2011. Scapa Flow is a world class dive site, with thousands of divers visiting every year. Consequently the first priority was to secure a suitable boat charter and accommodation at the most optimal time of year and a reasonable cost. Ian and Fiona Trumpess and the M.V Invincible of Scapa Flow diving (www.scapa-flow.co.uk (<http://www.scapa-flow.co.uk/>)) offered us an ideal combination of a liveaboard with an on-board compressor and dive lift that was available within the Summer weeks we wished to visit.

The committee were cautious as the costs involved were likely to be £4-500 per person, presenting a significant financial risk to the club. Spaces rapidly filled after the initial trip announcement in early 2012, with 10 people needed to make the trip financially viable. Although three people subsequently dropped out as the trip approached, there was some shuffling of places using the waiting list and when that still left places open we advertised externally to first the BSAC Eastern Region then in online forums. In the end 11 of the 12 places were taken, with Tanya Murphy joining us as a guest from Ireland.

Whilst preparing for the trip it became apparent that people had very different levels of flexibility and financial constraints regarding travel and holidays before and after the dates of the trip. Consequently we split into a number of autonomous groups with different travel and holiday plans surrounding the trip. Some took two days to drive north with stopovers in Inverness and Aberfeldy. Others drove from Cambridgeto the north of Scotland in one long day. Stuart successfully made it on foot by public transport. Ian, Rowena and Tanya left their cars in the long term parking at Scrabster making the crossing to Stromness as foot passengers, with dive gear pre-booked into dive trolleys. Two of the three cars that made the crossing to Orkney chose to cross between Gills Bay and St Margaret's Hope on the Pentland Ferries Catamaran as the costs for cars on this route were significantly lower. Than the more direct Scrabster to Stromness route.

Our charter boat, the M.V. Invincible, provided liveaboard accommodation for 7 nights. This included 6 days diving (two dives a day) with hearty 'double breakfasts' before and after our first dive each day, plus a hearty and warming soup for lunch after the second dive. In the evenings we either dined out, or cooked for ourselves in the tiny galley. The latter gave us a deep appreciation of Fiona's amazing breakfast-producing skills.

A requirement our DO had placed on the trip was that everyone must dive with independent air sources. In most cases this meant twinsets, although Rowena used a 15l cylinder and pony instead. The Invincible offered cylinder hire, so a number of our group hired either manifolded twins (£50 for the week) or independent twins (£60 for the week). The Invincible benefits from an on-board compressor, so our cylinders were refilled between each dive, with nitrox (at additional cost) being available for those that wanted it, although it's worth noting that only one mix of nitrox per dive for the group, and that the skipper uses a higher oxygen partial pressure for his calculations than the BSAC standard of 1.4.



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Stromnes Harbour

Having travelled north in separate groups, our party slowly assembled in Stromness during the course of Saturday. Just as my ferry pulled into St Margaret's Hope, I received a voicemail from the Skipper telling me that he had moored in a different location to that expected and some frantic texting followed between myself and Jan to try and help the German contingent find the Invincible as they were to arrive first. On arrival in Stromness I found the cause of the confusion - the main street was closed and a party was in full swing. Subsequent questioning of the locals revealed that the reason for this celebration was to mark the anniversary of Stromness 'no longer being dry' - a very worthy cause indeed.

After unloading our cars during the afternoon Jan, Clemens, Stephan and I wandered through town and settled on the Ferry Boat Inn as a good venue for supper. I was most delighted to find that they had Dark Island on tap. Shortly after we finished our meal Ian, Rowena, Stuart and Tanya arrived by ferry, so we helped them wheel their kit across to the Invincible and then had the fun of transferring kit across to the boat at low tide without a gangplank. As soon as we'd finished transferring their kit the final wave of Simon, Adrian and Greg appeared tired after a long day of driving from Cambridge and we repeated the loading procedure.

Some people wandered off to join the on-going party in Stromness. Being middle-aged and boring I retired to bed, somewhat exhausted in the hope that I would be fresh and awake for the first day's diving.

SUNDAY 28th July

The disadvantage of being moored close to the Ferry became apparent as the Hammnavoe prepared for its early morning sailing. My, it does have an interesting array of alarm bells and klaxons. Most people had emerged bleary eyed and on deck by the time Ian and Fiona arrived, and people noticeably perked up as Fiona explained her cunning concept of first and second breakfasts. By 8am we were underway, and heading for our first dive of the trip.

Dive 1: SMS Cöln II

We though we'd start with a nice easy dive on one of the shallower wrecks. The Skipper suggested the Cöln, which lies in 34m on its starboard side. As I had not been sufficiently organised to do my 35m depth progression before the trip, Rowena and I were limited to 30m and my computer showed that we ventured as far as 29.9m. The vis was good, perhaps 9-10m and we swam out to the bow and back, although we were unsuccessful in locating any guns. The water temperature was a balmy 12-13 degrees.



Stephan

explores ...

Over lunch we moored at Lyness on the Island of Hoy, which gave us the opportunity to wander around the Scapa Flow visitor centre and museum.

Dive 2: SMS Brummer

The Brummer was a fast mine-laying cruiser launched in 1915. She lies at a maximum depth of 36m on her starboard side.

After our failure in the morning, it was clear that our mission was to find the big guns. In this, we spectacularly failed once again despite heading to the prow where guns were apparently awaiting in abundance. We did, however, find the almost intact control tower. The vis was lower than the morning's dive, approx 7-8m.

Everyone had fended for themselves on Saturday night as they had arrived throughout the afternoon and evening. Consequently this was our first opportunity for a communal evening meal, and the Scapa Flow restaurant in the Stromness Hotel proved to be very welcoming hosts producing a table for 11 at very short notice.

MONDAY 29th July

We had moored up in the Invincible's usual space last night, which provided no respite from the ferry's klaxons and again a morning party slowly gather on the deck ahead of departure. However, Fiona had initiated us in the black art of the hot water boiler, so coffee and tea was available for the early birds.

Dive 1: SMS Kronprinz Wilhelm

The Kronprinz Wilhelm was our first dive on a Köenig class battleship. She lies in 38m, resting on her starboard main deck, the shallowest point of her upturned hull is 12-15m.

This was my first dive to 35m, which I found very disorientating, and after being confounded by the upside down rudders at the stern, I asked my buddy (Stuart) to take over leading the dive. He duly obliged, turning us towards the bow and finding a really large gun just beyond a broken up area. In truth we only really saw the stern end of the ship on this dive, although afterwards there a heated debate arose within the CUUEG party about which end was actually the bow and the stern, with groups who had gone in opposite directions on the wreck both asserting that they had seen 'the pointy bit at the front'. Tanya observed us all with bemusement. Ian wondered whether perhaps we might consider running the Wreck Appreciation SDC in the club next year...



We spent lunch time by a small island known as the Barrel of Butter, which, to the delight of the photographers on board, has a thriving seal colony. due to this seal p0rn may soon be invading the club's Facebook page.

Dive 2: SMS Karlsruhe

This was our shallow afternoon dive, with a max depth of 26m. Simon sat this one out due to a dicky tummy, while the rest of us explored the wreck. This has been heavily salvaged giving access to various tangled innards of the ship.

After we returned to port we took the opportunity of good weather to visit some of the famous archaeological sites on Mainland. We started at the Neolithic tomb of Maeshowe, where we discovered that advance booking was required. Slightly disappointed we went on to the Prehistoric village of Scara Brae (which as a qualified and experienced archaeologist I maintain is a prehistoric crazy golf complex). In the early evening drove on to see the Ring of Brodgar, from where we walked along the Ness of Brodgar to see the Stones of Stenness in the World Heritage area while they were relatively tourist free.



CUUEG at the Ring of Brodgar

TUESDAY 30th July

By now the 'woken up by ferry', emerge in time for 1st breakfast, have first dive ~9am routine was firmly established, and some people were developing the ability to sleep through klaxons.

Dive 1: SMS Markgraf or SMS Kronprinz Wilhelm

Our group divided for the first dive, the Invincible skipper placing the boat between our two dive sites to enable our more technical (and suitably qualified) divers to explore the Markgraf (max. depth 45m) while the remainder of the group returned to the Kronprinz Wilhelm (max depth 34m) for a second helping. The two dive sites are adjacent, and the Invincible placed itself between the two wrecks providing surface cover for both groups.

Entry was a little bit choppier than the previous two days, and as we dropped down the shot-line and the superstructure of the Kronprinz Wilhelm began to reveal itself it became clear that a second opportunity to explore more of this wreck provided a welcome opportunity, and this time I found the effects of being at 35m proved far less disorienting.

Stuart and I found the broken up masts that others had mentioned from the earlier dives, and moved towards the bows. Noticing that my computer was counting down very rapidly towards deco, I distinctly recalled analysing my cylinders but being distracted before I had a chance to set the nitox percentage on my computer – that would explain why we were counting down so fast.



Clemen's short film of his exploration of the Margraf is here:

<https://vimeo.com/72002190> (<https://vimeo.com/72002190>)

Dive 2: F2 Escort Boat, YC21 Barge & ??A.N. Other??

Our second dive had a max depth of 18m. We came down onto the YC21 Barge, which was covered in marine life and located the almost-salvaged machine gun in its hold. There was some noticeable current, particularly visible when following the line between the Barge and the Escort Boat underwater, although shelter from this could be found at various points around the very broken up hull of the YC21.

After returning to port most of the group headed off to visit Kirkwall and acquire supplies for a group meal of chicken curry made by our resident master chef, Stuart. As usual the portions were generous, leading to a surfeit of left-overs. Simon volunteered to source storage vessels from the Stromness Co-op, returning to everyone's surprise with a set of large black plastic flower pots. As the alcohol continued to flow (including some chocolate flavoured wine), his tale of Antarctic initiation rituals came to mind and while he was not looking a smiley face was drawn on one of the flower pots and ceremonially placed in his bunk. Simon took to wearing his new fashionable headgear at various points throughout the following days.

WEDNESDAY 31st July

Dive 1: SMS Köenig

The Köenig was built in Wilhelmshaven, was launched on 1 March 1913 and was one of the remaining three battleships of the German High Seas fleet. The wreck lies at a maximum depth of 40m, almost entirely upside-down, the shallowest area of her hull lying at 20m. Those able to go to 40m dropped down to investigate the accessible areas of deck between 35-40m, whilst the remainder of our group investigated the upturned hull.

This was not as dull as it sounds as the wreck is teeming with life. Large areas of the armoured upturned hull have been salvaged, creating deep drop offs and gullies – all carpeted with anemones. In fact, swimming over the upturned hull of the wreck provided an entertaining break from the majority of our dives this week, and one I thoroughly enjoyed.

Dive 2: Blockship – Tabarka

We had heard that the block ships provided interesting shallow dives and requested to do one or two one them. These were intentionally sunk across various entrances to Scapa Flow with the intention blocking entry to the flow by enemy vessels. However, the sinking of the Royal Oak demonstrated that they were not as effective as had been hoped, which led to the building of the Churchill barriers across parts of the flow. The latter now provide causeways between the Islands of South Ronaldsay, Burray, Glims Holm and Mainland. Their location at the mouth of

Scapa Flow makes the block ships highly tidal and subject to potentially strong currents. The block ships are only accessible at slack water; we entered the water very rapidly as if we were doing a drift and under instructions to shout 'EEK' so that the skipper could count us down to be sure everyone was in the water. I was diving with Ian, and we were the first in dropping right next to the block ship whose upturned hull was covered in kelp and looked deceptively like sea floor. As long as you check your depth it is easy to realise that you are on top of the ship. This is a very different dive to the German Fleet – much shallower, bright colours with greens, reds and purples everywhere and it makes a refreshing break.

The Tabarka was a steamer built in 1909, and was first sunk in Kirk Sound in 1940, and subsequently moved to her current position in Burra Sound in 1944. Today she lies in 12m of water, and has formed an impressive artificial reef. The wreck is mostly open inside, so after a bit of faff trying to find an opening wide enough to allow access our group penetrated the wreck and began to explore it. We were joined on the wreck by divers from another boat, the only time we encountered another dive group underwater. At times the wreck felt overcrowded because of this, but in hindsight we were lucky to have been able to have exclusivity on all the other wrecks.

We had been instructed to leave the Tabarka by the Skipper once the current began to pick up, launching DSMBs so that we could be collected while drifting with the current. Our visit to Scapa Flow coincided with a Neap tide, making the currents much gentler than expected and giving us longer than anticipated on the Tabarka.

In the afternoon we ventured back to the Ness of Brodgar, and took advantage of the free guided tour to experience one of the most important Neolithic excavations of the Century. I hope that everyone else enjoyed themselves, I remain unashamedly excited by the site and what people are finding there. Dinner for most people that evening was some skilfully prepared left-overs, although Clemens and Stephan ventured off to explore the Michelin starred restaurant in Stromness.

THURSDAY 1st August

Amazingly, by this point in the week I managed to sleep through the early morning sounds of the ferry, and emerged relatively late on deck just in time to see us heading out of port. Simon re-assured me that the Ferry was just as noisy as ever.

Dive 1: SMS Dresden

The Dresden was a light cruiser launched in 1917 and lies at a depth of 34m on her port side. She was sunk whilst being towed towards the Island of Cava, and lies approximately half way between that and the seal colony on the Barrel of Butter. Tanya and I found her mostly intact; we had fun investigating the mast and crows nest, followed by some entertaining swims through the very large arches formed by the ships superstructure and finally reached the bow before deploying a DSMB and returning to the shot.



Dive 2: Gobernador Bories - Blockship

This wreck almost defies pronunciation and spelling. The Gobernador Bories was built in 1882, sunk in 1915 and currently lies in 16-10m in Burra Sound. We had hoped for perhaps 15-20m visibility given the highly tidal nature of the location, but had to settle for 8-12m in the end.

Our second blockship, this one was much more broken up than the Tabarka. Beyond one rather fun twisty swim through near the boilers there were no real opportunities for wreck penetration, and instead we spent our time exploring different parts of the the wreck as the current slowly increased. The place was full of life, with many fish amongst the kelp. The skipper had encouraged us to break open some sea urchins to feed the fish, and the fish gathered expectantly although neither I or Tanya were particularly inclined to oblige. I did this as a planned decompression dive as part of my Dive Leader training using the BSAC tables with Tanya as my buddy so we spent 36 minutes at the bottom which provided ample opportunity to investigate various parts of the wreck.

The weather was overcast with some light drizzle as we returned to port. We had booked ourselves onto a tour of Maeshowe on the last tour of

the day, so as soon as hot showers had been enjoyed by everyone we headed off and had an entertaining guided tour of the tomb including Viking graffiti. Afterwards two cars headed into Kirkwall, where we had an excellent group meal at Skippers by the harbour.

FRIDAY 2nd August

This was our only day of 'bad weather', with fog lying over Scapa Flow. Having dived all the 'big ticket' wrecks the skipper had asked us to let him know to which dive sites we wished to return. However, the fog presented a risk and so the skipper advised us that he would do what he could to enable diving, but if he felt the fog was closing in diving would be cancelled on safety grounds.

Dive 1: Brummer

There had been quite a bit of discussion about which wrecks to return to on our final day. In the end we settled on the Brummer as our first 'deep' dive. Due to the foggy conditions the Skipper instructed us to descend and return on the shot line only as he could not be sure to find or see and DSMBs if the weather worsened. As it was essential to relocate the shot Stuart placed a strobe towards the bottom of the shot line to help people relocate it.

Stuart and I went to one end of the ship, where Stuart did his 'Titanic' impression. My main memory of this dive was swimming past the outside of the ship while Clemens, Stephan and Jan came past in the opposite direction inside the ship. I had not really encountered this group on earlier dives, as they had generally gone deeper and investigated other areas of the wrecks. However, many people had commented on Clemens' lighting rig over the week, and it is indeed remarkable. The light blazing through every opening in the hull and superstructure is reminiscent of the best efforts of a Hollywood special effects department.



On the way back to the surface the need to use the shot amply demonstrated the 'joys' of an overcrowded shot line full of people doing their safety stops. This was not the first time on the trip that I mentally thanked Jan for spending much time with me in Gildy over the last few months practising these, despite a somewhat unexpected upside down liaison with Adrian during the course of the stop – he was, as always, a gentleman under the circumstances.

Dive 2: Brummer

We had originally planned to return to the Karlsruhe for our final dive, however, the fog persisted and the Skipper did not want to move us closer to any shipping lanes given the conditions. He was happy to put us back down onto the Brummer for a second dive, again on the condition that we returned up the shot line.

Once again a strobe was attached to the shot, and Stuart and I ventured off to find the other end of the ship, which proved to be the bow, via a few big guns. As we began to return towards the shot I signalled that my 5 minute countdown to deco had begun. Things went a little awry after this, and

we missed the shot, proceeding back to the bow that we had investigated earlier. I had been puzzled as to why Stuart had swum past the shot, but followed him along to the bow, trying to catch up with him to attract his attention. By the time realisation dawned that the shot line was back the way we had come my deco was starting to clock up, and by the time we returned to the shot I had 26 minutes of deco showing. We ascended gently, and I once again mentally thanked Jan for all the time invested in practising stops at Gildy as we spent what felt like an eternity at around 6m waiting for my computer to clear. Fortunately the independent twins meant that there was plenty of air (and likewise Stuart also had an abundance), we managed to successfully explain to the rest of the group why we were hanging on the shot for quite so long so that the message as to why we were delayed surfacing was eventually relayed to those on the boat.

When we eventually surfaced the fog had cleared, Stuart and I sat down with Ian and talked through what had gone wrong and why. Whilst this was not the note on which I had hoped we would end the trip, we were all relieved that it had not become a full blown incident and that we had both had more than sufficient air to complete a very long stop. Diving with twinsets was clearly the right decision regarding the trip as a whole, and it meant that no-one's bottom time was constrained by air.



Things that worked well

- › The diving was excellent – everyone really enjoyed themselves with vis in the 7-12m range and water temperatures between 12-13 degrees centigrade.
- › Fiona's breakfasts (apparently we're not allowed to take her back to Cambridge with us).
- › Tanya was a brilliant addition to the group – we're delighted she was able to join us and hope to take up her invitation to come diving in Ireland in the foreseeable future.
- › Having the flexibility of different groups with different travel plans made sorting out travel arrangements a lot simpler. Many thanks to all the willing drivers!
- › Stromness is the perfect base for divers. There are a number of dive shops selling dive kit and accessories, and overnight repairs are possible if needed.
- › The group meals in the Stromness Hotel and Ferry Boat Inn.
- › Having some vehicles on the Island meant that we could do some sightseeing.

Things that could be better next time

- › We really must learn to differentiate between the stern and bow of a boat, although the debates on this point following each dive did prove quite entertaining.
- › Air was included in the boat charter costs but nitrox was extra. The nitrox charging structure seemed relatively high. This discouraged those using nitrox from having a second nitrox fill, instead having an 'air top' – which usually left us with anything between 24-27%. It would be a good idea to give more consideration to nitrox use and charges when selecting our boat charters in future.
- › We were a little disappointed to learn there was no breakfast provision for the day of our departure.

- > If we return, exploring a land-based accommodation option would be worthwhile. Whilst there was nothing wrong with accommodation on the Invincible, the cabin space was compact and the taller members of our group found themselves rather cramped.
 - > Tourist numbers were uncharacteristically low in Stromness and Kirkwall. If it had been busier we could have struggled getting bookings for meals for a large group at short notice, particularly as the number of establishments that could cater for a group of our size was low.
 - > It would have been good to have more time to explore Kirkwall.
 - > Maeshowe, one of the major tourist attractions, must be booked in advance. This could have been done before we left Cambridge, particularly as it could have proved difficult to find a slot to accommodate a group of 11 at once on short notice had it been busier. Apparently they can do evening tours by prior arrangement.
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