

December 1999

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SKYE HIGH DIVING



By Simon Volpe

Arguably some of the finest British and European diving is available when diving from Skye in north west Scotland. Its remoteness and the extra effort that is entailed to get here is more than offset by the lack of queues when launching a boat or using the shot line. In this context, Skye's 'inconvenient' location actually becomes an asset.

Skye is home to a measure of tranquillity: unspoilt reefs, abundant and varied marine life and a few shipwrecks. More waits to be discovered, whether it be marine life or perhaps identifying an unknown sunken vessel. And, like so many others before me, I found myself visiting Skye for a second time.

In the company of Waternish Peninsula-based Hebridean Diving Services – Aileen, Gordon and Spog, the mad collie dog – I was able to fill in some of the gaps which my short previous stay, of only a week, had been sure to leave.

The Waternish Peninsula is a good place from which to prepare for a scuba diving adventure. Here the sunsets are remarkable, bathing the Outer Hebridean islands with a gentle golden glow, and illuminating the village of Stein; as the sea turns from blue to yellow and finally a radiant crimson red. It's dusk, and adrenaline-fuelled adventure is only held back by the cover of darkness.

The new day brings the promise of light winds and gentle seas, the perfect beginning for a scuba diving expedition.

The Meanish Pier was to become the launching point for boat-diving over the next couple of days. A short drive from Stein, the journey was punctuated by twisty roads and dramatic coastal scenery. Meanish Pier has a long slipway which slopes gently into the calm, clear water. From here it is a ten-minute ride 'around the corner' to the wreck of the *Chadwick*.

THE CHADWICK

Wrecks do not come much finer than this in UK waters, and I was lucky enough to have a camera with me to record the scene.

The *SS Chadwick* was built by Swan Hunter of Newcastle in 1882 and registered in London to RB Avery. She was a British iron collier of 77 x 10 x 6 metres en route from the Clyde to St Petersburg, carrying coal.

On the night of 5 July 1892, she struck and grounded on the rocks below An Ceannaich at the north end of Oisgill Bay. The crew of 19 were rescued by a passing mail steamer.

A tug had been despatched to pull the vessel off the rocks, but on 6 July the *Chadwick* slipped back into deeper waters. With only her bow visible, she was considered a total write-off.

The wreck site of the *Chadwick* requires

careful consideration with regard to both tide and winds. The proximity to the cliffs can cause a strong backlash and wave turbulence, making this area very unsettled. The site should not be dived in south west, west or north west winds greater than force four. Because the tides can be strong at this location, the *Chadwick* is best dived at slack water.

Today she lies broken in several hull sections, beginning in 15m and extending down to 25m. Still distinguishable as a sunken vessel, there are many interesting aspects to this wreck.

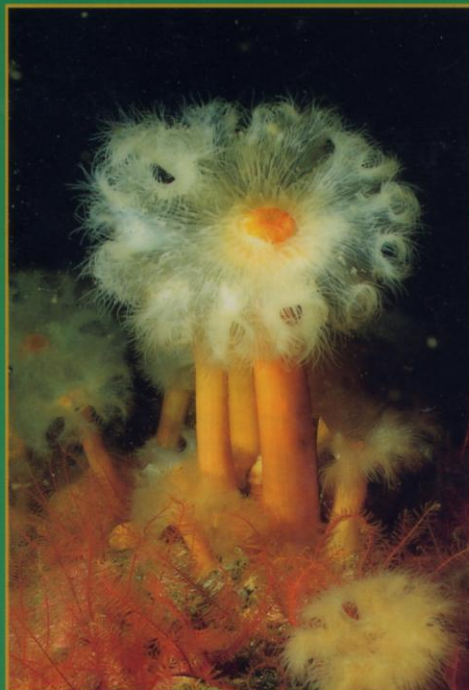
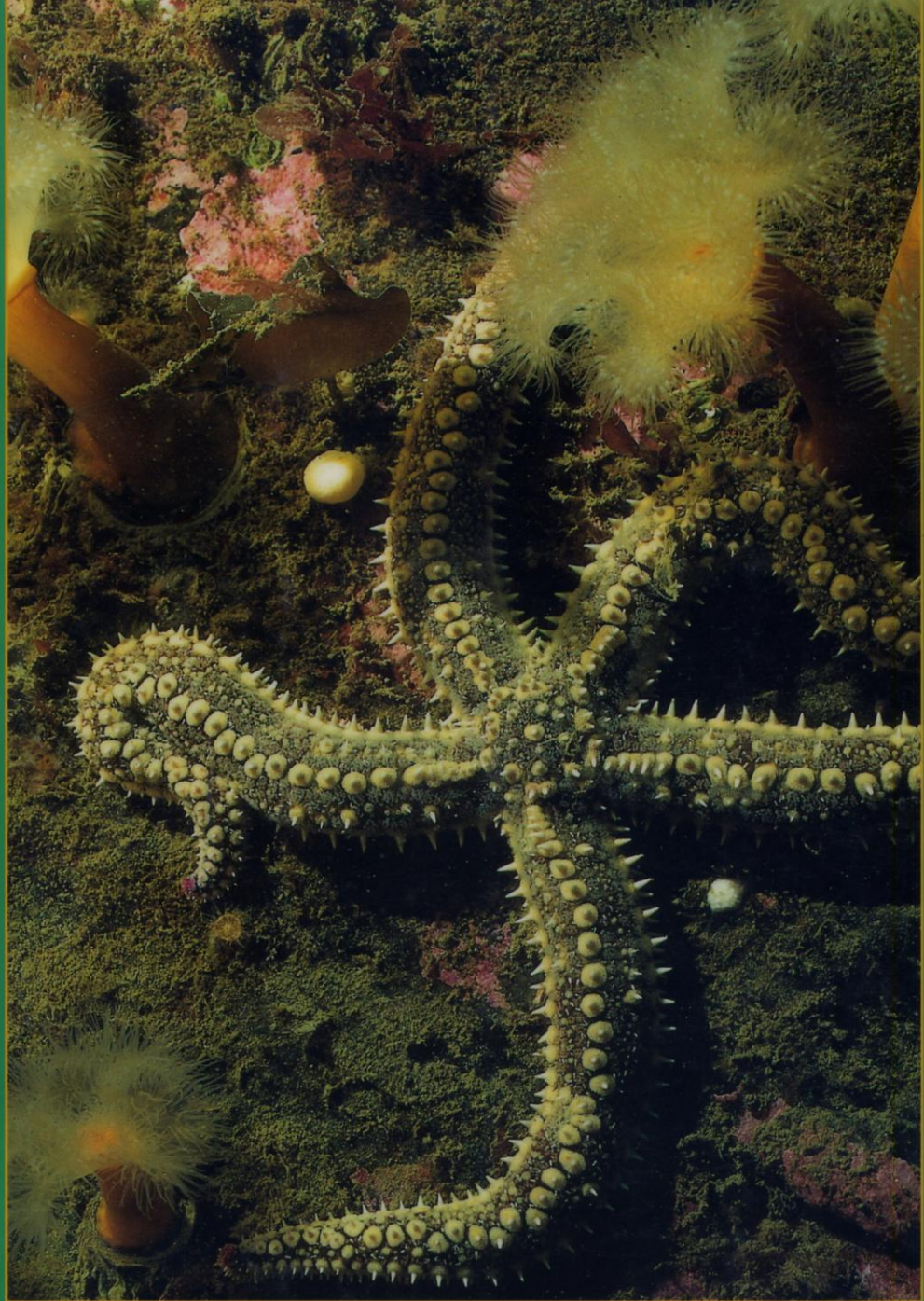
Visibility, which always exceeds 10m and occasionally reaches 20m, helps considerably in appreciating the quality of this wreck site. Marine life is prolific, with large shoals of pollack, the occasional cuckoo wrasse and vast sections of the wreck carpeted in anemones and dead man's fingers. The occasional starfish adds a splash of colour, aided by the bright, mid-morning sunlight as it streams down from the heavens. Slow finning along the debris field brings you to features like the broken bow, the large cylindrical boiler, centre mast, the ribs of the hull and the anchor winch. A closer look at the rubble around the wreck reveals that much of the material is anthracite coal, some of it measuring half a metre across.

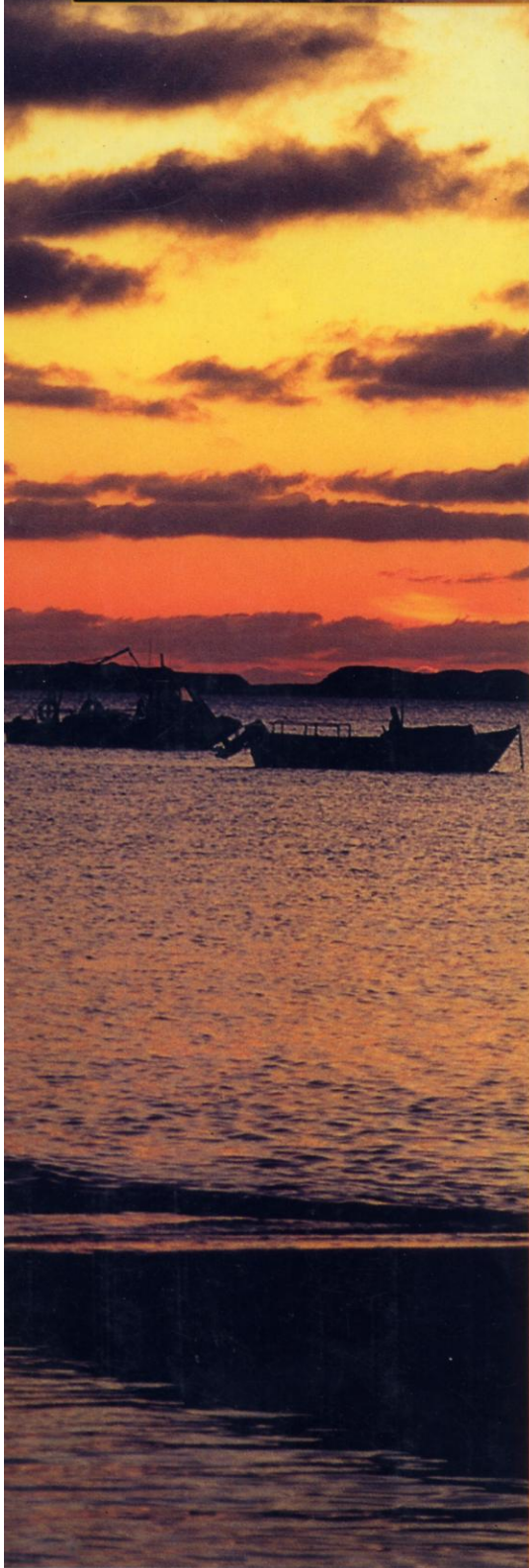
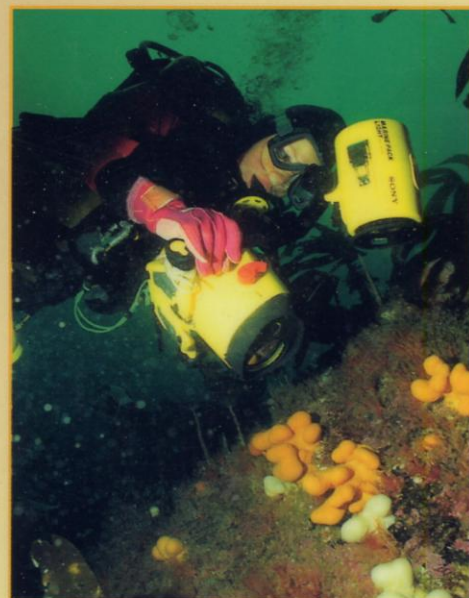
Full marks go to the vessel's propellor, which sits in its normal seagoing posture, albeit that the hull actually lies upside down! The ferrous blades are cloaked in a most profuse display of dead man's fingers, so much so that your attention is momentarily taken away from the propellor itself.

A return to sea level can be achieved following the sea bed, which gently slopes to the surface underneath the cliffs. A safety stop at 5m has the added benefit of allowing the diver to observe the rich variety of marine life within the jungle-like kelp forest. Here the stalks of the kelp fronds glowed yellow and red as the warm shafts of sunlight danced through the gently undulating sea.

Diving in Skye is subject to weather conditions and a reminder of this arrived in the afternoon. Winds gusting to force five or six, rendered most dive sites undivable. Fortunately, the geography of Skye affords shelter whatever the wind direction, due to numerous coastal inlets and sheltered headlands.

We put this observation to the test, completing a shore dive from Meanish Pier itself. This proved very rewarding, with an excellent range of depths to choose from. The shore line plunged in a combination of steps and sheer walls to 25m. The dive was completed twice; once using a camera with a wide-angle lens, and then going back to





record the fine detail in macro mode.

Purple sunstar, red cushion star and spiny starfish were abundant, as were the sand-dwelling scallops. Careful scrutiny among the rocks revealed long-clawed squat lobsters, hermit crabs and pink shrimps.

Underwater visibility, at a respectable 8m, was impressive when the sea state beyond the headlands was so disturbed.

A kelp forest in the 3-6m depth zone allowed for an interesting safety stop. The flora and fauna created more questions than answers, such was the concentration of marine life in the area.

We took extra care clambering from the clutches of the sea to terra firma. The boulders were big, slippery and very round, waiting to claim an unwary diver should he or she stumble.

Allowing for the heavy weather to pass over, the scuba diving opportunities multiply many fold. Wrecks like the *SS Urlarna* offer quality recreational exploration. In only 6-15m depth, you can visit the remains of the 6,850-tonne twin-decked single-screw cargo vessel, which sank on 5 September 1943.

Slightly further south are the magnificent Macleods Maidens, an above-water geological feature resembling huge statues, which also offers a parallel eye-blinding

undersea vista.

Protecting known sites from plunder is a topical subject. Imagine the possibility of 5,000 tonnes of plate metal being removed from a hull! This is the fate that possibly awaits the wreck of the *HMS Port Napier*, which lies in Isle of Skye waters. The steel currently being analysed, as it was not contaminated by radiation which emanated from the atomic bomb and such metal has in the past been used for things like surgical instruments. Developments should be noted with keen interest, as this wreck has offered much enjoyment to divers for decades.

And then there are the new discoveries to be made – in the west of Skye there is a World War II German submarine to be located!

Not to be forgotten are the long walks or mountain-climbing available within the island's interior, or travelling across rough terrain using a quad bike. But then there is always the pub in the historic fishing village to while away those surplus hours, before the sea beckons you to return.

Travel information

Hebridean Diving Services, Shorepark, Lochbay, Watnish, Isle of Skye IV55 8GD, Tel: 01470 592219; 0378 761313.