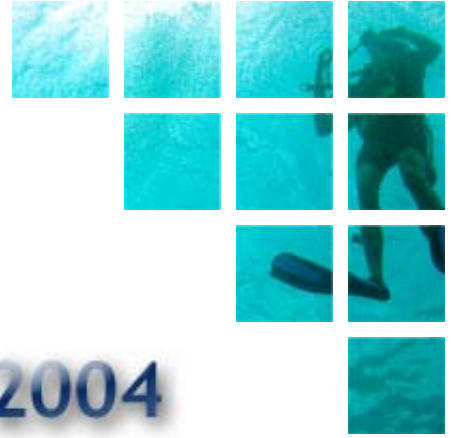


TRIP REPORT



issue 2

sound of mull september 2004

After a fantastic weekend's diving out of Swanage in the first week of September, we were hopeful of a great week's diving in Scotland.

We loaded our hired minibus up to the gunwales with multiple twinsets and kit and set off late on Saturday 11th, with a plan to get to Oban to catch the ferry early on the afternoon of Sunday 12th.

By leaving late at night, we had a clear run north until an unscheduled detour at Wigan. The M6 had been closed for a couple of days due to a serious accident (and some said chemical



• Etienne loading the boat

spillage), so off we went into the main metropolis that Wigan is at 3am. This turned out to be quite an experience as the pubs and clubs were chucking out and their patrons were chucking up.

There was no shortage of rather rotund ladies, completely trolleyed, tottering about on their stilettos and gawping into our rather bemused and tired faces. With us being badged the "sleeve-suckers" on tour 2004, a couple of the "local ladies" nearly got lucky, but their men dragged them away at the last gasp.

Thankfully, "Armitage Shanks" Renshaw, at the wheel (and no, not asleep either) took us back to the M6 and north we plodded into the night and early morning.

Why "Armitage Shanks"? Well, we stopped and used every service station on the route north – secretly we think he was a "vitreous china" spotter on the quiet. Nothing wrong with that, but boy, hold back on the tea next time!

With Paul at the wheel, ably assisted by Philip, the Sat. Nav. thingy, we skirted Glasgow and headed across the hills and dales along the A82 to Oban, passing on the way the site of the landslide about six weeks

earlier where a number of car drivers were winched to safety by helicopter. Not quite so dramatic by the time we went through, but the damage to the road and area surrounding was quite marked.

We arrived in Oban at 9am, well ahead of time, and having changed our ferry booking to the 11.00am sailing, we tracked down good old Tesco's and filled our faces in the café.

The ferry from Oban took us to Craignure on the Isle of Mull and from there, about 20 minutes drive north, is the Fishnish ferry terminal. We had a little wait here for the ferry across to Lochaline itself, back on the mainland on the beautiful Morvern peninsula. Why two ferry crossings over to Mull and then back to the mainland? Well, get a map out and have a look where we were going and you'll see!



• the pretty Morvern peninsula

We finally arrived in Lochaline late on the Sunday afternoon and briefly met with Alan Livingstone of Lochaline Boat Charters on board the Peregrine to determine what we'd like to do during the week and also times for the following morning.

We then repaired to the Old Post Office, right on the old pier at Lochaline and our self-catering accommodation for the week.

The OPO as it's known has three large bedrooms (with twin beds), two bathrooms, kitchen, dining room and lounge with open fire.

We unloaded and then scooted off to the Lochaline Hotel for something to eat. Ever wondered if Basil Fawlty exists in real life? Not as a bloke, but the wife of the owner of the hotel (Sally) is a pretty close match.

God forbid if you try and just walk in for a meal without booking a time.

This, by the way is a time you are given not that you choose.

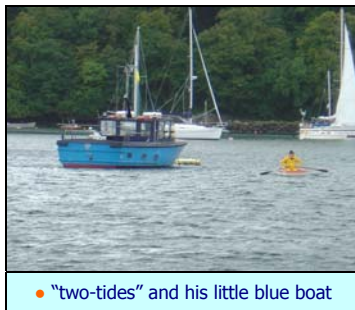
Don't think about moving tables in the restaurant and certainly don't answer back or be cheeky!

She's known locally as "Basil" and brightens up an otherwise dull evening.

Monday 13th September

Our first dive day took us out to the Hispania (which turned out to be a favourite of the week).

As we come to the Hispania, there's a great little story which must be told. The last time we were in the Sound of Mull in 2003, we dived for a few days off another boat, called Amidas and skippered by a certain Charlie Lafferty.



● "two-tides" and his little blue boat

A strange little boat with plastic owls watching over the bow, we rather took to Charlie (Danny became teacher's pet "I'll tie your ropes Charlie – want the fenders out, Charlie?" – that sort of thing).

Anyway, we asked Alan, our skipper for the week this time around, whether Charlie was still around and if so, what was he doing.

Alan chuckled and nodded sagely.

Charlie is known in the area as "two-tides". He's been skippering boats in the Sound for at least 15 years and been taking divers to the Hispania all that time. In all those years, Charlie has only ever got slack on the Hispania right twice – hence "two-tides". As most dive boats deposit their divers in the water, Charlie will come on the radio and ask what the tides are doing. When told "It's slack Charlie" he just mumbles about hurrying up and then promptly arrives an hour later with the tide running like the proverbial train.

Luckily for us, Alan is spot on and knows the area well. He claims to know all the wrecks better than anyone else and the Sound of Mull like no other skipper. Fair enough, but he has never dived, yet he knows every wreck just like he says, depths, features, points of interest etc. Quite uncanny.



● the Hispania

The Hispania was only 1337 tons and 70m long, so not a large ship, but an excellent dive nonetheless. She sits in about 28m of water with the top of her superstructure in 14m, so you get plenty of time to look around this very pretty wreck.

She is absolutely covered in dead mens' fingers, cup corals and anemones and provides a haven to all manner of fish life.

Her sizes means that it is easy to circumnavigate the whole vessel easily on one dive, from the bow, along to the huge rudder and up over the aft rail to swim along the deck and then down into her holds.

It is also possible to easily enter her engine room, through the hole where her funnel used to be. Visibility on the wreck can be 10m or more, but on our dives, we had 5m, possibly due to the unsettled weather.

We managed a good hour's dive before returning to the shot to ascend.

We nearly didn't make the Hispania (at all). On the way out, we were radioed by another boat to ask if we knew about the trail of smoke we were leaving.

Alan stopped the Peregrine and a huge cloud of black smoke billowed from the engine intakes and vents.

After quickly zipping up our drysuits in case of a rapid exit over the side, it was determined (by Paul who's a fireman) that the exhaust flexible tube had split and was chucking water all over the engine compartment.



● one of many common sun stars

We were towed to the site of Hispania and by the time we came up after our dive, Alan had effected a temporary repair.

Our second dive of the day was to be the Shuna, a larger ship than the Hispania, but known to be a bit silty, so care is needed when accessing the holds etc. not to stir the bottom up too much. The Shuna went down fully laden with coal in 1913 during a storm after running into rocks in poor visibility.

She sits in about 33m with 23m to the deck and although the silt does stir up, if you get the wreck to yourself, she's a great dive.

Most of the superstructure has gone, but the forepeak, main accommodation section and aft sections still remain as does the prop., most unusually.

This makes an impressive site along with the rudder if you lay on your back at 34m and look up over the stern to the aft rail.

Back to Lochaline following the day's diving, we wanted to arrange with Philip at the dive centre what we wanted mix-wise for the Tuesday dives.

Without pen and paper to hand and with Phil AWOL, we resorted to the tried and tested method of stone arranging.



• don't you dare kick his stones away

Primitive, but quite effective!

Typically, just as Danny finished, Phil turned up and we wrote it all down instead.

We resorted to battling with Basil for our evening meal, but generally gravitated to cooking our own meals as the week went on.

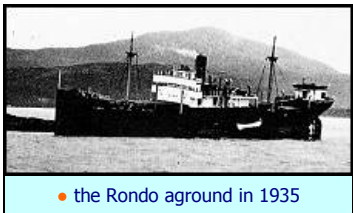
Tuesday 14th September

The weather generally went up and down each day, so we took things as they went along, planning each day depending on what was diveable and what wasn't.

The beauty of the Sound is that you can always get a dive in – Alan told us he had cancelled diving for just a single day in the last three years.

That's impressive when you consider how many days diving have been lost off the south coast this summer.

Our first dive was to be the Rondo. A most unusual wreck, the shallowest part is the stern in 6m and the deepest, the bow in 52m. She is an 80m long steamer that went aground on rocks in the centre of the Sound in January 1935 and rests bow-down on a 30 degree slope.



• the Rondo aground in 1935

This means that you can largely pick your depth, but for this dive, Nick and Danny went to the bottom at about 48m.

The great benefit is that although you clock up deco time, by the time you have meandered back up the wreck to the shallower parts, your computer is again showing no-stop time.

Again, a prolific carpet of anemones, dead mens' fingers, sea stars and cup corals greeted the eye all along the wreck with all manner of fish making their home in sheltered parts of the vessel's broken hull.

There is also a nice swim-through at 25m where you can swim under the hull of the Rondo.

Interestingly, when we surfaced, Alan was full of tales of a Minke whale breaching just 20m or so from the Peregrine while we were diving the Rondo.

He said that he'd only seen one whale in the Sound before, about three years previously – so we were a bit miffed to miss that.

As the wind was increasing all the time, Alan advised a location where we could dive in the shelter of the mainland. Named Livingstone bay (as Alan had first found it) this was to be a gently sloping bottom from 5m to over 80m.

We had a pleasant bumble along the slope, Etienne and Nick taking photos and Kev scalloping with his goody bag scooping up the spoils.

There were a huge number of squat lobsters, sea stars and scallops to be seen hiding in the nooks and crannies, and although the wind blew up to a F7, the surface was flat calm when it came time to be picked up.



• a Livingstone Bay squat lobster

It's probably here that we should mention the audio selection that we had during the course of the week.

Alan's choice varied on the CD player from Johnny Cash ("The night Hank Williams came to town" was our favourite...), The Pogues, Tom Jones to Mozart.

Eclectic is one word that could be used – the other is loud – all the tunes were banged out at top volume. The seals didn't seem to mind too much though.

The forecast for Wednesday was looking good, so we elected to plan the Breda as our first dive, being as it was, a short chug across the Lynn of Lorne, which can be a bumpy ride if the wind blows up.

Wednesday 15th September

Well, the day dawned bright and clear with hardly a breath of wind, so the plan was on.

Etienne prepared himself by venturing into the kitchen and warming a few sausages to within an inch of tepidness. Why cook something when it gets warmish in just a few seconds in the frying pan?

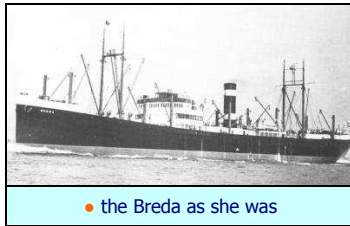
After this display of culinary expertise, Kev was less than inclined to partake of Etienne's comestible concoctions.

The trip out to the Breda was a pleasant one in the warm sun, around Lady Rock island and into Ardmucknish bay, boats Peregrine and Brendan in tandem.

The Breda has been likened to the UK's Thistlegorm – that may be a bit enthusiastic, but it's a great dive nonetheless.

It took just over three hours for a wave of fully bombed-up Heinkel 111s to fly from Stavanger in

German-occupied Norway to attack shipping waiting for Atlantic convoys in the Firth of Lorne, near Oban in 1940. On 23 December, among the many ships gathered there was the 6941ton, Dutch cargo ship Breda. The German bombers dropped four 500 pounders which straddled the stationary Dutch ship.



• the Breda as she was

Not one of the bombs scored a direct hit, though the very-near misses almost shook her to pieces. In the engine room, one blast was so violent that a cooling-water inlet pipe snapped clean away. Seawater poured in, cutting off all electric and steam power. In minutes the Breda started sinking by the stern. In the nick of time a tug got her under tow, pulled her into Ardmucknish Bay and beached her on a shallow shelf.

Salvage started on Christmas Eve on her cargo of 3000 tons of cement, 175 tons of tobacco, three Hawker biplanes, 30 De Havilland Tiger Moths, spare parts for the aircraft, rubber-soled sandals, NAAFI crockery, Army lorry parts and copper ingots. But very little was saved before the 140m long Breda gave a lurch and slipped off the shelf into deep water.

Now she rests in 24m and is a big ship, but easily navigable on one dive.

We started our dive at the bows and examined the wreckage on the seabed before swimming up the hull and through a breach on the port side before entering a forward hold.



• a shoe in the Breda's hold

There are many remnants of her former cargo visible: shoes, small glass bottles of medical supplies, wheels, tyres and even a lorry axle.

It is easy to swim almost the complete length of the ship through the holds and 'tween decks and each of the holds drops a full three or four decks, which gives some impression of the size of the ship.

On this dive, Danny took the DPV for a spin (or "Fatboy" as the machine is fondly known).

He became known as "Guardian Daniel" as he always stated to Alan prior to a dive with Fatboy, "I'll dive on my own and keep an



• "Guardian Daniel"

eye on the others." How reassuring for everyone else to know he was looking out for them!

A good hour-long dive on the Breda allowed us a comprehensive tour through the holds, the midships accommodation and then to the aft holds and superstructure.

Our second dive of the day, following a leisurely chug back around Lady Rock island and into the Sound again, was to be the Thesis.

Easily the oldest wreck we dived during the week, and the smallest, the Thesis is still an interesting dive. At 500 tons and 60m long, she was carrying a cargo of pig iron when she went aground in thick fog in October 1889.

Not particularly deep, her stern rests in 30m and her bows, where the shotline is tied off, in 14m. Her hull plates have decayed away leaving interesting swim-throughs with very atmospheric lighting. Alan commented that "She likes the sun" and this was to be the case, as the wreck lit up after the sun popped out from behind clouds.



• ready to dive the Thesis

Her holds and engine spaces are easily accessible and penetrating the wreck is easy and safe.

Diving for the day completed, we looked at the forecast for the Thursday – not good. The weather people were giving F8 gusting to F9 and so we decided to take a check in the morning and see how things fared before deciding if and what we could dive.

On returning to Lochaline pier, another diver spied Fatboy and passed the comment "Oooh, is that a Graham scooter?" Danny, with a straight face replied "I think you mean Gavin, and no, it's a Silent Submersion"

From then on, it was Graham the Fatboy DPV – it kind of stuck.

We dined in for a change (and yes, we kept "lukewarm" Etienne out of the kitchen – for safety's sake).

Thursday 16th September

The following morning dawned just a tad windy (it had been howling all night).

We went to the pier and checked with Alan. The weather being what it was (crap), we had the option of some shallow reef or wall dives, but no wrecks. They would be diveable, but getting to them would be very uncomfortable.

We elected to have a day off and took the van over to Tobermory for a wander around.

Tobermory (home of the children's TV programme Balamory) is the only town on Mull and is very pretty, with various coloured buildings all along the main promenade.

We took a wander around the shops and then a leisurely lunch before taking a tour of Tobermory distillery.



● Tobermory from the boat

This is only a small distillery, so the tour was a fairly brief one, but an interesting snapshot following our recent brewery tour of Gales back home.

Is there a theme developing here?

Our day ashore complete, we ambled back to Lochaline and hoped for better weather on Friday.

Friday 17th September

Wrecks were again on the menu due to an improvement in the weather. One consolation is that you can almost always get a dive in the Sound of Mull, even if a gale is blowing.

We elected to do the Rondo again, and this dive, spent more time around the 20m to 30m mark.



● remember "coconut snowballs" from your childhood ...

The marine growth on the Rondo's hull makes a spectacular sight and the proliferation of dead mens' fingers and cup corals is very pretty.

We aimed for the Hispania as our second dive and luckily, were on site early as slack arrived about 40 minutes ahead of schedule (Charlie would have been completely buggeded!)

Another RIB full of divers who pottered around near the shoreline waiting for the posted slack time were in for a rollercoaster dive, as they were just going in as we came up and the tide beginning to really run.

For the most part, we had the wreck to ourselves and with Alan judging slack just right, it was a pleasant dive in and out of the accommodation remains and into the holds and engine room.

Lucky the cat found the Captain's bath and was photographed lazing in it for posterity!

We lived dangerously that night as Danny and Etienne donned aprons and ventured into the bowels of the kitchen.

Having purchased enough spuds to sink a fire station, Danny proclaimed that we would have mash with dinner.

And so we did, until it was coming out of our collective ears.

There was a small mountain of mash left over in the fridge after we were all stuffed, and it was to linger in more than just the memory as Danny effectively sat on his pile of mash all the way home on the Sunday!

Saturday 18th September

Our last diving day and with the Breda off (which was our first choice) we dived the Shuna again.

Had the weather been more favourable ("the previous week was fantastic" – thanks for telling us that over and over and over, Alan), we could have dived the Tapti, Labrador and Aurania, just north out of the protection of the Sound of Mull and relying on good conditions as they are close in to the rocks and mean the skipper has to have his wits about him.

As it was, we would have been indoors watching the telly had we been diving off the south coast with similar wind (and no, that wasn't just the mash).

The Shuna was a good dive – a bit murkier than earlier in the week, but that was the forces of nature at work for you.

You really need to have the Shuna to yourselves to get the most from the dive, but we did and we had a good hour's wander around the whole of her before making our ascent.

The luncheon adjournment was taken in Tobermory, mainly as Paul wanted to change his batteries which were duff when bought on Thursday, although purporting to be new.

We even saw "two-tides" rowing to his boat – no doubt off to chase slack somewhere – albeit late.

We boarded the Brendan again (we had moved from the Peregrine for the last day) and motored for the five minute run to Calve Island.



● Calve Island, here they come ...

This site, just out from Tobermory harbour has a wall which extends down to 80+m, but which provides a gentle drift where urchins crabs, lobsters and other fauna nestle in amongst the kelp fronds.

Nick sat the dive out (there were biscuits to be eaten you know).

More a case of apathy really, and with not a trace of "the mat of apathy" anywhere to be seen.

Reflecting on the week's diving, we managed to get a lot in when other locations would have precluded any diving at all – that's very much the attraction of Mull.

Most of the wrecks are intact, they are upright, and offer a range of depths so that there is something for everyone; those who are happy going into deco. can and those who prefer no-stop dives are also kept smiling.



• Peregrine, our boat for the week

The underwater visibility during our week was at most 5-10 metres, but can easily be double that, but you have to factor in the wind and sea conditions to our week's diving.

We cleared out from the boat, settled up with both Alan and Phil at Lochaline Dive Centre and rinsed all the kit out before loading the van up for the return the following day.

We dined that night at the Whitehouse Restaurant; no Mary wasn't in, but the food was good.

Not cheap, but with all local produce and freshly cooked, we had an excellent meal and a few beers to unwind.



• motoring back on Saturday

The party then split, with an intrepid bunch going off in search of what had been dubbed the Lochaline (anti) Social Club.

The reports that came back suggested that the "Antisocial" was a magnet for Lochaline locals to get absolutely out of their collective trees.

It is said that Kev was propositioned, but that's another story...

Sunday 19th September

A clear and bright day for the return trip (bugger).

We were returning south along a different route, firstly heading north out of the Morvern peninsula and on the road towards Fort William.

To put the remoteness in context, Lochaline has a volunteer fire station, with a small van as their fire engine manned by Lesley the shop owner, her daughter and a few other locals. They are not even part-time fire-fighters as we have here – the nearest part-time fire station is over 40 miles way in Strontian.

Jane who owns the Whitehouse restaurant lives in a 200 foot tower at the other end of Loch Aline itself.

When she asked the Fire Officer from Inverness what they would do if there was a fire in her home, the reply was "not a lot – by the time we get there your tower will have burned down." One of the many things which, living where we do, we take for granted.

Lochaline may be remote, and that's its attraction, but when there is bread delivered only three times a week, fish and meat once a week and rain every day, you realise that paradise has its cost too.

The beer delivery lorry always seems to get through though – strange that ...

Our return trip took us up the side of Loch Sunart and on to Corran where there is a strange side-loading ferry which runs across the Corran Straight and cuts the drive to Fort William itself out of the equation.

Once across, the Corran Straight, it's through Glencoe, past the chairlifts, idle in the rain and back along Loch Lomond towards Glasgow.



• mintoe anyone?

The drudgery of the M6 ("the never ending motorway" as Danny calls it) lead us home, though we did try the new M6 Toll road which was momentarily exciting – travelling along something called the M6 with hardly any traffic on it.

A new use was found for the lid of Graham the DPV when Kev wanted a small tray in which to deposit his selection of sweeties. There was a suggestion that Kev was going to buy some Bombay mix at the service area to put in the new receptacle, but we think Guardian Daniel drew the line at that.

13 hours after setting off, we were back at the dive centre – a round trip of some 1300 miles.

The consensus, a good week's wreck diving though Alan recommends mid to late October as the best time to go, so maybe we'll aim for that next year or the year after.



• cup coral on the Hispania

With that in mind, we would aim to dive the Tapti et al, all big liners and apparently great dives (so told from Alan the non-diver). We certainly look forward to the return trip.

Did I forget to mention that we called into Puffin Dive Centre on the way up? Yes?

Now that IS another story ...