

~~War Helmet / Northcoates / Gascony / Bottle Wreck~~

Or

The Case of The Mysterious Tide

As winter approaches, and the window of opportunity for Banstead Diver's fair weather members to get out to sea diminishes, any chance to take advantage of the remaining season is firmly grasped. The weather had improved throughout the week, and a growing sense of optimism suggested a Friday dive might be possible. And so it was that eight members found themselves once again at the Boathouse, enjoying a hearty breakfast and discussing the day's plan. The initial suggestion was the War Helmet, but due to tide times, it was felt that the Northcoates might be more suitable. However, one late arriving member suggested that as this was quite small, maybe something in the same area but slightly larger might be more interesting, and so the Gascony was finally agreed on. Dive pairs were sorted, based on the age old method of bags your buddy, then the rest can sort themselves out. This resulted in Andrew and Jenny, Jacqui and Simon, Malcolm and Mark, and Dave and myself.

The boat was prepared, kit loaded and launch requested. As the kindly marina staff reversed the rib down the slip, and an eagerly awaiting bunch of divers stood patiently on the pontoon, a voice could be heard. It was captain Hubbard with a not unreasonable request of "Can someone get the keys from the boatbox?" We probably should have taken this as an omen and gone home then...

The last essential item retrieved, we finally set off, and after a swift but uneventful passage, arrived at the dive site. The large wreck was soon identified on the sounder, and after a couple of circles to confirm, the shot was deployed. At this point it was noted that the tide was still running, but as we had arrived early, this was no cause for concern. We drifted around for a while, before deciding to check the shot. It was still on the seabed, but apparently not within the vicinity of the actual wreck. Bigger. The shot was recovered, then deployed again, hopefully with a bit more success. It appeared that the tide was still 'slightly' running, but the first pair, Jacqui and Simon started to kit up.

Whilst we had been drifting, a large object some way from the wreck had been repeatedly spotted. There is no marking for this on the chart. Interesting. This has been marked on the GPS for further investigation, but on the off chance it is an undiscovered wreck containing gold bullion or diamonds, the exact location will not be given at this time. We don't want Odyssey Marine getting wind of this.

Although still slightly concerned about the tide speed, with four pairs to get in, Jacqui and Simon finished kitting and prepared to enter the water. Unfortunately, Captain Andrew hadn't fully appreciated the current speed, and dropped them in rather too close to the shot. Simon managed to grab hold, but Jacqui missed it, and after a rather valiant but fruitless attempt at swimming to it, agreed to grab a line and be towed back to the shot. Meanwhile, Simon was offering some observations regarding the slack, or lack thereof, roughly translated to "it's still running a bit". For some reason Andrew took offence to this, and decided to give Simon an opportunity to check the underside of the boat. Simon, for his part, wasn't so keen on this arrangement.

Eventually, Jacqui and Simon were recovered to the boat, and a brief dive planning meeting took place. It was decided that given timing for slack might not be quite as predicted, the numbers of divers to get in, the distance to shore, and the lateness of the day, something closer in might be more suitable.

The Bottle Wreck was decided upon, and once again a motley crew set passage. Arriving a short time later, the shot was once again prepared for deployment. Now the Bottle Wreck is not the largest of wrecks, and so shooting it can be a challenge. Observing something that can best be described as a "small lump", the shot was thrown over the side with more wishful thinking than skill.

Jacqui and Simon were first back in, with guidance that the shot might be on the wreck. Or might not be. They planned to reel off and do a circular search just in case. Jenny and Andrew were next in, followed by Malcolm and Mark. Unfortunately whilst Malcolm had chosen his winter suite, he had chosen his summer weight, meaning that descending wasn't possible. Malcolm and Mark were then recovered, and had to wait for one of the pairs to return so that Malcolm could borrow some additional lead.

Jacqui and Simon eventually returned to the shot, whilst Andrew and Jenny sent a delayed up. It was noted that Andrew and Jenny's SMB was some way off the shot. Not normally a good sign.

With both pairs recovered, we learnt how Jacqui had followed the trail left by the shot, and having fully reeled off, began to circle and soon found the wreck. Andrew and Jenny had followed Jacqui's line and had also found the wreck. Both pairs had enjoyed the dive, enthusing about the amount of life to be seen. Malcolm and Mark once again kitted up and planned to line off following the shot trail, whilst myself and Dave took a bearing from the shot to the rough area Andrew and Jenny had surfaced, and confirmed by the sounder, decided we knew where the wreck would be.

We descended and followed Malcolm and Mark's line, which fortunately was going in the same direction as our expected pilotage. We soon arrived at the wreck, and as predicted, were inundated with life. The wreck consists mainly of a stack of large pipes, and each one appeared to contain a conger. Vast numbers of large crabs sat around, and the occasional lobster could also be seen, watching the dancing shrimps. The whole thing looked like an aquatic pick and mix that wouldn't be out of place at an up market Waitrose.

After circling the wreck a couple of times, we decided to look further afield for debris, finding broken plates and bottles, the occasional lump of wood, but nothing of any major interest. We gradually drifted as the current picked up, and decided to deploy an SMB. However, we drifted straight onto a lump of metal with rope attached, which turned out to be the shot. Result! Whilst ascending it occurred to me that we should have drifted to the east. The shot was to the west of the wreck, and after slack, we were now on an incoming tide. Strange?

Once recovered, we discussed with our fellow dives how the current appeared to be going in the wrong direction. Jacqui and Jenny said that they both drifted back to the shot, but I pointed out that that was before slack, and as we were now after slack, we should have gone the other way. After much debate, someone, (Simon I believe) hypothesised that maybe the shot had been dragged by the tide east all the way passed the wreck, and we had simply caught it up. Whilst this isn't as interesting as the tide going in the same direction before and after slack, it is probably more likely that the shot was just pining for the fjords, and had decided to return to the marina of its own accord. Mystery solved.

The errant shot was caught and recovered, and we returned uneventfully to Littlehampton. Recovery wasn't possible due to time and low water, so was left in for Andrew and Jenny to kindly recover the next day. Thanks guys

Fair to say, an interesting days diving.