

Back to the Future

by Mark Webster

Some people say that you should never re-visit your past as often things are never quite as you remember them and inevitably you are likely to suffer some level of disappointment. This philosophy can easily be applied to popular dive sites which once discovered can suffer from the increased diver traffic which can take its toll changing the appearance and quality of the marine life inhabiting the site. There are many in the Red Sea which I can recall first diving in the late 1970's which are now a mere shadow of their former glory.

So where are these musings leading to? In fact they lead to our revered editor who now operates a boat charter (MV Magic) in his spare time for obsessive UW photographers like me. He recently invited me to dive a special site called the Crown Jewels in Plymouth Sound which he assured me had spectacular marine life on it. A little detective work revealed that this site is in fact a portion of a former gas production rig (WE platform from the West Sole field) which was decommissioned around 1980 and had been placed near the Breakwater Fort to be used for commercial diver training. I

recalled that I had in fact first dived it commercially when it was complete and operating in the southern North Sea, when it was covered mostly in heavy growths of mussels, and then secondly when it had recently arrived in Plymouth and I was taking NDT (Non Destructive Testing) assessments. My recollection of the second visit was of barren steel rusting tubulars and, although I expected some marine growth since then, I was somewhat doubtful of our revered editor's enthusiasm and assurances. I should of course have known better!

But firstly a few comments about the boat and the operation in general. You can of course get the full technical low down on MV Magic from the website (www.magic-charters.co.uk) but from a practical point of view the boat is well laid out for small groups (max five) with plenty of room on the deck for kit and a warm dry cabin for camera preparation or just to get out of the weather. The deck is level from bow to stern which makes movement around the wheelhouse very easy and allows the group to divide and use both areas for kitting up. There



(Above) HMS Scylla – there are many different species of fish on the wreck and some like this Pollack do not show their normal wariness of divers making them perfect foreground subjects. Nikon D300, Subal ND2 housing, 10-17mm FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 250, f8 1/25.

(Right) HMS Scylla – shooting up from inside the wreck against open water helps minimise the effects of the silt and having a cooperative and graceful model to pose for you completes the image. Nikon D300, Subal ND2 housing, 10-17mm FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 250, f11 1/80.





*MV Magic on the pontoon at Dry Stack Marina.
Nikon Coolpix S3000, auto.*

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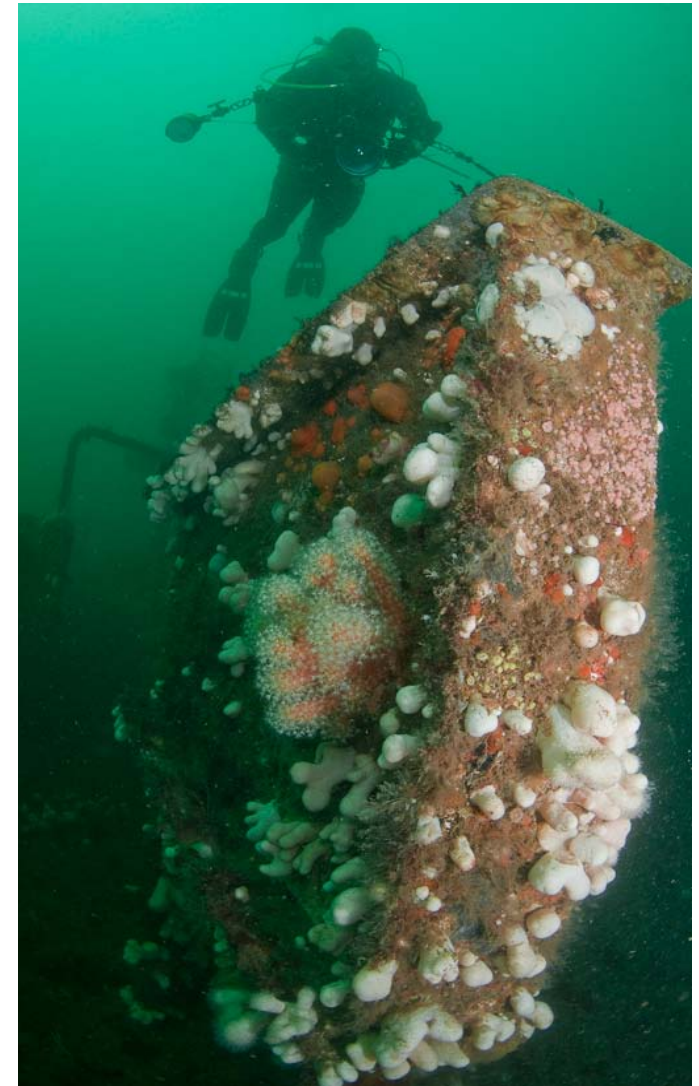
is all the normal navigational and communication equipment plus 240v power for laptops and batteries and even a fridge for chilling drinks or in our case chocolate biscuits due to the warm weather! There is a stern platform to drop in from and an open rung ladder that you can climb with your fins on at the end of the dive. The boat operates from Dry Stack marina which is easily accessible without passing through the centre of Plymouth and has plenty of free parking. Either through innocence or ignorance the name of the marina meant nothing to me until I arrived to find that the boats here are literally dry stacked on two or three levels in large warehouse structures. When you want your boat it is lifted on a very large fork lift and delivered to the pontoon for you to board in a matter of minutes - all very high tech.

Although I used to dive in the Plymouth area frequently I had not done so for perhaps ten years.



*Peter Rowlands – MV Magic skipper, UWP veteran,
guru and model. Nikon Coolpix S3000, auto.*

During my absence things have of course changed and one of the additions is HMS Scylla which was sunk as an artificial reef in Whitsand Bay just a twenty minute steam from base on the MV Magic. So in order to build my anticipation for the second dive at the Crown Jewels we dived here first in near perfectly calm surface conditions and bright sunshine. The Scylla was the last Royal Navy Leander class frigate to be built at the Devonport dockyard in Plymouth and so it seems suitably poignant that she should also become the first artificial reef (wreck) to be sunk in the UK close to her home port in 2004. The wreck sits upright on the seabed and has been well prepared for diver access prior to sinking, so it is easy to swim in and out of various parts of the wreck. It would take a few dives to become familiar with the layout, so ideally your first dives should be with someone familiar with the layout of the wreck. The visibility



You will find the white species of dead men's fingers (Alcyonium digitatum) all over the wreck with the occasional colony of red men's fingers (Alcyonium glomeratum) which stand out amongst the others and seem to extend and feed during slack water conditions. Nikon D300, Subal ND2 housing, 10-17mm FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 250, f11 1/125.



The walkways on the lower deck of the frigate offer a good opportunity to frame a diver and include some receding perspective. Nikon D300, Subal ND2 housing, 10-17mm FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 250, f8 1/25.

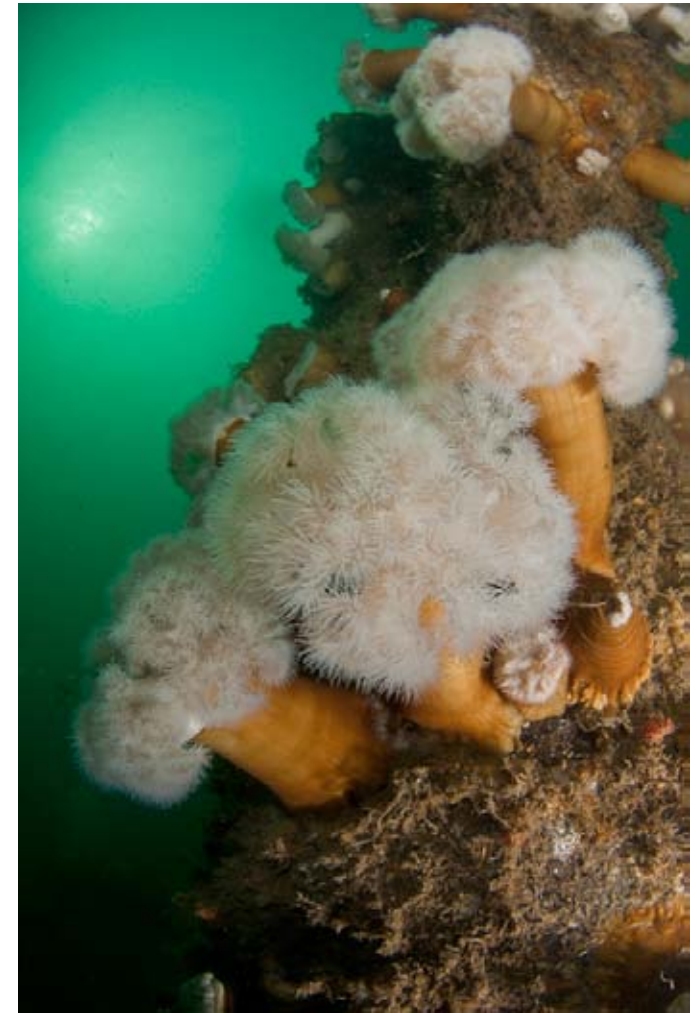
on the wreck is rarely stunning due to the soft silty seabed conditions in Whitsand bay which are further exacerbated by dredging spoil from the Plymouth docks also being dumped in the bay. We had perhaps 6m of visibility during our dive with a heavy green cast due to a plankton bloom which gave the wreck and resulting images a moody atmosphere. The wreck is now completely covered in marine life, predominantly dead means fingers (soft corals) and plumose anemones which were mostly closed during our dive due to slack water conditions. Nevertheless, the impression is one of lush growth and colour and there is a good variety of fish life on the wreck which are very accustomed to divers and therefore excellent subjects for photographers. There are endless photographic opportunities on the wreck particularly if you have a diver to pose for you in the shots. It is a good



Breakwater Fort Plymouth Sound. The Crown Jewels lies a few metres from the fort wall in the centre of the picture. Nikon Coolpix S3000, auto.

idea to dive the wreck with another photographer and you can then alternate posing for each other. I was particularly lucky to have a cooperative and graceful model for my dive who also knew the wreck well.

Following a civilised lunch break on the foredeck we moved on to the Crown Jewels location which is adjacent to the Breakwater fort at the entrance to Plymouth Sound. The fort itself was built as part of the coastal defence system proposed by Prime Minister Lord Palmerston in 1860 and was operational in 1875 and completed in 1880. Military use of the fort ceased in 1976 and from 1978 it was used by Fort Bovisand and Plymouth Ocean Projects for commercial diver training. During that period a number of structures were placed on the seabed including the section of production platform mentioned above.



The Crown Jewels – although the water can be quite green here, particularly during a plankton bloom, the structure is shallow enough to see the sun on the surface on a good day to add to the composition. Nikon D300, Subal ND2 housing, 10-17mm FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 200, f11 1/25.



The Crown Jewels – there are healthy colonies of sea fans (Eunicella verrucosa) around the structure growing alongside a wide variety of other filter feeding marine life. Nikon D300, Subal ND2 housing, 10-17mm FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 200, f11 1/125.

Many local clubs and dive operators dive in the shelter of the breakwater when conditions are too rough outside the sound and consequently do not see this area at its best. Peter's philosophy is to explore the structures when the weather is good and thus enjoy the best visibility which of course is exactly what we desire for our photography. Having a little bit of current running here is also desirable to ensure that all the filter feeding marine life is out and

also that any disturbed silt will clear quickly for the next shot. The bottom depth at high water is around 12-15m and the structures stand between 3-4m proud of the seabed. At the end of the dive you can ascend slowly up the fort wall where there are also numerous subjects, so the dive profile is close to perfect.

Approaching the structure I could immediately see that things had changed dramatically since my last visit here. The entire structure is



The Crown Jewels – this shot from inside the structure shows the complex array of horizontal and diagonal braces which opens up a variety of unusual compositions not normally seen with plumose anemones on the reef. Nikon D300, Subal ND2 housing, 10-17mm FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 200, f11 1/30.

now covered with colourful plumose anemones, jewel anemones, dead men's fingers, sea fans (gorgonians), hydroids and sponges. The structure comprises vertical, horizontal and diagonal tubulars which provide numerous compositional choices with a wide angle lens when visibility is good, or you can concentrate on the smaller life with a macro lens. The dense growths of hydroids are apparently very good for nudibranchs in the springtime as well.

I spent most of my dive working my way around the structure looking for the best angles to include the marine life, structure and a splash of sunshine from the surface. I could have spent the whole dive here but I wanted to also explore another cylindrical structure at the foot of the fort wall which is covered in sea fans (Eunicella verrucosa). These gorgonians are more frequently seen in deeper water, perhaps 15-20m and beyond, so it was a real surprise



to see such a healthy collection of colonies in such shallow water. In fact they are growing as shallow as 5m on the western wall of the fort which I can only assume is due to darker conditions due the shadows cast by the fort for most of the day. Perhaps a marine biologist out there can enlighten me if they read this. I spent some time also looking closely at the sea fans for the Triton nudibranch (*Tritonia nilsodneri*) and false cowrie (*Simnia patula*) and would have returned with a macro lens but I was out of luck or their camouflage was too good!

You can finish your dive with a

slow ascent up the fort wall which has numerous subjects in addition to the sea fans on the west side. The large granite blocks of the fort wall have deep fissures between them which are ideal homes for tompot blennies, shannies, squat lobsters, prawns and small crabs. There are also healthy colonies of fan worms (*Bispira volutacornis*) which seem to be unusually tolerant of a close approach by a noisy UW photographer. As you progress towards the surface the kelp canopy starts to dominate mixed with ascidians and sponges which provide cover for small scorpion fish to ambush their prey. At the end of the



dive it is safest to surface by the fort wall to check for boat traffic and make sure that your own boat has seen you before swimming out for pick up.

So was our revered editor correct in his prediction and does the MV Magic measure up as the ideal platform for photographers and film makers? You make suspect a certain degree of sycophancy as I have known our RE for quite some time and write often for this magazine. However, I have tried to be as objective as possible and in my professional life I assess all sorts of marine operations for efficiency and safety and on that score would have no doubts if you

*(Left) There are healthy colonies of sea fans (*Eunicella verrucosa*) around the structure growing alongside a wide variety of other filter feeding marine life. Nikon D300, Subal ND2 housing, 10-17mm FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 200, f11 1/60.*

(Right) this structure started life as a part of a gas production platform that was decommissioned and now offers a fascinating combination of shapes to compose around the marine life. Nikon D300, Subal ND2 housing, 10-17mm FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 200, f11 1/125.



(Above) MV Magic on the pontoon at Dry Stack Marina. Nikon Coolpix S3000, auto.



(Left) Breakwater Fort – the wall of the Breakwater Fort also has very healthy colonies of sea fans (Eunicella verrucosa) which can be as shallow as 5m when the tide is low. Nikon D300, Subal ND2 housing, 10-17mm FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 200, f11 1/60.

are considering a charter on MV Magic. As for the two sites that we visited I would say they offer fantastic opportunities for photographers and videographers and you could happily spend several days on each. But Plymouth as a base offers so much more a little further offshore when the conditions are good with sites like Hands Deep and the Eddystone a relatively short run from shore with a fast boat like MV Magic. So if you are keen on temperate diving then you can build a very varied itinerary for a few days or perhaps a week or more and have the great advantage of being able to return to a site with a different lens or technique in mind.

Dive sites are not normally like fine wines improving with age, but artificial structures are often an exception to this rule. Although I did not see the Scylla when she was first sunk, she certainly started her final life as naked steel and has been quickly colonised and transformed as an artificial reef. The Crown Jewels is also an exception to the rule and I was amazed at the variety of life now on the structure. I will certainly be making a return to both with a few shots planned!

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