

SCUBA

Official Magazine of Britain's Biggest Diving Club



RETURN TO EYEMOUTH

Revisiting the East Coast classic



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ON TEST

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Homecoming: Eyemouth and St Abbs

Neil Hope, SCUBA's kit guru, returns to his roots near the Scottish borders, and finds his memories of glorious local diving haven't let him down

Growing up exploring Northumberland's coastline around Beadnell, Seahouses and the Farne Islands, it was inevitable I'd gravitate across the border into Scotland. Then, as Eyemouth and St Abbs became increasingly regular haunts of mine it made perfect sense, when the opportunity arose, to move closer to this diving hotspot. So, in the following years, I spent many memorable moments exploring the underwater delights of this incredibly colourful and diverse area.

Eventually, work saw me relocate to the opposite end of the UK, but I always intended to revisit my former stomping grounds. However, in the decade and a half since I waved goodbye to Berwickshire and said hello to Cornwall, the opportunities to do so have been few and far between. So, a return visit was long overdue when the invitation to spend a week diving with Eyemouth-based Divestay, came my way. Originally from Lincolnshire, owners Gary Steenvoorden and Zoe Shephardson opened up their diver-friendly bed and breakfast, the Home Arms, around five years ago.

Below: Sunrise over Eyemouth harbour





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Home from home

The former pub, catering for up to 24 guests, is located centrally in the town overlooking Eyemouth's sandy beach. Accommodation is only half of what Gary and Zoe have to offer: the other comes in the shape of their 11-metre BlythCat catamaran, WaveDancer II.

This modern, well-equipped boat has a top speed of 20 knots and easily copes with 12 divers on her ample deck. The spacious wheelhouse affords plenty of shelter in less than favourable conditions. Thankfully, apart from the odd shower – this is Scotland after all – the mid-August weather

remained bright and sunny for my five-day trip. Joining me on board were half a dozen divers from BSAC's Nuneaton-based Marlin Sub-Aqua Club and a couple of independent buddy pairs. This wasn't the club's first trip on WaveDancer and just like myself they were here for a mix of the old and the new. They obviously knew what they liked as before the week was up they'd booked for next year. ➤

➤ **Below:** Beautiful plumose anemones (*Metridium senile*) are widespread around Eyemouth



Wrecks and reefs

Berwickshire's St Abbs and Eyemouth Voluntary Marine Reserve is the only one of its kind in Scotland. Covering around eight kilometres of coastline from Hairy Ness in the north to Thrummie Carr in the south it encompasses some of the best diving – and underwater visibility – that the UK has to offer. Extending seaward to the 50-metre contour the entire reserve covers 1,030 hectares.

Interestingly, my first dive on the wreck of the Shadwan was not only taking place outside the reserve but the site, located some two miles north of Holy Island, was in English waters to boot. The 1538-tonne steamship fell victim to severe northerly gales in November 1888 and her remains lie at a depth of 18m.

Although well broken up, the wreckage is spread across a wide area and there's plenty to see. The

boiler, winches, plates and bollards all provide points of interest and the dive's winning combination of great viz, lots of fish life and shallow depth allowed plenty of time for exploration.

Next up was an old favourite, Weasel Loch. While I've dived this site more times than I can remember, in the past it had always been from the shore, which is no easy feat. Negotiating the long, wooden staircase leading down the steep cliffs to the water's edge – and back up afterwards – requires some effort. Dropping in from WaveDancer, or more precisely being lowered in gently via her double-sized diver lift, was an altogether more sedate experience. Descending eight metres into vividly familiar territory, I followed the contours of the cliff wall.

It seemed more like yesterday than yesteryear since I last dived the spot, but I quickly reacquainted

Below: Divers from Marlin Sub-Aqua Club explore the remains of the Shadwan



myself with my surroundings and headed out from the shallows to negotiate my way onto the Cresta Run and Conger Reef. Here, at certain states of the tide it's possible to work up a considerable head of steam as the current flows through the narrow corridor between two spectacular reef walls. On this occasion however, with the tide in more benign mood I was able to explore my surroundings at a more sedate pace. The colourful dead men's fingers adorning every surface typify the unique atmosphere of one of my all-time favourite dives and without the energy-sapping route up the cliffs it brought another day to a successful conclusion.

Tunnels, holes and caves

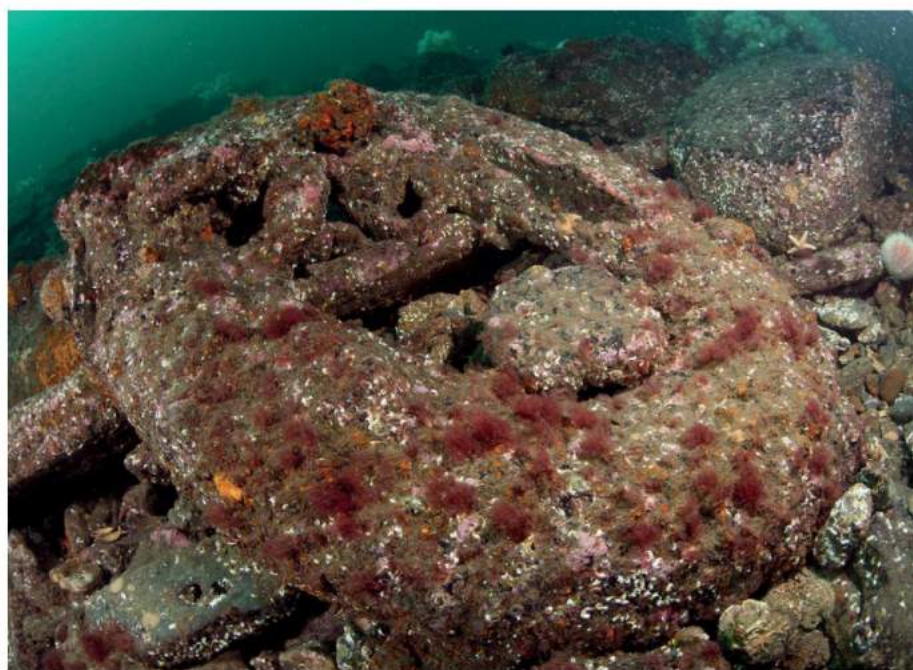
From the familiar to the not so familiar, the following morning we found ourselves kitted-up and ready to disembark at Cleaver Rock. Directly

opposite this large monolith is the concealed starting point to the 40m-long Tye's Tunnel.

This diver-sized entrance is accessible only around the high tide mark and this makes it particularly susceptible to swell and surge. Unfortunately for me, retrieving an errant fin that decided to take its own route rather than stick with me resulted in an enforced detour. Reunited, both fin and I met up with the others as they emerged one by one at the tunnel's exit. We soon found ourselves among an area of impressive-looking large boulders, giving way to another colourful reef system. I had to make do with descriptions of the tunnel and its colourful beadlet anemones.

Skelly Hole is another quintessential St Abbs dive. It may be shallow at just 12 metres but, from its impressive wall to the large boulder-filled gulley that gives it its name, there is so much to see. As is

● **Below: Shadwan's boiler, winches and bollards provide plenty to look at**



common throughout the reserve, dead men's fingers and large bright red dahlia anemones highlight this remarkable scenic dive. Even an hour-plus duration really wasn't enough time to do it justice.

Wildlife aplenty

Thrummie Carr is located at the marine reserve's northern limit and while the diving itself – including large shoals of pollock – was good, it was what occurred at the surface, rather than below it, that provided one of the highlights of the week. Surfacing to the sight of dolphins making their way down the coastline I barely had enough time to snatch my camera from the wheelhouse before they made an extremely close appearance alongside WaveDancer.

I was left cursing I'd not brought a longer lens as a trio of the 15 to 20-strong school of Atlantic bottlenose dolphins (*Tursiops truncatus*) embarked on some spectacular aerial sparring in front of us. One individual obliged my photographic needs by leaping repeatedly just forward of the starboard

📍 **Below: Dolphins cruise alongside WaveDancer**

📍 **Bottom: Dahlia anemones (*Urticina felina*) provide a splash of colour on Fast Castle's shallow reefs**



bow. After a good half hour of interaction they continued on their way, having turned a very good day's diving into an excellent one.

A few miles north of the village of Coldingham, perched atop the 40m-plus sheer cliff face is the remains of Fast Castle. Originally constructed in the 1300s, the former garrison's ownership passed several times between the warring English and Scots. While there's very little left of the castle – or the Spanish gold that legend says lies at the base of the cliffs – the real treasure of Fast Castle lies a few hundred metres out to sea where the seabed is absolutely teeming with life.

A series of low reefs running seaward in depths of 10-20m provide a haven for numerous crustaceans. I watched in amusement for several minutes as a lobster and crab faced off in a territorial dispute. Undersized and overpowered, the



mismatched crab eventually decided discretion was the better part of valour. There are plenty of fish too. Large ballan wrasse, blennies, decent sized ling and while I didn't come across one myself, several of the party confirmed that the region's legendary wolf fish were also very much in evidence.

Leiger Buss was another site I'd not come across before. This scenic dive consists of four kelp-covered pinnacles rising up from the sandy seabed in 14m. Swimming from pinnacle to pinnacle the dive was light, airy, undemanding and provided an interesting diversion.

Signature dive

The following morning was an early start and also the deepest dive of the trip. The steamer Glanmire, sunk off St Abbs Head in 1912 after striking rocks in thick fog, is one of the area's signature dives.

While it was one of the first 'deep' dives I completed during my training all those years ago, it was very much a short bounce dive then, so to all intents and purposes this would be my first real look at the wreck.

The site is prone to strong currents, so slack water is essential and unfortunately all too short. At around the 32m mark however, it is possible to take in most of the wreck's prominent features as a no-stop dive. In contrast to the scattered remains of the Shadwan this wreck is much more intact. The two large boilers are the most obvious feature, rising high above the broken plates and ribs of the wreck.

Literally every surface is completely covered in yellow dead men's fingers and combined with the green-hued water this makes for a very atmospheric dive. I passed the engine block on my way to the stern and it wasn't long before the massive

➡ **Above: Weasel Loch's rocky walls are covered with dead men's fingers**



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