

IT'S A LONG WAY TO LOCHALINE (VIA CAPERNWRAY)

GB DIVES

This spring 11 divers from Peterborough Sub-Aqua Club crammed into four cars and took a road trip 430 miles north, converging on Lochaline on the Sound of Mull for a weekend of diving among some of western Scotland's finest wrecks. **Tony Baskeyfield** takes up the story >>



ALL PHOTOGRAPHS BY TONY BASKEYFIELD

HEADING NORTH: the team of divers from Peterborough Sub Aqua Club [main photograph]; one of the divers spies a scallop [above]



TROUT POUT: the brown trout at Capernwray jostle for position [this photograph]; heading for the Highlands [above]; time for a pint [below right]



OVERLOOKING THE Sound of Mull, Lochaline is a tiny village perched on the southern edge of the Morvern peninsula, in the far west of Scotland, and offers some of this country's best wreck dives. I dived there 20 years ago and absolutely loved it, and I'd always planned to go back for more – so this trip, over a weekend in May with Peterborough Sub-Aqua Club, was the perfect opportunity.

We're an active club, often diving the east coast from our RIBs. We also travel around the UK, from England's South Coast to Scapa Flow, and abroad to the Red Sea, Seychelles and even Chuuk Lagoon. This time, though, we faced a 430-mile, ten-hour road trip north, and I was determined to make the most of the journey as well as the diving.

We set off from Peterborough on a drizzly Friday morning at 9am. I was travelling in one of four cars with my nephew and dive buddy John. The others planned to get to Lochaline as quickly as possible, but we had other ideas.

ROAD TRIP DETOUR

Anyone passing through Lancashire should consider visiting the Capernwray dive centre, on the edge of the Lake District and less than a mile from junction 35 of the M6. It's a disused 4.5-hectare limestone quarry with several underwater attractions, including a Wessex helicopter and a Second World War minesweeper. But it wasn't these, or the newly sunken plane and yellow submarine, that made me take this detour – it was the clear water and friendly brown trout that I'd heard about.

I wasn't disappointed. As soon as we entered the water, the first trout appeared, and we were mobbed when John took out the fish food. He decided not to wear gloves so he could open the bag



SOUND MAN: the well-equipped Sound Diver [this photograph]; skipper Mark Lawrence [below]

to feed the fish, saying that they were 'only' brown trout – but with 50 of them snapping for food, they bit his fingers till they bled.

We spent 30 minutes swimming and feeding the frenzied trout. They are really quite beautiful, with silvery sides and lovely markings. These specimens were big and powerful, averaging about 50cm in length and weighing around 3–5kg. I laughed as they swam under my arms and bumped into me – it was like being nudged by 50 hungry puppies.

We left Capernwray at 2pm and sped north, determined to catch the others. As we approached Glasgow, we had a choice of route: while others in our convoy took the west-coast A816 road via Oban, we thought the M80 past Stirling would be quicker.

In my opinion, the twists, curves, ups, downs and magnificent scenery make the routes through the Scottish Highlands the greatest driving roads on the planet. As we rounded Loch Lubnaig, our empty coffee cups slid across the dashboard, and we had to be careful that we weren't caught speeding through Glen Coe. By 7pm, we were heading to catch the Corran Ferry, which crosses Loch Linnhe at the Corran Narrows every half an hour.

After a 15-minute crossing, we rolled off the ferry and began the final leg of our journey, driving along single-track roads through the village of Kingairloch and the spectacular Highland landscape, before arriving in Lochaline at 8pm. We pulled into Lochaline Dive Centre, raced into the bar, ordered our pints of beer and put our feet up. We'd arrived first, despite our detour, and felt quietly triumphant when our pals turned up, aghast, shortly afterwards.

SATURDAY IN THE SOUND

The weather on the west coast of Scotland is influenced by the Atlantic Ocean. This ensures that the water here is reasonably clear, but the area bears the brunt of the ocean winds, so diving is extremely dependent on the weather. The beauty of the Sound of Mull is that it offers clear water and is sheltered from the worst of the Atlantic weather by the island of Mull.

We stayed overnight at the Old Post Office – self-catering accommodation that's ideal for divers, with a drying room, space for gear storage and facilities for washing kit. The following morning, we awoke at 6.30am to glorious sunshine with a southerly force 5 gusting away. The wind was so severe that it completely ruined our dive planning, bringing forward the tides

and our predicted slack water by one hour. So, we adjusted our plan to stay within the Sound of Mull, rather than go further afield as we'd hoped.

Both the dive centre and the Old Post Office are just a couple of minutes' walk from the old stone pier at Lochaline. It's lovely to get away from the hustle and bustle of a typical UK harbour, with too many cars, boats and divers all jostling for pole position. Here at Lochaline, we had our hardboat – the Sound Diver – and the whole car park to ourselves.

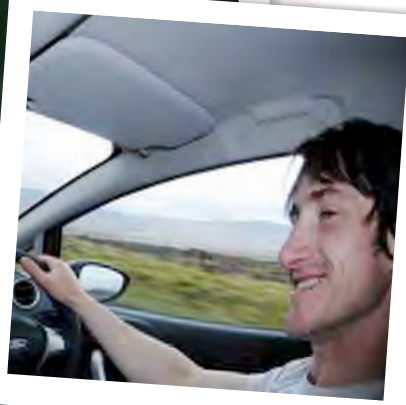
I rate the 12.5m Sound Diver – skippered by Lochaline Dive Centre owner Mark Lawrence – as one of the best-equipped boats I've dived from in the UK. It has loads of deck space, is licensed to take 12 divers, and has a hydraulic diver lift and compressor on board, as well as state-of-the-art wreck-finding gadgetry. By half past seven, we were motoring to our first dive, the Thesis, where the calm, sheltered water made it easy for us to prepare our gear.

The Thesis was a 150-tonne Belfast steamer that hit a reef in 1889 in bad weather. Structurally intact with ribs exposed and encrusted with dead men's fingers, this is a pretty wreck to dive ➤➤





MULL IT OVER: [from top to bottom] plumose anemone; on the road; a lift makes life easier; swathes of marine life cover all surfaces



– it lies upright 50m from the shore, with the bow at 12m and the stern at 30–35m.

We dropped onto the bows and moved into one of the forward holds containing the cargo of pig iron, then swam out of the port side and along the sea bed to the stern. From here, we returned along the deck, passing the boiler, before exiting the water in comfort on Sound Diver's hydraulic lift.

Our second dive later that morning was a typical Scottish scenic wall dive leading to Ardtornish Bay. I just love this kind of scenery in such gin-clear water. We began at an exposed wall where the tide flows quickly and the rocks are covered with dead men's fingers and the occasional strand of kelp. We then rounded the point at 20m where rocky wall meets gravel and mud on the gradients of the inner bay. The still water in this area is full of scallops, brittlestars and plumose anemones.

Our final dive on Saturday was the Hispania, a Swedish merchant vessel that sank in 1954 after hitting a reef during a storm. All the crew were rescued, but the captain went down with his ship. Now, it presents one of Scotland's best wreck dives: upright, mostly intact and covered in sea squirts. The amount of marine life around the hull is exceptional and includes orange and white anemones, sponges, fish and starfish. The engine room and deck are all penetrable.

Thirty minutes by boat from Lochaline, the Hispania can only be dived on slack water. Swimming inside is reasonably safe, as most of the plating has fallen off, providing numerous exit points from swim-throughs and companionways. We spent most of our dive in the aft hold and around the bridge area, which is great to swim around, with the metal beams criss-crossing overhead.

EASY LIKE SUNDAY MORNING

We resolved to rise extra early on Sunday morning in order to dive twice more before going home, so by 8.30am, we were preparing to dive the Shuna. This Dutch ship sank in 1913 while carrying a cargo of coal, and now lies intact and upright in 30m. The wreck can be dived at all states of the tide and is only 200m from the shore.

And what a good dive it is: not too big and easy to circumnavigate in one dive. We started amidships, where

our buoy line was attached to the mast, then made our way toward the stern. It takes little effort to stir up silt here, but we carefully made our way over and under the massive rudder and propeller without making it too dark. We swam up and round the rail to the bows with winches intact, and back to the line.

Finally, we dived a real historical relic. The *Swan* is a small warship built by Charles I in 1641 as a light, swift vessel to counter piracy. She changed sides during the English Civil War to become part of the Cromwellian navy, and was lost while attacking Duart Castle on Mull in 1653. The site is designated under the Protection of Wrecks Act and can only be dived under licence from Historic Scotland. Luckily, Lochaline Dive Centre runs a visitor scheme that allowed us to dive here.

After excavating and mapping the site, underwater archaeologists have covered the

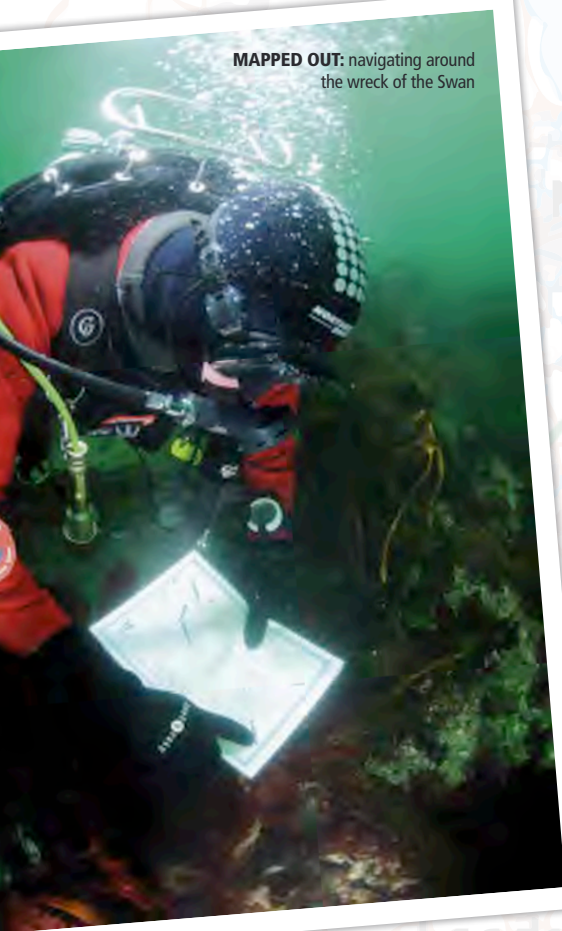
wreck with a layer of sandbags.

Consequently, there's not much to see here but a scatter of cannon and an anchor, all lightly covered with kelp. However, I love to see old bits of wreckage, and this, combined with the tale of the *Swan*'s sinking, gave me a thrilling glimpse into history.

As we made our way home on the Sunday afternoon, I thought about the weekend. Although the weather prevented any diving outside the Sound of Mull, we were still able to do some terrific dives in the calm water within it. All in all, it was a fantastic trip with a great bunch of experienced divers – British club diving at its best. ■

• To find out about diving from Lochaline Dive Centre, see www.lochalinedivecentre.co.uk or call 01967 421627. For information about Capernwray go to www.dive-site.co.uk or phone 01524 735132

MAPPED OUT: navigating around the wreck of the *Swan*



SCAN AND PLAN

Mark Lawrence, Lochaline Dive Centre owner and Sound Diver skipper, is a very clever guy. Not only has he got a great diving setup with his wife Annabel, he has also developed a three-dimensional imaging system with sophisticated post-processing to create images of wrecks with incredible accuracy.

The WreckSight imaging system combines high-resolution multibeam sonar with GPS to map a 3D image that can be viewed at almost any angle. We were shown an up-to-date 3D picture of the *Hispania*, which could be rotated to see details of the hull, deck and surrounding sea bed. We could zoom in and out to obtain depth and distance information in order to plan our dive.

This visualising technique has been developed primarily for commercial, salvage and environmental applications. Lawrence's company, ADUS, has been collecting and visualising data on shipwrecks that pose an environmental hazard due to oil, explosives or nuclear material, or because they are a danger to navigation.

ADUS has mapped a wide range of underwater objects for government agencies, including a Russian nuclear submarine in 250m of Arctic waters, a bulk cargo carrier in 50m of tropical seas and the Richard Montgomery munitions ship in the Thames.

Having taken 3D images of most of the Scapa Flow wrecks, Lawrence plans to map the most popular wrecks on England's south coast, starting with the Scylla.

