

## **PLYMOUTH**

**AUGUST 13<sup>TH</sup>, 14<sup>TH</sup>, 15<sup>TH</sup>, 16<sup>TH</sup> 2009**

**Dave Jones, Bill Whitfield, Pete Gilling, Nick Whitehall, Marcus Bancroft, Daren Mottershead, Dave Jamieson**

It was all Jones'ys fault.....

After his fantastic Red Sea Wreck Diving liveaboard trip during late February this year, he wanted to do some proper UK wreck diving. Having sought advice from the clubs more experienced fraternity, Dave decided Plymouth would be ideal because of the "recently" sunk Scylla, the famous James Egan Layne close by and the abundance of other sites to choose from, all within easy reach of each other.

Thursday morning I threw my kit into my pick-up (not literally) and drove to collect Daren (and his kit). Realised I'd forgotten my pony we went back home for it. Half an hour later, determined it wasn't gonna' be one of those days ... We'd loaded up Dave's kit ... and all his "Noise Kit" because Bill had arranged for him to do a job on Monday in Torquay.

Pick-up packed to the roof panels we set off destined for Malins holiday pad in Padstow to collect the RIB. (Good job his name 'ain't Paddy!) He'd stored it for the club after his own trip and Garry had used it for the Kernow Festival. We had to take the gate off its hinges to wriggle the boat out into the road. Replacing the gate, we then spent an hour mesmerised by the wonderful sea views from his holiday cottage.

Well, it was real fun and games dragging the RIB through those narrow Cornish country lanes amongst the August holiday traffic ... don't think we were very popular! For three guys that normally use Sat Nav on a daily basis, not one of us had brought one with us. Relying on each other to bring his. Still, you can't beat good old fashioned map reading and a spot of guess-work! ... 'cos we arrived at Mount Batten, Plymouth still during daylight, launched the RIB, moored it ready for the morning, well in time for last orders and a good hour before the rest of the guys got there .... Didn't we do well!

We had deliberately chosen this weekend because we all preferred neap tides and with it being August hoped we'd get good weather.

Friday morning arrived; no wind, clear blue sky, flat calm sea. . Just perfect!

It was decided to do a shake-down dive (max 15M) to make sure everything worked as it should. i.e., equipment, weights ... US!

So plan A was to dive the Mewstone, then if all went well, head back to Mount Batten to refill the cylinders. We would take a spare cylinder so we could do the Scylla, then the James Egan Layne.

I had a problem donning my dry-suit, so I decided to skipper the RIB instead of diving. This meant we could have three buddy pairs instead of two pairs and a three. Three pairs would make the diving safer for everyone and the overall group dive time

shorter, which meant, depending on max depth and accumulated surface intervals, there was the possibility of a third dive, So buddies for the weekend were: Marcus and Pete, Dave and Bill, Daz and Nick.

## **Mewstone Ledges**

**Location:** Position; Area South West of Great Mewstone

**Depth:** 18m to 30m of water

Mewstone Ledges area generally has good visibility as the whole area is predominantly rock based. Around the 20-25m mark there are some lovely deep gullies full of Urchins. The area supports a variety of marine life including Dogfish, Pollock, Bullhusk, Spider crab and Lobster. During spring tides you can often get a strong drift in this area as well. Always use an SMB on this site as wind conditions sometimes make it difficult for the skipper to keep tabs of the divers' bubbles.

Bill missed the boat. He was still on his way from South Wales and had planned to meet us for lunch. Dave and Nick insisted on going in first, so I dropped them off in 12m of water. Then the other four managed to kit up quickly as the sea was flat and calm. They were about to roll in off the RIB when the other pair surfaced after only fifteen minutes. Both complaining the bottom is just fields of kelp and there was nothing to see. We all advised them rather than hover above they should drop below the kelp to the bottom and mooch around . . . so they went back down for another go.

Daz, Marcus and Pete all plopped in together, and descended into the disappointing gloomy green. Masses of kelp everywhere but heading down through the waving, slimy fronds we soon found distinct gullies running northwards. Moving slowly and focussing on the smaller marine inhabitants illuminated by our mega torches, we all agreed that this was a perfect 40 minute shakedown to start the weekend.

Dive successfully completed, we headed back to Mount Batten for more air, spare tanks, lunch .... Not forgetting Bill.

It was a little bumpy rounding Penlee Point towards Rame Head into Whitsand Bay but we persevered and soon arrived at the Scylla.

## **The Scylla**

**Depth:** 12-24m

**Location:** Position; 50 19.64N 03 15.20W

One of the last warships to be built at Plymouth the Scylla was built in Devonport Dockyard in 1967 launched in August 1968 and was commissioned on 14 February 1970

At the outbreak of the Falklands war in 1982 Scylla had just started a major refit. So short were the Navy of spare parts and equipment for the fleet that the Scylla was used as a donor vessel and cannibalised to allow other ships to be repaired. She did however receive her refit which was completed in December 1984 and went on to the Persian Gulf escorting British Merchant ships through the Straits of Hormuz at the height of the Iran, Iraq war in 1986 - 88.

By the early nineties the Scylla was obsolete in design and technology, and was decommissioned in 1993. On the 27th of March 2004 the Scylla was sunk as an artificial reef. This gave the National Marine Aquarium a unique opportunity to map the development and growth of sea life on a structure from day one.

The wreck itself used to have three large yellow buoys stationed at the bow, middle and stern. Unfortunately these were lost in the storms of the winter of 2005. There is now a single yellow marker on the bow and a yellow channel buoy being used as uplink site to the Aquarium amidships.



A year or so into the sinking of the Scylla, marine life really started to establish a foothold on the vessel. Soft corals and barnacles have now adhered to the sides and deck areas whilst the fish population is picking up.

The Scylla is sitting upright with a small list to starboard that has developed since she was sunk. The Scylla was stripped for sinking with only the bridge as a major feature. The doors and hatchways have been removed and there are notices telling you to check your air.

At the stern is the flight deck and hanger for a helicopter and if you want to penetrate this wreck, holes have been cut in the sides to effect entry and exit points. It's worth noting that there are some dead ends that you can't get out of. Just because the wreck has been prepared for penetration, do not be lulled into a false sense of security... Plan your dive and dive your plan!! The Scylla is not a wreck to ignore your best diving practice.

Having dived the Scylla last year (finally) with Dave Murphy, Daz was confident of finding his way around this fantastic wreck and acting as a guide for Nick. As they descended it was obvious that the visibility was much better than 2008, the massive superstructure looming into view within seconds of leaving the surface. One thing you must do on this dive (as with most intact wrecks) is position yourself hovering just off the bow and get an awesome view of both flanks of the vessel as if she was steaming directly towards you. The pair then followed the classic Scylla route along the port side companion way all the way to the stern and back along a similar route on the starboard side. Back at the foredeck, descending from the main deck level you find a couple of straight swim-throughs which penetrate the whole width of the wreck from starboard to port and back again. Then back up to the bridge where a fairly tight squeeze through the doorway and a sharp turn up a few steps finds you inside what used to be the room with the most windows. Dives like this make you realize that the Scylla really is worth all the hype.

Just a few years ago whilst diving the area we stumbled across a beach café near Withnoe Point. We just fancied a spot of afternoon tea. However the beach landing was proving too tricky in the high surf. So abandoning that idea, surface interval was spent floating over that other wreck. . . at around 500m east of the Scylla lies the world famous James Eagan Layne.

## James Eagan Layne

**Depth:** 11-22m

**Location:** Position 50.19.606N 004.14.705W

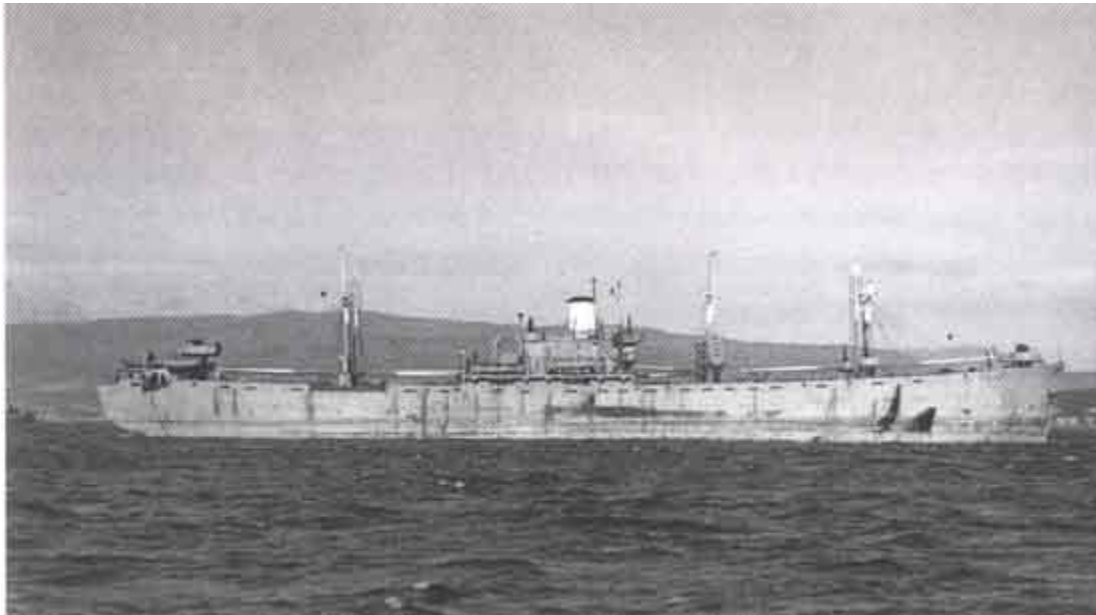


The Eagan Layne is a well known wreck and would probably qualify for one of the UK's most dived. She lies upright on the sea bed around 22m to the bottom. As a wreck she is ideal for novices and experienced divers alike. She is easily accessed by

dive boats from Plymouth and there are usually no problems with the dive. The old adage of plan your dive and dive your plan holds true on this site as indeed all other dive sites!

The Eagan Layne was an American Liberty ship bringing supplies to Britain during World War 2. Hundreds of these ships were built in the early 1940's; the Layne was built in December 1944. As she passed near to Plymouth she was torpedoed by a German U boat (U-1195) between holds 4 and 5 on the starboard side, her steering gear failed and she began to flood. She was taken in tow to shallower water in Whitsand Bay where she gently sank upright on a sandy bottom. There were no casualties and much of her cargo was salvaged.

She is 440 ft long and was over 7000 tons gross weight. She lies in 22m with about 11m to her deck. The stern section of the wreck is separate from the main hull and lies about 25m to the south.



Although the Layne is deteriorating she is an excellent dive. The sides of the Layne are covered with white dead man's fingers and soft corals. The bows are intact and make an amazing sight the first time you experience the size of the wreck. The Eagan Layne supports an enormous fish population where shoals of Pollack, Pouting and Bib mass on sections of the wreck. The holds are accessible although care needs to be taken swimming between the bulkhead stanchions. The stern section is separated from the main wreck by about 50m and was connected by a cable to make it easy to find. The stern is also buoyed separately. There is still some live ordinance in the stern section which should be left well alone.

Daz, Marcus and Nick jumped in as a threesome on this one as Pete was feeling a bit moby after all the rolling around in the surf at Withnoe Point. The last time Daz and Marcus did this dive was also in a three last year (with Lisa) and that one ended up with Daz becoming separated from the others, fining around solo for 15 minutes and

then spending another 10mins slowly ascending the shot line – only to find Lisa and Marcus back on the RIB with DJ and the others wondering where the hell he was and on the verge of testing their VHF skills.

This time around the three managed to keep together and, although the viz was reduced compared to the Scylla, still had a memorable dive in amongst the majestic rusting pillars and jumble of scrap that is the wonderful James Egan Layne. A magical moment occurred when Marcus flashed his torch erratically in our eye-line and pointed into a crevice between two huge rusty plates. Nick and Daz couldn't see anything at first but suddenly spotted a big black eye the size of a jam jar lid. Tracing the form of the grey beast through gaps in the wreckage they quickly realised that this was one big mother of a conger with a head like Shergar. Nobody seemed keen to give it a poke or stick their hand in, so a hasty retreat was made hoping that Mrs Eel wasn't inclined to give chase. The dive was soon over and a short deco top was completed whilst hanging on to the shallowest section of the wreck, which was varying in depth between 5m and 8m due to a strong swell topside.

It was quite late when we arrived back at Mount Batten. We moored the RIB on the pontoon for the night, sorted the kit and took the cylinders to In-Deep dive centre for re-filling ready for the morning. A quick shower, then down to the local pub for a pie and a pint or two. It had been a long but enjoyable 'ol day and it gave us chance to relax and reflect on the three crackin' dives that had been achieved, and plan our next days diving. . It wasn't long before we all turned in.

The next day the wind had got up which dashed our hopes of diving the Eddystone Rocks (Lighthouse). At around twelve miles away from Plymouth it was a long way to go and have to endure a 2m swell in a rough sea. So we decided on the Persia instead. Although it's around the same distance away; it's closer to shore, therefore sea conditions should be more favorable. However we would still continue to monitor the weather as we entered Wembury Bay heading towards Bigbury Bay.

We had no idea it would be so popular! Two hardboats and two RIBs already on site! It was going to be very crowded down there.

It's just not 'cricket' throwing a lead weight on top of unsuspecting divers, so we gained permission from one of the hardboat skippers to use their shot line instead.

It was proving to be a little tricky kitting up on the high swell, but we all helped each other and soon dropped them all at the buoy. I think one or two were feeling a bit moby though!

Whilst patiently waiting for their return another two hardboats and three more RIBs arrived. Well I'm no mathematician, but with four hardboats and five RIBs circling the wreck there'd be no cat swinging down there today!

## **Persier**

**Location:** 50:17:06N; 03:58:07W:

**Depth:** 30m

The Persier, formally known as the War Buffalo, was a 5000 ton merchantman built in Newcastle in 1919 and took part at Dunkirk in 1940. She nearly sank while doing convoy duty from America to Britain in 1941. She remained stranded off Iceland for over a year until she was towed back to Britain to be repaired. In 1945 on convoy duty off Eddystone she was hit by a couple of torpedoes from UB-1017. Support vessels managed to rescue the crew and passengers and she was left to drift into the night. She sank but no one knew where.

In 1969, a fisherman found the wreck in Bigbury Bay. Divers from Plymouth Sound went down and brought up the ship's bell which now lives in Ray Ives Diving Museum in Plymouth. They bought the wreck for 300 pounds and still own her.



The Persier is at position 50:17:06N; 03:58:07W at a maximum depth of around 30m. Diving can be done at much any time - there is little tidal flow around her. She lies on a sandy-rocky bottom with extensive and interesting reefs around her. Her bows and stern are fairly recognisable, but the amidships is a mess of plates and wreckage. The bow is quite upright and stands some 10m above the sea bed. Three large boilers can be seen. The remains of the engine with large pistons scattered over the wrecked plates are easily found.

The Persier supports an amazing amount of fish life. Bib and Pollock are especially common. The guys all said the visibility was quite good although very over-crowded.

We headed back to Bovisand for lunch, stopping briefly to scan the horizon as Pete spotted dolphins. Alas, we didn't... But he was wearing his hood upside-down 'cos of the salt water getting in his eyes!

We had only gone around five miles or so when we heard on radio channels 16 and 14 the dive boat 'Fintan' had a problem with a diver suffering from suspected hypoxia. We knew it was one of the hardboats at the Persia. A helicopter had been scrambled and as we continued on our way we passed the Plymouth Lifeboat racing out to rendezvous with them.

Our next chosen wreck was the Elk. Because of her position being very close to the main shipping lane, we had to seek permission from the Longroom (Royal Navy). The Longroom controls all marine traffic in and around Plymouth waters. They told us we could dive after 15:10hrs or after the Brittany Ferry had left for France.

On leaving Bovisand heading towards the western end inside of the breakwater someone noticed a guy on a speedboat waving frantically. Being the good Samaritans we are, we stopped to help. His electrics had failed and he couldn't start his boat. Nick decided, as his boat is the same size as ours, it would be safer to

Side Spring (tie onto the side of our RIB) and tow him and his companions back to Bovisand. For which they generously forced £20 into our beer kitty.

It seemed the swell had increased slightly as we passed the calm of the breakwater heading back out towards the Elk. The Brittany Ferry wasn't far behind and soon passed into the distance.

Seconds after deploying the shot line some of us saw 'real' dolphins only a few meters from the RIB. They probably came to find out what all the commotion was about? - Us trawling back and forth, scanning the sea-bed to find a wreck in a choppy sea.

What a lucky shot ... smack in the middle of the wreck! As first guys in, Nick and Daz thought it sensible to lift the shot weight from the lower deck onto the main deck to a better position for recovering later. This of course gave the impression to the other four guys it was more of a perfect hit than it originally was .... But, hey, I don't mind taking the credit!

After Nick had manfully hauled big weight out of the bowels of the wreck and placed it squarely on the bare central spine of the Elk, he looked up to see Daz staring hypnotically at a huge shoal of Pollack hovering effortlessly above their heads. They must've had quite a shock a few minutes earlier when a 20kg lump of iron had come barreling down from the surface and plunged straight into them. There was probably a dead one somewhere inside the wreck with half its head missing. The Elk is one of those wrecks which is at the perfect depth for its size. The no-stop time at 32m is 17mins and that's just enough time to circumnavigate this lovely little 100ft trawler lying mostly intact and upright on the sea bed. And when you get great viz, as on this occasion, you can just hover above it and gaze at the whole thing just lying there waiting for a good service and a fresh tank of diesel. After completing a full circuit of the wreck at a leisurely pace, Daz decided to attach his SMB reel to one end of the Elk's foredeck winch before inflating the buoy. (He's always full of mad ideas).

## **Elk**

**Depth:** 32m

**Location:** 50:18:24N; 04:10:12W

The Elk is a small trawler of 108 ft length that was mined in November 1940 just outside Plymouth Sound. For most of her life she was a fishing vessel. She was built at Hull in 1902 and until the 1st World War fished from Grimsby. In 1915 she was requisitioned as a minelayer and saw service off the Dardanelles.

The Elk was discovered in 1981. She lies upright on the Elk Reef at position 50:18:24N; 04:10:12W at a depth of 32m on a sandy bottom. Being small, she is easily dived and her cabin is a notably intact feature. She has suffered in recent years, and is now in a poor condition however you can easily dive the entire length of the wreck and get an appreciation of what she was like. The surrounding reef is excellent with a variety of marine life to see, surrounding her are artillery shells and other naval debris.

Jones' had made plans for us all that evening and pre-booked a Burmese restaurant for 19.30hrs. We got back to Mount Batten by 17.30 hrs, which didn't give us much time to moor the RIB, sorted out the kit, take the cylinders to the dive shop for refilling, have a very quick shower and change, in order to meet the 19.00hr ferry crossing to the Barbican. It was all a bit of a rush but we got there on time. And very nice it was too.

Next morning after talking to the guys at the dive shop, they persuaded us to dive Hand Deeps instead of The Eddystone Rock.

Daz phoned Gerald; not only to 'rub it in' but also more as a precautionary procedure to inform someone we knew where we're all heading for and to expect us all back at around 13.00hrs. If he didn't hear from us then he could then call in the Cavalry.

We tracked the distance to be some fourteen miles from Mount Batten. As we approached the site with some caution there is nothing to see but a wide expanse of open sea and a single western cardinal buoy marking its danger to large ships.

Suddenly the echo sounder showed a considerable loss of depth ... from 55m to just 8m! We slowly trawled over the area searching for a place to drop a shot line. Deciding on a plateau of around 10m very close to the drop-off we initially stumbled upon.

## Hand Deeps

**Location:** 51.12.127N 004.05.167W

**Distance From Shore:** 13NM

**Depth:** 12m to 55m of water

This dive site has topography to beat the sights of Pembrokeshire and the Farne Islands combined. The visibility is usually fantastic as the site is 10 miles offshore and swept with clean water constantly. The diversity of sea life supported by this reef is staggering and combined with the sheer size of the drop offs and walls makes this a favourite site to all who visit. Dogfish and crab are predominant and there is a mass of coral and sea fans to photograph. Because the site is exposed, good weather conditions are essential, whilst the depth component of the dive requires divers to plan their max depths and stick to them!

After dropping our shot line plus big buoy on top of the main pinnacle, Daz and Nick went in to investigate. At first the viz was disappointing with the water being full of tiny white flecks of organic matter like submarine snow. They realised that this stuff was coming off the fields of kelp which smother the upper reaches of this rocky outcrop. Descending through the blizzard and just below the kelp line, a mind blowing sight emerged. Suddenly, they could clearly see the whole expanse of rock spreading out in massive fingers below (hence the name) all the way down to 50m+. The amount of natural daylight was amazing and their torches were redundant. With such unexpected visibility, it was tempting to carry on descending but they sensibly levelled off at 35m and continued to gaze around and down into the Atlantic depths. Fish life was a little scarce but the sides of the pinnacle were festooned with jewel

anemones in every imaginable colour. All too soon, their no-stop time had expired and it was time to begin a gradual ascent. Looking up from 25m they could clearly see the RIB circling above. On breaking the surface, a few suitable expletives were exchanged and Daz and Nick agreed that it was like being back in the Red Sea (only a bit colder). Back on the boat, Dave and Bill were equally ecstatic about the dive, and they had even enjoyed the added bonus of swimming with a sunfish during their ascent. As we motored back towards Mount Batten, everyone (even moby Pete) agreed that this had been one of their best ever UK dives and a great way to round off the weekend.

Arriving back at Mount Batten, Daz phoned Gerald again to 'rub it in' ... er, I meant inform him of our safe return!

It took us just over an hour to recover the RIB, tie it securely onto the trailer, sort out all the kit, pack our bags, change and head off home .....

So ... It was all Jones'ys fault ... that we all had such a fantastic time diving in Plymouth waters that weekend in mid August.

Dave Jamieson and Daren Mottershead