

Submarine A1 Licensee report 2014

By

Martin Davies

Overview

This year should have seen a rise in visitor numbers to the site after the successful implementation of the diver trail created during 2013, but in fact has seen only a handful of dives done on the site this season. The weather has been generally good with few dives cancelled in the diving calendar overall with long spells of hot dry periods and low winds. Visibility at the beginning of the season during the first dive was an impressive 6m. However it soon became apparent as the season unfolded that there were some dark forces at work that destroyed the visibility for the whole season.

Diving

The wreck was dived on 5 occasions of which only three early dives could be classed as successful dives. The dates are listed below:-

25.4.14 First dive on the site after the winter storms, visibility was around 6m and the wreck looked as if it have been swept clean of silt, no pictures are available to reflect this as it was



Figure 1 – Pipe clamp ©Martin Davies

totally unexpected and my usual camera have been left at home! At the bow where the seabed material is a hard substrate the layers had been exposed by the removal of about 3 inches of silt, this had exposed a brass fitting that had never been seen before and also a lump hammer! This is a pipe clamp from somewhere inside the submarine, I do not consider it a recent intervention into the submarine as it has been hidden for as long as I have been the licensee (since 2006). The fitting has been left on the site but there is a concern that a diver may recover it due to its value in weight of brass or just for its novelty value. The lump hammer was recovered by a diver despite being briefed not to touch anything, though the removal of something that can do harm to the wreck is probably acceptable. This was also an opportunity to test out the guides that NAS had produced with regard to being able to use them and read them underwater.

28.4.14 this dive was to be a test dive in respect of the diver trail and how it would work, a group from Eastley Sub-Aqua club wanted to dive the wreck, so I used them as a test group in order to see how the day that we had set up would work. Visibility was acceptable though there was a lot more plankton in the water 3 days after the first dive on the site. All divers enjoyed the day and we had a lot of positive feedback.

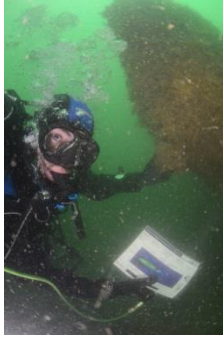


Figure 2 – Diver at the bow ©Martin Davies

30.4.14 the official launch day of the diver trail, visibility on the site was still acceptable though there was noticeably more plankton in the water column. The day was successful and a group of divers attended informative lectures and dived the submarine using the guides produced by NAS. The success of the day gave us confidence that all was well and the rest of the season would pan out well. Lots of other dates had been planned and the interest was high and I in particular was looking forward

to doing the many of the dives that I had planned. There was press interest from the day and some pictures were sent to English Heritage for publicity purposes.

8.6.14 Southsea Sub-Aqua planned a dive on A1, which was abandoned when divers reached the bottom of the shot line. Only when they hit the bottom did they know they had reached the bottom. The first 2 metres of water had good visibility, and then it was a dense black cloud that was impenetrable by torch light all the way to the bottom. I did not attempt the dive myself as it sounded like and would have been a waste of time and effort. Interestingly on the same day the team then moved onto NAB tower to attempt a dive, whilst visibility was less than two metres the dive was also abandoned but due to a large unmanageable swell. The team then moved to Benbridge and dived there where the water was clearer 3 to 4m was reported at 6m depth.

18.6.14 this was the second official NAS dive with a group of divers who were all keen to visit the wreck site. Conditions had marginally improved on the site. The plankton should have gone by this time leaving clear green water. Whilst everybody enjoyed the dive the visibility was only 1m and a lot of what can only be described as sediment was clouding the long range visibility was present in the water column.

All future NAS diver trail diving was abandoned after this as further reports suggested that visibility had reduced back to near zero and the water was black.

30.8.14 I attempted a dive on the site with a local dive group, after spotting the site I was first down and was hit by a wall of darkness and again the first thing I knew of getting to the bottom of the shot was when I hit the seabed. I reeled off the shot looking for the site but gave up after 20 minutes of searching in pitch black conditions. Something had had a dramatic effect on the visibility, at that time of year the conditions should have been at their best.

No further diving has been done on the site since.

Condition of wreck

The condition of the wreck at the beginning of the season when I could see it, seemed to be as it has been, no major changes were seen apart from what appeared to be a large removal of silt from the scour in the bow area in particular. The large volume of suspended particles in the water column since then has prevented any meaningful observations and measurements to be done on the site.

The Diver trail

I believe that the diver trail has been a success despite that lack of visitors to the site; the creation of a 3D model backed up with information, stills photography and video gives divers a real feel for what they are about to see and experience prior to diving. I would fully support and endorse this approach for any future projects that may be considered on historic wreck sites.

Conclusions

Obviously it is disappointing to see such poor conditions on the site particularly as the weather top side has been on the whole good. On all planned visits the bookings were full, but I have to consider the safety of divers as the number one priority. With conditions being so poor and verging on atrocious at times I have never seen the site so bad. I took the decision to cancel the rest of the bookings that had been made. Divers also need to enjoy the day, not endure the day and some divers would simply not have coped with those conditions that I personally witnessed. I believe it would have been dangerous to allow diving on the site. It is strongly thought that these conditions have been created by the dumping of millions of tons of silt and seabed material at the NAB dumping ground no more than 8miles away from the site. The denial of the MMO that it is nothing to do with the dredging activity is a very hard and bitter pill to swallow. Their desk top modelling of where the spoil is going in my opinion is clearly wrong and inaccurate to what is actually happening in the water in Bracklesham bay and the surrounding area. Their failure to monitor conditions up and down stream of the dumping area and in Bracklesham bay is unacceptable; considering the sheer scale of spoil that has been dumped at NAB and their reluctance to even accept that it has had any impact on the underwater environment is deeply disturbing. With the same again waiting to happen next year I cannot see that much diving will be taking place in the 2015 season.

Martin Davies