

Winter Madness 2017

After the great success of the Winter Madness 2016 Plymouth trip; a year later, Gary of South West Diving repeated the Winter Warmer weekend offer and it was too good to miss.

The weekends offered are generally early in the year, well outside the peak diving season and as a result are really great value; if the weather holds out. I chose the weekend of the 25th of March being slightly later and hopefully slightly better weather. Calls were made and deposits placed.

The weekend consists of two days diving on Top Gun, Gary's well equipped hard boat with diver lift, Pasties and a bucket of chocolate. Accommodation would be at the Mountbatten Center, which is a no frills bunkhouse which is perfectly located just across from the boat pickup point.



Weeks later, the evening before the trip, calls were made to Gary for a weather update. It wasn't looking good, with easterly winds which would most likely limit the diving we could do.

Undeterred, everyone made the long drive to Plymouth and we all met in the nearby pub for some Pre-dive banter.

The next morning, full of breakfast; we were greeted with beaming sunshine and calm seas much to the surprise of Gary who had expect much worse. We loaded our gear onboard and started prepping. Lewis, the deckhand ensured we all had hot drinks before we sailed out to the first dive of the trip. *HMS Scylla*, the Royal Navy frigate sunk as an artificial reef in 2004 is perfect depth for Ocean Divers with a maximum depth of 22m to the seabed and with lots of marine life on and around the wreck.

The visibility was quite milky, giving it an eerie foggy atmosphere as we navigated around the wreck. Penetration of the wreck isn't permitted as its beginning to collapse in places so we stuck to swimming through walkways and peering into dark hatches before reaching the stern and heading back along the superstructure to the shot line before making our way back to the surface to be picked up by the boat.

A hot drink and a surface interval full of post dive banter and we headed to the second dive of the day, the wreck of the Liberty ship *SS James Eagan Layne*. This is one of the most well known and most dived shipwrecks in the UK. Lying upright in just 20m depth in Whitsand Bay, this wreck has been the first wreck dived by many novice divers. We busily kitted up, assisted by Lewis and waited for the horn, indicating time to enter the water. Once in, we headed for the shot-line before descending. The visibility was only a few meters but when we reached the seabed, there was no wreck to be seen. A few more divers arrived at the end of the shot and headed off in search of the missing wreck. After a short period of searching the barren sandy seabed, we called the dive and returned to the surface. Back on the boat Gary was adamant the shot was placed accurately on the wreck. Conspiracy theories of scrap metal merchants to strong localized currents moving the wreck could not be confirmed or disproved! Another hot drink and a Pasty helped pass the time as we motored back into the moorings at the Mountbatten Centre.

A successful first days diving and a quick shower later, we adjourned to the pub for post dive refreshments. Everyone was in good spirits and the days diving certainly made the evening conversations enjoyable. After dinner we headed back to the bunkhouse to get some well-earned rest.

It was an early start on Sunday morning with 8.00am boat pickup. The weather had worsened and the wind had picked up considerably from the day before. This meant the dive locations were limited to coastal or harbour sites. We motored to the first site, Mewstone Ledges. The site is a short way from Plymouth Sound breakwater and is sheltered from the effects of the wind. This is a shallow site, close to the shore with a pebble seabed and thick kelp forests. Dropping off the back of the boat we immediately descended and deployed a DSMB so we could be easily followed by the boat.

At around 20m depth, there are some lovely deep, sandy gullies that weave through the kelp and make great swim throughs. These gullies are full of Urchins and the occasional Dogfish, Spider crab and Lobster. A relaxing 45min of swimming through the kelp and gullies without seeing another diver apart from my buddy, it was time to return to the surface.

The second site of the day was to be Mewstone Rocks which is a site a short distance from Mewstone Island. This sheer rocky island stands about half a mile out from Wembury Point and is the largest offshore island for many miles along the South Devon coast. The site is similar to the Mewstone ledges with Kelp dispersed amongst rocky and sandy patches. Scattered among the rocks, countless pieces of broken pottery and chunks of twisted, rusted metal can be found. Remnants of old boats that strayed too close and floundered on the submerged rocks. Swimming on further we found a string of old lobster pots, tangled up in the rocks with a taugt line linking two rock pinnacles together with evenly spaced pots hanging from it. Instead of Lobsters we found Steve and Paul taking photos of critters trapped in the pots. The planned dive time was up and we returned to the surface where we were promptly picked up by the boat.

With all divers safely back onboard (with drink and pasty of course) we began our journey back to the Mountbatten Center. Before long, we encountered a group of rowers pulling a small inflatable boat which had been found drifting off-shore. We agreed to recover the boat and with a bit of maneuvering we pulled the boat aboard. Our first item of marine salvage!

We agreed to give the boat to Lewis, the deckhand who was going to use it as a fishing boat if nobody came forward to claim it.

We returned to the moorings and packed up our kit after a successful weekend of diving on a weekend that had promised anything but perfect conditions. Everyone had enjoyed the diving and most importantly there were no incidents.

Thanks must go out to Gary and Lewis for providing great diving onboard Top Gun. Also many thanks to the MKSAC / BSAC members that made this weekend such a success (Tony Farr, Paul Furlong, Chris Catlin, Steve Tearle, Richard Baldwin, Alan Kilcline, Rob Hanlon, Colin Jackson and of course Terry!)

This is the second year of MKSAC participating in the Winter Warmers, so look out for the return to Plymouth in 2018!

