

18 Hours from Stromness

By Mike H Scott

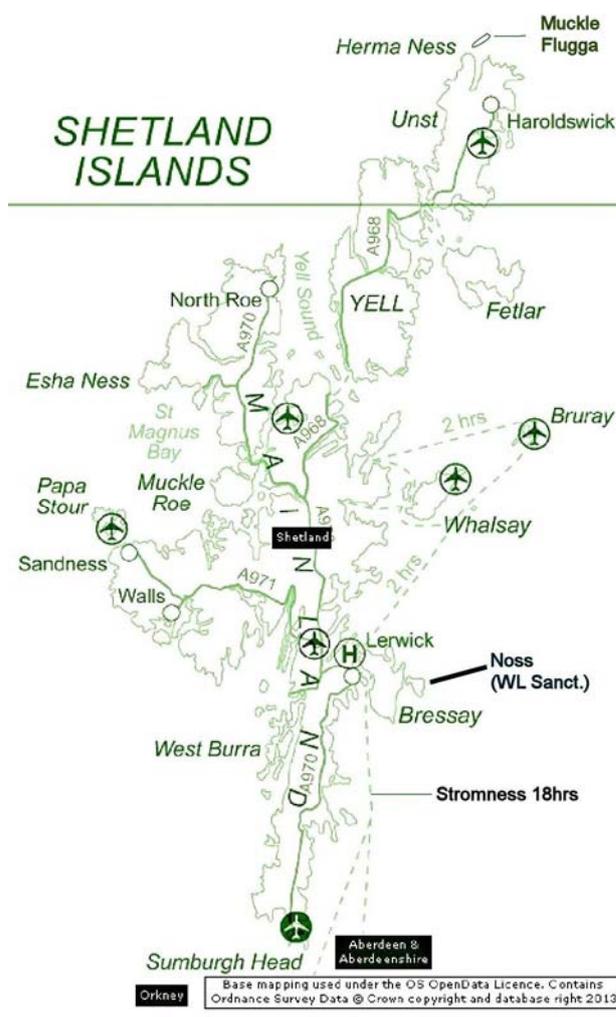
On Friday 14th June 2013, twelve club members, with complete sets of dive gear, set off on the long drive to Scrabster and the ferry to the Orkneys. The convoy consisted of three vehicles – two vans and a car. The outward journey was undertaken in two parts, and Friday evening was spent at the Fairways Travel Lodge in Inverness. The evening provided the ideal time for the group to chat over a beer (or six) and renew friendships with those who had not been diving with us recently.

A short walk from the Travel Lodge brings you to a large and well-provisioned ASDA, complete with restaurant, in which most of us took breakfast. As might be expected, the drinks department offered a wide range of Scotch whisky brands, but sadly, the sale of such goods is not permitted before ten-o'clock.

(We are still trying to understand the appearance, at the end of the week, of such a bottle, complete with "security furniture" in the hands of Andrew H! We are assured it was lawfully purchased in Swindon...)

With just over one hundred of the six-hundred and thirty-six mile journey remaining, the convoy departed just after nine-o'clock on the Saturday and headed for the true Highlands, and the ferry terminal. We had enough time to allow a relaxing tea and cake at the Laidhay Caithness Croft Museum tearoom, where we were also treated to a gathering of vintage and classic cars, which, despite the rain and mist had ventured out for the day.

The journey to the ferry terminal at Scrabster was soon completed, tickets obtained, and Hazardous Goods - compressed air cylinder - declarations delivered. The ferry had been out of service for some time, undergoing major repairs, so we were very happy to see it arrive on time.



The Hamnavoe is of the same style and quality as the ferries that service the English Channel, and the crossing was smooth and timely. The lunch on board was excellent, so we arrived in Stromness fully charged and ready for the adventure that lay ahead.

The vessel we were to join lay just one hundred metres from the ferry ramp. The M.V. Invincible is certificated under Category 2 as required by the "Code of Practice" and is licensed to carry up to 15 persons, 12 passengers, and 3 crew. Accommodation was fitted out by a local craftsman and comprises sleeping facilities for twelve divers within six twin berth cabins; each cabin has its own radiator and hand washbasin with hot and cold running water. Each bunk has its own twin 240-volt socket and reading light.

Our Skipper for the week was the owner Ian Trumpe, who has been diving since 1978 and Skippering and taking divers out to the wrecks of Scapa Flow for quite some time now. His background is that of a former commercial and Scallop diver, though now, he purely dives for fun and looks forward to every opportunity to get in. Ian holds a Department of Transport Boat Masters licence as well as a commercially endorsed RYA offshore Boat master certificate. The crew for the week consisted of Ryan, the skipper's son, and James who joined us as crewman and cook.

Exceptional underwater visibility makes Shetland perfect scuba diving country. Some of the most spectacular views in the islands are below the waves - submerged cliffs, stacks and caves of long-drowned shorelines.

Shetland's coastline extends to 2,702 kilometres (1,697 miles) and Gordon Ridley, in Dive Scotland Volume III, estimates that it offers 405 geos (coves), 351 caves, 246 bays and firths, 205 skerries, 190 stacks, 158 natural arches and at least 7 subterranean passages.

Shetland has everything from historic wrecks (like the WWI steamship Gwladmena in Lerwick Harbour) to modern trawlers and the 1993 wreck of the huge tanker Braer. The shape of Shetland means that you can dive on almost any day of the year - there is always somewhere sheltered, with deep-water close inshore.

The long hours of summer daylight are an added bonus, allowing you to pack more diving time into a week's stay than would be possible further south.

At Stromness, we transferred all our belongings on to the Invincible, and parked the vehicles a short walk away in a free car park. Yes – really – a FREE car park in the UK. Two are now known: Stromness and one in Pembrokeshire.

All we had to do was get there aboard the Invincible, and all we had to do, on a personal level, was relax and sleep on the outbound leg. That outbound journey lasts about eighteen hours and the route includes areas of turbulence. We reached Lerwick late in the morning on the Sunday. Ian had paperwork to complete while we prepared our kit.

The diving started with a wreck that offered a good range of depth for those who were intent on going deep from dive 1 and those who preferred a gentle start to the week:

The Lunokhods – a Latvian registered Klondiker – her anchor was dragged and she ran aground in a storm on 9th November 1993 – A Russian Klondyker- sunk in 1993 – 2500 tons. This wreck lies in the geo under Bressay Lighthouse in a very picturesque area. Under water, the wreck is broken but in two lumps, with two main sections-lying in general depths of 12m-40m with lots of life on it and lots of life on the walls next to the wreck and a pretty archway leading away from the wreck again covered in life.

We returned to the Invincible for a proper breakfast of eggs, bacon, and sausage prepared by James. (The standard day consisted of an “early” light breakfast, followed by the first dive, then a full breakfast before the second dive.)

We cruised north at a leisurely pace to our next dive site: this was a scenic dive through a cavern. This would be the first occasion when a Seal would check over some of the group:

The Giants Leg, at Bard Head on Bressay is part of a series of sea stacks in the making. It is possible to swim behind the stacks through two gaps in the rock formation, making an interesting dive.

After that, it was back into Lerwick, an evening meal, and a calmer night's sleep, aboard a stationary Invincible. The next day started with a light breakfast of cereals and toast while the boat made the short run out to a local site in the main Lerwick Channel:

The Glen Isla - a 1263 Tonne steamship that foundered and sank after a collision with the SS Gleneig. She lies on an even keel in 42m, in the south entrance channel to Lerwick harbour. Complete but broken in the middle, her deck gun lies on the seabed alongside of the wreck. Considering this is in a main shipping lane, the visibility was incredible.

We returned to the Invincible for a proper breakfast of eggs, bacon, and sausage prepared by James. We then cruised north at a leisurely pace to our next dive site:

The Jane – a steamship with a cargo of Herring – drove an anchor in between Yell and Unst, but drifted off and sank in 20m in the Sound of Grunay. An area of strong tide, that keeps her clear of silt and covered in marine life. The most impressive features of diving the Shetlands were becoming clear – the visibility is generally good, and the seabed is sandy, and less prone to lift and cloud the visibility... even when the wannabee techies plough the fields...

The next target was very much north of us and we continued on our way to Unst and Baltasound which is the largest settlement on the island of Unst, the most northerly inhabited island in the United Kingdom. The village lies halfway along the island's east coast on a sheltered bay called Balta Sound. Baltasound was formerly the most important herring port in Shetland; in 1902, its catch exceeded that of the Shetland capital Lerwick. It was here that we would visit the most northerly pub in the UK – the Springers Bar – supplied by the most northerly brewery in the UK – the Valhalla.

Ian had to radio ahead to ensure there would be food available for all 15 of us. The Baltasound Hotel is surprisingly busy in the summer months, but not so surprising when you consider the bird life in the Shetlands. The UK has two geographical opposites – the Scillies, and the Shetlands – both prime targets for twitchers in the summer. Both requiring early booking of accommodation and transport. The restaurant was fully booked! However, they welcomed us with bar food that hit the spot. They also welcomed us as visitors to Unst even if it was only for one night. The next morning we set off to one of the most prized sites in the UK:

Submarine E-49 – HMS E49 was a British E class submarine built by Swan Hunter, Wallsend on Tyne. She was laid down on 15 February 1915 and was commissioned on 14 December 1916. HMS E49 was mined off the Shetland Islands on 12 March 1917. (The minefield was laid by U-boat UC-76 on 10 March 1917.) There were no survivors. HMS E49 now lies about 30m down with her bows blown off, on the way out of Balta Sound. This is an impressive wreck deep in the sand but enough showing to indicate the size of the vessel. The conning tower has been broken off and reveals an array of mechanical parts and offers homes to a wide variety of life, including a resident Octopus.

Once again, we enjoyed good visibility and light levels. Most of the sites deserve longer or multiple visits. After returning to the Invincible for the “second breakfast”, we moved on to dive two of the day, a scenic wall on:

The Leera Stack in the Burra Firth to the north of Unst, a wall with Kelp and other flora a-plenty. The fish life consisted mainly of small fry by the thousand, but few adult fish were seen. We have to assume that the Shetlands lower temperatures and later spring are responsible. Perhaps in September the fish life would be plentiful.

Some of the team tries fishing and were greatly rewarded with plenty of Mackerel, a large Cod and very large Pollack, which served us well through the week with no less than three meals. Hand-picked Scallops added to one meal.

A quiet evening followed the dive on the Leera Stack, during which the Team Chefs prepared the catch of the day. Steve and Lee were immediately invited on all future live-a-boards! The next day brought the start of the return south, diving near Fetlar and sailing on to dive near the wildlife sanctuary of Noss Island. At this point, we were close to Lerwick harbour again, and plans for our last nights in the Shetlands were made.

The Clett – Northeast of Busta Pund, Fetlar - a wall with kelp and other flora, but little adult fish at this time of year. All the picturesque dives are full of colour and many were teeming with small fry in June.

Noss Head – on the southeast side of the Isle of Noss – a Gannet Colony on the large size... and content in the sea to match... Fortunately, it does not stick to your suit like wotsit to a blanket.

(And that reminds me of a game we created while on this voyage of discovery – a new detective game called “Poodo”. According to our on-board detective (some may think I spelled that wrong!), Ben, it appeared that it was Phil, in the Port Head, with the naval sphincter. He has since denied it... The recovery work fell to Ross with the strong gut and the bleach. Well done Ross.)

After Noss Head, we returned to Lerwick and the traditional curry evening – in a Ghurkha Restaurant. Not the greatest food but plenty of banter to keep the spirits up. This, of course, was followed by the inevitable cooling refreshment both on shore and on board.

Thursday morning was bright and sunny and calm, and we had a late start too - not diving until 11 am:

The Glen Isla – with the visibility not quite so good but still worth a second survey.

A late breakfast followed before we proceeded at about 2pm to:

The Gwladmena – The 928-ton steamship Gwladmena went down off Lerwick in the Shetland Islands following a collision with the Flora in January 1918 and now rests on an even keel in 35-37m. Steamships are always more interesting due to the boilers and the life they attract. A third dive completed a busy Thursday:

The Fraoch Ban – lies at 28m in Hopewich Bay between Bressay and the Isle of Noss – capsized due to the shifting of the cargo of sand eels (there were no divider boards in the hold). Once again, we were treated to an interesting and colourful site.

Having completed three dives on the Thursday, we set off on the return voyage. During this voyage the Team Chefs made a fish pie from the latest catch. Some of us were unable to enjoy it properly that evening, as the going was “a bit choppy”. The next morning found us in calmer seas, and we were able to breakfast and prepare to the last dive of the week:

The Freesia – a steam trawler – sank 1st Jan 1922, after striking Colfa Head on mainland Orkney, then drifting off and sinking in Cynhallow Sound.

Lunch after the morning dive was fish pie - of course and this time we all tucked in and thoroughly enjoyed it, during the gentle cruise back into Stromness, at the end of a busy and exciting week on the Invincible.

During the cruise back, after we had packed all our kit away – of course – we were visited by two Basking Sharks. Seeing them feeding, just off the Orkneys, was a great way to finish the week at sea.

Once back in Stromness, dive kit was unloaded and transferred to the three road vehicles, which were still in the car park with clean paintwork, and full sets of wheels, leaving only domestic items for the early start on Saturday. (Phil had booked the 06.30 ferry.) Once loaded, the vans were left on the dock by the Invincible. For those of us who dive the UK mainland in many locations, free parking and indeed leaving the car on the dock is “rarity” to put it mildly.

The excitement was not yet over. The last evening in the Shetlands was spent in the restaurant of the Queen’s Hotel, where we did our best to clear them out of steaks. We knew the Invincible would not be moving during the night, so the luxury of a pudding was enjoyed by many. We also learned that Glaswegian is less understood in the northern isles than is English, whether you are after a meal or just after the “afters”. Other beverage outlets were sampled during the return to the dock.

Saturday went smoothly enough, with the one hundred metre drive to the ferry terminal, and a short wait to board. Breakfast was taken on board, with Ossie making an investment in Cereal Futures with Frosties at £142.85 per kilo.

Most of us went for the eat as much as you can option. If you undertake this trip, I recommend you do that too and make sure you help yourself to everything.

The road journey south was thankfully smooth and event-free and, with short pit stops, and driver rotation, we were in the Wroughton area by 7pm. An appropriate finish to a trip well worth the effort – and easily accomplished due to Phil's detailed planning.

And finally... would I recommend this trip? Yes, the dive sites of the Shetlands are well worth the effort, but if you are not a good sailor arrange to meet Ian at Lerwick, and go by ferry from Aberdeen. Ian also runs live-a-boards within Scapa Flow and that remains a popular destination for wreck divers. The Seahorse Dive Club will no doubt return to Scapa in the future.

The Shetlands Team:

Andrew Osborne, Phil Green, Dave Hall, Andrew Hancox, Mike Brien, Derek Clark, Lee Krawczyk-Brown, Steve Marchant, Ross Smith, Mark Horton, Ben Horton, and the author.



DATA	The Dives
16th June 2013	The Lunokhods, and The Giant's Leg
17th June 2013	The Glen Isla, The Jane
18th June 2013	Submarine HMS E-49, and the Leera Stack
19th June 2013	The Clett, and Noss Head
20th June 2013	The Glen Isla, the Gwladmena, and The Fraoch Ban
21st June 2013	The Freesia
<u>STATISTICS:</u>	Swindon to Inverness: 524 miles, estimated 9hr 30 min Inverness to Scrabster: 112 miles, estimated 2hr 30 min Stromness to Lerwick: 132 miles, estimated 19hr 0 min
<u>LINKS:</u>	
Images 1:	http://www.seahorsediveclub.co.uk/
Images 2:	http://www.againstthewind.org.uk/diving/UWImagebank/Shetlands/Shetlands2013.html
MV Invincible:	http://www.scapa-flow.co.uk/
Muckle Flugga:	http://www.nlb.org.uk/LighthouseLibrary/Lighthouse/Muckle-Flugga/
Shetlands:	http://www.visitscotland.com/destinations-maps/shetland/
And:	http://www.undiscoveredscotland.co.uk/areashet/index.html