

IRISH ADVENTURES

RATHLIN ISLAND MAY 2010

Best known for its abundance of adrenaline pumping top class deep wreck sites and clear waters, the North Antrim coast of Northern Ireland is also a great place to experience spectacular scenic dives and shallow scenic wrecks.

As a result, a group from Buccaneer Divers crossed the Irish Sea to complete three days diving over the May bank holiday and experience "the craic" first hand.

The only dive centre on the North Antrim Coast is Aquaholics based in Port Stewart, which has a subsidiary operation in Ballycastle where we planned to base ourselves as the harbour is directly opposite Rathlin Island making for easy transfers to site.

They have two RIBs, a large 11m craft with a side ladder, which takes 10-12 in comfort and a 6m craft which takes 6 divers.



Aquaholic's RIBs at sea

Travelling in our own cars via the Norfolk Line overnight ferry service from Birkenhead to Belfast we disembarked in Belfast at 7am on the Friday giving us plenty of time to drive to the Ballycastle dive centre, settle in and explore the area.



Ballycastle main street



Ballycastle harbour

Diving operations began on Saturday which was a real "four seasons" day featuring mist, rain and hail before ending in brilliant sunshine.

Our first dive was on the SS Lough Garry.

This former Caledonian McBain ferry was pressed into war service as a troop ship and sank with the loss of 29 crew during a gale in January 1942 whilst en route from Glasgow to Oban where she had been due to transport a garrison to the Faeroe Islands to prevent them being used as a U boat base.

Now lying in 30m, she's a lovely dive with lots to see and explore including an impressive boiler and the mount for her stern deck gun.

IRISH ADVENTURES

RATHLIN ISLAND MAY 2010

With the weather dial now firmly set to sunshine, our second dive was a gentle drift along Rathlin Island's famous North Wall near Farganlack Point.

An underwater version of the Giant's Causeway, its sheer face extends from approximately 15 m to at least 200m creating a truly amazing dive. The cliff face was covered in sponges and dead men's fingers and was a riot of colour considering the temperate waters in which they lived.



Rathlin Island north wall



Rathlin Island north wall



Rathlin Island north wall



Rathlin Island north wall

Sunday brought more brilliant sunshine but freshening winds.

Despite the weather, quality diving was always possible thanks to the excellent local knowledge of Richard and his Aquaholics crew.

Our first dive was another victim of Antrim's ferocious winter gales, the SS Templemore.

Built in 1905 she belonged to Henry Lane & Co. of Londonderry. She measured 145 x 24 x 8ft., and grossed 386 tons.

In December 1911 she was bound for Londonderry with a cargo of coal when she was caught in a gale which caused her cargo to shift.

She sought shelter in Murlough Bay after suffering heavy weather damage but the gale soon snapped her cables.

An attempt was made to get her to Ballycastle less than a mile away but she capsized and sank just 600

IRISH ADVENTURES

RATHLIN ISLAND MAY 2010

metres east of the harbour with the loss of two engineers.

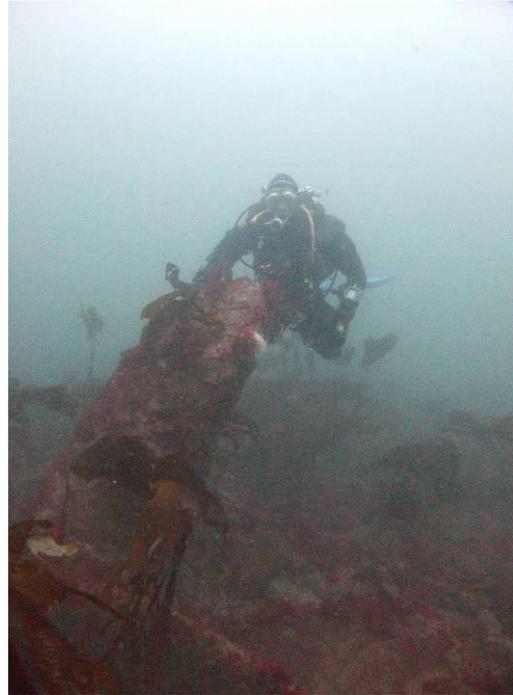
The following year the barque Fecamp sank over the wreck.

When the barque was raised the Templemore came with it and both were towed into the shallow water that she now lies in.

She now lies in 20m and is well broken but still made a very interesting and enjoyable dive



SS Templemore Figure 1



SS Templemore (Propeller)

IRISH ADVENTURES

RATHLIN ISLAND MAY 2010



SS Templemore (Boiler)



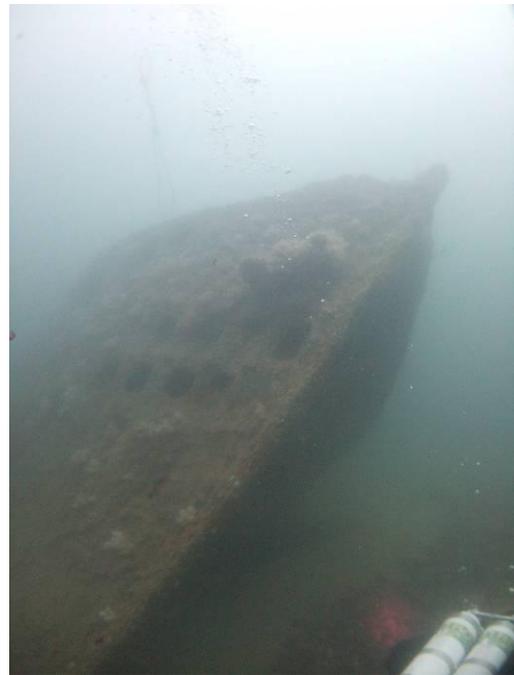
SS Templemore

Due to the freshening wind, we drove 30 miles west along the spectacular North Antrim Coast road to the small town of Port Stewart where we rejoined the RIBS ready to dive the SS William Mannell near Malin Head in Co. Donegal.

Built in 1911 this Castle Class naval escort trawler saw action in both world wars before being converted into a minesweeper in 1940 to work the dangerous North Passage between Antrim and the Scottish Islands. Post war she returned to civilian fishing activities.

She sank in February 1949 as a result of hitting rocks after her steering had been damaged in a gale.

Lying in 34m this was the best dive of the trip. It had everything – a wreck which looks like a ship, light sand sea bed and on the day we went 15-20m visibility and great light penetration.



Bow SS William Mannell



SS William Mannell

IRISH ADVENTURES

RATHLIN ISLAND MAY 2010

In brilliant sunshine we took a slow drive back to Ballycastle taking in some of the sites along the way including the Giant's Causeway, the Carrick-a- Rede rope bridge and the spectacular ruins of Dunluce Castle, ancestral home of the McDonnell clan



SS William Mannell (bridge area)



Giants Causeway



SS William Mannell



Giants Causeway



SS William Mannell (Dinner?)



IRISH ADVENTURES

RATHLIN ISLAND MAY 2010

Carrick-a-Rede Rope Bridge



Carrick-a-Rede



Dunluce Castle



Dunluce Castle

Monday was our last diving day and with the wind blowing firmly from the west it was back to Port Stewart to complete our adventure.

Our first dive was a shallow drift on the north coast of the Skerries a group of low lying islands near Port Stewart which are home to a small resident seal population.

Poor visibility caused by the recent high winds spoilt what would otherwise have been an excellent dive along a long basalt wall which dropped to 20m and like its big brother on Rathlin Island, was covered in life.

One pair got lost on the way to the wall so stayed in the shallows but were rewarded with a 20 minute play time with a very inquisitive seal – was there a camera to record the event – no chance!

The final dive of the trip was another iconic Malin wreck, the SS Castle Eden.

Built in 1914 in West Hartlepool she was a 1950 ton 283ft coaster owned by Furness Withy and Co.

IRISH ADVENTURES

RATHLIN ISLAND MAY 2010

Pressed into war service she was fitted with a 13lb stern gun and used to transport goods from England to Ireland.

In March 1918 she was en route from Glasgow to Lough Swilly in Donegal with a cargo of coal and timber when she was torpedoed by U110 commanded by Korvettenkaptain Kroll. The torpedo strike killed one fireman but didn't sink the ship so Kroll surfaced and sank her by gunfire but only after putting 20 4" shells into her at a range of 800 yards.

She now lies broken and scattered in 32m on a fine light coloured sand sea bed less than a mile from the SS William Mannell.

Her massive twin boilers stand several meters proud and her stern and steering gear are clearly recognisable. The whole site is covered in life and with 10-15m visibility and good light penetration is a very enjoyable dive.



Castle Eden Boilers



Castle Eden



Castle Eden winches



Castle Eden



Castle Eden winches

IRISH ADVENTURES

RATHLIN ISLAND MAY 2010



Castle Eden



Castle Eden



Castle Eden

Top Tips/Lessons learnt

1. Equipment

We brought our own twin sets and stage cylinders which was a mistake as twin sets and RIBs don't go well together and it was difficult to re-fill between dives leading to some challenging gas management issues. A better bet would have been to bring single cylinder set ups and hire 15 litre cylinders from the dive centre.

2. Accommodation

We stayed in a hostel close to the dive centre. This had 3 x twin rooms for the chaps and a self contained annex which had 2 x twin/double en-suite rooms which the ladies used. All the rooms were clean and looked after though the hostel rooms were

IRISH ADVENTURES

RATHLIN ISLAND MAY 2010

significantly smaller and had shared bathrooms and toilets.

3. Eating out/supplies

Next door to the hostel was a supermarket that seemed to be open all hours and supplied everything you could possibly want.

There are lots of places to eat out in Ballycastle though it gets busy at weekends especially Sunday as Belfast residents come out in droves for a day at the seaside.

4. Diving spares

Aquaholics has a fully equipped dive centre in Port Stewart which can supply most things.

5. Diving itineraries

Aquaholics aim to complete two dives a day and have you back on shore after the second dive by 2.30pm, thus giving you plenty of time for non diving activities such as sightseeing and holiday time with families/non diving partners.

6. Water temperature

Water temperatures on these dives in late May averaged 11C so a dry-suit hood and gloves is definitely recommended.

7. Visibility

Clean deep Atlantic water washes this coast which when combined with rocky or sandy sea beds results in generally good – excellent visibility once away from the kelp beds. Generally visibility improves with depth and distance from shore

8. Travel options

There are good flight connections between many regional mainland airports and Belfast City airport. Flying

can of course complicate diving activities particularly on the run up to departure.

9. Useful numbers

Aquaholics: Shop – 02870832584
Mobile: 07968-164748

