

Littlehampton – Two roller coaster rides – Weekend 18-19 October

The sun was shining high in the sky as we made our way down to Littlehampton for the last of the club's pre-planned hard boat weekends. As planned we met up at 10:30 am on the pier. Though one had arrived earlier and amused our Saturday night B&B landlord by enquiring at 8:30 am if he knew where the boat was (by the water...). The poor landlord was further confused when my wife turned up, he assured her she could not possibly be booked in as he had a load of diver staying. At which stage she had to resign herself to being a seahorse groupie and he let her in.

Our cheerful Captain watch us board. His joyous nature lead to a suggestion that, having lost an arm, he had been a pirate in an earlier life. We got the tanks kitted up, stored our gear, listen to the brief about the boat and began our hour chug out to the Jaffa. If you look the Jaffa up you will discover that this is a "1400 ton steamship sunk by torpedo in 1918, sitting about 28 meters down. The wreckage lies on her port side. the keel broken along her entire length. The boilers are proud of the sea floor by six metres. A heavy, scour exists around the keel area. Shell cases have been found." I saw all that on my dive of course.

Once there, we looked over the side to much speculation about the visibility. The pessimist said if you don't use a buddy line you will loose you buddy and the optimist on the board did suggest that you never knew what it might be like deeper down, it may clear completely. Which is not quite what happened.

Steve and I were last in. It would have been Phil and Marcus but I think the latter ignored the former's desire to delay and so Phil had to dash to the end of the boat ahead of us.

It was a bit murky as Steve and I descended the shot line, but you could see 2 meters maybe 3. However at about 15 meter the lights went out. Zero visibility, I could not see my hand in front of my face let along see it holding the shot line. (so I exaggerate a little, but it was really very dark, OK!) Out came the torches. We passed half a dozen fellow divers on the way to the shot but with my torch I managed to follow Steve's bright blue fins and having a yellow pony on his back helped, identify him.

At the bottom Steve shone his torch on his hand and I tried to make out the shape/sign he was making. I wondered (hoped) if he was suggesting aborting the dive given the murky sea and total lack of natural light. But he was just checking I had followed and asking if I was OK to swim on. Naturally I shone my torch on my hand and gave the most appropriate signs indicating my concern and anxiety that I could think of. He indicated to swim right and swam on. I looked at my hand, I had signed "OK" and the dive was on. (Followed by a quick sanity check, which I may have failed)

It probably took 3 minutes for my heart to stop pounding in my throat and to relax enough to enjoy the wreck. The following 35 minutes was great fun. We found a lobster in one of the holes, bright in colour, who came out from the decking, dropped to the sea bed and seemed to be making straight for Steve. I later discovered that Mike tried without success to bag it. Elsewhere, the tail of a conga stuck out and despite hunting Steve could not find the head, it was so long. The wreck housed many fish of a good size, though I am unsure what they were. At one stage we found

ourselves inside when we discovered ceiling above and made an immediate retreat the few meters to the outside. Just before we came up, my buddy found the prop in the gloom, though I missed it. Steve got his SMD out while I provided illumination and the air, although I am sure I foolishly put 20-30 bar into the sea trying get it into his SMB. At the end of the day I was just glad he was putting it up in the dark rather than me. The lack of illumination meant watching my ascent rate for the first 15 meters, while I worked out where my computer's light switch was, was hard enough without having to wind an SMB reel. Steve seemed to manage both with ease. A nice gentle ascent was had by both. We did 46 minutes, at a max of 28 meters and an average of 22 meters. It was absolutely brill!

Back on board we came across a variety of experiences. Those with pocket torches had tended to come straight back up. But not all and those without a main torch had found it a bit of a challenging experience. There were some amusing consequences but you had to be there to appreciate them. However ask Tony C about his hand writing at 28 meters. It was generally agreed to have been a great night dive for the middle of a sunny day and so an important addition to any log book. I felt a bit like I had just got off a roller coaster it had seemed scary at times but an exciting experience to be repeated and certainly not to be missed. Like I said absolutely brill!

The second dive was a 15 meter drift. (we got 51 minutes with a max of 15 and an average depth of 12.) A very fast drift. We dropped in like lemming off the end of the boat, split ourselves off from one another (though still in buddy pairs) and I put up the SMB, it was my turn after all. There was abundant fish life but with only 2-3 meters visibility. Consequently, with us coming out of the gloom like a bat out of hell, they most took off at a rate of knots. Boulder 2 meters or more high and 3 meters plus wide appeared out of the dark as if from no where. I am sure some were a couple of inches shorter after I had scrapped over the top of them before plunging back down towards the sea bed. The current and SMD took us between valleys and over lumps of rock.. The dive was set at 45 minutes after which we surfaced from the rollercoaster ride. Steve cited that he had counted 19 dog fish. Again the dive proved of mixed experience with one of our crew losing a weight pouch. I ended up falling flat on my face coming off the lift. I don't know how. I ended up trapping my fin/foot and face down on the deck. My many thanks to those that sorted me out. Probably more embarrassing than when I lost my SMB at Salcombe, certainly more painful!

The wind came up as we returned to town and anyone not keeping their dry suit on got very wet. The B&B proved a great choice and a local pub (The Nelson Hotel) provided excellent food. My wife even got up to do a bit of Karaoke but only after the rest of the team move onto another pub.

Breakfast was excellent. Keith, our land-lord, provided much entertainment as we discussed our captain Ivan's outstanding social skill. Ivan may have got pissed off when someone had offered the one armed gentleman "a hand", but we suspect and Keith confirmed, that customer relations were not among his assets.

The wind had kicked up and the diving called off for Sunday. We unloaded the gear from the boat and impatiently awaited the Two Tony's to return with our tanks which they had kindly offered to get from the nearest dive place. Sometimes there is no justice in the world as most moaned while waiting but such is life for we could but

wait. Once we had the tanks the group dispersed back to Swindon, though Helen and I enjoyed a day sight seeing. A great weekend excellently organised, well done. Having read Steve's blog on the Web site, it says it all. So you did not really need to read this afterall....