



# Scapa Flow

Text and photos by Lawson Wood

## *The Wrecks of Scotland's Orkney Islands*

Situated 25 km (15 miles) north of the Scottish mainland, the Orkney Islands are located on the same latitude as southern Greenland, Alaska and Leningrad, however Orkney is bathed in the warm waters of the North Atlantic Drift that first started out as the Gulf Stream in the Caribbean. Hence, a profusion of marine life, water that rarely gets too cold and mild winters, whilst the islands are inevitable windy, the almost landlocked bay of Scapa Flow is sheltered for diving all year round. The Orkney Islands are created by submergence and give the impression of tipping westwards into the sea. There are great sea stacks, arches, caves and caverns all around the coast, some of which are world famous such as the Old Man of Hoy, and they have a total land mass of around 971.25km<sup>2</sup> (375 square miles).

Stromness Harbour in the Orkney Islands. **BOTTOM LEFT:** Lawson Wood with the Standing Stone of Sten Ness  
**PREVIOUS PAGE:** Aerial view of Scapa Flow Bay in the Orkney Islands

When you travel around Orkney you cannot help but notice the standing stones and ancient stone rings which predate the Norsemen as far back as Stone Age, Bronze and Iron Ages and the Pictish civilisation.

Although very little is known of these early times, other than

the monuments themselves, detailed history of the Norse Occupation was not committed to paper until the 13th century in Iceland. The Orkneyinga Saga tells the tale of the Earl's of Orkney and the occupation of the islands.

More recently, the sheltered bay of Scapa Flow was the base of the British Naval Fleet over several generations and indeed has served the nation well during the Napoleonic War and the American War of Independence. Orkney had the almost perfect naval base with calm sheltered waters surrounded by protective islands, creating a deep natural harbour first named by the Vikings. Graeme Spence, Maritime Surveyor to the Admiralty said in 1812, "...the art of Man, aided by all the Dykes, Sea Walls or Break-Waters that could possibly be built could not have contained a better Roadstead



Dive boats in Stromness Harbour

than the peculiar situation and extent of the South Isles of Orkney have made Scapa Flow ... from whatever

point the Wind blows a Vessel in Scapa Flow may make a fair wind of it out to free sea ... a property

which no other Roadstead I know of possesses, and without waiting for Tide on which account it may be called the Key to both Oceans."

### To the Orkneys

There is always a sense of mounting excitement as you approach the Orkney Islands by ferry, either from Aberdeen direct to Kirkwall or from Scrabster with landfall at Stromness. The initial huge land mass that looms up out of the early morning mist is the Island of Hoy, and as one approaches the first of several entrances to Scapa Flow, visitors can appreciate why this natural harbour was used by the British Admiralty. In Stromness, we disembark next to the harbour where the majority of Scapa Flow's fleet of diving boats are based; most are converted fishing

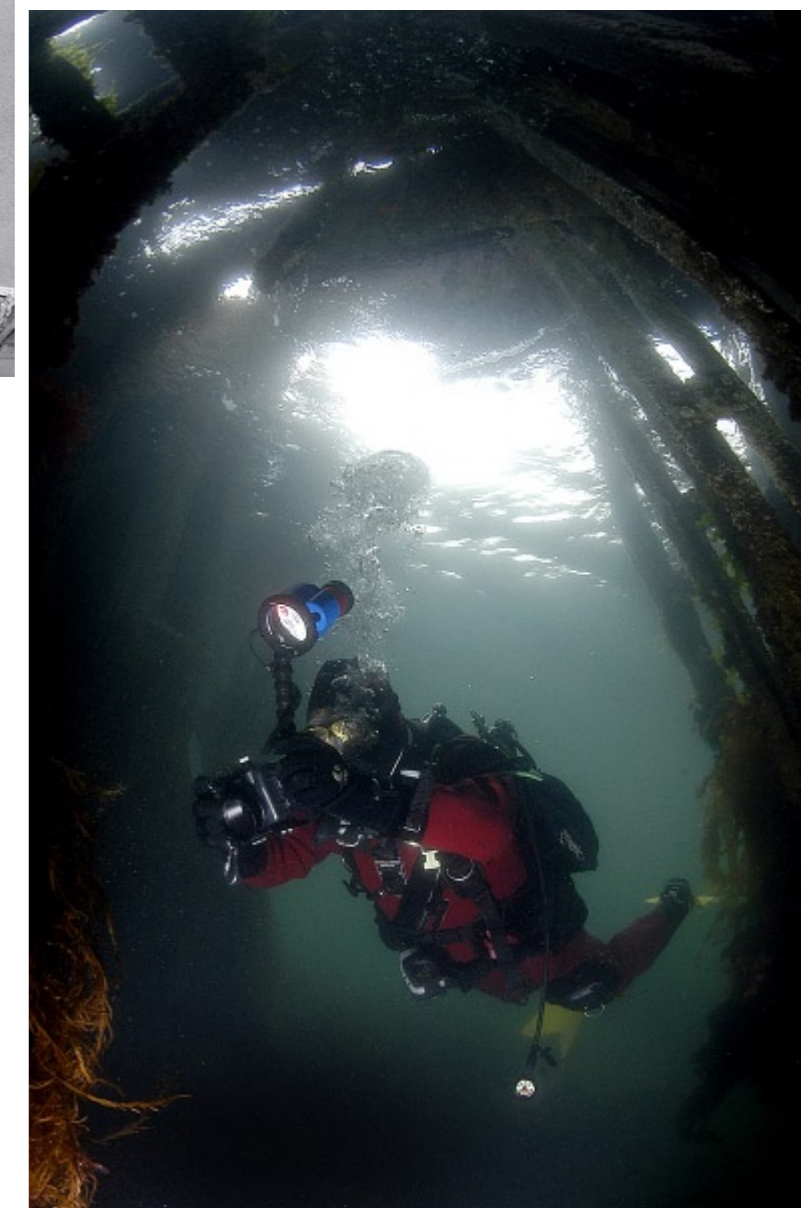
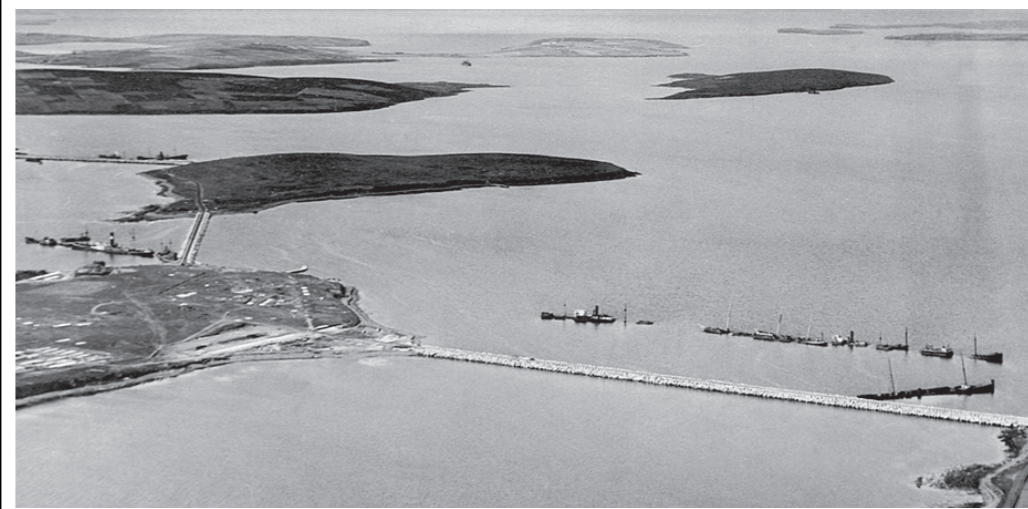
trawlers, their skippers and crew eagerly awaiting our arrival.

So what is it that brings the droves of divers from all over the world? Why visit an area, which is not exactly known for its sun-kissed beaches, crystal clear water and palm trees. In fact, I seem to remember the famed Scot's comedian Billy Connolly complaining that when visiting Orkney, he could not take his dog out to relieve itself because he couldn't find any trees! The interest is undoubtedly around the fleet of warships sunk deliberately or otherwise during the last two world wars and principally to dive on the German High Seas Battle Fleet, scuttled ninety years ago, in 1919.

The Orkney Islands and specifically the bay of Scapa Flow are home to the largest amount of diveable



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Interior of the wreck of the blockship Doyle; Archive photos of the blockships and their placement in Scapa Flow Bay during WWI

shipwrecks and wreckage to be found on the planet, directly as a result of the deliberate scuttling of the German High Seas Battle Fleet in June 1919. Seventy-four ships sank within just a few hours of each other. Couple that statistic with a further 43 ships deliberately sunk to block the entrances into this bay during both World Wars; 11 airplanes, one submarine and a further 16 British shipwrecks including two British battleships, then we have some major wreck diving interest.

Considered by many to be impregnable to attack, the bay of Scapa Flow covers some 311sq.km (120 square miles) and is now almost totally landlocked with Mainland to the north, the islands of Hoy and Flotta to the south and west, and to the south and east, the Churchill Barriers link the islands of Lamb Holm, Glimps Holm, Burray and South Ronaldsay. This makes for some relatively calm waters

for most of the year. The wrecks are actually dotted all over Scapa Flow, with blockships found in the extreme east and west of the Flow and the German light cruisers and battleships found roughly in the centre of Scapa Flow, arranged in a horseshoe shape near the island of Cava and a rocky pinnacle called the Barrel of Butter.

But first, let's look at the reasons why the ships are here and what makes them so interesting.

When Germany capitulated at the end of the First World War, her High Seas Battle Fleet—comprised of battlecruisers, battleships, light cruisers, destroyers and motor torpedo boats—were interred until it was decided what was to be done with them. In November 1918, the entire German High Seas Battle Fleet, escorted by 200 British Naval ships sailed into the bay of Scapa Flow, much to the surprise and consternation of the local population.

There they languished for over seven months, with most of the ships' crews being returned to Germany. Admiral Ludwig von Reuter, convinced that war conditions were to be reinstated and that the interred fleet was to be used by the Allied force against Germany, took it upon himself to scuttle the entire fleet on 21 June 1919 whilst the British fleet had left for manoeuvres. At 11 a.m. the skeleton crews on board opened condensers, valves and pipes. Within four hours, most of the ships had sunk from view, others were beached and many flipped upside down on their way to the sea bed.

Whilst there are still so many wrecks to dive, the largest majority of the German fleet were actually raised and scrapped, and interestingly, much of the scrap metal was resold back to Germany for them to rebuild their navy! Cox & Danks were the first major

Anemones on guns; Underwater photographer under the pontoons at the wreck site of the blockships

Diver on the wreck of the Markgraf



CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM LEFT: Shrimp on coral; Conger eel; Anglerfish; Queen Scallop; Red Gurnard fish; Seal at the Barrel of Butter



Scapa Flow

Scapa Flow is undoubtedly the best wreck diving in Europe and certainly ranks in the top five of the world, having three times more wrecks than found in Chuuk (Truck Lagoon). Although many of the ships were salvaged, at present there are still three German battleships; four light cruisers; five torpedo



divers on over 70 percent of the same shipwrecks.

### The Top Ten Diveable Wrecks of Scapa Flow

The following list is purely arbitrary, as virtually all of the German Naval Fleet wrecks are in deep water, making each dive, potentially either a mixed gas dive or a decompression dive of some sort. Photographically

and time wise, the blockships—*Tabarka*, *Gobernador Boreis* and the *Doyle*—are superb and definitely the best accessible

seabed is less than 30m (100ft) deep. All of the motor torpedo boats and blockships are in less than 18m (60ft), the blockships at Barrier II are in under 6m (20ft) and are quite possibly some of the best shallow shipwrecks in Europe. Therefore, all the blockships and German light cruisers are achievable for novice divers (under supervision). A diving holiday in Scapa Flow is realistic for novice divers, as the diving on offer goes beyond mere opinion and expectation, novice diver are able to dive alongside those super-qualified, mixed gas



next eight years, Cox & Danks raised two battleships, four battlecruisers, one light cruiser and 25 destroyers. His first ship took ten days to lift from the seabed but before long, as one observer recorded, "he fished up ships almost as easily as an angler winds in salmon".

The next salvor was Metal Industries and they continued the same practice set up by Cox & Danks and raised all

salvors of the German fleet and were extremely innovative in sealing up all of the holes and pumping the sealed hulls full of compressed air, thereby floating them to the surface. From their early beginning in March 1924 and over the

of the remaining battlecruisers and many more ships accidentally lost during the occupation of Scapa Flow by both major navies, including the *Derfflinger*, which was the largest ship ever raised from the deepest water at 45m (150ft).

boats (small destroyers); a WWII destroyer (F2); one submarine; 27 large sections of remains, debris sites and salvor's equipment; 32 blockships and two British battleships (the *Vanguard* and the *Royal Oak*); a further, 16 known British wrecks and many other bits of wreckage as yet unidentified including a number or aircraft.

### Diving Scapa Flow

Many divers still assume that one can only explore the German Naval Fleet wrecks using nitrox, trimix or rebreathers, and that all of the dives should be treated as decompression dives, only to be dived by super-qualified divers. In fact, diving in Scapa Flow can be as simple or as complicated as you want to make it.

Novice divers can have a great diving holiday in Scapa Flow and indeed many visitors gain their first diving qualification through the excellent diving schools on the island. The shallowest part of the *Karlsruhe II* is in only 15m (50ft) and the



Panoramic view showing positions of German battleships in Scapa Flow Bay during WWI, c. 1919

wrecks in Scapa Flow. The four German Light cruisers come next as they sit far enough off the seabed, lying on their sides, and this allows for a little extra time for exploration. I have only included one battleship, as all of the others are well broken up and are considered quite dangerous now, and divers should not be tempted to enter the ships at any time. The last two are somewhat of a prize, as the *F2* was sunk in 1945, and the barge attached by rope to her was sunk in 1968. Both are great for photography in shallower water.

Everyone who visits Scapa Flow to dive the wrecks has his or her favourite dives. As a photographer, my interest is different to perhaps someone on trimix, who will explore the seabed piece by piece, and in many cases, do long penetration dives within the deeper battleships. However, I am quite content to stay on the shallow ships. Even better, I could spend all of my time on the blockships, as not only are they shallow enough for plenty of bottom time, they are also in much clearer water, and therefore, much more photographic. So, I have tried to compile a comprehensive list of the top dives to suit all tastes.

1. *Doyle* (blockship) sunk 1914
2. *Gobernador Boreis* (blockship) sunk 1914
3. *Tabarka* (blockship) sunk 1941 & 1944!
4. *Cöln II* (German light cruiser) sunk 1919
5. *Brummer* (German light cruiser) sunk 1919
6. *Dresden II* (German light cruiser) sunk 1919
7. *Karlsruhe II* (German light cruiser) sunk 1919
8. *Markgraf* (German battleship) sunk 1919
9. *James Barrie* (fishing boat) sunk 1969
10. *F2* (German torpedo boat) sunk 1945 and *YC21* (barge used to salvage *F2*) sunk 1968

Although the German fleet now makes up the bulk of the wrecks more accessible to divers, the blockships sunk at the entrance to Burra

Sound continue to be picked as the best dives by visiting underwater photographers.

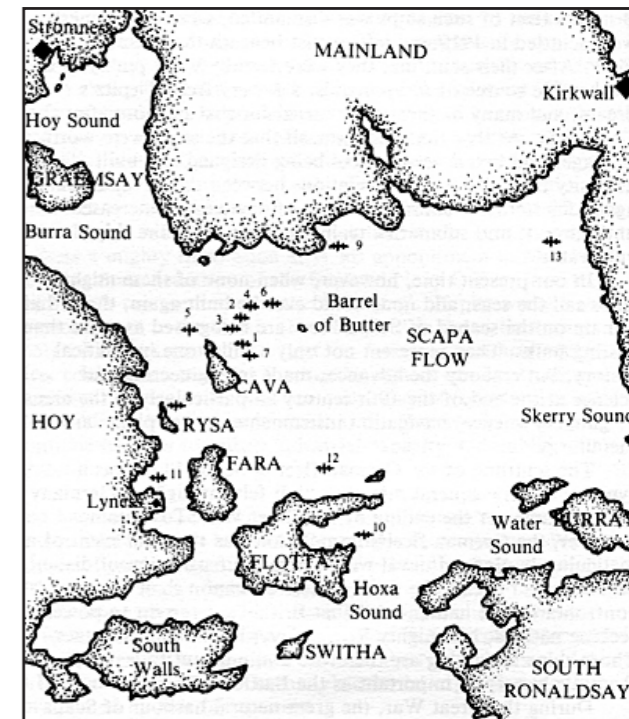
#### The top five photographic wrecks:

1. *Doyle* (blockship) Burra Sound
2. *Gobernador Boreis* (blockship) Burra Sound
3. *Kronprinz Wilhelm* (battleship) Central Scapa Flow
4. *Brummer* (German light cruiser) Central Scapa Flow
5. *Cöln II* (German light cruiser) Central Scapa Flow

For those deco freaks who insist on wearing their computers in the bar—post diving—just to scroll off, or show off their excesses of the day.

#### The top six deco deepo's:

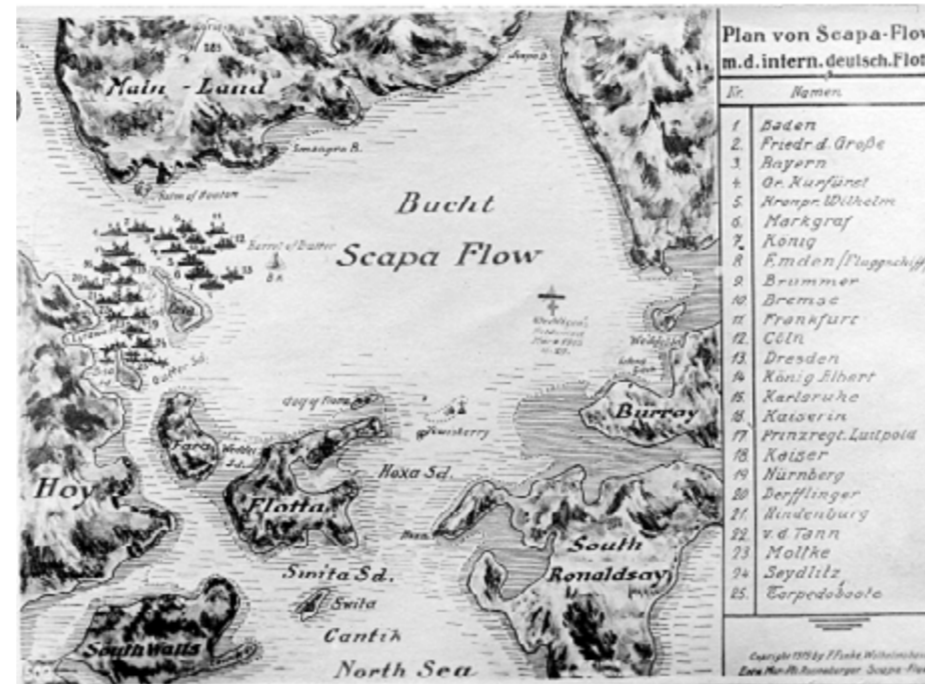
1. *Strathgarry* (fishing boat), 57m



Wrecks located on map of Scapa Flow



ABOVE: Stern of the *Gobernador Boreis* wreck  
RIGHT: Inside the *Gobernador Boreis* wreck lurks a Ballan Wrasse



- 2. *Markgraf* (battleship), 42m
- 3. *James Barrie* (fishing boat), 42m
- 4. *König* (battleship) 42m
- 5. *Bayern* debris site (battleship remains), 38m
- 6. *Kronprinz Wilhelm* (battleship), 34m

### Just a few little dives in Scapa Flow

Sitting in the early morning calm, the cold air of daybreak was leaving a foggy residue around the dive boat, we could see no land, or in fact any other living thing, except a tiny orange marker buoy with a frayed bit of line attached. A couple of seagulls flew overhead just to check us out, then a seal popped its head up—I guess we weren't alone after all. Our skipper, Andy Cuthbertson on board the *MV Jean Elaine* had brought us to the site of one of the German light cruisers scuttled in June 1919—90 years ago!

We were about to dive on one of those ancient warhorses, in both eerie and spectacular fashion, dropping through 30 metres of water (100ft) to arrive near the bows of the *Cöln II* in a bay set amidst some of the most dramatic scenery in Europe, considerably heightening the diving experience and raising our adrenalin in anticipation of what was to come.

### The *Cöln II*

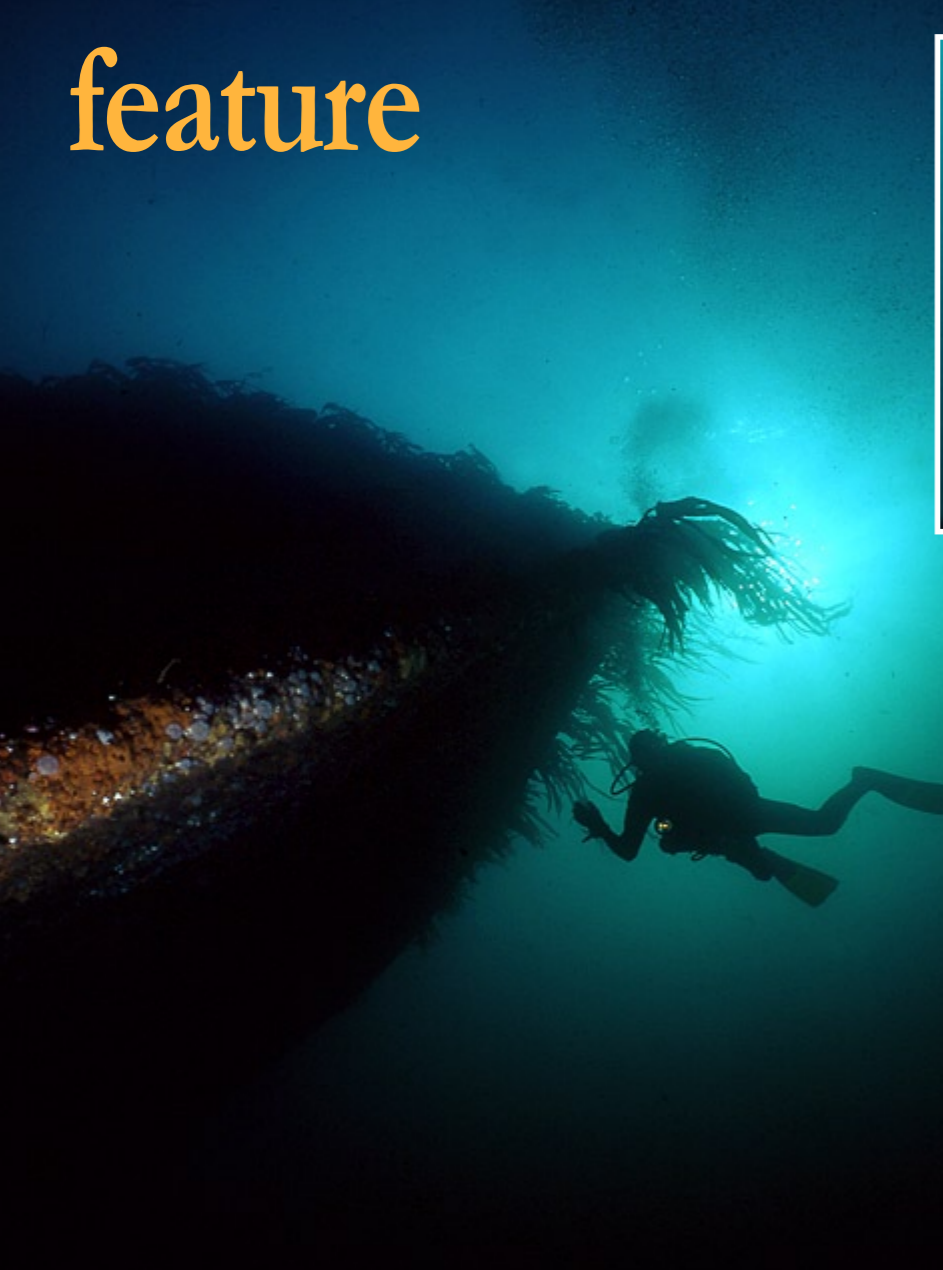
The *Cöln II* is just one of the four remaining German light cruisers and three battleships, which were scuttled under the orders of Admiral Ludwig von Reuter in 1919. Virtually all of the others sunk at the same time were thoroughly salvaged, but the huge debris sites are still superb dives on their own, subsequently there are tons of wreckage still scattered over the seabed, much of which is still unexplored.

Through the descending gloom, the

graceful arch of the sharp bows approach us, and we drop to the stony seabed to gaze upwards in awe at this massive ship lying on her starboard side. The hull is completely festooned in plumose anemones (*Metridium senile*) and feather starfish (*Antedon bifida*). From here we swam along the now vertical decking, past the forward 5.9 inch gun and approached the superstructure, which is mostly collapsed. The central section of the ship is now completely destroyed, blasted apart by salvage divers, however the stern is mainly intact and the other 5.9 inch gun can be found. Maximum depth is 36 metres (120ft) and all too soon, it is time to make our way up the mooring buoy line.

Conditions vary tremendously during the season, and it can be poor visibility and dark on the seabed in the centre of Scapa Flow. Lights should always be used, and work up dives should be undertaken

LEFT TO RIGHT: Diver at the wreck of the *Cöln II*; Archive photo of the *Cöln II*; Historic map of the German Fleet in Scapa Flow Bay, c.1919; Diver inside the wreck of the *Tabarka*



### The *Tabarka*

Many divers prefer the *Tabarka* as their number one blockship, as it rests upside down in 18m (60ft) of water. You enter the water at slack tide and quickly explore the outside of the ship before penetrating its cavernous interior. Here, you can spend your maximum bottom time until your computer makes sufficient noise at you to return to the surface. By the time the dive is over, the tidal race will be in full flow, and you just launch yourself into the current. The dive boat skippers know exactly where you will surface and will pick you up safely and easily. In the immediate vicinity is my personal favourite dive on the blockship *Doyle*.

### The *Doyle*

The *Doyle* was a single screw coastal steamer built in Troon, Ayrshire, and weighed 1,761 tons. At 79.3m (260ft) long, she was requisitioned by the Admiralty and sunk on 7 October 1914. The smallest of the blockships in Burra Sound, she is instantly recognizable by her intact



Diver investigates the interior of the *Doyle* wreck

## Scapa Flow

curved bows and stern. Lying on her port side, the more exposed starboard hull is covered in dwarf plumose anemones (*Metridium senile*), seaweeds and sponges. Her wooden decking has all rotted away, but virtually all of her ribs, posts and lower sections of masts are still in place allowing divers many safe access points into the interior of the ship at various levels.

The ship is still robust enough to allow for full safe and easy access, and the interior allows you to extend your dive into the time when the current starts to run once more. Hull plates have come away over the years, and the light now streams in through a huge number of square holes making for a rather superb cathedral-like quality.

Ballan wrasse, cuckoo wrasse and conger eels are found in the interior and huge schools of juvenile Saithe and Pollack swirl around the superstructure. The stern is also largely intact, topped with kelp, and the huge blades of her single propeller are covered in anemones and small pincushion sea urchins.

Once slack water passes, divers are recommended to just drift away from the wreck, as they will only pull down the dive boat's shotline. Divers should deploy a delayed surface marker buoy, and the dive boat will follow your easy progress into Burra Sound and be there to collect you.

### F2 German torpedo boat

In between dives, the dive boats often anchor on the jetty at Lyness, the former Naval Base on the Island of Hoy. Incidentally, nearby is a former dive boat called the *Mara* and the wreck of the *F2*, a German Torpedo boat, as well as her salvage barge, sunk in 1968. The salvage company had just removed a set of guns from the *F2* and had tied tight onto the stricken vessel (at low tide). The crew



went off to celebrate their good fortune at being able to raise the guns and left their booty to a rising tide, which low and behold, sunk

LEFT TO RIGHT: Diver at the wreck of the *Doyle*; Cuckoo Wrasse; Massive propellor of the *Doyle* wreck

before one dives the deeper battleships. Which is why so many of us photographers prefer the Blockships at the entrance to Burra Sound, where the average depth is half that of the German warships, subsequently with much more light, more interesting marine growth and in much clearer water as the tidal race at Burra Sound sweeps all sedimentation particles away. But this also means that one has only limited time on these wrecks and then only at slack tide.





Scapa Flow

their barge (and their booty) now making two very nice diveable ships (and both with guns). The wrecks are attached by rope.

There is a museum nearby on Hoy with an excellent display of artefacts relating to the two World Wars.



### The Royal Oak

Twenty years after the German Fleet was scuttled, on the night of October 14th, 1939, the 188-metre (600ft) battleship *Royal Oak* was at anchor in the northern region of Scapa Flow. Her duties were to protect Kirkwall and the British fleet from aerial attack. Scapa Flow was considered impenetrable because of the narrow passages between the reefs and islands. Likely attack would be expected only from the skies.

However, nobody told this to the commander of the *U47*, Günther Prien, who stealthily approached Scapa Flow—in what is considered by many to be one of the bravest feats in naval history—and at the dead of night, sunk the *Royal Oak*, taking with her the lives of 833 men and boys. The *Royal Oak* is now a designated war grave and is



protected by Navy Law. Diving on her is strictly forbidden without express permission from the Ministry



ANDY CUTBERTSON

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP CENTER IMAGE: Archive photo of *Royal Oak*; Archive photo of the salvaging of a battle-ship in the German Fleet; Anti-aircraft guns on the *Royal Oak*; Commander Günther Prien of the *U47*

of Defense.

As a direct result of the loss of the *Royal Oak*, Winston Churchill visited Orkney and ordered the complete closure of all of the eastern approaches into Scapa Flow, which had clearly been unable to stop the ingress of an enemy U-Boat, which passed through the blockships unhindered.

TOP TO BOTTOM: The *Royal Oak* wreck at Admiral's Pinnacle; Stern of the V83





## Scapa Flow

### SCAPA FLOW CONTACTS

Orkney Dive Boat Operators Association - Halton Charters  
www.mvhalton.co.uk

Orkney Islands Charters  
www.orkneyislandscharters.co.uk

Roving Eye Enterprises  
www.rovingeye.co.uk

Scapa Scuba  
www.scapascuba.co.uk

Scapa Flow Charters  
www.janelaine.co.uk

Scapa Flow Diving Centre  
www.scapaflowdivingcentre.com

Scapa Flow Technical  
www.scapaflow.com

Stormdrift  
www.mv-stormdrift.co.uk

Stromness Diving Centre  
www.orknet.co.uk/scapa/triton.htm

Sunrise Charters  
www.sunrisecharters.co.uk

The Diving Cellar  
www.divescapaflow.co.uk

### ORKNEY USEFUL CONTACTS

British Airways  
(operated by Loganair)  
www.ba.com

Nautical Archaeological Society  
nas@portsmouth.msn.com

Orkney Archives  
www.orkneylibrary.org.uk

Orkney Dive Boat Operators Association  
www.odboa.co.uk

Orkney Heritage  
www.orkneyheritage.com

Orkney Islands Council Harbours Department  
harbours@orkney.gov.uk

Orkney Tourist Board, Stromness  
www.visitorkney.com

Northlink Ferries Ltd  
www.northlinkferries.co.uk



### Tourism

Although the contract for the work was awarded to a civilian company, over 1350 Italian Prisoners of War were transported to Orkney and billeted on the eastern islands to work alongside the locals.

Rather cheerless and lacking in home comforts, the Italians, whilst

working alongside civilians on the construction of the barriers, set about improving their huts by laying concrete paths, planting flowers and of course redecorating.

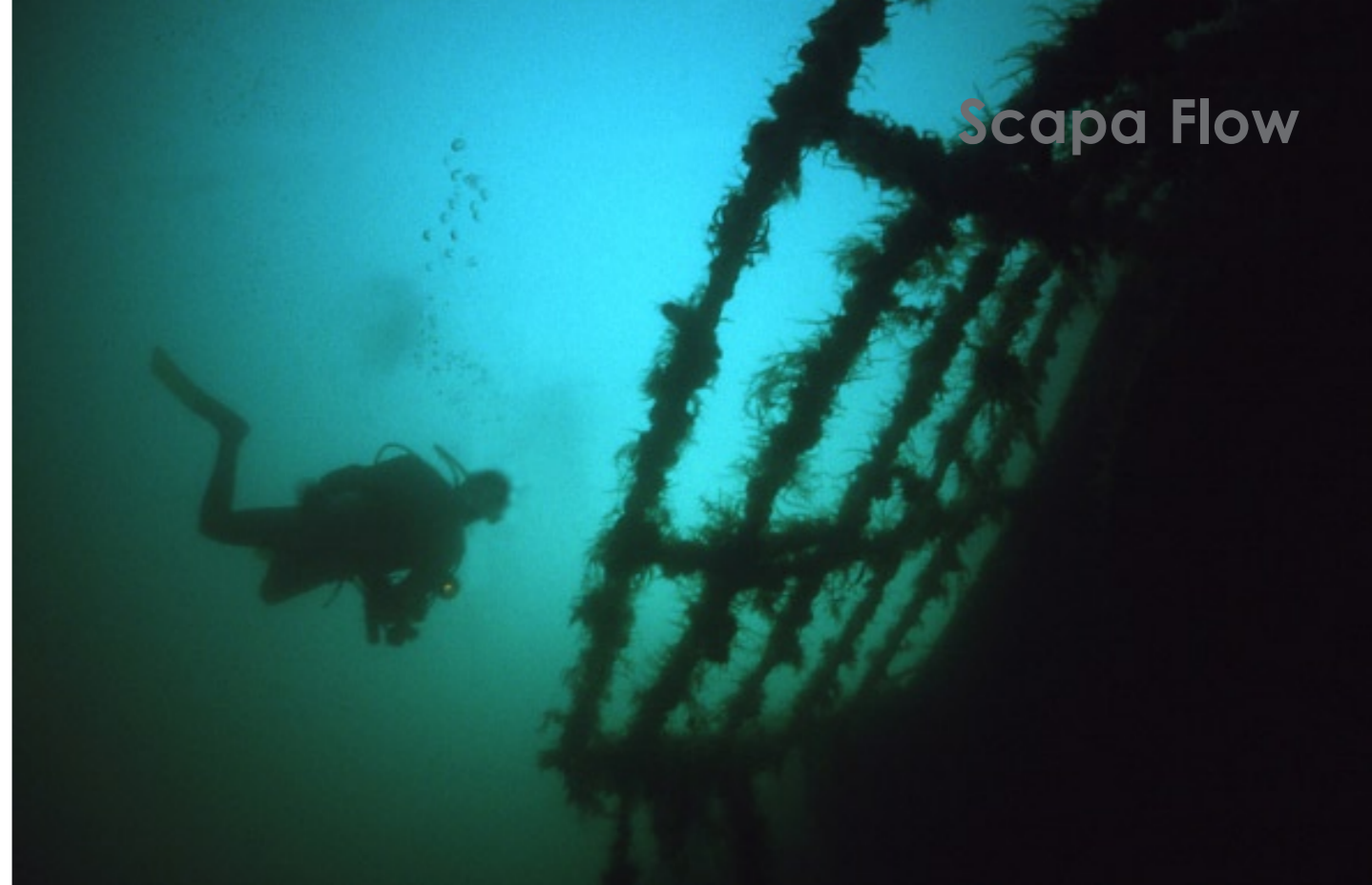
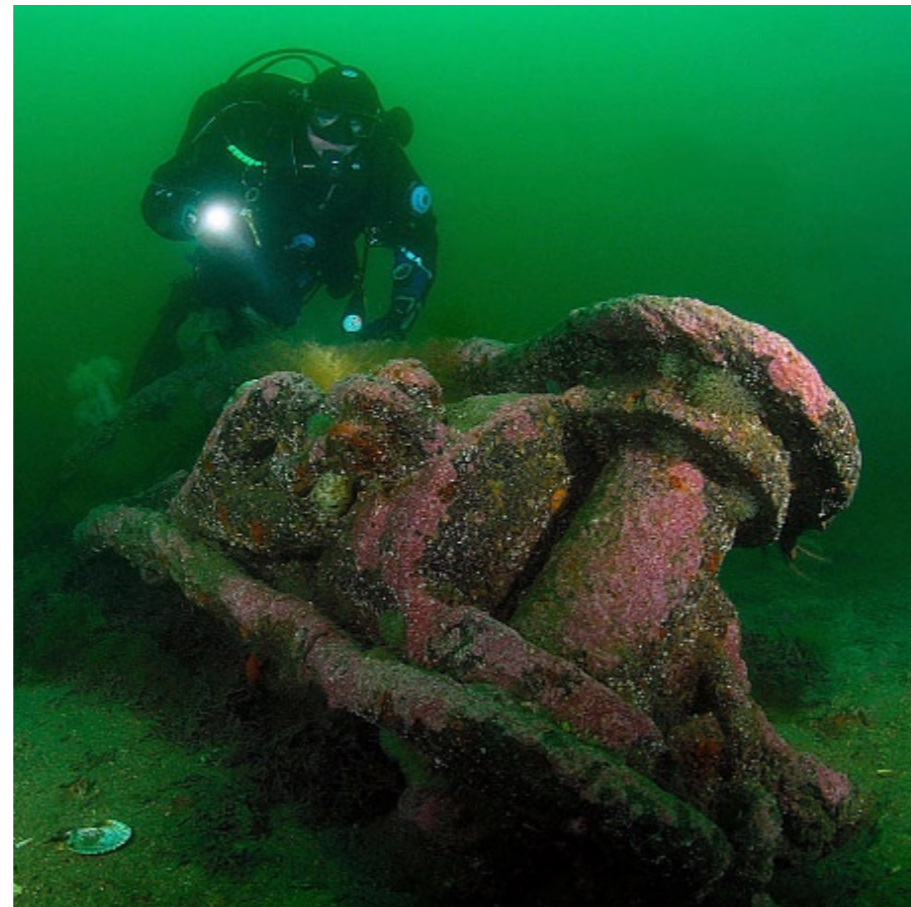
Italian artist Domenico Chiocchetti set about painting the interior of one of the camp huts and transformed it into a Chapel. Completely restored by the original artist, the Italian Chapel on Lamb Holm is well worth a visit when staying in Orkney.

Undoubtedly a visit to the Orkney Islands is not just about visiting the sunken fleet, Orkney is so much more. Sports diving is seriously big business in Orkney and has been for many years. Scapa Flow is one of the most popular dive sites in Europe.

Recreational diving alone contributes well over GB£1,000,000 a year to Orkney's economy, with up to 3,000 divers making almost 30,000 dives a year—about 60 percent of them on what's left of the German High Seas Fleet.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:  
Diver inspects an anchor at the *Seydlitz* wreck; Diver at the bow of *Brummer* wreck; Exterior of Italian chapel; Interior of Italian chapel



TOP LEFT TO RIGHT: Anemones decorate the wreck of *Kronprinz Wilhelm*; Diver investigates the *Kaiser* site; Diver inspects bridge railings of the *Brummer* wreck

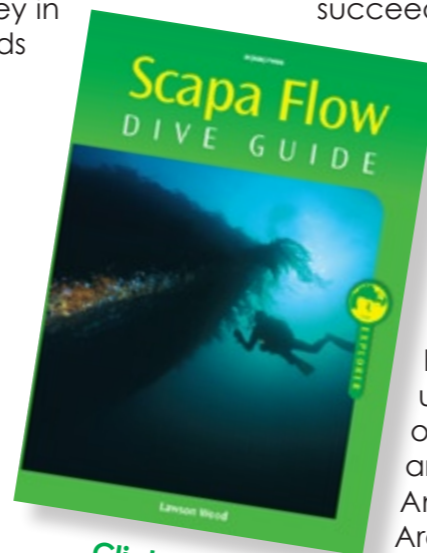
And that's a conservative estimate. It translates into thousands of divers needing accommodation, transport, shops and equipment; spending time and money in the islands; and thousands being carried by Orkney dive boat operators and others, whose livelihoods depend on the diving industry.

In the story of the German High Seas Fleet at Scapa Flow, we have a microcosm of the changing approach to historic wrecks and the way we as a society value them: First, they were seen as weapons of mass destruction (1918-21); then as a salvage resource (1923-39); then an unrestricted diving amenity (1960s onwards); and finally, as national historic and archaeological assets, worthy of protection by law.

As for the remaining seven wrecks,

scheduling should help to ensure that they survive as intact as possible, for as long as possible, for the enjoyment and opportunities they offer to succeeding generations of

Orcadians, dive boat operators, and the vast majority of responsible divers. Scapa Flow is there to be enjoyed by everyone, but please dive responsibly and please recognise that all of the shipwrecks have protected status under the Protection of Wrecks Act 1974 and are scheduled under the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas. 1979.



Click to Buy!

Want to learn more about wrecks and diving in Scapa Flow? See Lawson Wood's book, *Scapa Flow Dive Guide*, published by Aquapress or visit his website at: [www.lawsonwood.com](http://www.lawsonwood.com)



ABOVE: Aft gun on the *Kronprinz Wilhelm* wreck. BOTTOM LEFT: Stern gun breaches landscape at the *Karlsruhe* wreck. INSET: *Scapa Flow Dive Guide* by Lawson Wood