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Castle Howard



Andrew Jackson with a recovered diving helmet

Andy's underwater mission

Roy Hampson meets the diver with tales of shipwrecks, stirring rescues and precious items recovered from the sea

The sea off the Yorkshire coast was once just as busy as the motorways that span our county, according to Andrew Jackson, a member of the British Sub-Aqua club based at Scarborough.

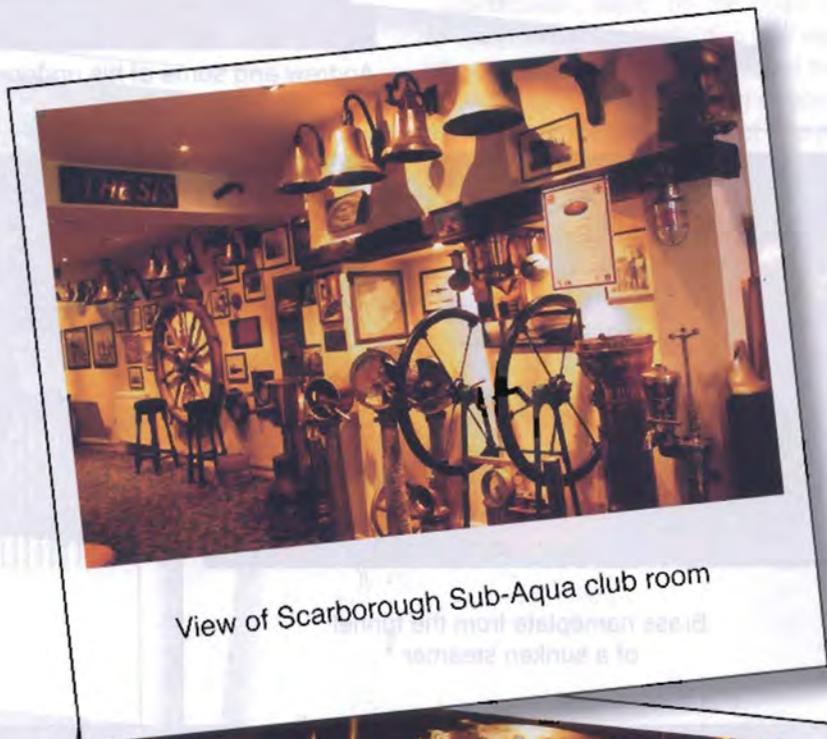
Steamers and wooden sailing ships transported coal, timber and all manner of goods from Hull up to Newcastle and Scotland, or down to London. Many voyages would end in disaster especially off the hostile Yorkshire coast. Bad weather, overloaded ships, German U boats and sea mines during The First World War were among the hazards

Andy, who has been diving for 20 years, told me the area near Whitby and Scarborough is a rich hunting ground for divers looking for shipwrecks. Along with his fellow club members, his aim is to identify the exact locations of the vessels. The diving club provides valuable information for cartographers who keep up to date charts of the hidden undersea world.

Andy's team are skilled in recovering valuable artefacts, such as brass ships bells, lanterns and pottery, which go towards identifying the sunken ships.

'It's not Spanish gold or pirates' treasure,' Andy said, although he has recovered a bottle of gold dust! 'Nevertheless, the objects are important because they are a direct link with the past allowing us to bring history off the page. People can now touch items from a few of the forgotten tragedies at sea.'

Currently the divers are exploring 14 trawlers in deep water off Whitby, sunk ▶



View of Scarborough Sub-Aqua club room



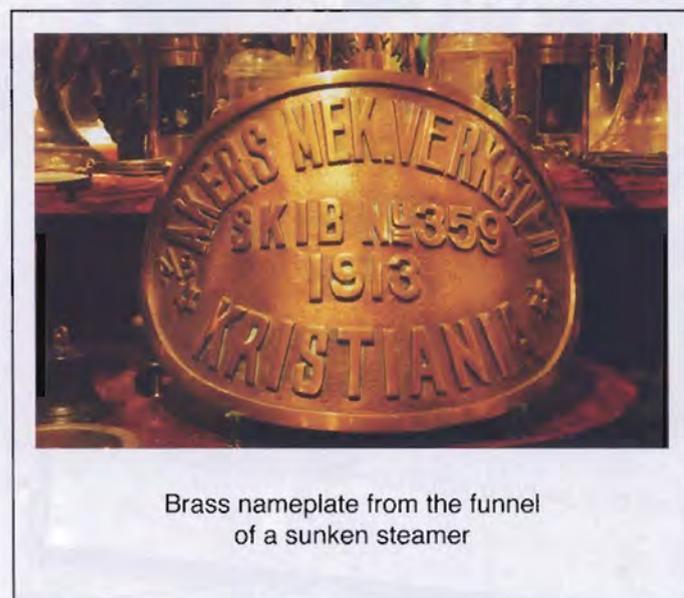
Second World War ship's radio



Andrew's bottle of gold dust



Andrew and some of his underwater discoveries



Brass nameplate from the funnel of a sunken steamer



Ship's wheel

by one single German U boat, amazingly without loss of life. Luckily they are all close together and three have so far been identified through recovering the trawlers' bells.

Andy said the team's most fascinating diving adventure began 15 years ago, the search for a ship called the 'Disperser'.

She sank as a salvage vessel near Saltburn in a gale on a bitterly cold night on February 7th 1934. The Runswick Bay lifeboat was launched led by its coxswain Robert Patton. The 'Disperser' crew were saved in a dramatic rescue, but one man, the ship's cook called Fallon was stranded on board. Patton knew the ship could sink at any moment and during an attempt to rescue him, he was crushed between the heaving ship's hull and that of the lifeboat, as they banged together. Patton, although suffering from severe internal injuries, clung to life. It's said that the sea gives up its dead nine days later and Patton died in hospital exactly nine days after that fateful night.

The 'Disperser' had always been of interest to divers, as she was rumoured to have 12 copper diving helmets on board.

So why hadn't anyone found the wreck? After all, the events of that night were well documented in the press and lifeboat records dictated a precise search area.

The break eventually came when the team was doing other research in Hartlepool library and stumbled across an obscure, previously overlooked newspaper report. It stated the 'Disperser' had floated a further four hours before sinking, thus contradicting the original lifeboat records. So it occurred to the divers that the wreckage would be several miles south east of where everyone thought it would be and a new search area was plotted.

The hunt began in the scorching summer of 1995 during a heatwave and hosepipe ban. The following year the 'Disperser' was discovered at last. However, it wasn't until 2001 that the silt level had dropped sufficiently enough for the ship to reveal some of its secrets.

The ship's captain was George Frater and Andy managed to track down his descendants who told him there was at least



Hand cranking pump recovered from the 'Disperser'



Ship's telegraph

one diving helmet on board when she sank belonging to the captain.

The team was 'dogged' by problems as preparations were made for a dive to actually recover the helmet.

Andy added: 'If I was superstitious I'd say the whole operation was cursed and something didn't want us find it. The echo sounder failed, followed by major trouble with our boat's gearbox.'

Nevertheless after 70 years, the team eventually brought George Frater's diving helmet to the surface. 'The colours were amazing, the copper had rusted to a beautiful green hue, after been buried in silt for so long,' Andy said.

Robert Patton had once been hailed as a national hero, but the memory of what he'd done had faded. Thanks to the recovery of the helmet and other artefacts from the 'Disperser' the story of his heroic deed can be now told to future generations and his memory will live on. ■

A maritime museum

Andrew would love to open a museum somewhere like Robin Hood's Bay and make all his undersea finds available for public viewing, linking the fascinating tales that go with them. Normally his finds are kept in deep storage, but exclusively for readers of Yorkshire ridings, he staged a special display in the Scarborough club room, along with more discoveries by other members. The collection included an Edwardian luxury toilet, a periscope from a German U boat, that diving helmet and the bottle of gold dust.

The gold dust? It wasn't much of a dive for Andy the day he found it. The waters were murky as he investigated a sunken Scandinavian vessel off the coast of Whitby. The unsuccessful dive itself was coming to an end when he spotted the unusual bottle with a porcelain stopper, although he thought nothing of it as he popped in his bag.

Back on shore he joked to his mates: 'I'll go and look at my treasure now.' He discovered the bottle was full of gold filings, which more than likely originated from a jeweller's workshop. It's a bit of a mystery. Perhaps a sailor's nest egg hidden under his bunk bed?

* More about Andy and updates...
www.subseatv.com

The British Sub-Aqua Club

The British Sub-Aqua Club is the largest diving club in the world and its training regime has internationally recognised qualifications.

The Scarborough Branch No 83 was founded in 1960 and has had its own premises in St Mary's Street, since 1964. Current membership is 120.

The club is always on the look-out for keen and committed divers who can turn up regularly at weekends and who are prepared to play their part in the team.

They must be open circuit trimax divers with experience down to 70metres. Please contact Andy at andy@subseatv.com or phone him on 01723 362966.