

Wreck of the Luxury 20th-Century Motor Yacht “Alastor” at Ringhaddy Sound, Strangford Lough, N. Ireland

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Abstract

This report contains the results of a multidisciplinary survey carried out on the wreck of the “M.Y. Alastor”, ex “M.Y. Vita”, one of the most popular dive sites in Ireland, over the summer of 2003 as part of the Queen’s University Belfast Sub-Aqua Club’s scientific diving program. Combining literature research with fieldwork, it is proven that the wreck is not that of the “M.Y. Alisdair”, as has been wrongly assumed for the past 55 years, but beyond reasonable doubt that of the “Vita”, a luxury diesel yacht that Camper & Nicholsons built for the millionaire and America’s Cup challenger Sir Thomas Octave Murdoch Sopwith. Multiple sources including books, contemporary newspaper articles, and the “Lloyd’s Register of Yachts” have been used to reconstruct the history of both vessels, the “Alastor” and the “Alisdair”.

Furthermore, key features of the wreck were measured by volunteer scuba divers and compared with available historic information and photographs to establish the true identity of the vessel. Together with two sidescan sonar images, the condition of the wreck and damages inflicted by a blaze and deterioration of the wreck through exposure to the elements are summarised.

Finally, a marine life survey was carried out and shows the importance of the wreck as a habitat. The wreck acts as an artificial reef providing shelter and anchorage for all different life forms on the otherwise predominantly mud and silt bottom of Ringhaddy Sound.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

When we set out in spring 2003, this time armed with tape measures and dive slates on top of the usual diving gear, our intention was to gain some experience and skill in using this new type of “scientific diving equipment”. We were merely looking for a practising opportunity, to get familiar with the kit before using it for “SeaSearch” or “Diving with a Purpose” projects. So that we could concentrate on the handling of the tapes, we picked a wreck for these exercises that we knew very well, and which was not too challenging from a diving point of view. Our wreck of choice was that of the “M.Y. Alisdair”, lying at about 25 m depth in Ringhaddy Sound, and being one of the most popular wrecks in Ireland, presumably because of its good state of preservation and ease of access. Thus, we did not expect any major surprises, since we assumed that the wreck had already been scrutinised by dozens of interested divers. There even was a fairly detailed, albeit not to scale, sketch of the wreck available, created by members of Castlereaugh SAC.

To make exercise a bit more realistic and interesting, we tracked down a photograph and the plans of the “M.Y. Alisdair”, so that we had something to compare our measurements and observations against, and one of the first things we noticed was that we could not find any trace of the big panoramic windows on the wreck, figure 2.3. Still not too suspicious about this fact, we assumed that they had been welded up when the “Alisdair” was modified for service during World War II. However, as we kept trying to match the plans to the wreck, it became more and more obvious that we were not diving on the wreck of the ship shown in the photograph and on the plans. When we finally managed to measure the overall length of the wreck, it was immediately clear that the wreck on the bottom of Ringhaddy Sound was significantly bigger than the “M.Y. Alisdair”, a fact that had escaped divers and historians alike for more than 55 years.

Following this discovery, we then spent many hours in libraries and col-

lections, trying to find out the true identity of the wreck. After a search that took more than a year, we finally identified her as the “M.Y. Vita”, the first Camper & Nicholsons diesel yacht of the eccentric millionaire Sir T. O. M. Sopwith, best known for his World-War-I fighter plane, the “Sopwith Camel”. Just to be sure, we also researched the history of the “Alisdair”, and were able to prove that she was still afloat in 2002, making it impossible for her to be the wreck in Ringhaddy Sound.

The results of this bibliographic research are detailed in chapter 2 of this report. It gives a fairly extensive overview of the history of both vessels, and also contains a number of photographs that we found in various historical sources, mostly the “Lloyd’s Register of Yachts”. Chapter 3 then contains the results of the actual survey. It begins with an overview of the location and geology of the dive site, before continuing with the actual measurements taken on the wreck. Where possible, these measurements are also compared to photographs and entries in the “Lloyd’s Register of Yachts”. With the help of sidescan sonar pictures, an overview of the current state of decay is given. Finally, the chapter concludes by giving an overview of the marine life encountered on the wreck, and compares it to a reference site nearby. Chapter 4 finally concludes the main part of this report. Details are given about the facts available in the open literature prior to this report, and the way this knowledge has been changed by our findings. This chapter also contains a summary of the local rumours in circulation about the wreck, and examines their likelihood. Finally, an outlook is given into what further work needs to be carried out to fully record this vessel’s state and history. The main part is followed by the appendices which list additional information and background material.

Chapter 2

Historical Background Information

2.1 M.Y. Alastor

The “M.Y. Alastor” started her live as “M.Y. Vita”, built in 1926 by the renowned shipyard Camper & Nicholsons for the millionaire Sir Thomas Octave Murdoch Sopwith [1], the man behind the famous World War I fighter “Sopwith Camel”, and the World War II “Hawker Hurricane”, to name only two of many. In the shipping world, he was renowned for several nearly successful attempts to bring the “America’s Cup” to Britain, using purpose-built sailing yachts also supplied by Camper & Nicholsons, and for having built the biggest ever privately owned diesel yacht in the United Kingdom, “M.Y. Philante” . Sir Thomas Sopwith used the “Vita” for “ocean-wide pleasure cruises” [2] until 1929 , when he sold her to buy the bigger “M.Y. Vita II” [3].

According to the “Lloyd’s Register of Yachts”, the “Vita” was 143.0 feet long¹, 24.0 feet wide², and had a draft of 9.6 feet³. Driven by two 6-cylinder oil engines providing 300 bhp each (see Sultzer advertisement in [1]), and twin screws, the steel yacht displaced 340 t⁴, and grossed 345 t, respectively, resulting in a 100A1 classification through Lloyd’s. She is equipped with electric lights, and a teak deck, and was commissioned in July 1926 [1]. A picture of her taken shortly after her launch can be seen in figure 2.1. A second picture, taken at an unspecified date during 1927 or early 1928, can

¹43.59 m

²7.32 m

³2.9 m

⁴Thames Measurement

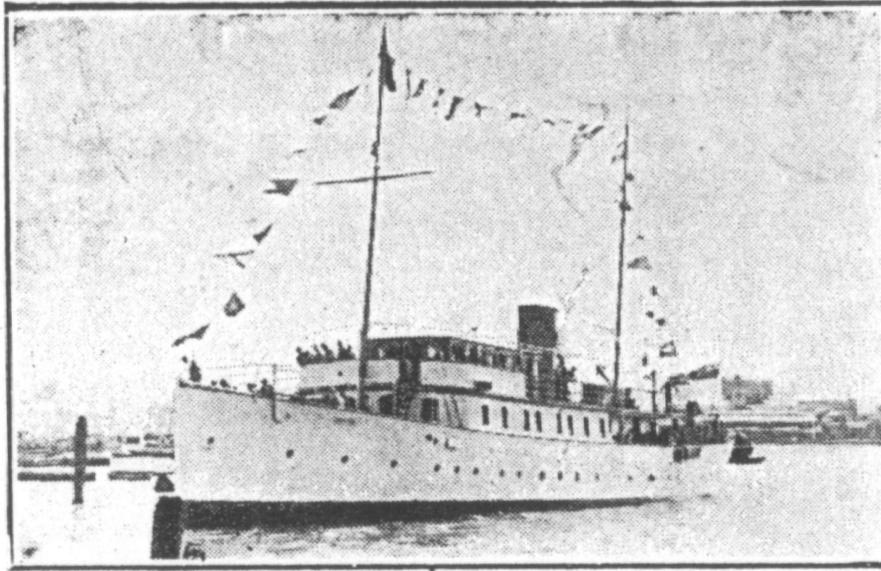


Figure 2.1: “M.Y. Vita” shortly after launch [1].

be seen in figure 2.2.

In 1929, the “Vita” is then bought by Sir John Courtown Edward Shelley-Rolls, a son of Sir Charles Shelley, who in turn was a nephew of Mary Shelley, best known as the author of “Frankenstein”, and her husband, the poet Sir Percy Bysshe Shelley [5]. After acquiring the “Vita”, Sir John C. E. Shelley-Rolls renames her presumably after a famous poem of his great-uncle, Sir Percy Bysshe Shelley, to become “M.Y. Alastor” [6], the Greek god of revenge for crimes and blood feuds.

After the sale in 1929, the “Alastor” is re-classified by Lloyd’s, again as 100A1, and has subsequently been surveyed in June 1931 [7], and June 1935 [8], while her engines were surveyed in June 1933 [9] and April 1937 [10]. During all these years, her registered technical details remain unchanged.

Sir John C. E. Shelley-Rolls kept the “Alastor” until 1939 (see supplement of [10]). In July 1939, the “Alastor” was acquired, most likely by compulsory purchase, by the Ministry of War Transport, and was used as a transport in various theatres of the war. The Admiralty kept the “Alastor” until 1946, when she was considered redundant and sold to the Greek government [2].

The “M.Y. Alastor” presumably met her end sometimes between 11th and 16th March 1946. At that time, the “Alastor” was relocated to Ringhaddy Sound, where she anchored on the mooring of the local sailing club, to be repainted at a later date in preparation for her new role in Greece. At some

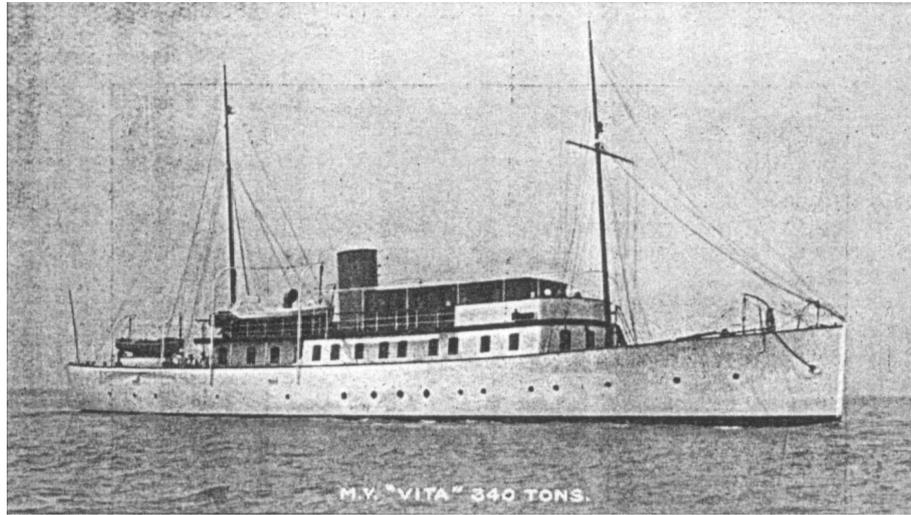


Figure 2.2: “M.Y. Vita” in 1927 or 1928 [4].

time during the 11th March 1946, a fire broke out on board, the cause of which has never been established. The crew managed to safely abandon ship and someone alerted the Fire Brigade, with units from Belfast and Bangor rushing to the site. However, the “Alastor” was anchored too far from shore, and the firefighters could not reach her. The yacht eventually burnt out completely [2]. The burnt out hull stayed afloat for an unspecified number of days, but by 16th March 1946, she had finally sunk [11].

The local newspapers give the name of the stricken vessel as “Allister” rather than “Alastor” [2, 11], which means that there will always remain a certain amount of doubt about the true identity of the yacht. However, the vessel is attributed to Sir T. O. M. Sopwith, and her displacement is given as 350 t, which also approximately fits the Alastor’s listed 345 t displacement prior to World War II [1]. Furthermore, due to the measurements taken on the wreck matching very well the dimensions of the “Alastor”, section 3.2, and the fact that there is no record whatsoever of a yacht called “Allister” anywhere in the world prior to World War II [12]⁵, and the total lack of any yacht with similar dimensions in the 1947 Lloyd’s Register of Yachts, it is reasonable to assume that the reporters of the “Belfast Telegraph” and “Down Recorder” misspelled “Alastor” as the English name “Allister”.

⁵The only “Allister” on record is a 3,600 t cargo ship sailing under Panamese flag [13]

2.2 M.Y. Alisdair

The “M.Y. Alisdair” is the ship that was believed to be lying on the bottom of Ringhaddy Sound for the last 55 years. The reason for the mix-up is most likely the fact that the reporters of the “Belfast Telegraph” and “Down Recorder” gave the name of the ship, presumably wrongly, as “Allister”, see section 2.1 [2, 11]. Since the researchers could not find any record of a yacht called “Allister”, they in all likelihood then checked for the other common spelling of the name, “Alisdair”, and indeed found a ship that seemed to vanish from the records shortly after World War II, and therefore apparently fitted the profile. It is remarkable that nobody ever checked whether the dimensions of the “Alisdair” actually match the wreck, and indeed they do not, because the reason of the Alisdair’s apparent disappearance from the Lloyd’s Register are not her assumed sinking, but the simple fact that she was renamed by her new owner in 1948. Her story is given here for reasons of completeness, and also because it proves beyond doubt that she could not possibly be the wreck in question since she had been afloat until at least the year 2002, and presumably still is today.

The “M.Y. Alisdair” was a luxury motor yacht with a steel hull and teak deck launched in May 1937 by the Dutch shipyard “Gerard de Vries Lentsch, jun.”, Amsterdam. She was designed by Norman Hart, one of the most renowned yacht designers of the period who also designed some light warships during World War II [14], and the shipyard specified her to be 95.0 feet long, 17.6 feet wide, to have a draft of 7.5 feet⁶, and to displace 119 t⁷ [15]. She therefore is significantly smaller and lighter than the “Alastor”, and definitely does not match the dimensions of the wreck in Ringhaddy Sound, section 3.2. She was initially equipped with two Gleniffer 8 cylinder oil engines and twin screws [15], providing her with 56 hp [16], and reached a top speed of 11.5 kn on her first sea trial in 1937 [17]. Figure 2.3 shows a photograph of her during those sea trials⁸.

Equipped with electrical lighting and an echo sounder, the “Alisdair” is initially sold to Mr. John P. Glass from Kensington, and London is recorded as her home port during this period. In 1938 she is classified 100A1 and officially entered into the Lloyd’s Register of Yachts. During the classification, the engineers measure her to be 95.1⁹ long and to displace 120 t [12].

Then in March 1939, the “Alisdair” is acquired by His Majesty’s Government, and work is carried out to increase her fuel capacity and therewith

⁶28.96 m × 5.36 m × 2.29 m

⁷Thames measurement

⁸Picture courtesy of William de Vries Lentsch

⁹29.0 m

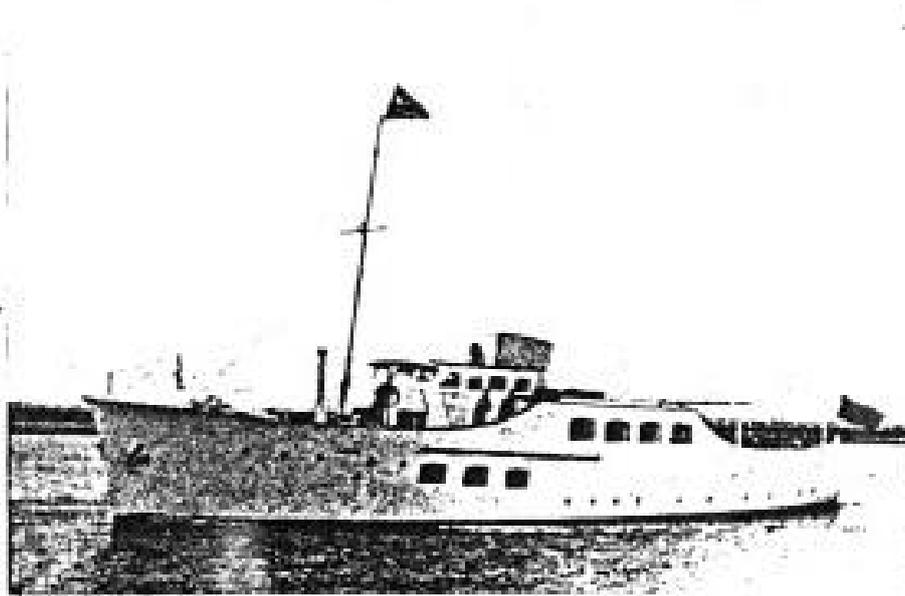


Figure 2.3: “M.Y. Alisdair” during first sea trials [17].

her operational range [10]. She remained in His Majesty’s service until 1947 [14].

In August 1947, she was surveyed by Lloyd’s engineers in Ipswich, and then sold to a Mr. John Andreatos from St. Mary Axe, London [18]. Mr. Andreatos kept her until 1949, when he sold her to Mr.(?) A. B. Maconochie from Piccadilly, London [19], who renamed her “Marsaltese III” and registered her home port again as London [19]. Sometimes during the next year she was also fitted with an unspecified “wireless direction finder” [20].

In 1951, she was then sold to a Mr. Jack Teller from Belgrave Square, London [21]. In January 1951, a complete survey was carried out by Lloyd’s engineers in London, and a second Lloyd’s survey, this time of her engines only, took place in London in May 1953 [22].

In 1954 she was then sold to Mr. David Brown from High Wycombe, Bucks.–Tms. [22]. Her engines were again surveyed in London in 1955, and eventually she was sold to Mr.(?) F. H. Schweers from Amsterdam sometimes between 1955 and 1957. She is subsequently transferred to Amsterdam and renamed “Michiel de Ruyter” [23]. Through the course of 1957, several further partial surveys were carried out in Amsterdam [24].

In 1960, she was then bought by a Mr. P. Luigi Buzetti from Cannes, France, and renamed “Don Juan” [24]. He registered her in Brussels and

CHAPTER 2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND INFORMATION

transferred her to Cannes in the Mediterranean. In 1961, two 24 years old second hand 170-bhp General Motors 6-cylinder oil engines are installed in replacement of her original 56-bhp Gleniffer engines. In June 1963 Mr. Buzetti finally withdrew her Lloyd's classification [25].

Having lost her Lloyd's classification, she was surveyed now much less frequently. However, in 1971 she was now owned by a company called Don Juan, Ltd from Valetta, Malta [26]. Her port of registry also changed to Malta, but her registered home port remains Cannes. It is quite likely that this company belongs to Mr. Buzetti, and that the Don Juan's time as a luxury motor yacht were now over. At that time, she was 34 years old, and probably showing her age. Most likely, she was now used as a charter yacht for paying passengers in the Mediterranean instead. Also in 1971, her 1937 General Motors engines suddenly supplied 250 bhp. There is no record of what was done to increase engine power by such a level [27].

In 1975 then eventually her port of registry was deleted [28], and in 1980 finally there was no owner on record any more, and she was registered again in London [29]. Since the "Lloyd's Register of Yachts" was discontinued after 1980, information about the "Don Juan" alias "Alisdair" is becoming increasingly patchy after this date. However, in 1993 the yacht is in possession of a French company called "Yachts de Paris", and serves as a floating restaurant on the river Seine close to Paris city centre, figure 2.4. According to the homepage of that company, the "M.Y. Alisdair" was retired in January 2002, her further fate remaining unknown [30].



Figure 2.4: "M.Y. Don Juan" as a floating restaurant in Paris 1993 [31].

Chapter 3

The Wreck Survey

3.1 Description of the Dive Site

Ringhaddy Sound, figure 3.1, is part of Strangford Lough, a huge sheltered bay South of Belfast in Northern Ireland. The site is located on the Western side of Strangford Lough, just North of Killyleagh, and about a third of the way from Downpatrick to Comber. It is running in approximately North-South direction, limited to the West by Ringhaddy on the mainland, and to the east by an island called Islandmore, with both providing good shelter for the site for nearly all wind directions. Since furthermore the whole of Strangford Lough is very sheltered and connected to the open sea only by a small channel, called the Narrows near Strangford, the wreck is hardly ever exposed to any significant swell. However, due to the channelling provided by Ringhaddy Sound, the site is subject to moderate tidal currents.

Ringhaddy Sound, as the whole of Strangford Lough, was affected by glacial activity during a succession of glaciations, but the main surviving imprint on the landscape derives from the last, Midlandian, glaciation. As a consequence, the landscape around the dive site is dominated by smooth hills, and wide and open valleys, which primarily consist of Quarternary sediments, rich in sand and gravel. Ringhaddy Sound is characteristic for this landscape, with the bottom only very gradually sloping down to the wreck site [34].

The wreck is sitting nearly perfectly upright at about 25 m maximum depth on a mixed bottom consisting of predominantly mud and silt, plus some sand, gravel, and cobbles. Hence, visibility on the wreck is usually quite low. The stern is buried deeply in the mud, while the bow is exposed, which could indicate that she sank stern first. The highest point of the wreck is the top of the funnel at about 18 m depth. Her exact position is 54°27.10' N

CHAPTER 3. THE WRECK SURVEY



Wreck
Site

Figure 3.1: Position of the wreck site [32, 33].

5°37.71' W, grid reference J 538 584 [34].

3.2 The State of the Wreck

The wreck survey concentrated on establishing the overall dimensions of the wreck, and those of some distinct features like her funnel or windows, in order to unambiguously identify her. For this purpose, buddy pairs equipped with survey tapes would dive to the wreck and measure the distance between distinctive features of the wreck. The overall dimensions were then established by adding up those measurements. While this obviously means that the overall error on the measurement was significant, it nevertheless proved the only practical way due to the size of the wreck, and the fact that the superstructure, which is, at least partially, still in place today, prevents a direct measurement from bow to stern.

The results of these measurements can be seen in figure 3.2. Each number shown on the graph represents an actual measurement. Features shown without dimensions are only given to assist orientation, and are not to scale.

The over-all length has been measured to be 44.75 m, which is somewhat longer than the registered length over all of 43.59 m [1]. The probable cause of this discrepancy, besides the obvious measurement inaccuracies resulting from the section-wise measurements, is that over the years of settling in the mud the *Alastor's* back has bent, allowing her deck to settle outwardly, causing an overall increase of length.

The *Alastor's* beam was measured to be 7 m. This is 32 cm short of the registered beam of 7.32 m. This discrepancy is more than could be accounted for by measurement inaccuracies, and the probable cause is that the measurement could not be taken at the widest point due to the presence of the superstructure.

Figures 3.3 and 3.4 show sidescan sonar images taken of the wreck by EHS / DARD/ QUB [35]. The damage inflicted by the fire is visible in quite a number of places. The deck has been completely destroyed everywhere on the superstructure, between the superstructure and the raised stern section, and to a major extend in front of the superstructure. The metal grid visible in both figures is the support structure on which the deck would once have rested. Between the funnel and what would have been the bridge the fire must have been most savage, since here the steel has become so weakened that it collapsed under its own weight, particularly well visible in figure 3.4. There is nothing left of the bridge and the features of the promenade deck, see figures 2.2 and 2.1. The divers reported finding molten brass and glass in this area, witness to the ferocity and extreme heat of the fire. Close to the

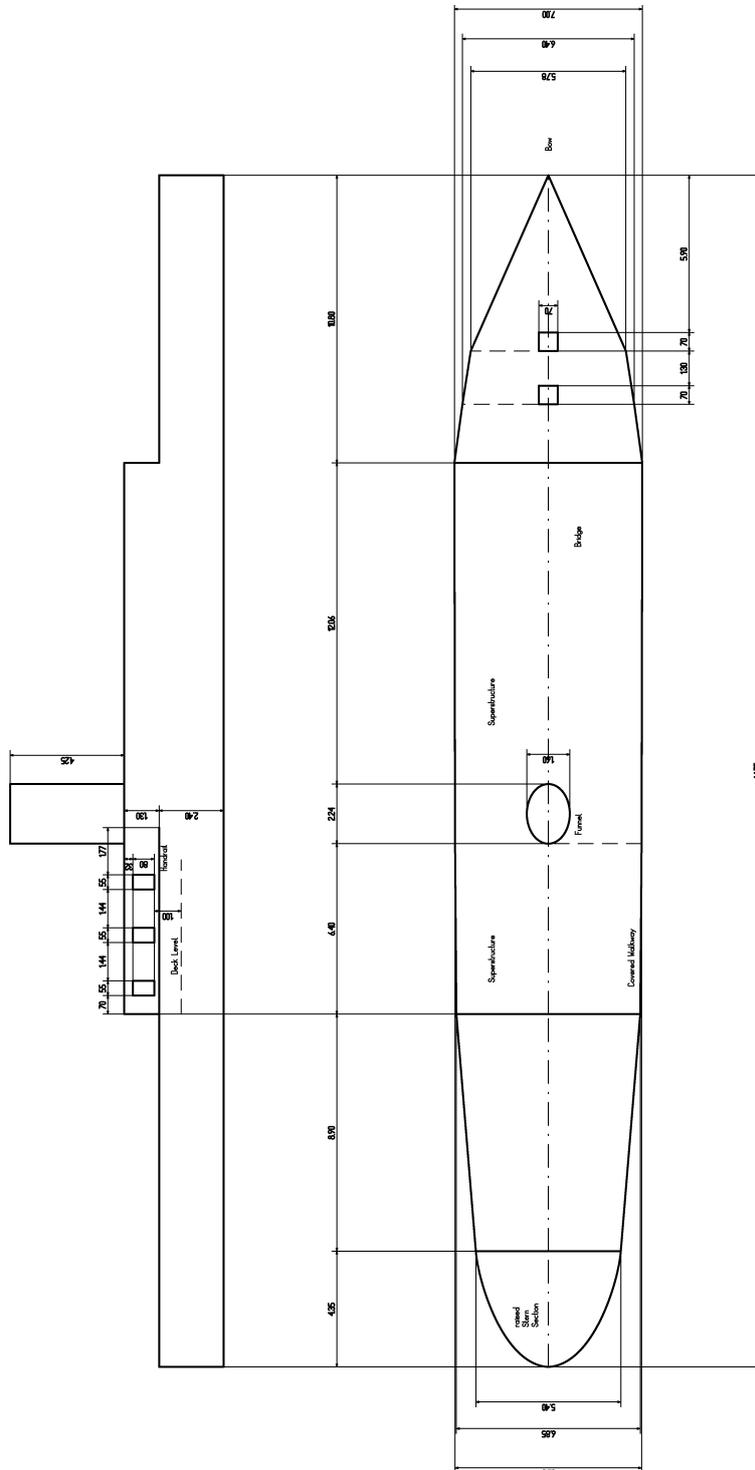


Figure 3.2: Measured dimensions (in m) of the wreck.

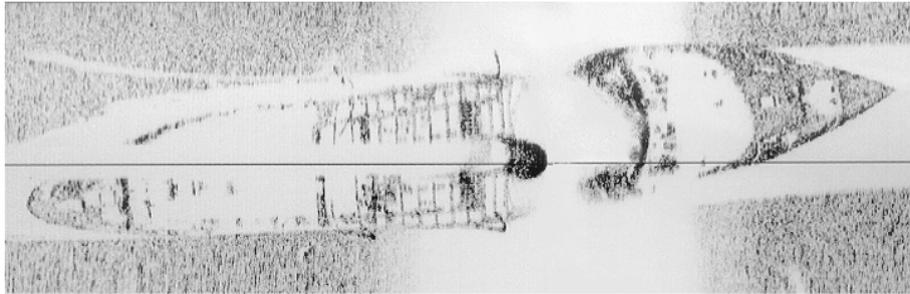


Figure 3.3: *Sidescan sonar picture of the "Alastor".*

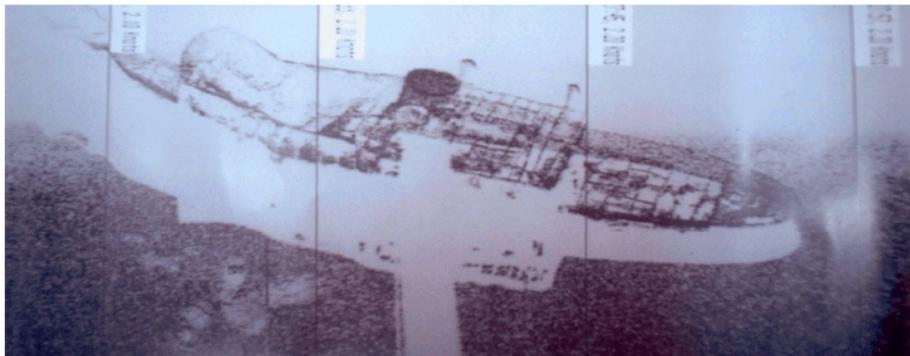


Figure 3.4: *Sidescan sonar picture of the "Alastor".*

right edge of figure 3.3, the anchor winch and forward hatch can just about be made out, while what is left of the midship davits can be seen quite well in both figures. There is no trace of the remaining davits visible in figures 2.2 and 2.1.

For its age, the wreck is in relatively good shape, probably most of all thanks to the natural shelter that the site provides. Most of the immediately obvious damage was in all likelihood caused by the fire. The complete lack of portholes can probably be attributed to the fact that she is within easy reach for sports divers. There is a local rumour that the yacht's bell was recovered by sports divers, but lost again on the way to the surface, now lying somewhere on the bottom of Ringhaddy Sound. Also, divers have repeatedly attached shot lines to one of the port davits, which is likely to break it in the long run. There is also a persistent rumour that owners of yachts affiliated with the local sailing club have used her as a convenient mooring anchor in the past, though no such practise was encountered during this survey. Finally, the "Alastor" was used by sports divers as a "practise object" for underwater cutting equipment, resulting in a number of moderate-size holes in the hull. The most bizarre of all stories is however that one sports diver has allegedly already spent several dozens of dives trying to pry loose one hull plate, apparently to allow the silt that has filled much of the inside of the wreck to be swept out by the currents. It should be mentioned at this point that the wreck has been bought by a Mr. Faulkner of Ringhaddy, i.e. the wreck is private property [35].

3.3 Marine Life on the Wreck

3.3.1 Methodology

The marine life survey was carried out by buddy pairs who would note all observed species on dive slates. Where immediate identification was not possible or questionable, samples would be taken to the surface, photographed, identified, and returned to the sea. Where a photograph was not deemed sufficient to allow an unambiguous identification, the samples were taken to Queen's marine laboratory for further study.

The survey concentrated on three habitats, namely the wreck itself, the seabed directly around the wreck referred to as the benthos site, and a reference site at the same depth about 30 m to the north. Since the bottom around the wreck as well as on the reference site consist primarily of mud and silt with some gravel and a few cobbles, only the wreck site provided a large, solid, reef-like structure. By then comparing the species found in each

habitat, the influence of the presence of the wreck on species abundance and community structure was estimated.

In total, the team spend accumulatively more than 12 hours under water, spread over six different dates between May 25th, and June 22nd, 2003. Each site was visited until two consecutive dives did not yield any new species. As a consequence of this methodology, more time was spend on the wreck rather than on the other two sites, because the wreck was significantly richer in life.

For counting the number of species, a worst-case assumption was applied. This means that if two species were not unambiguously identified as definitely different species, they were assumed to be the same. For example, the divers three times reported of having encountered an unidentified species of hydroid. For the evaluation of the survey, it was assumed that all three encounters referred to the same hydroid, and hence it was counted only once for the results section.

3.3.2 Results and Discussion

We encountered 62 different species during the course of the survey. A complete list of all these species is given in appendix A. A total of 49 species were found on the wreck, 23 species on the benthos directly around the wreck, and 15 species at the reference site. A graphical representation of these numbers is shown in figure 3.5. This figure also shows the distribution of the species over the different sites. For example, of the 49 species observed on the wreck site, left-hand column, six species were also found on both other sites, 7 were also found on the benthos site, 2 were also found on the reference site, and 34 were unique to the wreck site. Similarly, of the 23 species observed at the benthos site, centre column, 6 were common to all sites, 8 were unique to the benthos site, 2 were also found on the reference site, and 7 were also found on the wreck site.

It is quite remarkable that the wreck site has a total of 34 unique species that were not encountered on either of the other two sites. Furthermore, it is quite noteworthy that with only about 30 m between them, the reference site and the wreck site had just 8 species in common. Also, in spite of providing essentially the same habitat, only 8 of the species encountered at the benthos site also appeared on the reference site. This shows that not only does the wreck itself provide a unique habitat, but its presence even influences the surrounding habitats.

To further investigate the distribution of species over the different sites, next the preferred substrates of the encountered species were analysed, figure 3.6 and 3.7. For this purpose, the species were divided into four different categories, namely, first those species that do require a hard substrate, mostly

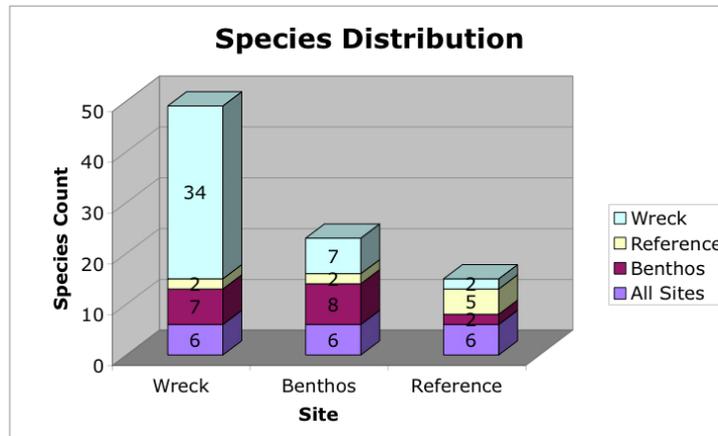


Figure 3.5: Number of species encountered on the different sites.

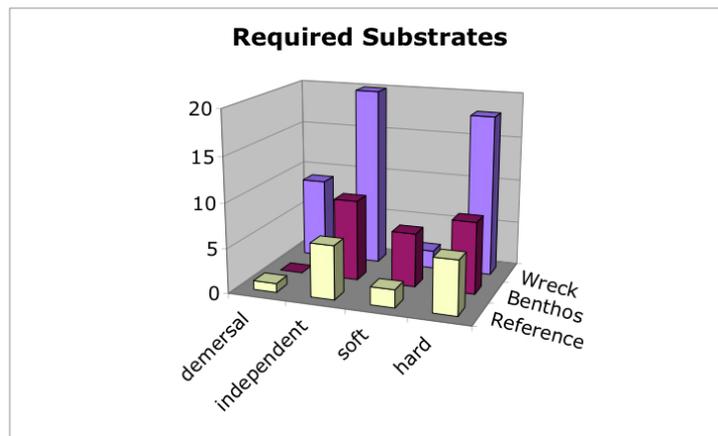


Figure 3.6: Preferred substrate of the species encountered on the different sites (absolute count).

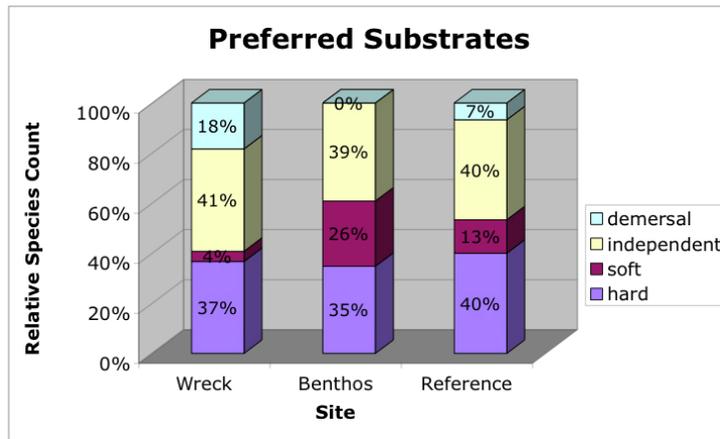


Figure 3.7: Preferred substrate of the species encountered on the different sites (relative count).

to attach themselves to, e.g. dead man’s finger, second those that require a soft substrate, usually to bury themselves in it for cover, e.g. peacock worm, third those species that can live on either, e.g. crabs, and finally the demersal species, i.e. those species that would preferably hover above the bottom, mostly fish. For this study, early development stages of species were ignored, i.e. a species was classified as “requiring hard substrate” even if the larvae are pelagic.

As could probably be expected, we encountered only very few species on the wreck site that would require a soft substrate, and the few that we found were dwelling on silt deposited inside the hull or on deck. Looking at figure 3.6, it is also quite remarkable that the increased species count on the wreck site when compared to the other sites does not only stem from species which require the wreck as a hard substrate, but that there are also many more species on the wreck site which either have no special requirements, or are demersal.

Figure 3.7 confirms this finding by showing that the substrate requirements are about evenly matched between all three sites. The conclusion is that the wreck does not only attract life forms that need it to attach themselves onto it, but attracts a wide variety of all different kinds of life. This observation is further supported by the relatively large proportion of

demersal life forms on the wreck site compared to the other two sites. These demersal life forms were nearly exclusively fish which presumably use the wreck as shelter from predators.

In contrast, the small number, relative to all observed species, of life forms requiring a soft substrate on especially the reference site seems to point to a problem of surveys like the one reported here. It is hardly imaginable that there are so few of those species present on a site where the bottom is predominantly mud and silt. The likely conclusion is therefore that the divers missed those species, since they were buried in the ground. There is probably also a human factor to the equation, namely that divers are more likely to spot big animals that are moving, like spider crabs or conger eels, rather than small animals relying on camouflage. Finally, since mud and silt bottoms are usually perceived as rather “boring” by divers, and therefore usually avoided, the divers might even have less experience in finding life forms dwelling on soft substrates.

While the seabed around the wreck is predominantly silt and mud, a number of biotic reefs, formed by horse mussels and oysters, have been identified around the wreck. These reefs provide a hard substrate for a range of species that would not normally be found on a soft benthos, e.g. barnacles and certain sponges. The full extent of the horse mussel beds could not be determined during this survey, especially whether they are specific to the wreck site or a general feature of Ringhaddy Sound.

Finally, the species were analysed for their mobility. An arbitrary distinction in three different “mobility classes” was undertaken, namely sessile for all those species which either cannot move by free will at all, or only during their larvae stages, e.g. anemones, secondly slow moving species which are mobile, mostly in search of food, but are not fast enough to outrun a predator, e.g. star fish, and finally fast moving species which use their high mobility as a method of escape, e.g. fish and scallops.

Figure 3.8 shows the absolute count for the three different sites. As was probably to be expected, the wreck was host to the largest variety of sessile life forms. However, in line with earlier findings about the substrate requirements, the wreck has also attracted a larger variety of slow and fast moving animals than the other two sites. These findings are confirmed by the graph with the relative distribution, figure 3.9, which shows that no mobility class was dominant on any of the three sites.

Appendix A contains a complete list of all species encountered during the course of this project. However, among the species that deserve a special mentioning is undoubtedly the conger eel (*Conger conger*), figure 3.10. The different holes, pipes, and cracks of the wreck make a perfect habitat for it, and quite a number have been spotted during the course of this survey. The

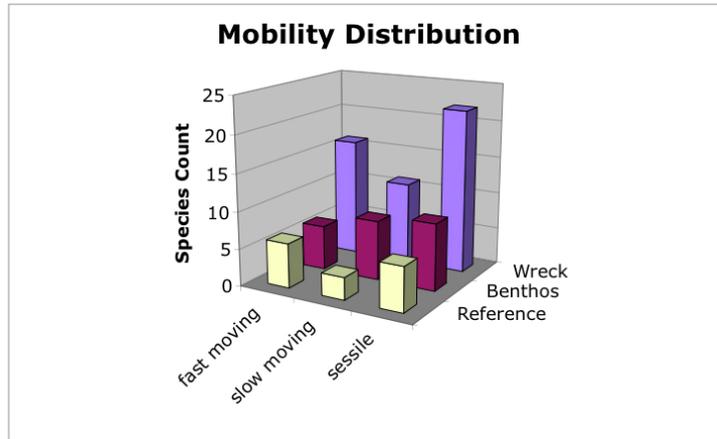


Figure 3.8: *Mobility of the species encountered on the different sites (absolute numbers).*

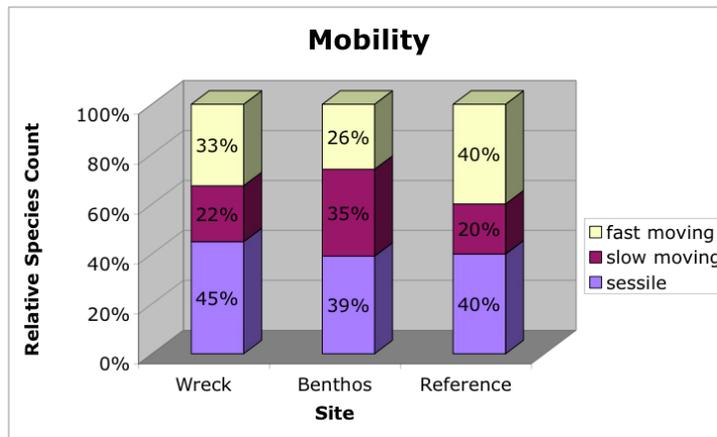


Figure 3.9: *Mobility of the species encountered on the different sites (relative numbers).*

diver reported of seeing at least three, possibly four different individuals of more than 1 m length. Initially, the conger eels were quite shy, but as the survey continued, they soon became quite used to the divers and eventually would swim freely with the project team. A separate “SeaSearch” dive carried out by three divers on December 14th, 2003, however failed to spot any of them. They possibly might migrate to deeper waters in winter, and it will be interesting to find out whether they will return in summer 2004.



Figure 3.10: *Conger eel* (*Conger conger*).

The wreck also supports a large population of crustaceans. Figure 3.11 shows a spider crab, probably *Hyas araneus*, sitting on the stern. Figure 3.12 shows a velvet swimming crab (*Liocarcinus puber*) sitting on a collapsed part of the superstructure just aft of the funnel. There is also a significant number of edible crabs (*Cancer pagurus*) living on the wreck, one very big one famously inside the anchor winch on the bow. Most divers who have seen it agreed that it has probably grown so big that it cannot leave the anchor winch any more, since all available openings seem too small.



Figure 3.11: *Spider Crab*, probably *Hyas araneus*.



Figure 3.12: *Velvet Swimming Crab* (*Liocarcinus puber*).

Finally, figure 3.13 shows a typical example of the animal turf that covers most of the wreck. Large areas are dominated by *Ciona intestinalis*, and feather stars, visible in figure 3.13. Further abundant species include big white tunicates (*Asciadiella aspersa*), dead man's fingers (*Alcyonium digitatum*), plumose anemones (*Mefridium senile*), shredded carrot sponges (*Esperiopsis fucorum*), and countless hydroids.



Figure 3.13: *Animal turf on the wreck (Ciona intestinalis)*.

Chapter 4

Conclusions

4.1 Available Scientific Information prior to this Report

Prior to this report, all scientific sources that the authors could find name the wreck at Ringhaddy Sound to be the “M.Y. Alisdair”, e.g. [16, 34, 36]. As discussed in section 2.2, this is virtually impossible since there are many independent sources that confirm that the “Alisdair” was still afloat many decades after the wreck at Ringhaddy Sound was first reported and dived. Therefore, not only was there no information available about this wreck whatsoever, but even worse, the available information was incorrect and misleading.

Similarly, there was no information available about how the “M.Y. Alastor” met her end. After her acquisition through His Majesty’s Government, there is no more record available. The discovery that the wreck at Ringhaddy Sound is in all likelihood the “Alastor” therefore also means the discovery of her final resting place 58 years after she sank.

4.2 Local Rumours

During the background research of this survey, besides of the patchy and sometimes wrong historical data available, also many local rumours about the “Alisdair” and her fate emerged. Many members of the public and particularly the diving community know the wreck, and many explanations for her loss and the rather peculiar lack of data about her have been offered. In this section, these rumours are discussed, and an estimate of the likelihood of their correctness given.

4.2.1 Various Ownership Attributions

The “M.Y. Alisdair” has been attributed to various owners, particularly to two families of local importance, namely the Londonderry family who own the Mt. Stewart estate, and the Guinness family.

Since both, the “Alastor” as well as the “Alisdair” were expensive, luxury motor yachts, it was certainly plausible that the wreck had indeed been owned by one of the most influential local families. However, the record of owners for the “Alisdair” does not have any gaps, so she could only have been owned by either family if one of the records was wrong. For the “Alastor”, the records are not quite as complete, but according to two sources she has been owned by Her Majesty’s Government from 1939 until shortly before her sinking 1946 [2, 37], and at the time of sinking her ownership was attributed to the Greek government [2]. This leaves little space for private ownership for about seven years prior to her end. Indeed, on enquiry, Lady Mairi Bury from Mt. Stewart assured that her family has never owned a ship of that name, in fact she had not even heard of such a ship prior to the request [38].

4.2.2 Various Stories about Her Sinking

It seems that the locals never believed that the sinking of the “M.Y. Alastor” was an accident, and various stories about how she really met her end have been offered. A suspicion mentioned very often is that she was deliberately set ablaze to claim the insurance money. According to this rumour, the “Alastor” was in the end owned by one or more unsuccessful businessmen who used her for “Dance on the Lough” events, where parties could hire the boat including a band and catering, and spent the evening cruising up and down Strangford Lough. The rumour goes on to claim that this was not proving too lucrative, and that days before having to declare bankruptcy the owners set the ship ablaze to claim the insurance money.

The likelihood of this rumour is rather low. To start with, the “Alastor” was not really big enough to accommodate this sort of activity. Furthermore, the ship was owned by either the Greek or Her Majesty’s Government at the time of sinking, neither of which would really need to commit insurance fraud in order to raise some money. All reports indicate that the “Alastor” was still fitted as an armed patrol ship, and as such would not be very suitable for “Dance on Strangford Lough” scenarios [2, 11]. A search of pre-1947 issues of the “Belfast Telegraph” and “Down Recorder” for advertisements for a “Dance on the Lough” event was not met with success. Finally, a search of the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland failed to locate any records of an insurance claim or related court case.

A similar story in circulation is that the crew of the “Alastor” had sold off fittings from the ship, and were afraid that this would come to light when the ship was to undergo refitting. They hence burnt her to destroy all evidence. The one interesting bit is that this rumour ties in with the fact that the “Alastor” was indeed about to undergo a refit. However, all other facts make this story too rather unlikely. It remains rather doubtful that after refitting the ship for war duties, and subsequently six years of combat patrols, anything of value should still have been left aboard the “Alastor”.

Finally, there is a rumour saying that a wild party was organised on board the “Alastor”, during the course of which the boat was set on fire accidentally. Since neither newspaper mentions any passengers, only a crew of six, and since the boat at the time was most likely still considered a vessel of the Royal Navy, and since furthermore the fire occurred presumably during bright daylight [2], this scenario is rather unlikely too.

4.3 Summary of Achievements

To our knowledge, this survey has been the first ever effort to use a multidisciplinary and multilateral approach to investigate the history and state of the wreck of the “M.Y. Alisdair” at the bottom of Ringhaddy Sound, Strangford Lough, Northern Ireland. For this survey, research of historic sources and available publications were combined with field work carried out under water on the wreck to create a wholesome understanding of the wreck, its current state, and the history of the vessel.

First and foremost, the survey revealed that the wreck was actually not that of the “M.Y. Alisdair”, as had been assumed for more than 55 years by historians and the general public alike, but indeed that of the “M.Y. Alastor”, ex “M.Y. Vita”. The ship was not launched in 1937, as previously assumed, but approximately ten years earlier in 1927, custom built for the eccentric millionaire aircraft designer and America’s Cup challenger Sir Thomas Octave Murdoch Sopwith.

It was later bought by Sir John Courtown Edward Shelley-Rolls, a distant relative of Mary Shelley and Sir Percy Bysshe Shelley. The identity of the vessel is established beyond reasonable doubt from several independent historic sources, including newspaper articles, entries in the “Lloyd’s Register of Yachts”, and books, as well as by means of comparing measurements taken on the wrecks against available information in those historic sources. Fire is confirmed as the cause of the sinking, and while it was impossible to determine the exact date of her loss, the uncertainty is however narrowed down to less than one week, while prior to this report not even the year of the

accident had been positively established. Available local rumours about the wreck were also recorded and an estimation of their credibility given.

The history of both vessels, the “Alastor” and the “Alisdair”, have been investigated in detail using several independent historic sources. They furthermore prove beyond reasonable doubt that the “Alisdair” cannot possibly be the wreck at the bottom of Ringhaddy Sound, since several of the examined sources confirm that she was still afloat for decades after the blaze and subsequent loss of the vessel in Ringhaddy Sound.

Volunteer scuba divers measured a number of key features of the wreck, and those measurements are reported. All measured features are in agreement with available technical data of the “Alastor”. An overview of the state of the wreck is given, and by comparing it with historic photographs the damage inflicted by the blaze, and the further decay by exposure to the elements over time have been documented.

Finally, a survey of the marine life on the wreck was carried out, and the results compared to a similar survey carried out for the area immediately around the wreck, as well as reference site of similar character to the North of the wreck site. The importance of the wreck as a habitat for all kind of animals is documented, and a problem with a non-contact survey like the one presented here is documented by a lack of data about species living in soft substrates from the reference site.

In summary, a detailed and multidisciplinary survey into the state, the marine life, and the history of this wreck was successfully carried out, and the results are reported in detail.

4.4 Future Work

The work so far has concentrated on establishing the identity and history of the wreck. With this foundation now in place, a more detailed study of the wreck itself, its rate of decay, and the damage already inflicted can be undertaken. For this purpose, the wreck of the “Alastor” has been adopted by the Queen’s University Belfast Sub-Aqua Club (QUBSAC) under the “Adopt a Wreck” scheme of the Nautical Archaeology Society, Portsmouth. The next step on this route will be to create a detailed plan of the wreck that can then be used as a reference basis for all future surveys.

The project team also intends to continue the marine life survey under the recently established Northern Ireland section of the Marine Conservation Society’s SeaSearch project. For this purpose, the existing database needs to be broadened to include all information usually recorded during SeaSearch surveys. By continuing to have all divers with SeaSearch Observer status fill

CHAPTER 4. CONCLUSIONS

in a SeaSearch form after each survey dive, eventually a very detailed study of the life on the wreck and its change over time and over the seasons should be possible. A major part of this future work will also involve determining the extend of the biotic reefs surrounding the wreck.

A major challenge will thereby be to refine the survey techniques for the reference site, in order to identify more species which usually live buried in the ground. This might be possible by better education and training of the survey divers, or by changing the methodology.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, thanks are due to Jeremy Lines, voluntary historian for Camper & Nicholsons, for his help to research which of the Camper & Nicholsons yachts was wrongly identified as “Allister”. Without his help, it would have taken much longer to single out the “M.Y.Vita” as the most likely candidate to be the wreck on the bottom of Ringhaddy Sound.

Special thanks are also due to William de Vries Lentsch (William III) from the Amsterdam Shipyard de Vries Lentsch for supplying vital information about the early time of the “M.Y. Alisdair”, and Mrs. E. Spits from the Scheepvaartmuseum Amsterdam for supplying the plans of this ship. It was this information that enabled us to rule out the “M.Y. Alisdair” as the wreck on the bottom of Ringhaddy Sound.

Furthermore, the project team gratefully acknowledges the help of the following individuals and organisations in compiling some of the historical information contained in this report:

- ILL Departments, Main and Science Library, Queen’s University Belfast
- Northern Ireland Libraries HQ, Ballynahinch
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- David Gotard, Rhodes Swiftsure Owners Association, Huntington, Long Island, New York
- Lady Mairi Bury, Mt. Stewart, Co. Down
- The Local Museum, Downpatrick, Co. Down
- The Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI), Belfast
- The Co. Down District Council
- Belfast City Hall

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Appendix A

Species List

This appendix contains the complete list of all species encountered during the survey, including those only partially identified.

<i>Wreck Site</i>		
<i>No.</i>	<i>Scientific Name</i>	<i>Common Name</i>
1		Hydroid spp.
2	<i>Alcyonium digitatum</i>	Dead Man's Finger
3	<i>Antedon bifida</i>	Feather Star
4	<i>Asciella aspersa</i>	Big White Tunicate
5	<i>Asciella</i> spp.	Sea Squirt
6	<i>Asterias rubens</i>	Common Starfish
7	<i>Balanus</i> spp.	Barnacles
8	<i>Balanus crenatus</i> (?)	Barnacles
9	<i>Bugula plumosa</i>	Hydroid
10	<i>Calliostoma zizyphinum</i>	Painted Topshell
11	<i>Cancer pagurus</i>	Edible Crab
12	<i>Caryophyllia smithii</i>	Devonshire Cup Coral
13	<i>Chlamys varia</i>	Variegated Scallop
14	<i>Ciona intestinalis</i>	
15	<i>Clavelina lepadiformis</i>	Lightbulb Sea Squirt

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APPENDIX A. SPECIES LIST

<i>...continued from previous page.</i>		
<i>No.</i>	<i>Scientific Name</i>	<i>Common Name</i>
16	<i>Conger conger</i>	Conger Eel
17	<i>Ctenolabrus rupestris</i>	Goldsinny Wrasse
18	<i>Epizoanthus couchii</i> ?	
19	<i>Esperiopsis fucorum</i>	Shredded Carrot Sponge
20	<i>Halecium Plumosum</i>	Hydroid
21	<i>Henricia oculata</i>	Bloody Henry
22	<i>Hyas araneus</i>	Great Spider Crab
23	<i>Labrus bergylta</i>	Ballan Wrasse
24	<i>Labrus bimaculatus</i>	Cuckoo Wrasse
25	<i>Liocarcinus depurator</i>	Smooth Swimming Crab
26	<i>Liocarcinus puber</i>	Velvet Swimming Crab
27	<i>Metridium senile</i>	Plumose Anemone
28	<i>Modiolus modiolus</i>	Horse Mussel
29	<i>Mytilus Edulis</i>	Common Mussel
30	<i>Nemertesia antennina</i>	Sea Beard
31	<i>Nereidae spp.</i>	Worm
32	<i>Ophiura ophiura</i> (?)	Brittle Star
33	<i>Ostrea edulis</i>	European Flat Oyster
34	<i>Pagurus bernhardus</i>	Common Hermit Crab
35	<i>Pandalus montagui</i>	Pink Shrimp
36	<i>Pollachius pollachius</i>	Pollack
37	<i>Pomatoschistus minutus</i>	Sand Goby
38	<i>Porcellana platycheles</i>	Porcelain Crab, long-clawed
39	<i>Porifera spp.</i>	Sponge
40	<i>Prosthecereus vittatus</i>	Flatworm
41	<i>Pycnogonidae spp.</i>	Sea Spider

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APPENDIX A. SPECIES LIST

<i>...continued from previous page.</i>		
<i>No.</i>	<i>Scientific Name</i>	<i>Common Name</i>
42	<i>Salmacina oysteri</i> (?)	Coral Worm
43	<i>Solaster endeca</i>	Purple Sun Star
44	<i>Taurulus bubalis</i>	Sea scorpion
45	<i>Trisopterus luscus</i>	Bib
46	<i>Trisopterus minutus</i>	Poor Cod
47	<i>Trivia monacha</i>	European Cowrie
48	<i>Urticina felina</i>	Dahlia Anemone
49	<i>Venus</i> spp.	Venus Shell

Table A.1: List of species encountered on the wreck site.

<i>Benthos Site</i>		
<i>No.</i>	<i>Scientific Name</i>	<i>Common Name</i>
1	<i>Aphrodita aculeata</i>	Sea-Mouse
2	<i>Asterias Rubens</i>	Common Starfish
3	<i>Balanus balanus</i>	Barnacles
4	<i>Buccinum undatum</i>	Common Whelk
5	<i>Calliostoma zizyphinum</i>	Painted Topshell
6	<i>Chlamys varia</i>	Variegated Scallop
7	<i>Clavelina lepadiformis</i>	Lightbulb Sea Squirt
8	<i>Henricia oculata</i>	Bloody Henry
9	<i>Hyas araneus</i>	Great Spider Crab
10	<i>Liocarcinus depurator</i>	Swimming Crab
11	<i>Macropodia</i> spp.	Spider Crab
12	<i>Modiolus modiolus</i>	Horse Mussel

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APPENDIX A. SPECIES LIST

<i>...continued from previous page.</i>		
<i>No.</i>	<i>Scientific Name</i>	<i>Common Name</i>
13	<i>Nemertesia antennina</i>	Sea Beard
14	<i>Nucella lapillus</i>	Egg capsules of Dogwhelk
15	<i>Ocenebra erinacea</i>	Oyster Drill
16	<i>Ostrea edulis</i>	European Flat Oyster
17	<i>Pagurus bernhardus</i>	Hermit Crab
18	<i>Pecten maximus</i>	Great Scallop
19	<i>Pomatoceros triqueter</i> (?)	
20	<i>Porcellana platycheles</i>	Porcelain Crab, long-clawed
21	<i>Porifera</i> spp.	Sponge
22	<i>Sabella pavonina</i>	Peacock Worm
23	<i>Venus</i> spp.	Venus Shell

Table A.2: List of species encountered on the benthos site.

<i>Reference Site</i>		
<i>No.</i>	<i>Scientific Name</i>	<i>Common Name</i>
1	<i>Anomia patelliformis</i>	Saddle Oyster
2	<i>Asciidiella</i> spp.	Sea squirt
3	<i>Asterias rubens</i>	Common Starfish
4	<i>Balanus balanus</i>	Barnacles
5	<i>Calliostoma zizyphinum</i>	Painted Topshell
6	<i>Carcinus maenas</i>	Shore Crab
7	<i>Labrus mixtus</i>	Cuckoo Wrasse (f)
8	<i>Liocarcinus depurator</i>	Swimming Crab

continued on next page...

APPENDIX A. SPECIES LIST

<i>...continued from previous page.</i>		
<i>No.</i>	<i>Scientific Name</i>	<i>Common Name</i>
9	<i>Liocarcinus puber</i>	Velvet Swimming Crab
10	<i>Macropodia</i> spp.	Great Spider Crab
11	<i>Ostrea edulis</i>	European Flat Oyster
12	<i>Porcellana platycheles</i>	Porcelain Crab, long-clawed
13	<i>Porifera</i> spp.	Sponge
14	<i>Sacculina carcini</i>	Parasitic Barnacle
15	<i>Venus</i> spp.	Venus Shell

Table A.3: List of species encountered on the reference site.

Appendix B

Additional Information about the “M.Y. Alisdair”

This section contains some additional material about the “Alisdair” that emerged during the course of the historical background investigation. It is here given for reasons of completeness, to aid further investigation into this ship.

Figure B.1 shows a sketch of the “Alisdair” as shown in the advertisement of her shipyard Gerard de Vries Lentsch in the “Lloyd’s Register of Yachts 1938” [12]. The picture has been digitally enhanced, and some missing parts of it reconstructed using the GIMP program.

Figure B.2 shows conceptual plans of the “Alisdair”. These are not the actual engineering documents used to build the ship, but concept drawings used to discuss her layout with the customer. There is therefore no guarantee that these plans accurately represent the ship, however they seem to be quite close to the launch photograph, figure 2.3.

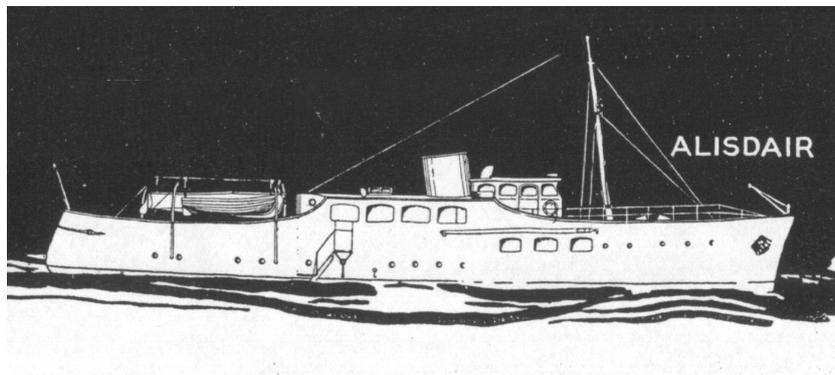


Figure B.1: *Catalogue picture of the “M.Y. Alisdair”*

APPENDIX B. ADDITIONAL INFORMATION
ABOUT THE "M.Y. ALISDAIR"

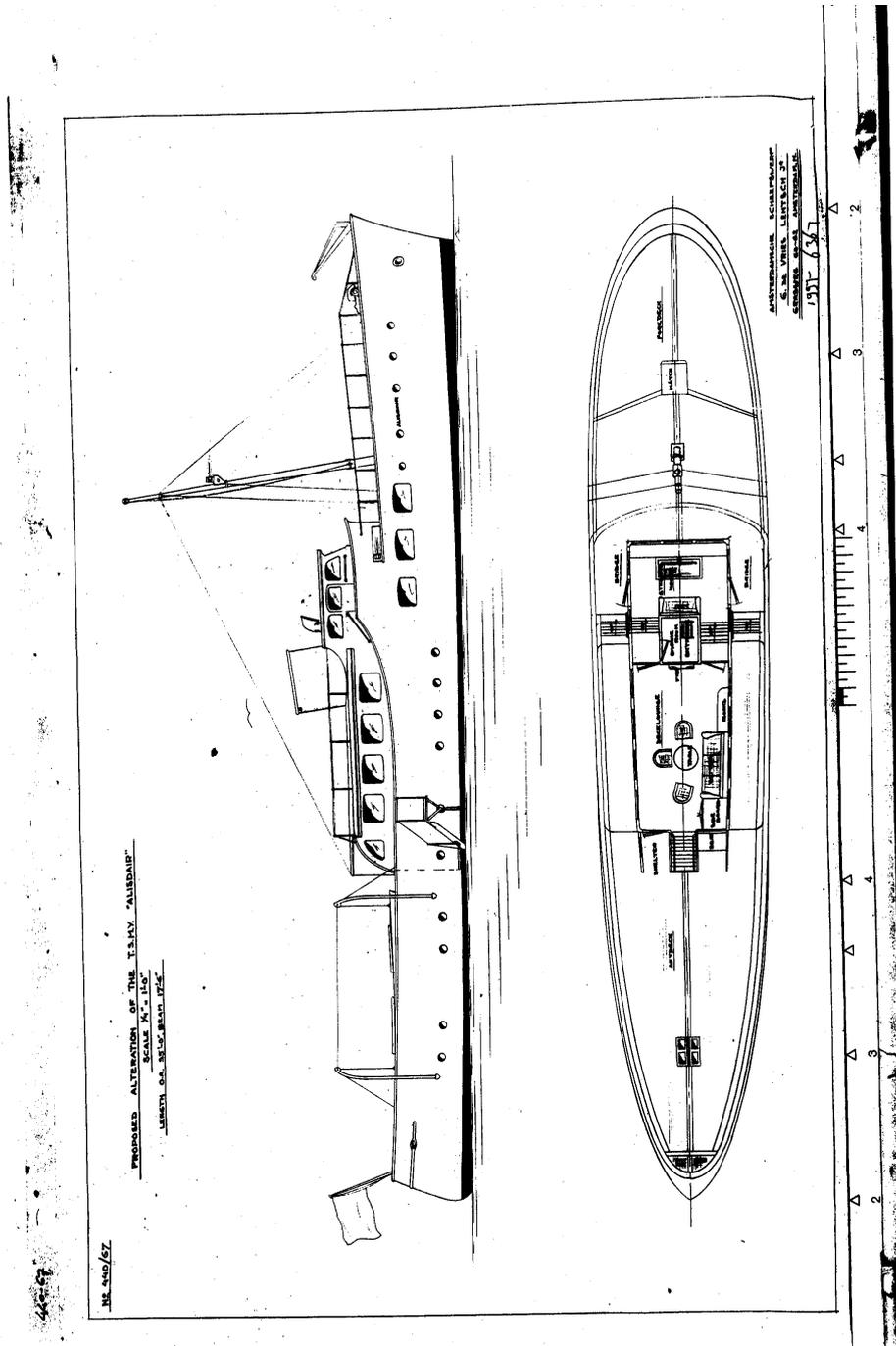


Figure B.2: Concept plan of the "M.Y. Alisdair".

APPENDIX B. ADDITIONAL INFORMATION
ABOUT THE “M.Y. ALISDAIR”



Figure B.3: *Deck saloon of the “M.Y. Alisdair”.*

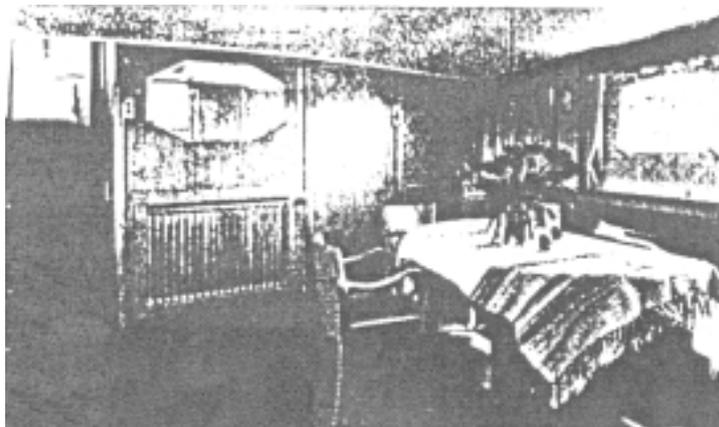


Figure B.4: *Dining saloon of the “M.Y. Alisdair”.*

Finally, figure B.3 shows the deck saloon of the “Alisdair”. Please note the carpet representing a compass, made exclusively for the vessel. Similarly, figure B.4 shows the dining saloon.

Appendix C

Credits

<i>Project Team</i>	
<i>Project Manager:</i>	Thorsten Brabetz ¹
<i>Background Research Team:</i> (in alphabetical order)	Thorsten Brabetz ¹ , Mary B. Callaghan ¹ , Maeve Edwards ¹ , Trevor Montague ¹ , Ron- nie Snijder ¹ , Simon Wheeler ¹
<i>Scientific Diving Team:</i> (in alphabetical order)	Marie Archbold ¹ , Thorsten Brabetz ¹ , Mary B. Callaghan ¹ , Olivia Crowley ¹ , Andy Dav- ies ² , Dave Goodwin ¹ , Gustavo Hinojosa ¹ , Cheryl McFarlane ¹ , Suzanne McFarlane ¹ , Claire Mullen ¹ , Ronnie Snijder ¹

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