

The wreck is by and large still in one piece, though the deck has started to collapse over the last few years. She is best dived at either high or low slack, and divers should either use the Strangford tide table, or Belfast + 2 h. Sometimes diving her slightly before or after slack helps to sweep the silt away, but if diving from the shore, the surface swim of about 150 m can become quite tiring with the presence of current.

During the summer month, the wreck typically has a shotline permanently attached to it. A second line, leading under water from Ringhaddy Pier to her stern, is in place all year round, but the long distance to be finned under water limits the time available on the wreck. Her exact position is 54°27.06'N 5°37.71' W, grid reference J 538 584.

Further information about the wreck will be published when it becomes available on the website of QUBSAC, www.qubsac.org.uk, and on a dedicated webpage for the 'Alastor', at www.sub-aqua-ni.org.uk/alastor.

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Notes for editors:

An image of the yacht, a side scan sonar image of the wreck, and a photograph of some members of the diving team can be obtained by contacting the above numbers.

'Vita' to those of the wreck, proving beyond reasonable doubt that she was indeed the vessel in question. With those data and the information from the newspaper articles, the team could then eventually reconstruct the history of the wreck.

The yacht was originally built in 1927 by Camper & Nicholson's as the motor yacht 'Vita' for Sir Thomas Sopwith, well known for being the chief designer of the World War I fighter plane, the Sopwith Camel and the World War II fighter plane, the Hawker Hurricane. Sir Thomas Sopwith eventually sold the vessel in 1929 to Sir John Shelley-Rolls in order to buy the bigger 'Vita II'.

Sir John Shelley-Rolls renamed the yacht, possibly after a poem by his famous relative Sir Percy Bysshe Shelley, husband of 'Frankenstein' author Mary Shelley.

Thorsten said: "We understand that the 'Alastor' was eventually acquired in 1939 by the Ministry of War Transport and was anchored in Ringhaddy Sound for re-painting when she caught fire on 11 March 1946. The crew of six managed to safely abandon ship, but the vessel was anchored too far away from shore to be reached by the Fire Brigade, and the interior was completely destroyed by the blaze. The burnt-out hull later sank at an unknown date between the 11 and 16 of March 1946."

The mystery of the incorrect identification remains, however. Thorsten said: "One possible theory is that the journalists reporting her sinking misspelled 'Alastor' as the more common 'Allister'. Historians, unable to find an 'Allister' in the registers, then presumably found the vessel named 'Alisdair'."

He added: "The wreck is very popular with divers from all over Ireland and the UK, and even the occasional diving tourist visits from mainland Europe. This is due to its good state of preservation, and also because it is an easy shore dive. Since the wreck has not yet broken apart, it offers a glimpse into the era of early luxury diesel yachts. The information discovered by the branch puts the wreck into its historic context, and is likely to stimulate further interest into the wreck and its history."

The 'Alastor' has now been adopted by the Queen's University Belfast Sub-Aqua Club under the 'Adopt a Wreck' scheme of the Nautical Archaeology Society. This means that Queen's divers have agreed to visit the wreck regularly to monitor its rate of decay, and especially to alert the Nautical Archaeology Society should the wreck come under threat from natural or man-made causes.

Thorsten said: "This whole story shows that there are still discoveries to be made out there, even by non-professionals. We certainly had no idea what we were getting ourselves into when we first set out to measure what we then thought to be the wreck of the 'Alisdair'. Since the wreck is dived so frequently, we certainly did not expect any surprises."

The 'Alastor' is lying in Ringhaddy Sound, which is part of Strangford Lough in Northern Ireland. The wreck is sitting almost perfectly upright at a chartered depth of 23 m on a mixed bottom consisting of predominantly mud and silt, plus some sand, gravel, and cobbles. Visibility on the wreck is therefore typically quite low, about 3 – 4 m, though some rare days with exceptionally good visibility exceeding 10 m have been reported.

Local Wreck Identified after 58 Years

Members of Queen's University's Sub-Aqua Club (QUBSAC), BSAC special branch No. 488, have identified a shipwreck in Ringhaddy Sound, Strangford Lough, as a yacht built in the 1920s for Sir Thomas Sopwith, designer of the Sopwith Camel.

The Club's findings mean that the vessel had been wrongly identified for the last 58 years, and have attracted widespread media coverage by Northern Irish newspapers and local radio.

Dr Thorsten Brabetz, the Club's Project Leader, said: "The wreck, which we have discovered to be the 'Alastor', had previously been locally known as that of the 'M.Y. Alisdair', most likely because of a spelling mistake in the original newspaper articles.

"This is actually an important find, because the 'Alastor' had a number of famous owners, and therefore the wreck is of more historic interest than previously assumed."

Having developed an interest in nautical archaeology, Thorsten, then Scientific Officer of QUBSAC, decided to run a project within the Nautical Archaeology Society's "Diving with a Purpose" initiative. He chose this wreck as a practice object because of the easy access to the dive site from the shore, in order to train a group of volunteers from the club in using underwater survey tapes. To make the exercise more interesting, Thorsten also acquired a copy of the plans of the 'Alisdair' from the Scheepvaart Museum in Amsterdam, so that they would have a reference to compare the measurements against.

"It soon became obvious that the measurements we took on the wreck were not matching the plans," Thorsten remembers, "and it was then that we became suspicious that the wreck might have been wrongly identified."

The Queen's team then started to research the 'Alisdair' through information supplied by its shipyard, Gerard de Vries Lentsch, Amsterdam, and the "Lloyd's Register of Yachts", and found that it had served as a floating restaurant in Paris until at least 2002, and therefore could not possibly be the wreck in Strangford Lough.

Thorsten said: "This then begged the question: if it wasn't the 'Alisdair', what was it?"

The first clue came when fellow QUBSAC diver Ronnie Snijder, found, in local newspaper archives of the Down Recorder and the Belfast Telegraph, the name of the stricken vessel given as 'Allister', and Sir Thomas Sopwith mentioned as a previous owner.

However, further research revealed that no vessel named 'Allister' had been registered to Sopwith. Going through the list of vessels owned by Sir Thomas Sopwith, Ronnie Snijder eventually managed to identify the 'Vita' as the only yacht fitting the displacement figures mentioned in the newspaper articles.

The 'Vita' was then traced by QUBSAC diver Dr Mary Callaghan through the Lloyd's Register in London. As a result, the team was finally able to match the dimensions of the