



➊ Above left: The conning tower rises above the deck gun, now lying on its side
 ➋ Above right: A closed hatch seals off this war grave
 ➌ Below: Exploring the bow - detached from the main wreck



➍ Above: The area of damage where the hull was breached

📍 **LOCATION:** St Catherine's Point, Isle of Wight
 📏 **DEPTH:** 38-42m
 👁 **VISIBILITY:** 6-12m

HMS Swordfish

Submarine wrecks have a unique atmosphere, but diving HMS Swordfish is tinged with sadness too. Underwater photographer **Martin Davies** and projects and expeditions adviser for the Southern region **Alison Mayor**, both from Southsea Sub Aqua Club, take us on a tour of this special wreck

With some wrecks you can clearly see the evidence of what catastrophe led to their loss, but perhaps few as dramatically as Her Majesty's Submarine Swordfish. The huge gaping hole, most probably from a Second World War German mine, is clear evidence of the tragedy that brought an immediate end to Swordfish with the loss of her 40 crew. Today Swordfish lies south of St Catherine's Point on the Isle of Wight at a depth of 42m. The wreck is designated a Protected Place in recognition of the circumstances of her sinking and the crew's ultimate sacrifice. Most dives on HMS Swordfish start somewhere between the conning tower and the stern. The first thing you notice is how complete the submarine is, lying upright on the flat seabed with just a hint of a tilt to the port side. At the stern, it is possible to swim between the rudder and two propellers, each with three blades. This is the deepest part of the dive at around 42m (depending on

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» tide). Slightly forward you will see the stern hydroplanes and one or two holes in the port side of the hull as you swim up towards the top of the submarine to begin making your way forward along its length.

About 12m forward of the stern, on the top of the pressure hull, you will see the first of the reminders of the dramatic events of Swordfish's loss. An open hatchway, from which her crew possibly attempted to make a frantic escape, begins to bring home the reality of what happened on that November day in 1940. Inside, the submarine is heavily silted up close to the hatch.

Moving a further 5m to 6m forward of the hatch will bring you to the remains of the exhaust box with various sections of large pipe. Each pipe has its resident conger eel, peering through the holes at passing divers and slipping back into the blackness



“An open hatchway brings home the reality of what happened in 1940”



- Ⓜ Above left: The periscope optics are still visible in the housing
- Ⓜ Above: The access trunk used by the anti-aircraft gun crews
- Ⓜ Left: Torpedo tubes are popular with conger eels

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when a torch interrupts their peace. From the exhaust box, continue towards the conning tower, which should be visible by now, the tall silhouette emerging in the background. You will find another escape hatch – this time firmly closed – mid way between the exhaust box and the conning tower. Also just before the conning tower you will find the 20mm anti-aircraft gun pedestal.

The impressive conning tower stands up 7m or so above the seabed with masts another 2m to 3m above that. Where the conning tower meets the hull the area is more open and you can see through a

doorway to the main hatch into the hull, which is shut tight. The 9.5-inch and 7.5-inch periscope masts rise through the conning tower and are supported by cross beams at the top of the conning tower. Incredibly you can still see the optical periscope sheathed inside the mast. The opportunity to see her so complete after more than 70 years is one of the reasons why a dive on Swordfish is such a memorable event. The conning tower is a good place to come back to when you want to start your ascent.

Just in front of the front bulge of the

conning tower, hanging over to the port side is Swordfish's 3-inch main gun. The gun has recently become detached from the hull and lies across the deck with the barrel hanging over the port side. There has been controversy recently about what led the gun to fall over, as there is some evidence of lines being tied to it, which may have been used in an attempt to remove it.

Beyond the gun and heading toward the bow, the enormity of the blast from the mine comes into view. The massive explosion has effectively blown the bow section away from the rest of the hull leaving a huge tangle of twisted and bent metal. Pipes, hatches and pieces of unrecognisable structure create a jumble of crushed and contorted shapes several metres across. This is clear evidence that the submerged submarine must have sunk in seconds.

What remains of the bow itself is several metres further forward, broken away from the main hull and lying completely on its port side. The starboard torpedo tubes are now on the top of the bow section and providing homes for yet more congers.

It's probably time to start making your way back to the conning tower to prepare for your ascent. As you return to the main wreck, look out for one of the forward hydroplanes and also, in among the tangled wreckage you may see some of the six round 21-inch torpedo tube hatch doors buried in the twisted metal. It is quite possible that the mine exploded right next to the torpedo stowage compartment and that the torpedoes had blown as a result. Certainly we have not yet seen evidence of any unexploded armaments on our dives.

The vulnerability of this wreck, because it remains so intact led to the application of Protected Place status under the

Never heard from again

HMS Swordfish was the first of more than 60 S-class submarines built between 1930 and the end of the Second World War in 1945. She was built at Chatham Dockyard and commissioned in 1932. She was just more than 60m in length, with a displacement of 927 tonnes. Her main armament was six 21-inch torpedoes and a 3-inch gun.

Swordfish sailed from Portsmouth to carry out a patrol off the French coast around Brest on 7 November 1940. It was her 12th patrol. After she failed to signal back to base as scheduled a week later, she was assumed lost. At the time it was believed she had been sunk in the Bay of

Biscay either as a result of striking a German mine or at the hands of German ships. She was never heard from again.

Her wreck was discovered in July 1983, by local diver Martin Woodward, a few miles south of St Catherine's Point off the Isle of Wight. Her bridge telegraphs were set to slow ahead when she was found. She had almost certainly been mined, probably shortly after diving, with the loss of all hands, and most likely just after she had left Portsmouth for her patrol.

Forty-three years after the sinking, 230 relatives and friends were finally able to attend a memorial service for her crew – held in 1983 at HMS Dolphin, in Portsmouth.

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The Knowledge

DEPTH RANGE: 38-42m depending on state of tide, so the dive should only undertaken by experienced, appropriately trained divers.

VISIBILITY: The seabed is mostly hard gravel with rocky outcrop at the bow and so visibility is generally 6-12m, but can sometimes be affected by plankton blooms.

FINDING THE WRECK: Some 12 miles south of St Catherine's Point, Isle of Wight. The exact position is known by local dive charter boats, who help to monitor diving on the wreck.

TIDAL INFORMATION: Currents can be strong, a neap tide is best.

GAS: The depth is suitable for a twinset with a weak nitrox mix, plus a decompression stage or better still trimix or a rebreather will allow you time to see the whole wreck. There is limited gas available locally, so bring gas with you particularly if you are diving for more than one day. Closest air and nitrox is TAL Scuba and Shooting, 8 St Catherine's Parade, Fairmile Road, Christchurch, Dorset BH23 2LQ (01202 473 030).

ACCOMMODATION: The New Forest has plenty of accommodation to suit all budgets. Campers should contact the Forestry Commission for local campsites (www.campingintheforest.co.uk). B&B at Durlston House, Gosport Road, Lymington (01590 677 364). Good parking suitable for large groups. Packed meals can be arranged in lieu of breakfast for early

starts. Jevington, 47 Waterford Lane, Lymington, SO41 3PT (01590 672 148). Very close to the Lymington boat marina pick up.

EATS AND TREATS: The local pub and restaurant the Mayflower is a great place for a 'second slack' and is only 100m from the pontoon at Lymington (www.themayflowerlymington.co.uk)

BLOWN OUT: A day trip on the Lymington ferry to the Isle of Wight to visit the Shipwreck Museum in Arreton is a great option. The museum is owned by Martin Woodward, who found Swordfish and many other local wrecks (www.iowight.com/shipwrecks).

CHARTER BOATS: We have dived with a couple of boats out of Lymington, Wight Spirit (Dave Wendes 02380 270 390) and New Dawn Diver (Richie Rimmer 01590 675 656) and also Wight Diver out of Portsmouth, although it's a long boat ride (Roy 023 9269 1414).



Ⓢ Protection of Military Remains Act. The site is monitored closely by the MOD for evidence of divers tampering with the wreck or removing items. Please don't be tempted to interfere with the wreck in any way and do report seeing

← Left: The front hydroplanes rising from the wreckage

↓ Below: The top of the conning tower is a good place to prepare for the final ascent



Special protection

The Protected Place status of a site designated under The Protection of Military Remains Act 1986 means that divers can visit the site without obtaining permission BUT it is strictly on a look, don't touch or take basis. The main reason for designating wrecks under this legislation is to protect the final resting place of forces personnel. The act makes it an offence to interfere with a protected place, to disturb the site or to remove anything from the site. Divers may visit the site but the rule is look, don't touch and don't penetrate.

BSAC
Dive with friends

One of the most active diving clubs on the south coast, Southsea SAC offers an extensive training and diving programme. Info: www.southseasubaqua.org.uk