Submarine A1 Licensee report 2021

By

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Overview

This year has seen another unusual year for diving, with very little diving going on in the early part of the year due to COVID 19 lockdowns. The wreck remains in a stable condition apart from the recent damage mentioned in the previous report. The weather over the year has been mixed and the majority of planned visits went ahead.

Diving

The site has had 9 visits over the year, this was mainly by Southsea Sub-Aqua club and 1 visit by NAS, Covid restrictions limited the number of divers on boats and in general clubs and individuals have stayed away from the area.

The site was first dived on 13th April the purpose of this dive was to confirm the condition of the submarine after the winter period and to also check that fishing pots and ropes were still attached to the wreck.

5th May NAS - Cancelled

The second dive was on the 27th May, this dive was to investigate the ropes and fishing pots in more detail.

The next dive on the 31st May with members of Southsea Sub-Aqua club visiting the site.

NAS visited the site on the 4th June and this included a representative of Historic England who viewed the damage to the submarine and looked at the ropes still connected to the boat.

Another visit took place on the 13th June by Southsea Sub-Aqua club

On the 2nd July a marine biologist visited the site to observe the marine life on the wreck and also look at habitat.

The visit on the 16th July was by Mulberry dives, a small group visited the site who had not been to it before.

One dive took place on the 12th September by Southsea Sub-Aqua club

30th September NAS - Cancelled

1st October NAS - Cancelled

The last dive of the year on the site was 15th October again by Southsea Sub-Aqua club.

Condition of the wreck

The wreck remains stable as previously mentioned, the recent damage to the stern area is still visible and the broken plates are now inside the area where they appear to be safe but not secured. Some

ropes are still attached and despite numerous emails to Historic England there has been a distinct lack of interest and support to resolve the situation.

Police investigation

To my knowledge Historic England have reported the crime to Sussex Police who have investigated the crime but have been unable to find the perpetrator, this appears mainly due lack of evidence and after having a conversation with a police officer there seems very little understanding of heritage crime and how to go about finding the offenders, this is purely my opinion having been kept in the dark throughout the whole process by the police and Historic England.

Looking for evidence

I had several conversations with Alison James who was working for Historic England at the time and had delt with a previous potting incident on A1. Alison sought clarification from IFCA over the identification tags that should be on the pots and as a result of gaining that information multiple dives were done to try to find the pot with a tag on as seen in figure 1. Had I realised at the time of taking the picture that the green tie wrap tag held the identification of the perpetrator then it would have been cleaned and photographed in detail.

Identification tag can be clearly seen



Figure 1- A cuttlefish pot showing the ID tag in place 29th September 2020.

It is extremely disappointing that Historic England did not act on this clear evidence presented to them last year in my report. On my return to the site in April 2021, the visibility and conditions were very

poor and it was difficult to see anything let alone search for a tie wrap. Visibility had improved in May and after my dive on the 31st May 2021 I reported back to Historic England on the 1st June 2021 that the pots that were still intact and serviceable had been removed from site by divers illegally diving the site and removing the pots on behalf of the perpetrator. The pots had been cut off and removed just leaving the connection point to the main ground line still there. Despite searching the length of the ground line and the mass of tangled rope, no tag has been found to date.



Figure 2 The crucial identification tag

Two crimes

It would appear that two crimes have taken place, the first was the initial laying of pots too close to the submarine within the exclusion zone and allowing then to come into contact with the boat. A second crime now has happened between October 2020 and April 2021 to illegally dive the site and remove evidence of the crime.



Figure 3- The cut pot line after a pot was recovered by illegal diving

Discussion

The damage to the stern area could have been caused by the pots drifting around or more likely when some attempt has been to recover them. This recovery action could have damaged the boat even more or divers could have dropped a heavy shot weight on the plating causing it to crack and break off. What ever happened in 2020 and early 2021 is unacceptable behaviour from a fisherman. The list of fishermen who pot in that area is very small and so I find it frustrating that the perpetrator has not been identified to date, Sussex IFCA issue and hold a list of licenced potters. Historic England has shown little to no interest in perusing the perpetrator despite there being clear evidence of a crime being committed in my 2020 report. It is now late 2021 the ropes are still wrapped around the stern of the boat. It looks as if there are no processes in place to deal with such situations and if there are then they have not been applied in a timely manner. The cost of recovery of the fishing tackle is now coming out of Historic England's budget, when had they acted on my report a fisherman would be picking up the costs. It would appear they are incapable of tasking a diving contractor themselves to do the work, instead now relying on others to raise a project plan to do the work in 2022. The discussions with HE in the early part of the year suggested that it would be delt with internally however over the summer it would appear to have been ignored and forgotten. There does not appear to be any ownership of the incident and certainly there is no appetite to prosecute even in the face of overwhelming evidence that has failed to be gathered and acted on. Furthermore, they have allowed the perpetrator to remove the evidence by not acting in a timely manner. There is a distinct lack of communication regarding any processes and actions being taken by Historic England to myself as the key stakeholder and the passage of time and lack of actions taken making a mockery of the event.

Conclusion

I can only conclude that Historic England do not take heritage crime seriously and have a lackadaisical approach to reports made to them. The A1 remains one of the UK's best examples of an A class submarine and despite being submerged for 110 years the boat is still extremely recognisable as a submarine from the early 1900's. If the boat is to remain a prime example, then every effort should be made to maintain it and promote the site not only to divers but all in the local area including fishermen as one of our premier Historic Protected Wreck sites. Fishermen do need to understand and respect the site, it is clear that they currently do not. It is unacceptable to allow fishermen to continue fishing around the site and maybe the exclusion zone need to increase to 500m and this then promoted by IFCA when licenses are issued to fishermen. This is not the first time this has happened since I have been licensee and I suspect it will not be the last.