



## **Mike HAIGH Wreck Hunters blog**

### **What attracted you to scuba diving and how much do you remember how your first dive?**

Like many people of my generation, my first introduction to scuba diving was through the magical undersea world of Jacques Cousteau, a great inspiration to those of us spellbound by these fantastic people wearing their titanium tanks, delving into the deep, exploring the Red Sea and other places. My first introduction to anything underwater was in the



*Herzogin Cecilie*



south of France. My parents owned caravans as a business and at the end of the year, we used to go there basically to

clean them up, and that led me to doing a lot of snorkelling, naturally progressing to go one step further and learning to use an aqualung. My first diving experience was *with on a YHA holiday at a hostel in*

*Herzogin Cecilie*, Salcombe, for my 18th birthday and we spent a week diving around Salcombe. I don't remember my first dive that well, but I do remember my first ever wreck dive, the wreck of the Herzogin Cecilie which was the last dive of the week and is still a popular dive site. And I do remember going right through the hull and thinking how wonderful it was. At the end of the course, the instructor took us around the corner to a place called Moor Sands, where a group of diving archaeologists were working on a Bronze Age site. That was my introduction to diving archaeology and probably planted the seed in my mind about taking it further.

**What is it about wreck diving that most captures your imagination?**



Well, I think that human beings are naturally inquisitive creatures. We like to see what's going on, especially things that are below the waves. It's a question of exploration; what we sometimes get to see is a time capsule of the ship as she was when she went down. Often of course a wreck acts as a magnet for marine life. Perhaps Cousteau put it best, 'a dead ship is the house of tremendous life. The mixture of life and death is mysterious, even religious; a sense of peace and mood that you feel on entering a cathedral.'

**You graduated with a degree in archaeology. When did this passion for history collide with your love of diving and how?**



At school, I was always good at two subjects - geography and history. When it came to choose a degree subject, I was interested in doing a practical form of history and so I chose archaeology. I did in fact work for a while as a land archaeologist. But I was lucky enough, via Margaret Rule of Mary Rose fame, to be introduced to Dr Toby Parker, a pioneer in underwater archaeology. I worked with Toby on a number of projects and through him I was introduced to other avenues which allowed me to develop my interest in diving archaeology.

**What have been some of the highlights of your involvement in marine archaeological excavations?**

Well, really two stick out. The first was on the island of the Giglio in Italy; when we were working on what was at that time the oldest shipwreck in the world, a 600 BC Etruscan trading ship. I was working as part of a large team, and because I was a reasonable diver, I spent most of my time at 50 metres.



*Meticulous excavation of keel, a rare find on the Giglio, Italy*



*Diving archaeology Studland Bay*

These were the days before computers, doing two 50-metre dives for 15 minutes each day with 15 minutes of decompression. So, it was quite a lot of tough diving. But in the end, the director's decision to work deep paid off. Because down at 50 metres we found the keel.

No one had ever found a 2,500-year-old ship's keel before. So that to me was a particularly wonderful thing.

The other thing that sticks out is a piece of work I completed using the skills I developed as an underwater photographer. I developed a particular panache for doing photo mosaics. And the photo mosaic I'm most pleased with was this one I did in Studland Bay.



*Studland Bay photomosaic*

Now, as you might know, if you dive the south coast of the UK, the visibility is normally quite challenging; and in Studland Bay (just outside Poole Harbour) the viz probably averages about two metres, and often is much worse than that.

So, in order to get a photo mosaic of the remains of the starboard section of Medieval Spanish trading vessel, covering an area of some 23 metres in length by five metres wide, was going to take quite some work. During the summer of 1987, I managed to achieve that photo mosaic, which most people said could not be done, but I knew could and the



results are clear to see. For me, that was my best piece of photographic work and my best piece of archaeological photographic work as well.

### **What's the most memorable find on one of your many expeditions and why?**

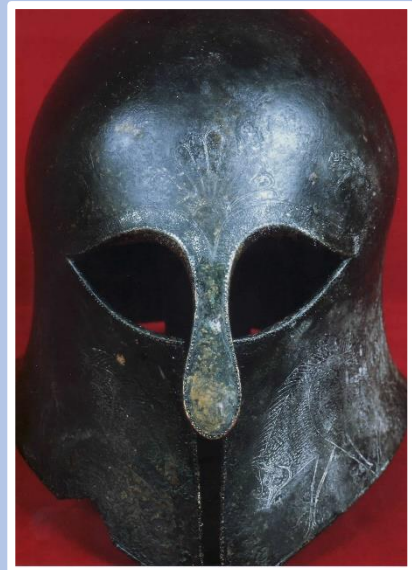
Well, the most incredible find on any site that I worked on, was made on the Giglio Etruscan wreck. However, the find was made well before my time on the project.

In fact, this find was recovered in 1961 when a group of divers led by



*Helmet of Achilles before restoration*

Reg Valentine, found what can only truly be described as the 'helmet of Achilles', the type of helmet that the Greek warriors would have worn in the siege of Troy. After two and a half thousand years under the sea, the plume, characteristic of



*Helmet of Achilles, an extraordinary & valuable find, now restored*

the Greek helmet, was gone.

But what was left was a fantastic, intricately carved bronze helmet.

Unfortunately, the helmet was taken away from the site and has never been returned. It's probably in a private collection. But that is an incredible find and we are fortunate to have pictures of it. On the same site, many years later, I was fortunate to discover something of at least some academic importance. As I said before, I spent a lot of my time on this site at 50 metres. When it was coming towards the time for me to fly back to the UK, it was felt that it was a good idea for me to dive a little shallower. So, I did a dive which I remember clearly to this day, to 26 metres in a little gully. Working through the debris, I found a small olive pot which still had olive pips in it. We surveyed and photographed the find and I recovered the pot. Until this discovery it was thought that olives were introduced to Italy from Greece about 400 BC. The Etruscan wreck was dated to about 600 BC. So, my little find in some way helped to rewrite history.

## **How important is diving archaeology to our understanding of the past and how it influences our lives today?**



Well at this present time there is great concern about how the world will return to economic growth after the unprecedented events we are seeing have to some extent subsided.

Economic growth results from a combination of population growth and a growth in productivity.

But this misses one important ingredient - trade. For without trade, neither of those two factors would produce any growth at all. And before the introduction of the commercial aircraft, if you wanted to transport goods across the seas, the only way of doing that was by ship. Diving archaeology allows us to

study these vessels, which have been central to mankind's economic development over the last 10,000 years. It helps us to understand how we got to be here today and hopefully will alert us to any errors we should not be making for the future.

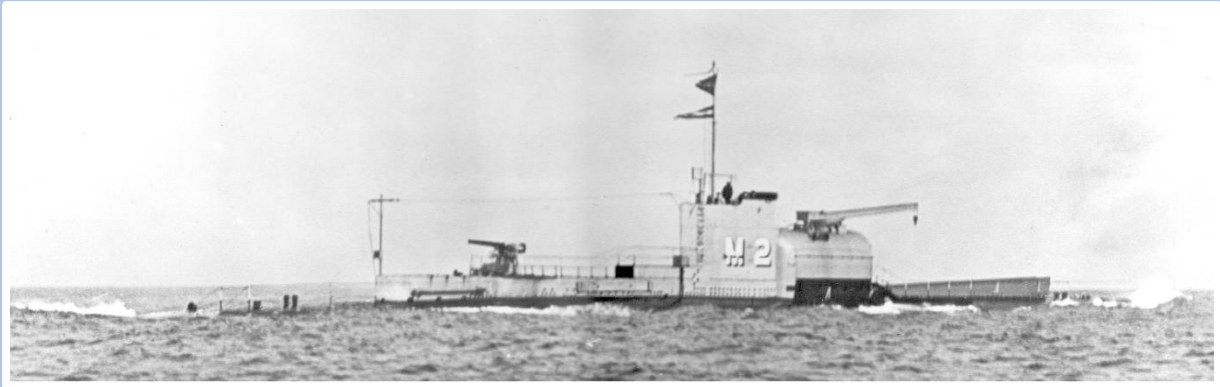
## **Do you have a favourite diving destination and its great appeal?**

This rephrased is, what is your favourite dive? I expect most people when asked this question, give a location. The trouble with that is the fact that one diver can go to a certain place on a certain day and have a great dive, and a diver can go another day and have much less great experience. To me, the best dive is doing the sport you love in a place you like, in the company of people you want to be with. The best dive is not a place, the best dive is an experience and that's my answer.

## **Is there a stand-out dive from the thousands you have logged?**

I have indeed logged many dives and I have done many dives I have not logged. But the one that stands out is a dive that took place many years ago, when we organised a night dive on the submarine the M2. Many people thought this was foolish. Indeed, if we hadn't used the best

skipper I have ever dived with, Andy Smith on his boat Skin Deep, with a bunch of very experienced divers, then it would have been foolish.



K-Class M2 submarine which sank off Portland in 1932. But we had great preparation. We had a great team of people. I remember the dive very clearly. We descended – the first pair in – to the M2, tied on the shot-line, explored the hanger area, which was occupied by many fish including a huge conger, and then came up into a whole blast of phosphorescence. All divers completed the dive safely and that, to me is the most memorable dive that I ever planned and achieved.

### **What is the trickiest dive you have ever had?**

I remember this dive very well because it occurred on my birthday in 1988. We were working on the Italian island of Panarea. We had dropped off two divers, two Italian divers to look for the wreck. I was chief diver on this project and on that day, I was acting as standby diver. After about 20 minutes one of the divers hit the surface, gave the distress signal and sank. My boat handler had me there in seconds; I



*Panarea* went down quickly. I located both the divers. One was in distress having no air at all, and the other one was some distance away. These are the days before octopus rigs, so with the diver who had no air I shared my air to the surface. He appeared to have no



symptoms, so, we simply put a spare bottle on him and took him back down so he could do his decompression. Being satisfied that he was comfortable doing that I then went off to find the other diver. He was still holding a bit of the polypropylene rope that he'd taken down. He had plenty of air, so I accompanied him during his decompression and then back to the boat. I then located the 40 metres of polypropylene which was floating around the Mediterranean, wrapped it up and attached it to a float to recover later. There were no casualties, apart from my watch, which came off during the episode. There was however a bizarre twist of fate. Three dives later, on the last dive on this wreck, whilst we were decompressing, my buddy reached into his BCD pockets and pulled out my watch. He had found it nestling in the neck of an amphora where it had dropped from the surface down to 40 metres. So, assisting two divers, one out of air and rescuing 40 metres of polypropylene definitely ranks as my trickiest dive.

### **What made you become and diving instructor?**

This occurred really by chance and by necessity. Back in 1985, we took a large student-based project out to Sicily to work on some wreck sites. The majority of students had been trained by the University of Bristol the previous year. Their training was adequate, but some needed additional work. So, I spent a lot of time that summer training people in the skills they needed. So quite naturally, this training carried on when I came back to the UK. I then decided to pursue the instructor route. I became a British Sub Aqua Club instructor and then an Advanced Instructor. I joined PADI and became an instructor with them. I also became an instructor for the Handicapped Scuba Association. So, since 1985 I suppose training has been always just a natural part of what I have done in diving.

### **Tell me about your first experiences of diving the historical wreck 'The Oliver' in Utila, in the Caribbean?**

This all goes back to 2005 when I first visited Utila. I was introduced to Gunter Kordovsky. He'd been part of a team hunting for treasure, and they had located a wreck but no treasure. I have visited Utila pretty much every couple of years since then, and every time continue to chat with Gunter, who originally was quite coy about the wreck he found but over the years became much more friendly, especially as I started to dive with him, sometimes to quite considerable depths.

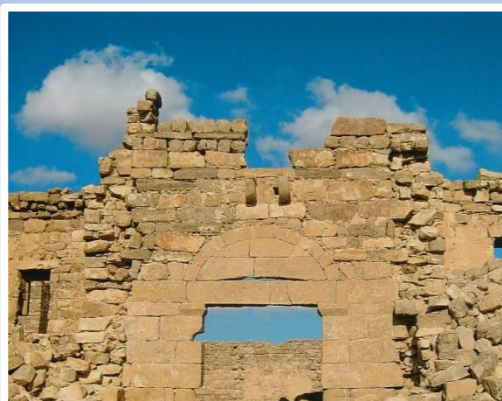


*Gunter Kordovsky*

Finally, after gaining his confidence, he let me look at the plethora of material he had from the wreck. He also took me back to the site. I was amazed to find that it was exactly as he had described it, where you have a wreck covering a large area, in relatively shallow, crystal clear water, which is just ripe for not only for excavation but also for training divers in the skills and disciplines of diving archaeology.

### **How did this experience change your life and inspire you to start a course in diving archaeology?**

Back at Leeds University where I was an undergraduate, we were



*Roman fort*

required to excavate as part of our course. And we were let loose so to speak on what we call 'training digs'. These sites were normally Roman forts where the main remains were structure and where you could do little damage. The problem with diving archaeology is that wrecks are precious; you don't want people to make errors. With the Oliver of course - because the wreck had already been badly disturbed by work in the 70s



by people looking for treasure not for artefacts or history or science - we have a fantastic opportunity. It's a bit like having your Roman villa site run through by the M25. You can do no further damage, but you can learn a lot from working on it, using it as an underwater 'training dig'.

**How challenging is it to start such a major and pioneering project; there must be some difficult issues with logistics?**

Diving archaeology is in the main about improvisation. I've been going to Utila since 2005. So, I have a good understanding of the island and of the people and we have excellent local support from people like Gunter. So, although there will be logistical problems, because there always are, they will be minimised by the fact that the location is well-known, and the island is well provisioned for both diving and for supplies for diving archaeology.



**Why this wreck? How will your students benefit from a course in this location?**

This wreck site represents for me a perfect environment in which to train diving archaeology. The climate is excellent; the water temperature is 30 degrees, there are no stresses from cold water and the visibility is excellent.

*Surveying 1970s style, Utila*

The depth of just 18 metres allows us to work for reasonably long periods. Therefore, we can have a lot of time practising. You will also be able to do a lot more in the time given to you than in a much more hostile environment. And that's why this location is perfect.

**Isn't this course more for the academically minded or can people who just enjoy diving gain from taking part?**

Diving archaeology is for divers who want to learn new skills and have an interest in the past. The history of diving archaeology projects is that they have been mainly run by amateur divers going all the way back to the Mary Rose.

With all the projects that I have been involved for every hundred divers there have been only a handful of archaeologists. So, diving

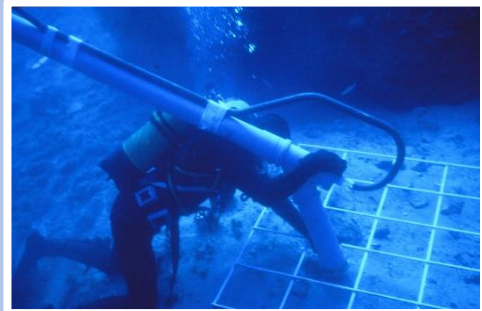


archaeology is for the majority of divers. Any competent diver can do this work. It is truly the case that it's easier to teach a diver to be an archaeologist than it is to teach an archaeologist to be a diver.

*Back from the dead - the historic Mary Rose wreck, Portsmouth*

### **What sort of skills will divers learn from this course?**

The course is comprehensive. It takes you through the techniques used for wreck location, the survey stage and right through to excavation. We also use tools and techniques that you would perhaps not get the opportunity to use elsewhere. These include the use of an airlift for excavation, the use of an underwater metal detector to locate items. They also include the use of underwater scooters for wreck location, as well as underwater communications equipment for basic communications. Students on this course will get the opportunity to learn techniques that will be useful for them if they were to work on an archaeological site, but also tools and equipment they can use in their wider diving lives.



*Air power. Vacuuming the seabed for hidden secrets*

### **What are your long-term ambitions for Wreck Hunters as a project?**

Utila is renowned for one thing – and that is of being one of the cheapest places in the world to learn to scuba dive. What I would like to do is to turn Utila into the place that people come to if they want to learn diving archaeology.

### **Tell us about this exciting competition you are running.**

The competition, the details of which are on our website [www.wreckhunters.co.uk](http://www.wreckhunters.co.uk) There is a fantastic prize worth around £2,000 pounds, including flights, transfers, accommodation, the course and all diving.

To enter, you simply have to tell us why you should be the successful candidate by completing a questionnaire which includes a free text area for your 'story'.

**You are running a season before the course begins. What do you hope to achieve in this time?**



*Anchors away! A key moment in any wreck excavation*

We need to understand a bit more about the wreck. We are in essence running two projects in parallel. We are running an archaeological project with the objective of finding out more about the wreck and running a 'training dig' at the same time.

So, we must start, as all projects of this type do, with a detailed survey of the site. This is an opportunity for experienced divers with some background in 'diving

with a purpose' to get involved at an early stage. We will be looking to supplement our instructor team in due course and some candidates for this may come through in this period. Equally if you just fancy a few weeks 'subsidised' diving this could be for you.

Best wishes  
MIKE



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