

THE HATHOR & PLYMPTON



This tour is a double treat, as **JOHN LIDDIARD** samples two wrecks rolled into one South-west dive site suitable for all levels of diving. Both John and illustrator **MAX ELLIS** complete their 100th *Wreck Tours* this month.

TO CELEBRATE THE CONCLUSION of our first century of *Wreck Tours*, this month we not only have a new look but two for one.

Two wrecks in one tour, that is, and two wrecks in one dive. They are the *Hathor* and *Plympton* in the Scilly Isles, in that order because *Hathor* dominates the site, resting across and obscuring much of *Plympton*.

In 1909 the *Plympton* drove onto the southernmost pinnacle of Lethegus Rocks from the south-east, initially coming to rest almost upright on the rocks, subsequently capsizing and later rolling down the reef to break up upside-down.

Eleven years later, in December 1920, the larger *Hathor* was under tow towards Portland when storms caused the towing tugs to cast her loose. She was swept sternfirst onto the same pinnacle of Lethegus from the south-west, coming to rest across the *Plympton*.

When you consider that the *Plympton* is mostly squashed beneath the *Hathor*, it's more like one-and-a-bit wrecks that we are actually touring.

Our tour begins in a gully on the south-east side of the rock that brought both wrecks to grief, where the propeller-shaft of the *Hathor* breaks at a depth of 20m (1).

The intact section of shaft leads towards the stern while, in the opposite direction, below the end of the shaft, sections of crankshaft and pistons from the *Hathor*'s engine are sprawled across the bottom of the gully (2).

Continuing in a seaward direction, the line of the wreck is fairly obvious and easy to follow. Forward of the engine are the *Hathor*'s boilers (3). Rather than linger, it's worth continuing forward and down at a reasonable pace to get the deepest part of the dive out of the way first.

As the reef drops, the way is marked by a section of hold hatch coaming, then a deck plate with a cargo winch still mounted (4) at a depth of 28m.

Following along the port side of the deck, there is a second cargo winch (5) and a pair of bollards at the edge of the deck.

Here our route leaves the *Hathor* and drops over the side to the seabed at 35m, where the tail section of the *Plympton*'s propeller shaft emerges from below the *Hathor*'s hull (6). This shaft leads into a short section of keel, followed by the propeller cut-out with the *Plympton*'s

Above: Last moments of the *Plympton*.



DOUBLE WHAMMY

PLYMPTON, cargo steamer, BUILT 1893, SUNK 1909
HATHOR, cargo steamer, BUILT 1912, SUNK 1920

IT'S NOT OFTEN THAT YOU CAN EXPLORE two wrecks that really are one on top of the other. But the *Plympton* and the *Hathor* on the Lethegus Rocks off St Agnes in the Scilly Isles provide exactly that kind of double-decker, writes *Kendall McDonald*.

First to sink was the 2869-ton steamer *Plympton*, built by Furness Withy in West Hartlepool. The single-screw ship was powered by three-cylinder triple-expansion engines with two boilers giving her 256hp. She was 314ft long with a beam of 40ft.

She was captained by Alexander Stewart with a crew of 24 and one passenger when she called at Falmouth from Rosario, Argentina. There she received orders to take her cargo of 4100 tons of maize in bags on to Dublin and discharge it there.

At midnight on 13 August, 1909, she ran into dense fog that lasted throughout the following day. Stewart knew he was in trouble.

The lead was used at short intervals and the siren sounded almost continuously. From 4am on 14 August, Captain Stewart set up a listening watch, with all hands on deck striving to hear the Bishop Rock foghorn. They still hadn't heard it when the *Plympton* ran on to Lethegus Reef, filled with water

and was abandoned. The crew and passengers landed safely on St Agnes.

Once the islanders were satisfied that all were safe, they set about the ancient Scilly practice of stripping the wreck, which they found hard aground by the bow. However, while they worked the *Plympton* rose with the flood tide and, without warning, capsized and sank. Two men who were below were drowned.

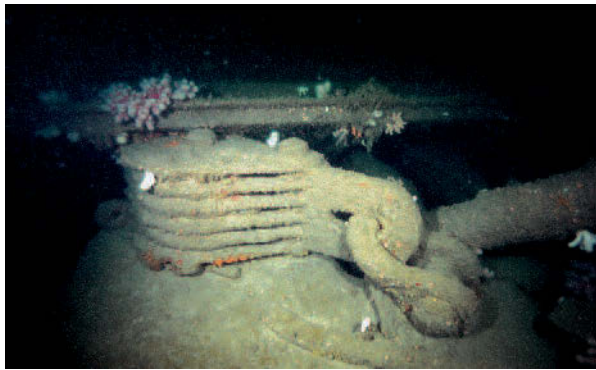
Eleven years later, on 2 December, 1920, a bigger ship sank on top of the *Plympton*. The 7060-ton German *Hathor* was 465ft long with a beam of 60ft, built in 1912 with 482hp triple-expansion engines and two boilers. She was interned in Chile during WW1, when her main engine was neglected and was considered very suspect.

Despite this, after the Armistice she sailed for Portland with a full cargo of nitrate of soda and oil cake, but her engine broke down off the Azores.

She was taken in tow by two tugs, which lost her twice when the hawsers parted, and finally became unmanageable off the Scilly Isles on 1 December, 1920. The tow was slipped off St Agnes. *Hathor* stranded and finally sank to mingle with the wreck of the *Plympton*.

WRECK TOUR 100

DEPTH
-20m
20m-35m
35m-45m
45m+
DIFFICULTY RATING
●○○○○



Above: Pulley-block shackled to the deck of the *Hathor*.
Right: Bollards inside the *Hathor*'s bow.

iron propeller still in place. A couple of metres out from this, the *Plympton*'s rudder lies flat on the sand (7). Now heading back towards the *Hathor*, the top of the forward mast and a pair of derricks (8) stick out from the general outline of the hull.

The hull of the *Hathor* is now almost flat to a level seabed until the bow, which has fallen to port. The break where the bow has tipped over provides easy access inside, and reveals some colourful anemones.

The anchor winch (9) has fallen from the deck, upside down below its mounting-plate, with steel tubes that would have guided the chain standing above it.

The tip of the bow is at 48m, with one of the *Hathor*'s anchors standing against it on one side (10). Above the anchor, chain leads out from the hawse pipe on he upper starboard face of the bow.

Having followed mostly the port side of the wreck out, our route is biased towards starboard heading back to shallower water. The mast we passed earlier lies across the wreck, followed by a cargo winch (11).

As the depth shallows, looking over the starboard side of the *Hathor* will reveal the upturned, squashed and broken hull of the *Plympton* (12), where it has fallen along the other face of the rock. From here, a dive

could continue on to the bow (13), but having been deep to the bow of the *Hathor*, a shallower and more interesting route is to continue on this wreck to the stern.

As the broken hull of the *Hathor* ascends the face of the rock, another boiler is orientated down along the wreck (14) to give a total of four. The *Hathor* is listed as having two, so why four?

Could the extra boilers come from the *Plympton*, which also had two? It's an amusing idea, but there is no way that they could have ended up on the *Hathor*'s hull. They are squashed and broken below.

Did a third, unidentified wreck become involved? Apart from the boilers, there are no signs of wreckage that cannot be easily fitted in as part of the *Plympton* or *Hathor*.

The boiler (14) has a slightly different look to the two behind it, though this could be because they have rolled differently. More likely, I think, is that the *Hathor* had a pair of double-ended boilers, each built as two "almost-boilers", back to back.

At 7060 tons, *Hathor* was big enough to use that much steam. As the wreck broke, the double-ended boilers came apart and now look like four smaller boilers.

Now behind the boilers, our route crosses our starting point, where the propeller shaft is broken. The shaft leads back along the side of the rock into an intact section of tunnel (15).

From the end of this, the *Hathor*'s spare propeller (16) can be found at the bottom of the gully at 24m. The general wreckage breaks at this point, though the propshaft leads further back before ending above a ridge of rock at 16m (17).

This gives the general direction to continue to the stern, descending again to 22m to a pile of chain (18), then a small derrick and a curved section of the stern railing (19). I suspect that as *Hathor* sank it

came to a partial rest across this ridge. As the stern parted from the rest of the wreck, the propshaft was pulled out to remain with the forward portion of wreckage.

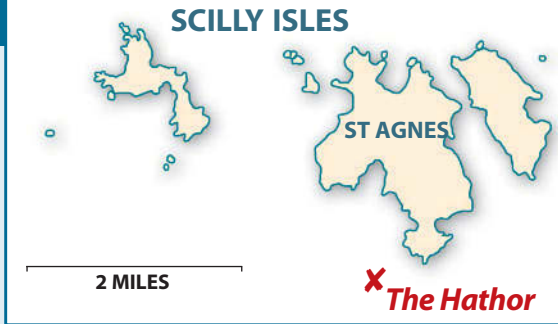
The railing continues round the stern past the steering engine (20), pushed up as the stern settled over the rudder-shaft, then ends by the broken parts of a winch (21), showing that the stern had turned slightly, relative to the general direction of the ship as it settled.

If there is no groundswell, one possibility for ascending is to head back to our starting point and ascend the rocks.

However, even on the calmest day there is likely to be a fair groundswell, so longer decompressions will be both safer and more comfortable on a delayed SMB.

Which brings us to the end of our first century of *Wreck Tours*. No one knows how many shipwrecks there are around the UK. Experts generally agree that there are more than 100,000.

That leaves 99.9% to go, and keeps me in a job for the next 8332 years.



TOUR GUIDE

TIDES ➤ The current is never strong enough to prevent diving, even though it does funnel between the rocks in places, being strongest just before high water St Mary's.

QUALIFICATIONS ➤ The variation in depth makes these wrecks suitable for divers wanting to build up their depth experience without committing to a rectangular profile dive.

DIVING, AIR & ACCOMMODATION ➤ St Martin's Diving Services, 01720 423420/422848, www.scillydiving.com.

LAUNCHING ➤ It's a long way from the slip at Penzance, but the journey is feasible for a large RIB in good sea conditions, especially if the divers take the ferry.

FURTHER INFORMATION ➤ Admiralty

Chart 34, *Isles of Scilly. St Mary's Road*. Ordnance Survey Explorer Map 101, *Isles of Scilly. Dive the Isles of Scilly and North Cornwall*, by Richard Larn and David McBride. *Shipwrecks Around the Isles of Scilly*, Gibsons of Scilly. Isles of Scilly tourist information, www.scillyonline.co.uk.

PROS ➤ Two nice wrecks that provide diving covering the usual spread of dive club experience.

CONS ➤ Exposed to the South-west.

Thanks to Richard Ross and Tim Walsh.
Would your club or dive centre like to see its favourite wreck featured here? If you would like to help John Liddiard put together the information, why not invite him to come and dive it with you? Write to John c/o Wreck Tour at DIVER.