

THE IOLANTHE

This WW1 victim provides a deeper wreck than some off Dorset, so you're less likely to have to share it with the masses. It's well worth a visit, says JOHN LIDDIARD – and MAX ELLIS felt it was well worth an illustration

WE BEGIN OUR SECOND CENTURY of Wreck Tours with the *Iolanthé*, an enjoyable but rarely dived wreck off the Dorset coast. Located a couple of miles further offshore from the popular wreck of the *Aeolian Sky* (Wreck Tour 27, May 2001), the *Iolanthé* is smaller, less intact and averages 15m deeper, so perhaps that has something to do with it.

The wreck has collapsed almost level with the seabed at 44-46m. Only the boilers, bow and stern rise 4m above the general wreckage. Our tour begins with a shotline dropped on the port boiler (1). The *Iolanthé* is listed as having two boilers. The port boiler is still in place, but all I could find of the starboard unit are the mounting brackets (2). There are not even any scraps of boiler

plating in this area, so I suspect that the boiler has rolled well clear off the starboard side of the wreck.

Heading aft along the starboard side, a pair of boat derricks that would have stood on the boat deck above the engine-room have collapsed into the wreck (3).

The triple-expansion steam engine (4) has also collapsed, leaving some parts upright with the cylinder heads tilted downwards to port. On the port side, the boat derricks (5) are half upright, leaning in towards the engine.

The main deck aft is largely intact and has collapsed straight down in line with the wreck. The coaming from the first hold aft is three-quarters complete (6).

Between the holds, a pair of cargo winches are intact (7) and still fastened

to the deck with the mast footings set between them.

Continuing aft, the last hold has an intact coaming, while off to the starboard side a small section of railing (8) still stands upright, providing a home for clusters of small plumose anemones.

The intact deck ends with a pair of ventilators, then there is a minimal break before the intact stern (9) rises above.

The stern itself has fallen to port, leaving the keel exposed with the rudder and propeller in place, though the uppermost blade of the propeller has broken. A slight scour makes this the deepest part of the wreck at 46m.

Following "up" the stern along the line of the rudder shaft, the steering quadrant and steering engine (10) stand above the stern, now almost parallel with the

the 3081-TON *IOLANTHE* STEAMED quickly past the Shambles Lightship and left a straight white wake in the moonlight as she stopped zig-zagging at exactly 10.35 on 4 January, 1918, writes Kendall McDonald.

Iolanthé was steering east by south and kept up the speed of nine knots only for the short time she was passing the lightship, in case a U-boat was planning to use the area as a killing ground.

Then she started zig-zagging again, as her orders instructed her to do every 15 minutes.

At 11pm she was safely 10 miles SE by E of Portland Bill, but Captain James Scott maintained a strict watch for submarines.

On watch he had two officers with him on the bridge, another look-out on the forecabin, and Leading Seaman John Rooke, one of the two gunners who manned the 12-pounder gun on the stern. However, none of them knew that they had become the watched in the past 20 minutes.

Bound from Greenock for St Helens, *Iolanthé* carried military supplies and a big cargo of hay in her holds, and on deck were railway wagons.

ACE STRIKES AGAIN

IOLANTHE, cargo steamer, BUILT 1904, SUNK 1918

The crew of 30 Britons and one Norwegian saw nothing until, at 11.05, a colossal explosion erupted on the ship's port side.

U-boat ace Oberleutnant Johann Lohs had put a torpedo from a bow tube of UC75 into *Iolanthé*'s port side, close to No 3 hold, and ripped a huge hole in her hull. Despite this, the ship appeared still to be buoyant, and the crew tried to get some direction on her, but she soon started to settle.

Just after midnight, it was clear that she was about to founder. Captain Scott gave the order to abandon ship. As they pulled clear, they had their first sight of the U-boat as it came out of the dark before disappearing seawards.

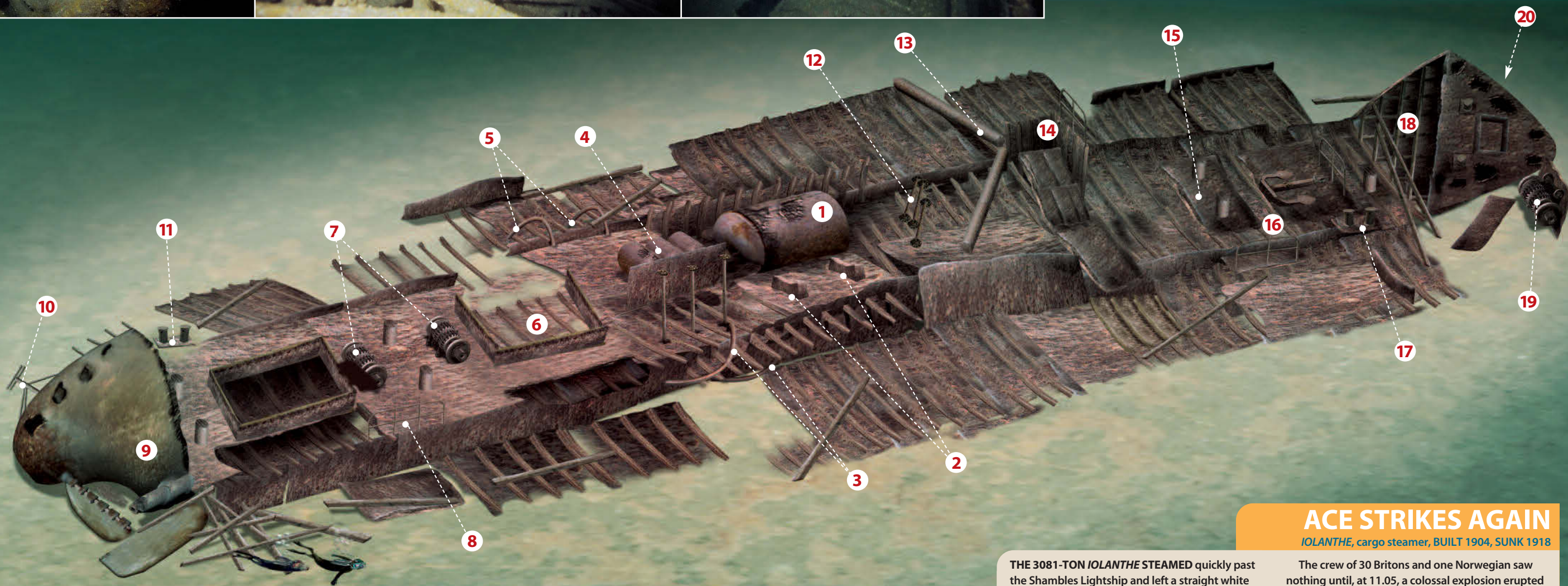
Two patrol trawlers tried to take the steamer in tow, but as soon as they got lines aboard, *Iolanthé* sank. All her crew were landed safely at Weymouth.

The ship, 325ft long with a beam of 49ft, had been built by W Gray and Co of Hartlepool. The wreck remained missing and undived until very recently. She was discovered by the Ballet brothers of Poole, who confirmed their find by bringing up her bell.

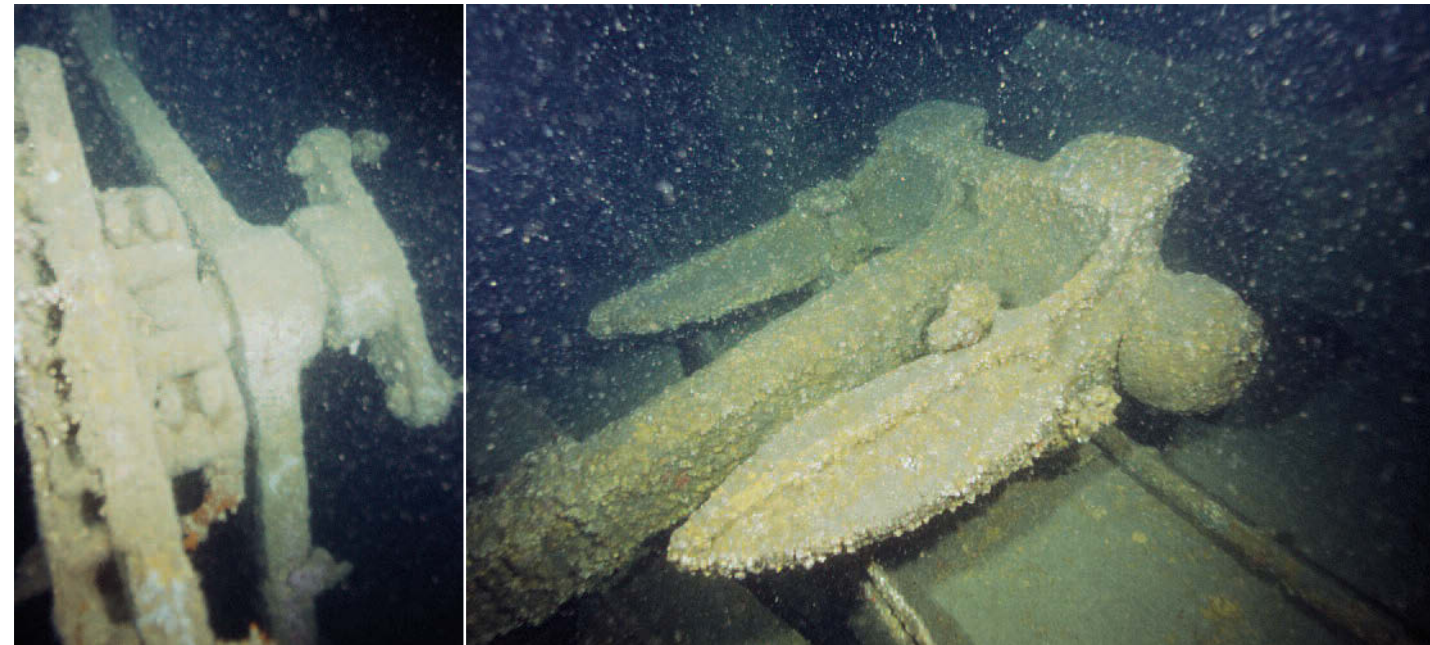
WRECK TOUR 101

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

✕
✕
✓
✕



Far left: Broken winch that once served the forward holds.
Middle left: A low-pressure cylinder from the triple-expansion engine that has fallen to port, with switch gear fallen above it.
Left: Cargo winch between the aft holds.



seabed. The *Iolanthé* is listed as having been fitted with a 12-pounder gun that would probably have been mounted here. I searched out above the stern, but could find no sign of it.

Now heading forwards again, our route follows a quick swim along the port side of the wreck past a pair of bollards (11) and then on past the boat derricks (5) and boiler (1) before slowing to explore the forward part of the *Iolanthé*.

A broken winch (12) lies on the centre-line of the wreck, with the forward mast (13) just forward of this. The mast has fallen to port and is broken about halfway along its length. Just forward of the break

Above left: Steering engine above the stern.
Above right: Spare anchor shackled to the main deck behind the bow.

in the mast is a short upright section of hull and then a bulkhead at right angles to it, with an intact railing across the top of the bulkhead (14). Held well clear of the seabed, this railing is particularly well decorated with anemones.

Located between the two forward holds, this is an unusual feature and evidence that the wreck is indeed the *Iolanthé*, as the vessel had a much-longer-than-usual boat deck extending forward past no 2 hold.

There would have been a railing across the front of the boat deck before it stepped down to the main deck and no 1 hold.

Having said that, the wreck was positively identified with recovery of the bell in 1994.

Continuing forward again, deck features resume with a pair of ventilator bases (15), then more intact railing running along the wreck on the starboard side. A big anchor is secured to a deck plate roughly on the

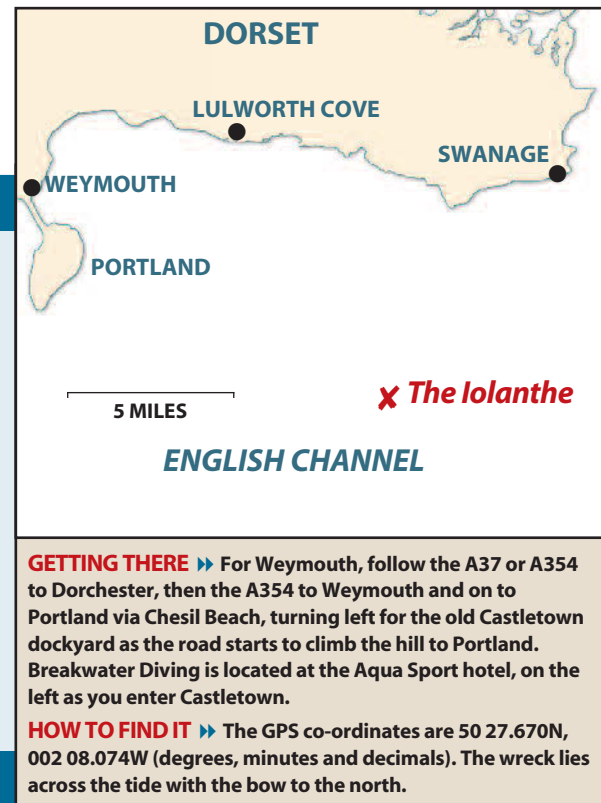
centre-line of the wreck, followed by another section of railing running across the wreck (16).

A pair of mooring bollards (17) mark the starboard corner of the bow. The bow itself is more intact, having fallen to starboard to leave the port side uppermost.

In good visibility there is an opportunity to swim through from the back of the bow (18) and out of the hole left where the anchor winch has broken away.

The anchor winch is on the seabed, tilted back with the underside of its mounting plate facing forward (19). Rounding the tip of the bow, the port anchor is still tight in place (20). Depth here is about 44m.

From here we can finish our dive by releasing a delayed SMB from the seabed, or by ascending to the upper (port) corner of the bow to set off a delayed SMB from 40m.



TOUR GUIDE

TIDES ▶ Slack water is 2.5 hours before high water Portland and 4 hours after high water Portland, though not on spring tides.

QUALIFICATIONS ▶ An advanced dive that can benefit from a rich nitrox mix for decompression.

DIVING, AIR & ACCOMMODATION ▶ Breakwater Diving Centre, 01305 860269, divedorset.com, hotelaqua.co.uk.

LAUNCHING ▶ Slips are available at Weymouth, Portland and Kimmeridge. Harbour and launch fees are payable.

FURTHER INFORMATION ▶ Admiralty Chart 2610, *Bill of Portland to Anvil Point*. Ordnance Survey Map 194, *Dorchester, Weymouth & Surrounding Area*. Dive

Dorset by John & Vicki Hinchcliffe. WW1 Channel Wrecks by Neil Maw. Weymouth tourist information, 01305 785747.

PROS ▶ A nice wreck that is less dived than many in the area. It's unlikely to be crowded.

CONS ▶ A bit deep for the average club dive.

Thanks to Andy Lawrence and David Aplin.

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.