Into the Abyss

Diving to Adventure in the Liquid World

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Mainstream Publishing *ebooks*

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Dive Scapa Flow, Mainstream, Edinburgh, 1990. Third edition 1997
Dive Scotland's Greatest Wrecks, Mainstream, Edinburgh, 1993. Second edition 2000
Dive England's Greatest Wrecks, Mainstream, Edinburgh, 2003

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MAINSTREAM PUBLISHING
EDINBURGH AND LONDON

He who fights with monsters might take care lest he thereby become a monster. And if you gaze for long into an abyss, the abyss gazes also into you.

Friedrich Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil

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INTRODUCTION

The Pinnacle, Corryvreckan Whirlpool, West Scotland

Our group of six divers struggled in the swirling currents to rendezvous at the appointed time on top of the Pinnacle, the column of solid rock that rises up from a depth of 200 metres to just 30 metres beneath the boiling surface of the Corryvreckan Whirlpool. The Pinnacle is both the cause and the very heart of the whirlpool, the third-largest whirlpool in the world.

The whirlpool lies in the Gulf of Corryvreckan, a half-mile wide channel between the islands of Scarba and Jura through which the whole might of the Atlantic floods and ebbs daily with incredible fury. Declared unnavigable by the Royal Navy, it is a hugely foreboding and intimidating place to be. On the surface, the powerful down currents produced by underwater waterfalls down the side of the Pinnacle create large standing waves and numerous swirling eddies. It is perhaps the most fearsome natural feature in British waters.

I gripped large rocky outcrops, my fingers searching for secure handholds to prevent me being picked up by the strengthening current and swept away into the abyss below. Apprehension upped my breathing rate – I tried to slow things down, taking several long draws on my breathing regulator.

I looked around the 100-foot wide Pinnacle summit. The underwater visibility was about 50 feet here and I could see the sheer sides of the Pinnacle dropping away all around me, disappearing vertically into the surrounding blackness of the Gulf.

My buddy diver Dave Hadden and I finned cautiously towards the side of the Pinnacle. The tide had now turned and I could feel the mass of water in which I was suspended starting to propel us over towards the edge. In just a few minutes the down currents would be so strong that this very edge would be a cascading underwater waterfall. Huge volumes of onrushing water were starting to thunder against the immovable Pinnacle, being pushed up one side to plunge and fall over the other side.

A gnawing fear gripped me as I moved over to the edge. If we lingered just a few more minutes the down currents would sweep us off the Pinnacle and drag us down into the depths – there would be little chance of breaking free of its grasp. To lose control here, in the face of the huge natural forces at work, would mean probable death.

Warily I kicked my fins and let the gentle current sweep me effortlessly and intoxicatingly over towards the sheer cliffs. I grabbed hold of any rocky handholds along the way that allowed me some semblance of control over my flight, finally anchoring myself with a handhold a few feet before the very edge itself. The current immediately swung my body round so that my feet were ahead of me, pointing towards the edge – and the abyss. The monster was trying to snare me and lure me to the point of no return, the point from which I could not escape its grasp.

Ducking into a small hollow behind a rock ledge at the very edge, I found some shelter from the current. Gingerly, flat on our chests, in the lee of the outcrop, Dave and I moved out and took hold of the smoothed edge of the pinnacle itself and peered down the sheer cliff face. We could see for perhaps 50 feet down the vertical walls.

Beyond, the walls merged into the pure black chasm beneath us.

As we lay prone, peering over the cliff, I noticed that the rate of ascent of the exhaust bubbles floating up from my breathing regulator was slowing down. As I watched, the ascent of the bubbles got slower and slower – and then they stopped going up. In what was almost a surreal sight, they simply hung motionless before me, their natural upward buoyancy perfectly countered by the downward drag of the current. Then gradually, as the down currents got perceptibly stronger, my exhaust bubbles started disappearing downwards over the edge with increasing ferocity. It was time to leave this strange world – before we too were sucked into the abyss.

CHAPTER ONE

The Beckoning Depths

‘There is nothing more powerful than this attraction toward an abyss’

Jules Verne, Journey to the Centre of the Earth

The chain of events that led me to dive into the heart of the Corryvreckan Whirlpool started in 1982 when I first turned up as a fresh-faced 20 year old at the Peterhead Scottish Sub Aqua Club’s weekly dive training night.

I had snorkelled on holidays before on coral reefs, and seen barracuda and sharks in the wild, but I always felt that as a snorkellor you are something of a voyeur. You are on the outside looking in. I wanted to be a diver, getting down there and becoming part of the action happening below.

The difference between diving and snorkelling is similar to the distinction between riding a motorcycle and driving a car. Driving a car is a bit like playing a video game or watching TV. You are cocooned from the wind and rain outside and shielded from noises and smells that you would normally pick up subconsciously. Riding a motorcycle is a totally different experience. You feel more a part of what is happening. You get wet from the rain. You are rocked by wind and slipstreams as you pass large vehicles – you feel the effects on your skin. All your senses take in the environment around you. Sounds and smells are real – unlike the car-driving experience, where sounds are muffled by noise insulation and smells masked by whatever you have in the car. Such is the difference between diving and snorkelling.

My initial training covered endurance swimming tests to determine if I was physically fit enough. From there I moved on to the delights of practical tests – like duck diving to recover a rubber brick from the bottom of the 15-foot deep diving pool.

After some basic training and theory it was time to be introduced to the diving tool which would become such an important part of my life, the aqualung. I didn’t, at this stage, truly understand how marvellous an idea it was, nor how it worked. I just knew that if you fitted the 1st Stage clamp of the aqualung onto the pillar valve on the top of a compressed air tank, and stuck the breathing regulator, the 2nd Stage, into your mouth, it gave you whatever air you needed, whenever you needed it.

Like practically every other novice diver in the world, my first experience of the aqualung was in a pool. Wearing just a T-shirt and swimming trunks, I sat down at the side of Peterhead pool and, with great relish, pulled on my new wetsuit boots and the incredibly robust black rubber Jet fins of the time. They have proved to be truly indestructible and are the only piece of my original dive equipment that I still have and use, 20 years later.

I picked up my mask and looped the strap over my head, perching the glass faceplate section on my forehead. I hesitantly slipped my arms through the straps of my back-mounted air tank harness and clasped the central belt across my stomach. After pulling my mask down over my face, I picked up the breathing regulator mouthpiece and put it into my mouth. Not knowing what to expect, I slipped into the water – and was immediately in love with a new sensation.

The cool water enveloped me and I sank down heavily to the bottom. Immediately, I saw a different aspect of the pool

– from below up. There on the bottom, in little groups of two or three, were other novice divers being trained by instructors. I was able to swim around them easily and choose at what depth to swim; the feeling of weightlessness was akin to floating in space. I could move easily in every direction, up, down, left or right. I tried turning a few cartwheels which seemed hysterically funny until I realised that I had lost control of my buoyancy and floated up to break the surface. Red-faced I sank back down to my instructor.

I was hooked for life and continued at my training, turning up for weekly lectures. I began to understand the mechanics of how all my equipment worked and what it was for, and started to learn something of the physiology of diving – what was happening inside my body as I dived.

After six months of training and a move to Ellon, I joined the local branch of the British Sub Aqua Club (BSAC) there. There were a number of very experienced divers at this branch and the club dived regularly and went on expeditions to far-flung parts of Scotland. It all seemed extremely daring and exciting.

Soon after joining the BSAC in Ellon, I turned up at my local dive shop in Aberdeen, Sub Sea Services, to buy my first wetsuit. At that time everyone was still diving in wetsuits – the dry suit revolution had not yet happened in sport diving. With great relish I bought the biggest dive knife money could buy, a wetsuit, a 72 cu. ft dive tank and harness, weights and a weight belt and a Fenzy ABLJ (Adjustable Buoyancy Life Jacket). The ABLJ was a large, bright orange, horse-collar life jacket that went over your head and was secured by a couple of straps, one round your back and one under your crotch, so you didn't drop out of it.

Equipped with all this new gear, I went on to scrounge, or pick up cheaply, the other essential pieces of diving equipment: a torch, dive watch and an old-fashioned capillary depth gauge. This clever device was the size of a large watch and fitted over your wrist. It had a circular face with numbers all the way round. A thin pipe, open at one end, circled the outside of the face, and it worked very simply. The deeper you went, the more the increasing water pressure compressed the air in the thin tube. You read your depth from the number at the point where the air bubble was compressed to.

Even with all this equipment, under the prevailing club system of the time, it took me about six months before the time came for my first sea dive. Swimming around in the safe confines of the pool environment was one thing, but diving in the sea would be completely new to me.

My first sea dive was from Aberdour Beach, to the west of Fraserburgh on the north-easternmost corner of Scotland. The regular Sunday dive had been planned as an easy shore dive for the novices like myself coming through the club system. About 15 divers in total turned up, some experienced, some, like me, completely new to the sport and under instruction. I was paired up with an experienced club diver, Colin Rivers. Colin was a genial, tall, bearded diver, unassuming but very capable.

We got dressed into our wetsuits and rigged up with our dive gear. Colin, knowing that it was my first sea dive, had a good look over my shiny new kit to make sure that I hadn't forgotten anything obvious, like turning my air supply on.

I knew how buoyant my wetsuit was without weights and I wasn't entirely sure how much I should carry in my weight belt to counteract that buoyancy. Sea water is more buoyant than the pool water I had practised in so I knew I would need *some* more – but how much? I was also concerned at what might happen if the seemingly fragile plastic clamp on my weight belt were to fail or be knocked open.

To avoid such a calamity, I thought it would be a good idea to put a half hitch knot in the excess length of my weight belt to secure it to the main section. Colin saw this straight away and patiently explained to me the error of my ways. If he had to recover me from the water and had to get my weight belt off to get me into a boat or onto rocks at shore, he would be hampered as he would not be able to untie the knot quickly. He might have to resort to having to cut the belt off me. The weight belts were designed to be quick release for just such an eventuality, and I was complicating the situation.

With my buddy check completed I took a few trial breaths out of my breathing regulator. It was working fine, so, tank on back, mask on forehead, fins in hand and the all-important ‘I’m a diver’ knife strapped to my leg, I walked with Colin down from the car park to the water’s edge over a shingle beach. Large rocky spurs ran out to sea from the beach for some way before disappearing underwater.

We walked into the water up to our chests then pulled our masks over our faces, ducked down, pulled our fins onto our feet and secured the straps over our heels. With trepidation I then let myself fall forward into the caress of the water wondering whether I would sink or float. As it turned out, with air in my ABLJ, I was quite buoyant.

We kicked our legs and snorkelled out from the beach on the surface until we got to a depth of about 20 feet. The sky was a rich summer blue and shimmering bright shafts of light were penetrating down through the water, lighting up a wondrous seascape below of sand, rocks and kelp forests. The north-east of Scotland has very clear seawater and I could easily make out the seabed and rocky spur in great detail.

Giving each other an ‘OK’ hand signal, I took the snorkel mouthpiece out of my mouth and stuck the breathing regulator 2nd Stage into my mouth. I took hold of the mouthpiece and corrugated hose from my ABLJ and held the mouthpiece up as high as I could. Pressing the dump valve on the end allowed all the air in the ABLJ to escape. The air rushed out and, from having been positively buoyant on the surface, I now became heavier – negatively buoyant.

I sank down, slowly at first but with increasing speed until I landed on the seabed, kicking up a cloud of white sand like a helicopter landing. Colin arrived down beside me gracefully and gestured that I should now get neutral buoyancy back. I took a long draw on my regulator and then took it out of my mouth and inserted the mouthpiece for my ABLJ in its place. Pressing the open/dump valve on it I then exhaled air into it and it puffed up a bit, but I was still too heavy. I replaced my breathing regulator, took another long draw, filling my lungs, and then repeated the laborious process of breathing out and into my ABLJ mouthpiece, giving it a bit more buoyancy. (In the following years this laborious process, something of an art form at the time, was ended when a direct-feed whip was introduced which ran from the 1st Stage straight into the ABLJ. Then, at the touch of a button, air could be bled directly into the ABLJ without having to remove your regulator from your mouth.)

After repeating this process a couple of times, I felt myself lift slightly as I breathed in, and sink slightly as I breathed out. I had achieved neutral buoyancy and it was time to head off on the dive.

Colin had a wrist-mounted dive compass and had taken a bearing for our route from the shore. While sorting out my buoyancy I had ignored my underwater bearings and, not having acquired a compass as yet, had no idea which way to go. Colin checked his compass, got our course and gestured for me to follow. We were off.

We swam over to the rocky spur, which had assumed a totally new perspective. Now there was a wall of rock, which ran all the way from the seabed up to the surface. It was an underwater cliff face and I was at once mesmerised by everything that could be found on it. Crabs and squat lobsters hid in the nooks and crannies. Large fronds of kelp drifted up from their fixings on rocky outcrops. Anemones and sponges competed for space. Large starfish lay on the bottom and fish drifted in and out of my vision. I was completely spellbound and followed Colin as we moved along the seabed beside the wall out into deeper water.

As our depth increased I could sense my surroundings getting a bit darker and could feel the cold of the water more. I realised that, even at this shallow depth, the weight of water above me was compressing my wetsuit, causing it to lose some of its thermal protection. Every now and then as I went deeper I felt the pressure increase in my ears and had to remember to ‘pop’ my ears, as you do on a plane, to equalise the pressure and relieve the pain.

Once we had swum out for about 20 minutes, Colin paused and took a new bearing on his compass at right angles to our previous path. We then headed off in that direction for five minutes before he reset his compass to take us on a return bearing back to the shore.

I arrived back in shallow water after some 45 minutes inwater and having got to a depth of about 15 metres. I had thoroughly enjoyed my first shore dive and the world of sea diving had been opened up to me.

The following week it was time for another first, my first boat dive. As with my first sea dive I simply had no idea what to expect when I eventually rolled off the side of a dive boat.

We arrived at Portsoy harbour and launched a battered old grey Zodiac inflatable. I watched, as if a spectator, as the old hands readied the boat for sea. Everyone except me seemed to know what had to be done. It was like a ritualistic occult practice. No one seemed to be giving any orders – they all just seemed to *know* somehow what to do, as if following some secret code unknown to me.

There were six divers diving off the boat that day, and all the divers’ tanks, weight belts, fins and other gear had to be loaded into the boat as it was tied up alongside the pier. The engine, an old Johnston 35hp, was on tilt, its propeller out of the water.

Once all the kit was in, we jumped aboard. The engine was taken off tilt and the propeller and shaft were lowered down into the water. A few pumps of the fuel bulb and several pulls on the ‘pull’ start and the engine roared into life in a cloud of blue smoke.

The painter, the bow mooring line, was untied and the Zodiac moved ahead. We motored towards the harbour entrance and, as we did, a gnawing apprehension started to work on me subliminally. I had no idea whether I should be scared – I didn’t know what there was to be scared of – but apprehension there definitely was. I suppose it was really just a fear of the unknown that was getting to me. The old hands chatted loudly above the roar of the outboard engine. There was a lot of manly banter. These guys didn’t seem apprehensive at all. However, I couldn’t help but think that this was a dangerous place to be going. It was one thing to do a dive from the shore. It was something totally different to head out into far deeper water, where there was no prospect of swimming back to shore if things went wrong.

We surged out of the harbour and throttled up. The boat pushed at its bow wave, driving a mass of water before it. We were heavy in the water with all these divers and their kit and the cox got us to clamber forward over the gear bags towards the bow.

The Zodiac got up to about nine knots, pushing at its bow wave. Then it seemed to conquer it and rode up and over. We were on the plane, and immediately our speed leapt up by about 10 knots, to between 15 and 20 knots. The cox then got us to return to our seats on the side tubes near the stern and throttled back as far as possible. He skilfully kept the inflatable boat up on the plane, conserving fuel – maximum speed for minimum fuel.

We roared along, bouncing from wave to wave, battered by wind and spray. With each impact onto a wave I was bounced upwards by the inflatable tube that was my seat. I held on for grim life with both hands to the lifelines along the top of the large grey side tube. At the same time I tried to wedge and secure my feet under heavy pieces of dive gear on the floor.

We headed out until we got into deeper water about a mile offshore. The boat didn't have an echo-sounder – they were not as popular and cheap in those days as they are now – so we didn't know exactly what depth we were going to be diving into.

After the short journey of 10–15 minutes out, the cox throttled back on the outboard tiller. We slowed and then the Zodiac dropped off the plane and wallowed to a halt before the pursuing wake caught up with us. The cox had the anchor ready and threw it over the side. We made an educated guess as to the depth we were in from the amount of anchor rope we paid out.

Once the anchor had snagged on something on the seabed the wind blew us round so that we were head on into the wind and waves. We now started getting kitted up and I soon noticed that the slow wallowing action of the stationary boat started to affect some of the divers – even the hard-looking guys in beards. One was sick over the side and one or two others started going a bit greenish-grey. I felt quite fine and, as if in some coming-of-age ritual, it made me feel as though perhaps I had the bottle for this after all.

My ABLJ went on, then my weight belt, then my air tank and harness, fins and mask. I was soon ready and sitting all kitted up on the tube of the Zodiac. I was to be diving with Colin Rivers again. We sat opposite each other and went through the standard buddy checks on each other's gear.

'Are you ready?' he enquired, staring straight at me.

'Yes,' I said hesitantly. I was on the brink of diving into deep water, and the gnawing apprehension I had felt at the harbour, which I had momentarily forgotten about as people got seasick, came flooding back.

‘OK – let’s get going,’ he said. Slapping his regulator in his mouth and holding it and his facemask in place with one hand, he deftly rolled backwards off one side of the boat. I copied him and did my first back roll off a dive boat, splashing backwards into the water.

As my weighted mass hit the water, the surface erupted in a confusion of bubbles and white froth. Almost immediately the white foam of bubbles from my entry disappeared and I thrashed my legs and arms around to get myself upright from my upside-down entry position.

I looked downwards and was surprised that I could not see the seabed below. There was nothing but empty deep water as far as the eye could see. Below that was a seemingly bottomless, dark, inky void which filled me with foreboding. Was I really going down into that?

Looking around at either side of me, other than the boat I was holding onto there was also nothing that I could see apart from empty water. It struck me that this was something of a tenuous position to be in. I was far from shore clinging to a small inconsequential speck of rubber with an outboard attached to it, preparing to let go of even that meagre modicum of safety to plunge down into the depths.

I kicked my legs and finned to the front of the Zodiac where the anchor line dropped away down below. I looked down the line as far as I could and saw it disappearing into the inky void, seemingly into infinity. This was something totally new to me – I hadn’t been in water this deep before and had not expected it to look so . . . well, deep.

Colin looked at me, eyes seemingly bulging through his facemask and gave me the OK question signal. I gave the OK signal back, belying my apprehension, and he then gave the thumbs down sign, the sign to start going down. He dipped his head and raised his feet high, and the weight pressing down helped him duck-dive. He started going down the line effortlessly and casually. I duck-dived and followed him down the line, hand over hand.

I was not to get far down. I had been unnerved by the depth of the water we were in – there was still no sign of the bottom. I then realised that I had not seated my mask properly on my face. The seal, which should clamp onto my skin, was sitting on *top* of a small section of my wetsuit hood, not *under* it. I did not have a watertight seal and so, as I went down, a steady trickle of water entered the mask and it started filling up. I was making the descent in a head down position so the water dribbling into my mask ended up on my faceplate. Everything below, including Colin, seemed to become slightly blurred and indistinct. Then everything swam completely out of focus so that I could not make anything out at all.

I knew that my mask was now almost completely filled with water. I had been trained in the pool how to 'mask clear' in a situation like this, but I was now in an 'incident pit', when one small thing triggers off a series of events and you lose the ability to sort it out. Each incident is manageable on its own but it is the combination of these individual factors that causes problems. A bit more common sense and experience and it would have been simple to resolve. As it was, I couldn't deal mentally with the depth or the mask flood and loss of vision. I was starting to lose it.

I tried a mask-clearing drill by holding the lower part of the mask off my face and blowing through my nose. You can only do that when you are in a 'head up' position, and I soon discovered this the hard way. As I was head down, the air I breathed out trying to clear the water from my mask disappeared, and more water flooded into my mask.

My mask was soon completely filled with water. As I breathed it was going up my nose and making me gag. My eyes were bulging wide open and were completely immersed in water. Why I didn't simply bring my legs and feet beneath me to repeat the drill I don't know.

On the verge of panic, I looked down with my blurred vision. I could barely make out my surroundings. I couldn't read my depth gauge and didn't know what depth I was in. I couldn't tell if I was going up or down and couldn't make out any sign of Colin below me. In the few seconds that it had taken for me to arrest my descent – and shoot from a semi-controlled state into abject terror – he had disappeared from view beneath me into the darkness. I grimly held onto the anchor rope and fought to deal with my mask flood.

In reality I was completely safe, but my novice's inexperience was playing havoc with my common sense. I was in an alien environment and things were going pear-shaped. I now perceived I was in trouble and was teetering on the edge of panic.

My first thought was to try and continue the descent and reach Colin who would now be well below me – out of sight but still holding onto the anchor line. I tried to tough it out and continue down blind but I got some more water up my nose and gagged – I couldn't go on.

I stopped this attempt at a blind descent and started to go back up the anchor line. I moved into a head up position and kicked my legs to start moving upwards. Why I didn't just clear my mask and recommence the descent I don't know. I had lost it and was bailing out whatever. Looking back, the main trigger for all of this was the simple fact that I was thrown by not being able to see the seabed below and not knowing what depth I was going into. That sealed how I behaved.

I reached the surface and my head broke through into daylight. I pulled my mask up and the water flooded out of it. I was back beside the Zodiac and safety. As I talked to the divers in the boat, reassuring them that I was fine, Colin appeared unexpectedly beside me. He swam over to me and asked if I was all right. It turned out that he had got right down to the bottom at 25 metres. When I hadn't appeared beside him he had followed the rules and made his way back up the line slowly.

I had given up on the idea of the dive completely and felt a fool. But Colin was very understanding and persuaded me to have another go. I agreed and we started the descent once again. This time Colin was right beside me, holding onto the strap of my ABLJ.

We pressed down and again I was disturbed at not being able to see the bottom. But then, when we got down to a depth of about 15 metres, it was as though a curtain had been pulled back and we moved through a visibility horizon. One moment I couldn't see the seabed. Next, there was an amazing underwater seascape about 10–20 metres beneath me. The white anchor line led down to the chain and anchor, which were just lying on the seabed.

We dropped down the last ten metres and landed on the seabed. I took time to look all around me at my new surroundings and get my buoyancy sorted out. Then, after an exchange of OK signals we moved off in one direction, swimming along just a few feet above the seabed.

All around me were flat slabs of rock, housing lobsters, edible crabs and lots of conger eels. I had never seen conger eels in the wild before and they hid in their dark bolt holes with their blue-black heads peering out at us, alien visitors in their underwater world. I had heard divers' stories of congers biting off fingers and so gave them a wide berth. At one point I saw a conger in the open, a rare sight during the day, moving over and under a large overhanging rock.

After a bottom time of about 20 minutes down at a depth of 25 metres it was time to start our ascent. My novice diver's inability had almost ruined the dive but Colin's stoic perseverance had saved the day and introduced me to the world of boat diving.

CHAPTER TWO

Learning Curve

‘A little learning is a dang’rous thing’

Pope, An Essay on Criticism

For the next couple of years after my introduction to the amazing undersea world of Scottish coastal diving I turned up every Sunday for club dives around the north-east coast. My diving skills developed as I explored an underwater fairy-tale land of plunging cliffs, massive subsea canyons, gorges and caves amidst all the rich and varied sea life of Scotland’s shores.

I moved down to Stonehaven, some ten miles south of Aberdeen, in 1984 but still kept my links with my dive buddies in the Ellon branch of the BSAC, now some 40 miles north of where I lived. I jointly took a small loan and invested in my own 5-metre orange inflatable dive boat, an Aberglen Gordon with a Johnson 35hp outboard engine.

Sundays consisted of an early wake-up to an alarm clock followed by a scrambled breakfast, before hitching my orange Aberglen onto my orange Renault 14, now rusting fast and covered in brown filler spots. In an orange blaze of polka dot car and boat, I would drive up to Ellon, arriving an hour later at my regular dive buddy Richard Cook’s house. Richard was a strong, fair-haired and bearded old hand at the club. Somewhat older than me, he was an active and very capable diver with a great technical knowledge gleaned from working in the diving side of the oil industry for a long time. He knew his stuff and often helped me with my kit when things went wrong.

We would have tea and toast then go on for another 40 minutes up to one of our regular dive sites such as Sandhaven, Rosehearty or Gardenstown. It was this year that I had my first encounter with the somewhat strained relationships between fishermen and divers.

Fishermen at the time had a mindset that divers were diving with the sole purpose of taking lobsters from the sea and from their lobster creels. I was new to the sport and had never taken on the fast claws of a lobster or edible crab. But that didn’t matter – I was a diver and that was enough. Some of them barely concealed their animosity.

I soon learned that there was a bit of a history in the north-east between my predecessor divers and fishermen. So much so that in the late ’70s and early ’80s, before I had started diving, there had been an attempt by locals in one of our now favourite dive spots to prevent divers using the harbour for launching and retrieving their dive boats. The BSAC had successfully taken the harbour trustees to court and got an order allowing divers access to the sea there.

My club soon discovered that the fishing town of Gardenstown, just a few miles to the east of Macduff, was situated in an area where there was little run-off from the land to bring silt down into the sea. Underwater, the sand was clean and white and, as a consequence, the whole area of sea around Gardenstown was truly blessed with fantastic underwater visibility, on average in excess of 20 metres. As a result our dive club found ourselves drawn there regularly for club dives.

I had not fully realised the strained relationship between divers and fishermen at that time – things are a lot better nowadays. But the history soon became clear when we returned to Gardenstown harbour in our dive boats after one dive. As we got changed out of the way at the end of the pier we saw a number of local youths in five or six cars driving along the harbour area towards the breakwater we were on. They then strung a barrier of their cars across the harbour pier, blocking in our cars and causing a bit of a stand-off as we tried to leave the harbour.

On another occasion our club had three boats out to sea from Gardenstown for a dive. As we arrived back at the harbour after the dive and I was jumping out of my Aberglen as we nudged up to the slip, a large splinter exploded off the side of a wooden creel boat tied up alongside. This was followed almost simultaneously by the crack of a rifle report. Our group had been shot at from the steep brae and houses above the harbour.

I reported the matter to the local police in the nearest large town some miles away but found that they were not interested in investigating the incident. No police officer bothered to come to see me about my formal complaint about the rifle shots. Perhaps they agreed we shouldn't be diving there as well.

Gardenstown itself is an idyllic, old fishing village. It is steeped in the sea and originally sprang up as a cluster of fishermen's cottages gathered around a favourable harbour site at the bottom of a steep, long hill, which shielded the houses from southerly and westerly winds. As is common with fisher houses along the north-east coast, many of the houses were built gable end on to the sea. This presented the smallest possible profile to the harsh northerly sea winds, which tried to strip the precious heat from the very stones with which they were built.

For us, as divers, to get down to Gardenstown towing a dive boat, was something of an art form. We had to manoeuvre down a hugely steep road off the main Elgin to Fraserburgh trunk road. This road meanders down through a confusion of old fishermen's houses with a couple of surprisingly tight hairpin turns which, towing a boat, we could only make by the barest of margins by taking a wide swing at it as slowly as possible.

Once down at the harbour we were able to launch our boats and then motor down the coast to the east, along plunging cliffs dotted with a white mass of seabirds, until we found a convenient sheltered cove to anchor in within a stone's throw of the cliffs.

Once kitted up, we would roll over the side of the boat into perfect visibility. It was often possible to see the seabed 20 metres below as soon as you entered the water. I never got over the sensation of weightlessness as I floated suspended in the sea, looking down some distance to the seabed below.

I was always amazed to be able to see other divers exploring far below in the distance. Their columns of brilliant white and silver exhaust bubbles belched and broke into smaller bubbles as they expanded and strained towards the surface.

As they reached the surface the large bubbles erupted in slow languid 'bloops', reminiscent of mud pools, before breaking into a shimmering mass of smaller bubbles and dissipating. Thousands of smaller bubbles accompanied the larger ones, shimmering and fizzing like a bottle of lemonade being opened. On oily, calm days you could hear the same noise if you listened carefully.

This area was rich in sea life and I became acquainted with all sorts of local fauna. I had my first encounter with a dogfish here. It looks like a small shark, about three to four feet long. Unlike most of the other sea life around it didn't seem to see my 6 ft 2 in. frame and that of my dive buddy Richard Cook as an immediate threat warranting flight. This dogfish just lay there on a large flat-topped boulder. Its cold, lifeless eyes looked at me but didn't flicker or show any emotion.

Richard swam up to it and it still didn't move so he put his hand high up at the back of its head and picked the fish up to show me how to handle it. It just remained impassive and unresponsive, waiting for us to tire of it and put it down. After he put it down again it moved off the boulder and with a flick of its long thin tail was gone. He told me later that if it was picked up in the wrong place it could quickly whip its tail around a diver's arm.

Diving around these parts I also came across my first monkfish, a thoroughly evil-looking flat fish which looks like a large naan bread from your local curry house. It has a huge semi-circular mouth, ringed with nasty teeth, that runs like a zip around the wide top of its head at the front. Its two small eyes sit behind, giving it good vision. As a child in Fraserburgh I had heard from fishermen how the jaws of this fish, once it has bitten something, lock fast and hold on – it just doesn't let go. Monkfish amongst a catch of fish were a continual hazard for local fishermen at sea. They would often put their hand randomly into the catch to pull out the next fish for gutting. If there was a monkfish in the pile of caught fish and it was still alive it could snap at them and cause serious damage to their fingers. I gave this one a wide berth, resisting the temptation to prod it with a stalk of kelp lest it come after me.

On another dive we came across an evil-looking wolf fish. This fish, enticingly called rock turbot in speciality seafood restaurants, has a very soft white flesh and is exquisite battered or fried. But in the wild these eel-like fish are blue-black, about five feet long, and have the meanest looking head and set of teeth and jaws you can imagine – designed to crush crabs and sea urchins.

On this same dive we next came across a rather less offensive-looking monkfish lying motionless on the bottom in a sandy clearing between several large boulders, which were covered in the waving fronds of a kelp forest.

My dive buddy on this dive decided to see what this monkfish could do, as it wasn't moving for us either. He pulled out his nine-inch long pencil torch, used for looking into nooks and crannies, and approached the fish menacingly . . . but obviously not menacingly enough to frighten this poor creature – it just stared at him. Emboldened, he got right up close to it and gave it a prod on its snout with his torch. It didn't move – probably hoping we would give up and go away.

Not deterred, my buddy gave the inoffensive and somewhat tolerant monkfish a harder prod on its nose. He had obviously overstepped some unwritten law and gone one prod too far. With blinding speed, the monkfish's inoffensive semi-circular mouth suddenly transformed into a large oval hole and, like lighting, it flicked off the bottom and attacked the offending torch.

The fish tried to take the whole torch into its mouth in one go, getting the whole one- to two-inch diameter width of it a few inches down its throat. However, when it bit down, it encountered, probably for the first time, man-made hard plastics. I expected to see its teeth all fracture and fall out like a *Tom & Jerry* cartoon scene, but even though the attempt to crack the torch in two wasn't a good idea for its dental care regime, it held on and simply wouldn't let go.

My buddy waved his torch about trying to dislodge the fish from the end of it but couldn't. It just hung on for grim life and he did not dare to try using his other hand to prise it off. If it could do this to his torch it could make a nasty job of a finger. Eventually, after a degree of thrashing around, the fish obviously decided that it had done enough to further our diver training on 'things not to touch underwater'. It let go and swam back down to the bottom where it turned round to face us and settled back down. 'You wanna try that again, laddie?' it seemed to be saying. If it was nursing a bad toothache it didn't show. We beat a retreat, Monkfish – 1, Divers – 0.

On another occasion we were swimming in a group of about four divers along the very bottom of some plunging cliffs looking into subsea caves when I saw my first bird flying underwater. This bird flapped its way down my bubble stream from the surface and swam right up to my mask homing in on the source of the bubbles, which it no doubt took for a shimmering feast of small fish. It got a shock when, unexpectedly, it came face to face with a 6 ft 2 in. Scotsman. It did an emergency brake in its flight through the water right in front of my face and stared at me for a second or two, no doubt trying to work out what this big, noisy, unusual visitor to its realm was doing. After working out that there was no food here, and that it may become food itself if it hung around, it beat its wings again and shot off towards the surface.

This bird was something of a vanguard, for as soon as it had disappeared, countless other birds came screaming into the water in quick succession, plunging downwards and speeding through our group leaving a small trail of bubbles to mark their passing – as if someone had been spraying machine gun bullets down through the water towards us.

On a shore dive towards the end of that summer of 1984, I had my first experience of something going wrong underwater. On a hot, lazy, blue summer day we had driven to a car park at a local beauty spot, Cullykhan Bay. This small, picturesque bay, only a few hundred yards across, is surrounded on both sides by high cliffs and jutting headlands. At one time there had been a medieval fort on top of the westmost headland, from which a cannon had been recovered by archaeologists. There was rumour of another cannon lying underwater in the rocks and gullies at the foot of the headland and we had decided to have a dive at the foot of the headland, out at its end, to see if anything was indeed there.

Our small group of six divers drove to a car park high up on the top of the plateau surrounding the small bay, arriving as usual at about 10 a.m. We got dressed into our dive suits in pleasantly warm conditions. The rolling farmland and woodland of the Buchan countryside seemed stunningly green, the water a deep blue. Once fully kitted up, we then walked gingerly and in a rather ungainly manner, weighed down by our heavy gear, along a small path that meandered across the hillside down to the rocky beach.

Once at the bottom we strolled past a few startled holiday makers sending their groups of children into an excited chatter about the ‘deep sea divers’ that were walking through them en route to what they thought was a terribly exciting adventure. Walking into the water to a depth which supported my body weight I bent down and pulled on my fins. One by one we flopped onto our fronts and started to snorkel out into deeper water, following the side of the cliffs on the west side of the bay.

Once we had got out to a depth of about ten metres and were approaching the end of the headland, we grouped up and then dumped all the air from our ABLJs. I sank slowly towards the bottom, a boulder field and kelp forest which, in the good visibility, I was able easily to see beneath me. Long kelp stalks were anchored to rocks, the fronds at their extremities waving in the gentle current.

As I sank I sensed the familiar increasing pressure on my sinuses but no matter how hard I tried to ‘pop’ my ears to equalise the pressure, I couldn’t. As I dropped down to three metres it became uncomfortable. By five metres down it was sore and I struggled to pop my ears to alleviate the pain.

The pain grew worse and worse as I sank deeper, becoming numbing and intense and filling my forehead inside my skull. I didn’t want to hold up the dive and with the ‘save face at all costs’ arrogance of youth, didn’t signal to tell any of the others that I was having difficulty. Eventually we landed on the bottom. The pain was excruciating for me but I still managed to take a compass bearing to head out to the end of the headland where the cannon was rumoured to be.

We set off, heads down, finning out to sea. As we did so, the seabed dropped away and it got slowly deeper. As the depth increased, so did the water pressure – and the pain in my forehead. The pain became the focus of my thoughts, but as I worked down the shelving bottom as the dive progressed, I found that the pain slowly eased. Perhaps, I thought, the effort of finning vigorously had helped clear my ears – or perhaps the increased pressure of air had forced its way through whatever sinus blockage I had.

'Nature always tries to equalise' was a rule taught to me at secondary school. The higher water pressures now working on me had strained to equalise with the lower atmospheric pressure in my nasal cavity. Eventually, somehow, the higher-pressure air had forced its way past the blockage and the pain left me.

We finned forward, winding our way through the large boulders. Here and there we encountered large kelp forests blocking our way. The large ten-foot-long fronds at the uppermost ends of the kelp billowed in the gentle current and snagged at everything that protruded from our rigs, wrapping themselves around our knives or our tanks. We swam right down to the bottom of the kelp stalks and found that once you got below the waving fronds and in amongst the stalks, there was plenty of clear space between the stalks to swim through with your chest close down onto the rocks.

Although we searched in and around the large boulders and potholes at the end of the headland, we didn't find the fabled cannon. Eventually we turned and made our way back into the bay and headed towards the shore. As I moved back up into slightly shallower water the pain in my sinuses returned. This time it seemed that the air in my sinuses was at a higher pressure than the water pressure around me. It wanted to get out to equalise but couldn't because of the same blockage that had caused the trouble