

## **THE WRECK OF THE 'HMS Port Napier'**

### **THE FACTS**

STAR RATING :	3 star
SIZE :	9,600 gross tons
BUILT :	Swan Hunter & Wigham Richardson (Newcastle) 1940
DIMENSIONS :	
SANK :	November 27th, 1940
CAUSE :	Engine room fire/ explosion / sank
LOCATION :	Loch nam Bieste . Kyle of Lochalsh
WRECK DEPTH :	0 - 20 metres
CONDITIONS:	Best dived when the sun has risen over the hill.
TIDES:	None
SEABED:	Silty, easily disturbed
LAUNCH SITE:	Kyleakin or Kyle of Lochalsh slipway
VESSELS HISTORY :	(download)
WRECK AT PRESENT :	(download)

MAGAZINE REVIEWS : 'Port Napier wreck tour' – Diver : February 2000 : p42-44  
Also features in many of the other Magazine reviews about diving with us.

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### **THE HISTORY OF THE VESSEL**

Built by Swan Hunter & Wigham Richardson for Port Line, she was taken over by the Admiralty during construction, and converted to a mine layer of the 1st Minelaying Squadron.

During a gale, while at anchor in the Kyle of Lochalsh on November 26th 1940, the newly completed ship, which was yet to become operational, apparently dragged her anchor and grounded in shallow water undamaged. On November 27th 1940 as debunkering to lighten and refloat the ship was in progress there was a fire reported in the engine room. The ship was laden with a lethal cargo of 400 mines, and had they gone up, the whole area would have been devastated. The harbour was cleared of every ship and the local inhabitants evacuated, but no explosion followed and volunteers went back aboard proceeding to disarm the mines and drop them into the sea by way of the stern chutes. However the volunteers had to retreat as the situation soon became worse, and shortly after there was the first explosion followed by an enormous flash which blew out the innards of the ship. After this the ship settled onto her starboard side in the attitude we see today, her port side showing at low tide.

According to record, steel plating was salvaged for reuse in 1944 and in 1950 the Royal Navy began clearance operations to remove the cargo of mines and some 6000 rounds of ammunition for the 4" guns.

Local photographer 'MacPherson' was commissioned to photograph the boat, however, due to official secrecy embargoes, the darkroom was situated on the boat itself. It appears that since its refit, no photographic records of this boat are in existence as they are thought to have been destroyed during the fire.

### **THE WRECK AT PRESENT**

The wreck at present lies as she settled in 1940, on her starboard side in 20 metres of water approximately 300m offshore of "sron na Tairbh" with the hull facing towards the shore and the deck facing the main channel. At low water the Port side of the vessel is plainly seen, or at least the bare bones of the carcass where the decks once joined the hull, giving you a good indication to the layout of the wreck.

Once in the water exploring the wreck, two routes present themselves to you. Swimming along the keel, you experience the sheer size of the vessel and this is well worth a look, but go too far, and you will have to travel the whole length of the wreck, as there is no access into the hull from this side.

More interesting views are seen by following the main deck, as from this side, it is possible to access the wreck through several hatches. From here you can explore the accommodation spaces and bridge structure, or drop into the next deck and follow it, with the open hull above you.

On a good day, the sunlight beaming in through the open port side above creates a dramatic effect. On coming upon the mast, it is worth swimming up this structure to check out the marine life with which it is encrusted, and to look back through the loose rigging as if onto the deck below.

Good visibility gives a great impression of the vessel from here. At the stern are the mine laying chutes with the rails running forward into the vessel, following these "with caution" leads you to the area where the mines were stored and fitted to their trolleys. These trolleys were attached to the mines and when jettisoned acted as the anchor point, with a predetermined length of wire cable to position the mine at a set depth in wait for its victim.

Towards the bow is the gun position where the 4" gun still stands silent guard, never having been fired in anger. The brass breech covered by soft growth must have witnessed an army of neoprene clad fingers with the one thought '....will it come off..?' Perhaps one day it will!

Over the whole wreck there is a multitude of marine life, giving a carpet of colour and soft outline to what was once the weapon of a distant war. Although the ravages of time are taking their toll of the wreck, it must surely be worth the journey.

### **POSSIBLE SALVAGE ATTEMPT**

During the Autumn of 1998 the navy commissioned the removal of one of the steel plate hull cladding sections for test and analysis. As it was sunk prior to 'the bomb' at Hiroshima it is hoped that the metal is uncontaminated and that the sheet metal plates will be a valuable resource.

If the sample is of pure enough quality the intention is to remove 5,000 tonnes of sheet plating from the hull. Apparently these sections are bolted onto the structural hull and removal should not damage the integrity of the vessel.

Old and shakey already, only time will tell if this famous wreck will survive!