

HMS Victory

with Dominic Robinson
interviewed by
Peter Rowlands

I was very impressed with your recent images of HMS Victory and thought UwP readers (and myself!) would be interested to know more about you, your underwater photography and the dive itself. Did deep diving and underwater photography start at the same time or did you turn to a camera to record your dives?

Prior to taking up deep diving, I spent many years as a recreational diver during which time I developed a gradual interest in underwater photography. Initially I started with a series of fairly standard compact cameras in their 40m manufacturer produced housings which I would take with me mainly to record images of the people I was diving with. On one very memorable occasion, we spotted a basking shark halfway to the Eddystone so all jumped in with snorkels. This resulted in a very cherished photo of the shark emerging from the plankton with its mouth fully open which is an experience that I've never managed to repeat since.

About 7 years ago, I started diving with a CCR and once I had become comfortable with this configuration then I continued to take photos at normal recreational depths. As I became qualified to dive deeper then I wanted to record my experiences, the people I was diving with and the things that we were seeing. In order to do this I needed a significantly better, and more expensive (!) housing, to withstand the pressure at those depths.



This led me to research and buy a new setup which is essentially the one that I have now.

What camera equipment did you use for the images and what was the reasoning for choosing it?

I use a Canon G7X Mk II in the Nauticam Housing with the short port and Inon UWL H100 lens. Light is provided by two ebay Chinese video lights on double 6" arms. Prior to this I had a similar setup using the Canon G7X Mk I but I had a chance to upgrade relatively cheaply about 12 months ago which I'm very pleased with. I'd imagine by the standards of many underwater

45 nautical miles south of Plymouth in the UK lies the remains of HMS Victory in 78 metres of water. Dominic's dive had 38 minutes bottomtime and was followed by 3 hrs and 8 mins decompression.

The first-rate warship was launched in 1737 with 100 bronze cannons on its three wooden decks. It was the predecessor to Lord Nelson's Victory. More than 1,000 sailors died when the top-heavy flagship sank in a storm in 1744.

The wreck was found in 2008 by Odyssey Marine Exploration, a US deep-sea salvage company.

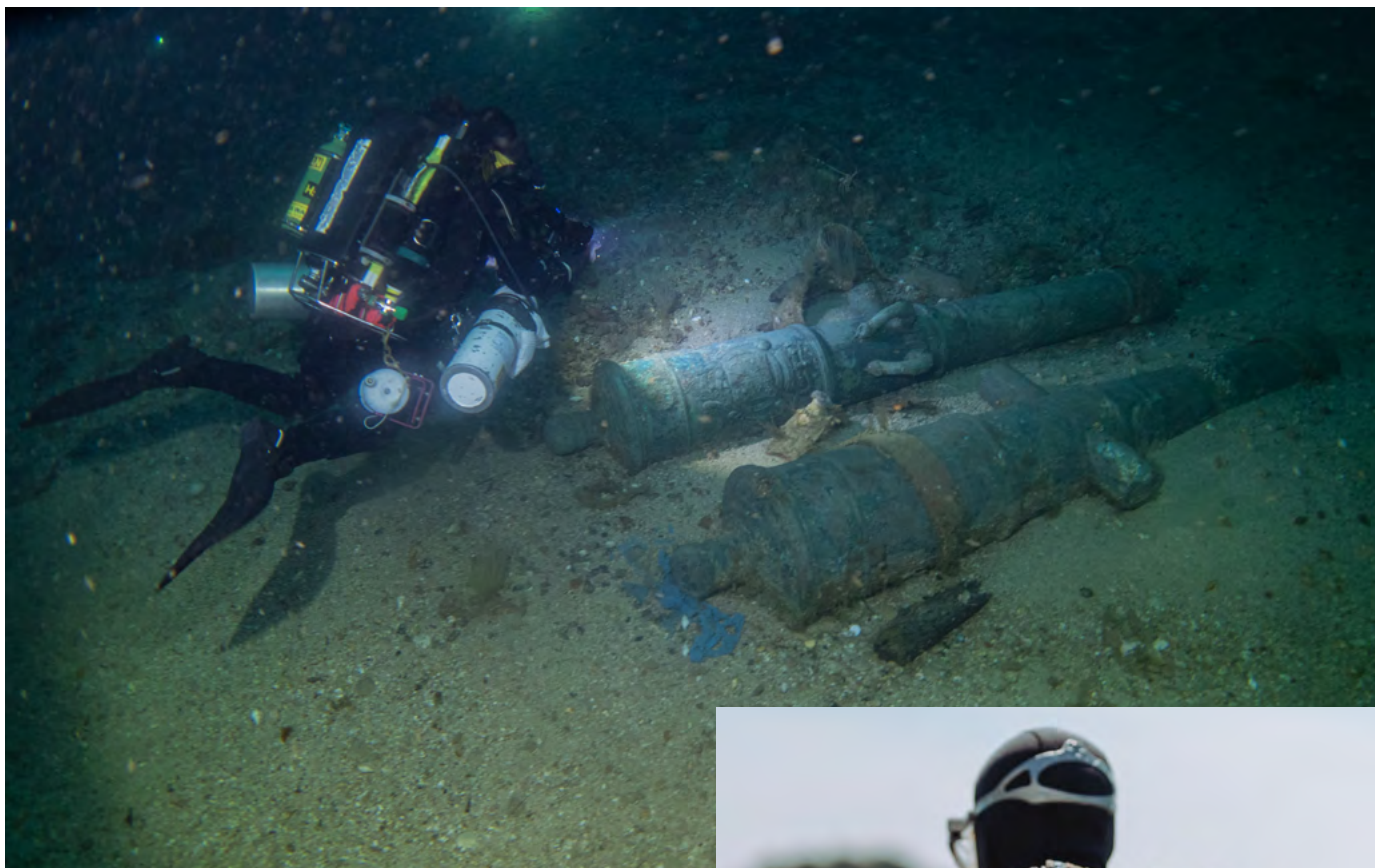
photographers that this isn't a particularly high end setup but I'm not trying to get top end photographs and don't have the resources to achieve this anyway. Technical diving isn't a cheap hobby and I have a young family so I need to have an appropriate balance. Overall I feel this setup meets my requirements very well.

I've used Canon cameras for a long time and have always had a good experience with them. A key requirement for my setup was that I wanted to stow it away at points on my dive which meant that it couldn't be too bulky. Having flooded a camera in the past, I also needed to know that I could buy a replacement relatively cheaply and easily off e-bay if necessary. Combined with the need to keep cost down this led me to look at high quality compact cameras from well known manufacturers which were known to perform well underwater so the decision came down to either the Sony RX100 or the Canon G7X. My research indicated that there were relatively few differences between them so the last element was that I'd previously used Canons so the menu system was one with which I was familiar.

The housing wasn't difficult to choose as it had to go as deep as possible which at that time meant the Nauticam! I can't really remember why I chose the UWL H100 but I suspect it was a slightly belated attempt to keep the cost down to what I considered a reasonable level whilst still having a fish eye.

Your rebreather looks very neat compared to some I have seen. Was this chosen with underwater photography in mind?

Thank you and this is something that I try hard to achieve. The complexities of rebreathers



and associated equipment means that for safety reasons it is a very good idea to have a setup that is as streamlined and well optimised as possible. As an instructor, this is also something I try to instil into my students as well so that means my own equipment has to be at a role model level.

Of course, there are also significant advantages to having an ergonomic setup when it comes to photography as well. Unlike my perception of other photographers, I don't spend the entire dive taking photos so my camera will spend a significant part of the dive clipped off on my shoulder. This allows me to enjoy the simple pleasure of doing the dive

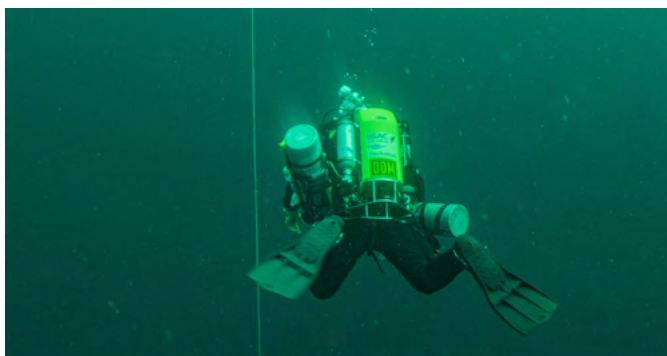


but then if I come across something that I think will make a good photograph then I can unclip the camera and try to capture it. On a deep dive you will typically have 25-35 minutes bottom time so every moment counts and it is important that I can transition between the two roles swiftly. There are dives that I do when I don't manage to get any photos at all due either to the conditions, not finding anything suitably interesting or being distracted by looking at other things.

It is also important that the camera doesn't impede operation of the CCR or any of my emergency actions. The day after the dive on HMS Victory I was doing a 73m dive when the electronics in my CCR ceased operating which is clearly a very dangerous situation. I was also carrying the camera but was able to revert to breathing off my open circuit bailout cylinders as I returned to the shot line and then carried out an ascent. It went so well that I even managed to get a couple of selfies at the final decompression stop and my buddy took one of me looking very pleased once we returned to the surface.

I presume that the Victory dive was planned well in advance. How did you become involved and was this your first dive on her?

To the best of my knowledge the Victory has only been dived three times which is partially due to secrecy surrounding the location but also the practical difficulties of organising a dive. Not only is it a very long way out (45 NM), very deep (78 m) and located very close to the shipping lane but it also has significant tidal movement. This all means that lots of individual factors have to come together at the same time for it to happen.



I became aware that a group of divers using a boat that normally operates from Portland had visited the site in summer 2019 which gave me the idea that perhaps it could be achieved from Plymouth. Over the winter, I floated the idea past Danny Daniels who operates Red Alert out of Fort Bovisand. We often use him for our deep charters and I knew that as an ex-matelot clearance diver with a keen interest in history that he'd be unable to resist. This proved to be the case so we agreed that if conditions permitted then we'd try to give it a go.



Fortunately early in September, everything aligned perfectly with neap tides, a lunch time slack, very light winds and a group of divers who were very keen to do something very different.

The technical group I dive with are mainly from the Plymouth Sound BSAC club but we also describe ourselves as Guztec. This is a combination of the Naval slang word for Plymouth (Guz) and tec for the technical diving that we do. Fortunately despite a late start in the year due to COVID-19, we'd managed to get plenty of deeper diving

completed before the opportunity to dive Victory came up which meant that we were ready for that sort of depth. For all of us, it was our first dive on HMS Victory and it is likely that less than 20 people have ever dived the site which makes it particularly special!

Were you the only one with a camera and with such limited dive time I presume your buddy was prepared to pose every now and then? Did you have a photography plan?

I chose my buddy for the dive because she is also a photographer and so could be expected to pose when she could see that I was taking photos. We also agreed that we'd swap roles so that she could get a few pictures of me as I didn't want to miss out on a photo with one of those stunning and unique brass cannons. She did have my old camera and housing but we agreed that it would be used to take video instead which is what she did.

Before the dive, we did agree that photos with the cannon were required for all six of us but it didn't really end up like that when we got down. This was probably because there hadn't really been enough agreement on a running order and where everyone would wait when the photos were being taken. As a result not everyone had their picture and some of those that did get taken had other divers in the background or swimming through the photo.

It is definitely a lesson for the future to be more organised with a better photography plan especially as several archaeologists were very interested in the site. They were hoping to get specific types of photographs which showed the site from above so didn't find the ones showing conger eels poking their noses out of cannons to be that useful.

Is photography the sole purpose of these sort of dives and what is the motive for shooting these images.

I consider myself to be a diver who takes photographs rather than the other way around.

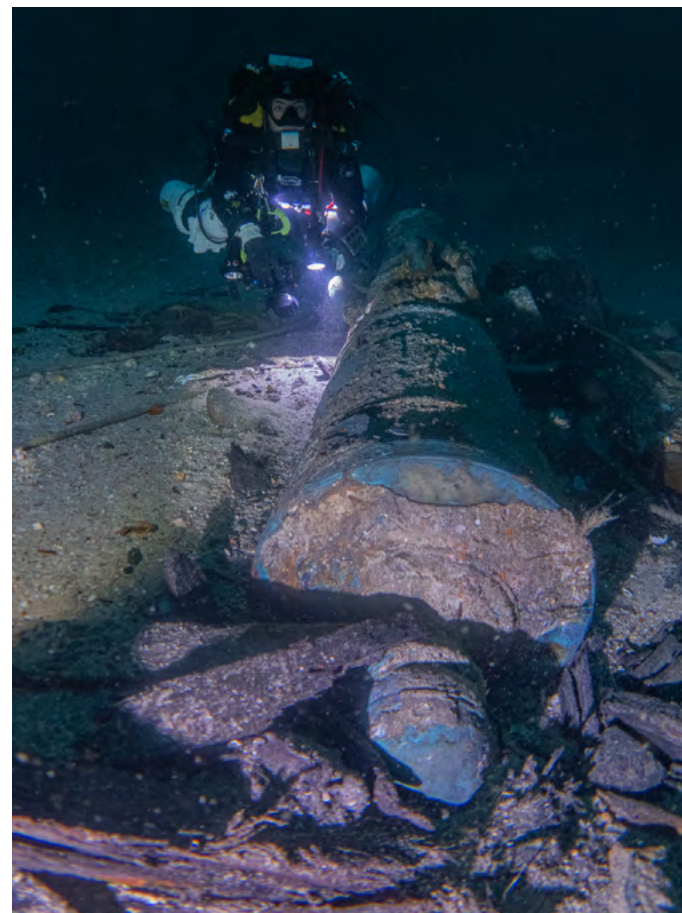
My main motivation is to record the dive so that I can remember it in the future but there are also two other aspects. The first is that I like other people to experience what we have seen which I know very few will get the opportunity to do but I also use my images to encourage other people to do the sort of diving that is my passion. I think social media is particularly important for the latter which is why I like to share the images on Facebook groups such as UK Vis reports and the BSAC Technical page.

We're always trying to encourage people to join the Plymouth Sound club and also consider BSAC for their technical development so I think the images are also very useful in promoting both of them. Many of my images are also being used to illustrate parts of BSAC diving manuals that are being produced which I'm very proud about.

The ambient light at that depth must be quite low. What settings do you use for the available light shots?

We were incredibly lucky that the ambient light on the Victory was about as good as it gets at that depth. Not only were we diving it at nearly lunchtime so the sun was directly overhead but the water was also incredibly clear without any sign of plankton or a thermocline in the water column. Although everyone was using torches, there was enough light to do the dive without them.

I feel something of a charlatan when I reveal that I put the camera into P mode so it auto selects



everything for me. Partially this is down to my own limitations as a photographer but also as I simply don't want to spend the time adjusting settings underwater that would be necessary if I set the camera up manually. Like much of my photography, I'm not after the perfect solution but something that produces the best possible solution with a relatively low level of investment and I believe that this is what I achieve.

What was the reasoning behind using a video light rather than a strobe for additional lighting?

I've previously tried to use a strobe but really struggled to get photographs in a timely fashion that didn't have horrendous amounts of backscatter.

The small screen on the G7X means that it isn't always possible to get a good idea if that has been successful so I find that the video lights are much more effective for producing results easily. It also helps that I can look above the camera to get a feel for how the picture will come out which isn't something I can do with a strobe.. Possibly if I was a better photographer, or spent more time learning, I'd be able to do better with strobes!



Thinking more about the available light shots do you do any post processing and, if so, are you willing to reveal more :-)

Unsurprisingly I take all my photos in RAW mode and then upload them to Lightroom Classic which is where I do the post processing.

The initial step is to brutally cull any photos that I don't think will come up well although I'm much more careful about doing this as I once was. On my last trip to dive the wrecks off Malin Head, I took a photo looking down on a wreck which was about 20 metres below me at 85 metres deep. In Lightroom the photo looked

as though it contained nothing so I almost got rid of it but thought I'd just have a little play. Much to my amazement the result was awesome and it is still one of my favourite pictures!

I normally use the White Balance Selector (dropper) tool to correct the white balance before adjusting light levels using Highlight/White and Shadows/Black. If necessary, I also adjust the exposure and contrast sliders until I achieve something that seems to be suitable.

To conclude I then use the Presence sliders to produce a final photograph that I'm happy with.

After processing, all my photos

get uploaded to Google Photos which I use as a repository and allows me to easily share with others via different communication means.

Thank you, Dominic, for your insightful answers which are very illuminating (pun intended) and what's refreshing to me is how you don't allow the photography to dominate the dive. Congratulations on your achievements and I look forward to enjoying your future images.

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