

The wreck of the Hera

By Mark Webster

As underwater photographers we generally have the images we intend to capture foremost in our mind when we visit a wreck and are often unaware of the individual tales of suffering and loss which may have occurred during the sinking of the ship. When marine life takes over the remains of a shipwreck the beauty and tranquillity can mask the grim circumstances of the loss and so we should make the effort to know the history of the wreck and spare a thought for those who perished as we enjoy the dive. One of my local wreck sites had a dramatic and sad end for many of its crew when it came to grief on February 1st 1914 in Veryan Bay close to Falmouth in Cornwall. When you visit the location even on a calm day you cannot help but feel the sense of isolation and desperation the crew must have felt during the wrecking.

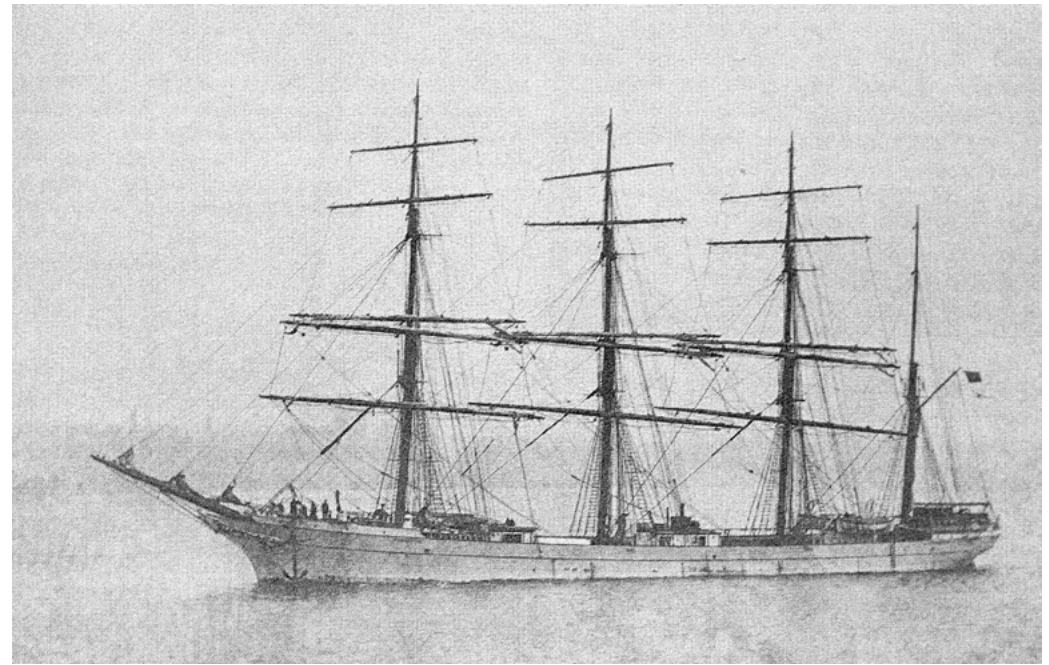
The Hera was a four masted steel barque built in 1886 in Tecklenberg, Germany and was originally named the "Richard Wagner" after the popular composer of the time. She sailed under the British flag with this name until 1890 when she was sold to Rhederei Aktien of Hamburg who renamed her "Hera", the Goddess of

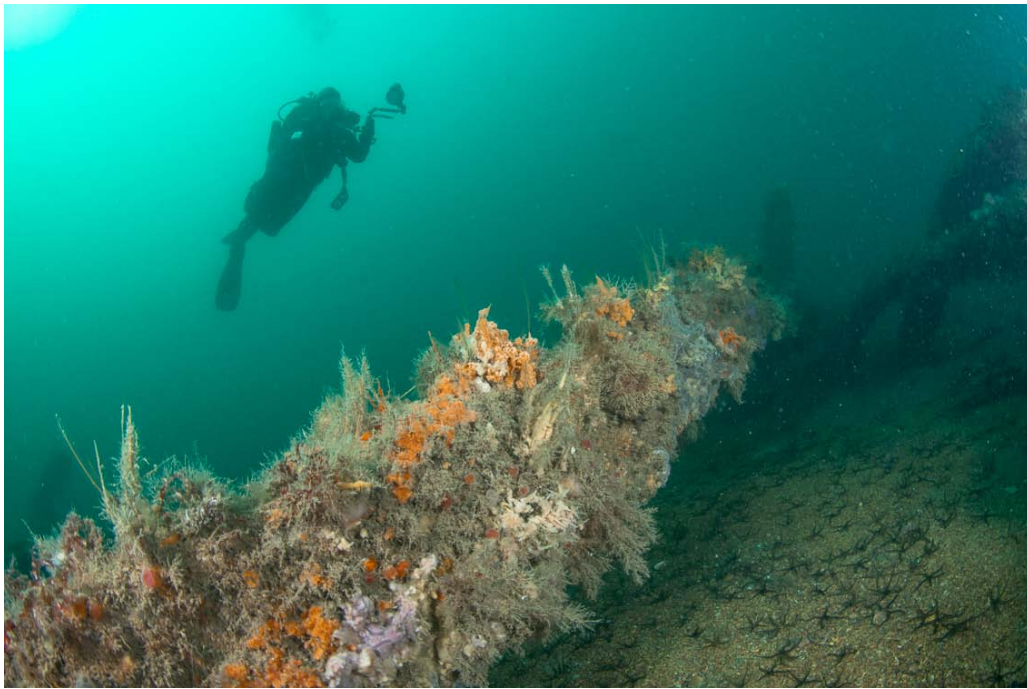
Power and Riches and the wife of Zeus in Greek Mythology. She was 280ft in length with a net tonnage of 1,994 and today would be admired as a classic tall ship. However at the turn of the century her ilk was common and she spent her working life carrying mostly minerals from the Americas to Europe.

On November 2nd 1913 she began her last voyage with Captain Lorentz as her master from Pisagua in Northern Chile with a cargo of nitrates bound for Europe. On the evening of February 1st the following year she was closing on the Lizard in a strong WSW gale. Lorentz was unsure of her exact position as they had been

The Hera in her heyday as a classic tall ship. Origin of image unknown.

The remains of the Hera cover a large area of seabed and the highest points can be found at the bow and the stern. These elevated areas attract soft corals and anemones that can feed on the nutrients born by mostly gentle currents. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 10-17mm FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 200 f11 1/60.





There are several sections of mast remaining some of which lie between the two sections of the wreck which makes navigating between them easy. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 10-17mm FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 200 f8 1/30.



There are areas of the hull which are accessible and these provide shelter for schools of pouting which disperse initially but soon regroup and become inquisitive. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 10-17mm FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 200 f8 1/30.

navigating by dead reckoning for the preceding three days due to a faulty chronometer and had not yet seen land. He was very much aware that only two years previously a company sister ship, the square rigger Pindos, had been lost on the Manacles reef in similar conditions. Anxious to avoid a similar fate the captain had decided to stay well clear of the Lizard and make slowly for Falmouth bay in the hope of spotting either the Lizard light to his stern or the St Anthony light to the north east of Falmouth as he

approached. The weather worsened in the darkness and one can only imagine the crew's mounting concern as the hours passed with no sighting of either light and the certain knowledge that they were fast approaching land. The Hera had in fact passed both these lights and not seen them in the poor visibility and was closing on Nare Head to the north east of Falmouth. The horrified crew suddenly sighted the offshore island of Gull Rock directly ahead through the mist and attempted to put the ship about, but it

was in vain with the gale driving them relentlessly forwards. The ship ran over the adjacent Whelps reef which ripped through her hull and she then stumbled onwards inside the towering cliffs of Gull Rock where she quickly settled.

Distress rockets were fired and attempts were made to launch the lifeboats but conditions proved to be too severe and the port lifeboat capsized alongside throwing several of the crew and Captain Lorentz into the sea where they quickly drowned.

The remaining crew abandoned the starboard lifeboat and followed the Chief Officer up the jigger mast to get clear of the breaking seas. The ship continued to sink and the men were forced to climb higher into the freezing wind and spray where gradually many of them succumbed to fatigue and exposure and slipped into the sea. The Falmouth lifeboat "Bob Newbons" had been launched when the flares were spotted by coastguards at Portloe but could not make the wreck until well after 2 o'clock the



Spider crabs are frequently seen on the wreck and foraging on the surrounding maerl beds which are rich in molluscs and smaller crustaceans. A weed covered part of the hull section of the wreck makes a good backdrop. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 10-17mm FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 200 f11 1/30

following morning, some three hours after the Hera had struck the reef. On arrival they were unable to locate the wreck due to the sea conditions and poor visibility and it was only the sound of the mate's whistle being blown furiously from the rigging which led them to her. Sadly only five of the crew of nineteen were found alive in the rigging and they were close to death themselves.

As always the tragedy provided profit for some and the wreck was auctioned within two weeks for

salvage. She was sold to Harris Brothers of Falmouth for the princely sum of £205 and although only her fore topsail remained above water the salvors made short work of recovering most of her gear and rigging. The wreck was then forgotten until 1970 when the Sub Aqua club from RAF St. Mawgan near Newquay discovered her remains in 12 to 15m of water.

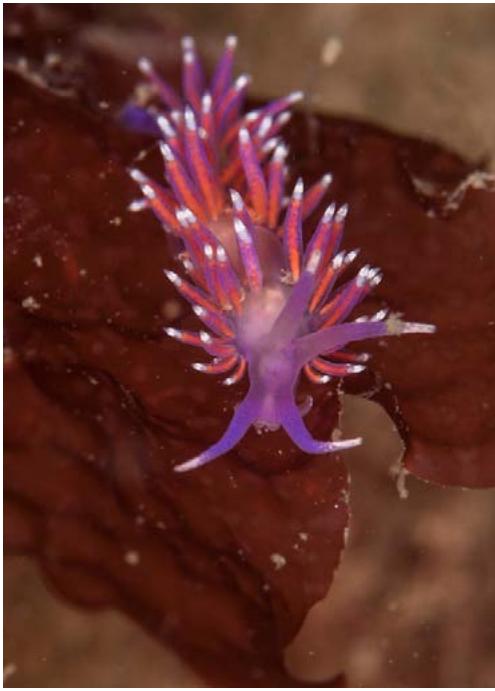
Since then the Hera has become one of the classic wreck dives of the area being in shallow and relatively sheltered waters and there is a



If you are exploring under the hull plates be aware that there is a large population of conger eels on the wreck. They are not aggressive but occasionally a diver gets a nip if they surprise the conger. Nikon D100, L&M Titan housing, 12-24mm zoom, Subtronic mini flash guns, ISO 200 F11 1/60

substantial amount of wreckage still to be seen. The hull now lies in almost two separate halves with the remains of her masts to lead you to from one to the other. Both bow and stern have areas of wreckage which stand up 4-5m from the seabed. The steelwork here is festooned with plumose anemones and dead men's fingers and attracts a wide variety of fish life. The central section of the hull is largely collapsed although the ribs and deck beams are easily distinguished. The cargo of nitrates washed away long

ago, but the remains of the holds still yield some interesting finds. Determined divers often find unusual coal waste 'briquettes', about 25cm square, which are embossed with a coat of arms. Some are still in good condition, although you have to dig deep in the wreckage to find them. There appears to be no record of this as cargo or its destination so perhaps it was carried to make use of surplus hold space or it is all that remains from the original salvage operation. Small non ferrous items are still found



The spring time is good for finding nudibranchs. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, ISO 100 f20 1/125

and occasionally, notably after winter storms, more substantial fittings are recovered. The seabed here is heavy sand and shingle and extensive beds of pale mauve maerl (a calcified seaweed) which settles quickly after rough weather and so the site often has good visibility.

Photographically the Hera is an excellent dive with a wide angle lens as there are several large areas of wreckage that rise above the seabed covered with colourful marine growth. The light coloured seabed also reflects



Maerl is a form of calcified seaweed which forms small coral like clusters on gravel seabeds. The colour can vary from deep purple to pale pink and orange and is most vivid in the springtime. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 10-17mm FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 200 f11 1/30

light so when the visibility is good you can create compositions that include a vista of wreckage in the background. Exploring the darker openings of the wreck will reveal many lobsters, congers and schools of pouting. In the summer months explore the kelp on top of the hull plates for John Dory which are common but very hard to spot.

It is also well worth exploring off the wreck particularly on the maerl beds which are home to all sorts of camouflaged fish and a favourite

haunt for cuttlefish, gurnard, flatfish and scorpion fish. A dive with a macro lens will not disappoint either as you will find dozens of small hermit crabs and dragonets in the maerl and many species of nudibranchs and often common cowries on the kelp.

The Whelps reef which was responsible for the Hera's demise is only a few hundred yards away on the south side of Gull Rock. At high water the tips of several rock peaks are visible, but as the tide falls the full hazard of the reef is revealed. Below

the water on the south and east side of the visible rocks the reef drops rapidly to 25m in a series of walls and gullies to a bright sand seabed. The reef supports a spectacular array of colourful marine life and ranks as one of the nicest reef dives in the area. So very often we start with a deeper first dive on the Whelps and then visit the Hera for a slightly shallower dive.

The port of Falmouth is only 45 minutes away by charter boat, or you can launch your own RIB from the excellent slipway at the water sports association and get there even faster. The position of the wreck is Lat. 50.11.48N 04.54.01W and is often buoyed in the summer months but is easily found from marks which the local diving centres can provide. Generally current is not a problem on the wreck, although on spring tides it would be best to wait for slack water. There are few opportunities to dive wrecks of the noble tall ship era and less still where the remains are recognisable in such shallow waters. So it is certainly worth considering if you are visiting the area and putting together a varied itinerary for your photography.

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Don't settle for 2nd best



Film - No Filter
No White Balance



Digital - No Filter
Manual WB



Magic Filter
Manual WB

Digital cameras have opened up new possibilities to underwater photographers. For available light photography manual white balance is an invaluable tool for restoring colours. But when you use it without a filter you are not making the most of the technique. You're doing all the hard work without reaping the full rewards. These three photos are all taken of the same wreck in the Red Sea. The left hand image was taken on slide film, which rendered the scene completely blue. The middle image is taken with a digital SLR without a filter, using manual white balance. The white balance has brought out some of the colour of the wreck, but it has also sucked all the blue out of the water behind the wreck, making it almost grey. The right hand image is taken with the same digital camera and lens, but this time using an original Magic Filter. The filter attenuates blue light meaning that the colours of the wreck are brought out and it stands out from the background water, which is recorded as an accurate blue.

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