



British Sub-Aqua Club

# Expedition Report

North East  
Regional Expedition  
Skye 2005

Nick Foster  
NE REDS Organiser 2005

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## Introduction

This expedition was part of the North East REDS scheme, which has been running successfully for a number of years now.

It was the main expedition of the REDS 2005 calendar with the aim of diving challenging sites, such as amazing walls and looking for undived/virtually undived wrecks off the small isles and if weather was kind to us a trip to the Small Isles.

We were based on Skye for a week; which would hopefully enable us to get to some rarely dived sites.

The original expedition plan had actually been planned to be based on Canna with the RIBS transported to Rhum and then driven across to Canna. Accommodation was sourced on Canna. The rest of expedition participants would then be transported to Canna via ferry along with all required equipment such as diving gear, fuel, compressors etc.

However due to inclement weather, the roof of the accommodation on Canna sustained damage and was blown off thus rendering it uninhabitable. A change of strategy was called for and the expedition base moved from Canna to Skye.

This would then hopefully allow us to dive all the previously planned sites if the weather was kind to us. As the expedition was planned for early in the year when there was a higher chance of bad weather, then this base would give easier access to diving in the more sheltered areas around the north of Skye and the Kyle of Lochalsh.

### Objectives of the Expedition:

- To dive challenging sites
- To look for and dive undived/virtually undived wrecks off the small isles and the West of Skye and/or in the Sound of Sleat.
- To allow divers of Sports Diver grade to increase their expedition experience.

## **Expedition Preparations**

One of the benefits of organising an expedition is that you can choose where you want to go and dive. For this expedition, I wanted to dive some of the rarely visited sites off the West Coast of Skye and the small Isles.

The original grant application was aimed at advanced divers especially those looking to obtain their first class diver as well as first class divers.

I approached a core group of divers to ensure that the expedition went ahead, with sufficient experience to act as assistant dive marshals and mentors to those less experienced divers.

I also advertised it throughout the North East. Posters were e-mailed to contacts in local clubs for display, mentioning at branch meetings and at the North East's Regional Conference Divewise. Applications to join the expedition were received from local divers (from the North East).

Unfortunately, of those who were provisionally booked onto the expedition a number of them dropped out, causing a slight change in strategy. *(A lesson for the future is to ensure that deposits are obtained well in advance.)*

As a result of a changing composition of the expedition participants, it was decided to aim the expedition at Sports Divers and above, with one of the aims to increase the expedition experience of these Sports Divers and as it turned out the expedition was fortunate in having some very experienced Sports Divers, who were more concerned with diving than obtaining qualifications.

The costs were kept low by staying in self catering accommodation and being self sufficient which meant that the expedition was economical enough to proceed even if we had been unsuccessful in our application for BEGS grant.

The final expedition was eventually limited to seven, due in part to logistical problems of getting two RIBS up to Skye. A 4x4 vehicle with a tow bar that was due to tow the second RIB, became unavailable due to circumstances beyond expeditions control.

As the date for the expedition loomed, tasks were delegated, with individual expedition members responsible for boat preparation, transport, food, accommodation and outline dive planning.

### ***Boat Preparation***

A RHIB was borrowed from Tyneside 114 branch but had to undergo some work to install some electronics and repair the VHF aerial, besides routine checks that shot lines were ready, oxygen kit full, engine started, flares were in date etc.

### ***Transport***

In the end the 4x4 took most of the heavy kit and estate car towed the boat. Each vehicle had a change of driver for safety.

**Food**

A meal plan was put together prior to the last minute shop at a convenient supermarket on route. The volume taken up food for hungry divers though should not be underestimated. Some passengers almost had to eat their way out of the vehicles.

A hot meal was cooked every night and packed lunch and soup was taken during the day.

The cooking was mainly done by 'expedition chef' Sabrina which meant that others could carry out other tasks whilst cooking was underway such as planning next day's diving and attending to kit etc thereby saving time overall.

The final night however we gave the chef a rest and ate out at the only local restaurant we could find.

**Accommodation**

This was booked after a search on the internet. The cottage was large, had ample space for kit fiddling, dive planning and enough rooms to make room allocation straightforward.

The cottage was a stones throw from the sea shore, with space for cars and RHIB.

**Dive Planning**

An outline dive plan was devised, potential dive sites identified and alternative back up sites as well. Information regarding wrecks in the area was obtained from the Hydrographic Department (for a small fee) to permit further investigation during the course of the expedition.

**Gas Supplies**

A number of options were considered for provided air fills and oxygen for rebreathers. Skye is a big island and travelling to a dive centre for fills each night would be tiring and time consuming. A portable compressor or lots of bottles were considered as alternatives. In the end a compromise was reached. Firstly take sufficient bottles to last a couple of days diving and then rendezvous with a hardboat at the Kyle of Lochalsh or the dive centre to fills them all up again. Rebreather divers took a 10lt bottle of oxygen for decanting and topping up their oxygen bottles and a single tub of sofnalime to share between them.

## Expedition Diving

### ***Saturday March 19<sup>th</sup> 2005***

We travelled up from the North East to our accommodation on Skye which overlooked Loch Eishort on the south side of the Island. It was a long drive up from the North East. To minimise costs, we travelled in three cars. Those towing the RIB arrived last but had the advantage of avoiding unpacking the food.

However, the narrow access road would mean that the trailer had to be turned around each morning by hand. There would not really have been room for a second RHIB if we'd been able to take it.



Sunset at Loch Eishort: Dive Planning, The RHIB, Own slipway (sadly, unusable)

We settled into accommodation and Katie Jordan planned the following day's diving.

There were great deliberations over the forecast at the time and whether we firstly would and secondly should try and dive off Canna.

It was decided best to have shakedown straightforward shakedown dive in the Kyle of Lochalsh and get everyone working as a team and happy with the boat and its equipment without having to worry about the weather too much.

### ***Sunday March 20<sup>th</sup> 2005***

The weather was absolutely gorgeous; so much for the forecast!

The old ferry slipway provided easy conditions for launching the RHIB and we headed out for our shake down dive was on the Port Napier.

The site was a popular choice with the group as half group had never actually dived the Port Napier. Others in the expedition had recently qualified as rebreather dives and so the perfect conditions and the surface to seabed datum (i.e. the wreck) kept their stress levels to a minimum.

Our second dive was a site from Gordon Ridley's book up in Loch Corran, which was quite a long boat drive around from the Kyle of Lochlash.

The sea was flat calm and so was ideal boat practice for Katie and Fran who had only recently attended a boat handling course. They successfully navigated a fuel efficient route avoiding shallow reefs and rocks. Progress was slowed by having stop a couple of times to say 'aaah' at some seals sunning themselves on one of the reefs.

Fran Mudd describes the day:

Being the least qualified diver on the trip, I was quite apprehensive about this week, but as it turns out, I need not have worried:

Today, not only did I get my first opportunity to put a BSAC Boat Handling course into practice, but I also learnt how to pee off the back of a RIB, which for a female diver I feel is quite an impressive and useful skill to possess, and one which is not taught on the boat handling course if I remember correctly....maybe I should produce a fact sheet?

The second highlight of the day has to be diving the wreck of HMS Port Napier; a large mine-laying vessel almost 500ft in length, which now lies in around 20m of water in Loch Alsh. After descending down the shot line and travelling along the horizontally protruding mast, there was time to swim first towards the bows, and then to the stern, although subsequent dives will definitely be needed during future trips to the area in order to see the full extent of the wreck!

After a quick packed lunch, it was off to Loch Corran for a scenic dive, before returning to the cottage in Ord, where roast chicken and vegetables was served up at a dinner table with spectacular views across Loch Eishort.

Pretty good day all round really



Shakedown dives on The Port Napier & navigating to Loch Carron

### ***Monday March 21<sup>st</sup> March 2005***

The weather forecast was not brilliant, initially force 2-3 increasing force 4-5. The distance to travel was about 10 nautical miles so it would be important to have a reasonable smooth ride there and back.

We planned to dive Sgeir Mhor, on the south west of Skye near the Sound of Soay. The journey to the site and the dive would be relatively sheltered but we would have to watch for any changes in the wind direction.

The Expedition headed off to the launch site at Elgol. Prior research and planning meant that we knew we should be able to launch and recover the RHIB but it was not until arriving that the true challenge became apparent. The slip was very long and very narrow; some expert reversing would be called for!



Launching at Elgol and the reef at Sgeir Mhor

The wind direction did change to onshore but fortunately this was after the first dive. As the first dive had been so awesome everyone decided to quit while we were ahead. We headed back in rapidly deteriorating weather conditions to the slipway, by which time the divers were starting to get cold and looking forward to a hot shower, food and chilling out at our expedition base.

Alan outlines the day's events:

Launched at Elgol. The slip is fairly narrow but is in really good condition, with a small but free car park nearby. The site to be dived was called Sgeir Mhor. We dropped a shot just off a reef that was partially exposed. The sea on the site was choppy but on the other side of the reef was a bay that was sheltered so was ideal for kitting up.

The shot was on an area of kelp in around 10m of water, this gently sloped to around 18m when a drop off was found. This wall, was sheer until approx 30m when another flat area was found, followed by another drop, which went to approx 44m. From then it gently sloped away.

A large amount of soft corals were present at all depths with good visibility. Even at around 45m the visibility was still around 15m with an abundance of life. No fish were present and very few crustaceans. This may be because of the time of the year however.

This was certainly a dive worth doing for experienced divers and certainly worth taking a camera in. A second dive was not carried out due to worsening weather conditions. The area around Elgol appears to be worth a look for a second dive.

### ***Tuesday March 22<sup>nd</sup> 2005***

We were not having much joy with the weather. This time we planned to head to the north of Skye and get some shelter from the strong near gale winds.

The slipway was not as long as we would have liked and there was a drop at the end of it. We still managed to launch the boat, but kit had to be loaded in afterwards rather than with the boat.

The wind speed increased as predicted and therefore dived very close to shore where it was flat.

However the funnelling effect of the wind around the headland was amazing. As wind rushed down the valley spray was whipped up in mini-water spouts. Everyone developed bright red tans from the 'pebble dashing' effect of the spray.

The slipway also faced into the wind and made recovery very interesting. Anyone who had been a little chilled at the end of the boat ride back was certainly not cold after recovering the boat.

Fiona outlines the day:

We made an earlier start to head further north, up to Lower Milovaig. There is a slip here, next to the ruined pier marked on the chart. On arrival the wind had picked up and was blowing onto the slip where we were launching. Strangely enough we were the only ones out diving there today.

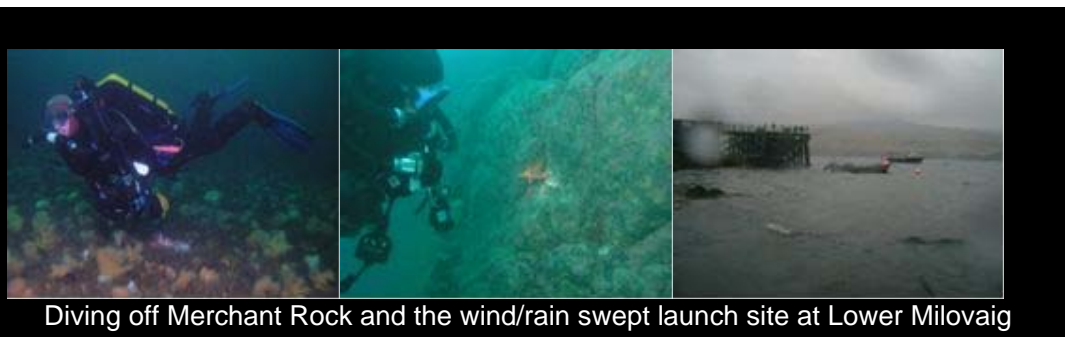
We launched the boat, after that there was a drop at end of the slip, and headed off. The first dive site we headed to was just north of The Merchant rock and Oisgill Bay. After spending a short time scanning depths and profiles with the echo sounder we settled on a dive site, and kitted up.

The conditions below the surface were more serene than above, with visibility approximately 20m and the water a pleasing blue hue. The bottom was a steep boulder slope with the rocks covered in jewel anemones, devonshire cup corals and plumrose anemones. We also spotted a lumpsucker, trying to evade our attention.

We headed back in for lunch: homemade carrot and coriander soup and rolls. By this time the wind had picked up and was blowing force 5 to 7 and was very gusty. The intermittent showers had also deteriorated into horizontal drizzle.

Undeterred we headed out for a second dive on the wreck of the Chadwick. The wreck is in about 20m at the north end of Oisgill Bay. As we were dropped up wind of the shot we soon realized that our calculations for slack water were a little out, as we ended up hanging on the shot like washing on a line, trying to pull ourselves down. This was a bit beyond me, as a new rebreather diver and we drifted off for a scenic drift.

The second pair managed to get onto the wreck. The wreck is fairly well broken and parts were sheltered from the tide. The wrasse seemed used to divers as they hung around expectantly. This was definitely a site that we could have bettered explored at slack water.



Diving off Merchant Rock and the wind/rain swept launch site at Lower Milovaig

**Wednesday March 23rd 2005**

Yet another atrocious weather forecast! Thankfully we had not gone to Canna otherwise we would have probably been spending a lot more time inside. Gale force winds were predicted so we looked for suitably sheltered sites. As we'd been driving quite long distances we decided on a site very close to our expedition base; a reef in the Loch outside our accommodation.

Unfortunately it was not going to be able to use the car to launch or recover the RHIB and as the 4x4 had no tow bar so how could we launch the boat?

The nearest slipway had been put out of action by excess rainfall washing away the top of the slipway but one a hundred metres further away there was functional slipway onto the sand.

Launching the RHIB wasn't too difficult. The recovery was a little bit more character building but with a cunning plan, some ropes, 4x4 and a little bit of brut force we managed to man handle the RHIB across beach. This was definitely character building but was too exhausting and time consuming to be done on a regular basis.

The launch and recovery however highlighted a problem! One of the rollers had seized and was now damaging the gel coat on the keel. Some repairs would be necessary.

Fortunately the Skye boat centre came to the rescue. Repairs to both boat and trailer were carried out overnight prior to diving the following day. Some contingency had been built into the budget just for these circumstances.



Katie writes

This week has so far been a steep but enjoyable learning curve especially with regards to boats, although even I could see that the slip at the end of our garden was missing a bit too much to be of any use. However, today proved to be the first time I would ever have to ponder whether to class my dive as a boat or a shore dive? The predicted gale force winds caused us to look close to home, the sea, Loch Eishort at the end of the garden seemed close enough.

A more suitable slip than the less than complete one at shore cottage was spotted on a romantic sunset walk earlier in the week, so, armed with enough kit to sink a less hardy boat we trundled down to test our boat manoeuvring skills. After a bit of heaving and less than elegant slime skiing, Sea Witch (The RHIB) was launched. Armed with GPS, charts and persistent wind and rain, we set out to our proposed site, in view of our accommodation. The charts implied a nice wall down to approx 35m with a deeper drop off.

The boat laden with more kit and people than for the rest of the week was cosy, always a bonus when the weather is determined to be miserable, and after lots of trundling about back and forth, with the odd circle thrown in for good measure, there was a rumour that we may have found the right spot.

Fran, Allen, and myself were the first ones to venture down. A minor flaw was noted when we reached the bottom of the shot to find it floating gaily away from the slope, we replaced it back onto the bottom but don't know how far from its original destination it had travelled. Unfortunately the site was more of a muddy slope than a wall, but that didn't prevent us from having an enjoyable dive in good vis (as long as you looked didn't touch). Some of the other groups and Allen collected a welcome addition to our dinner in the form of scallops, I was busy amusing myself and Fran with the top ten tricks an echinoderm can perform, along with kelp majorettes. As we were the first in we were also the first up and by chance managed to spot the boat where it was sheltering (aided by the fantastic visibility) whilst tootling around doing our safety stops, and managed to save any form of surface swim or boat movement by popping up directly under it.

Our contentment in the water and lack of enthusiasm for scrambling gracefully over the tubes saw us bobbing in the water till it was suggested that we swim home (perhaps in jest). However this was an achievement me and Fran felt couldn't be missed so off we set on a surface swim minus our weightbelts, with a flag orientated boat cover plan, 5 minutes later and seemingly no further away from the boat the idea seemed fairly foolish, however 32 minutes after surfacing we walked up to the house exhausted in time for the sun to come out.

Recovering the boat also turned out to be more character building stuff enough so that we decided to call it a day and explore the isle of Skye a little more, keeping a good eye out for suitable boat launching sites on the way.

**Thursday 24<sup>th</sup> March 2005**

The weather was improving slightly but was still not brilliant so decided to head north again to shelter from the predominately southerly gales.

Sabrina explains;

Due to gale force winds forecast for today we decided to choose a well sheltered spot and planned to do two wall dives off Greshornish Point. Due to some boat damage from previous days diving and a lack of spinning of the rubber bit at the back of the trailer (I'm a girl – don't know the proper name) we picked it up from Graham at the Skye Boat Centre with new working rubber bit and gel coated bottom and headed North towards Uig.

A long journey to get there resulted in the conversation being reduced to baaing at sheep – and getting a response – towards the end. We had planned to launch from Uig, but were advised that the slip was poor and would be better driving to the fish farm at Greshornish Point and asking to use their slip. A much better plan and considerably closer to the dive site, resulted in launching down their concrete slip with 'controlled' descent down the stone beach and loading of our dive kit from the jetty.

Arrival at the dive site was quick and uneventful, with much appreciated shelter from the wind by the cliffs. Our echo sounder confirmed the chart, registering drop-offs from 12m down to 75m. The first dive was a very nice wall dive with lots of jewel anemones, pincushion starfish and squat lobsters on descent down to 40m, with lots of holes in the rocks to shine your torch into. Nice and calm, and a good opportunity to practice sending an SMB up, drove the boat back to the slip for lunch. The wind had picked up considerably by this time, even though we had been very sheltered, which made for a bumpy ride back. Katie had her first drive of a RIB, with comments being "I don't think I did too badly - no one died; the only casualty was a hat and I managed to retrieve that" after Alan's hat was blown off after a particularly big bump. The second dive was a shallower wall dive but just as nice, although I think the fish farm nearby has likely had an impact and resulted in perhaps less life than I would have expected.

The traditional dive night out was held tonight, with food provided by Hotel Eileaniamaim, a short taxi ride from the accommodation. A very nice place to eat, although the portions were not quite diver-sized and resulted in a couple of noonoo's (hoover from Teletubbies) eating up anything that was left on a plate. Some interesting discussions too, perhaps helped by a little alcohol, including why bubble and squeak is so called. The two theories put forward were that it is the sound it makes whilst cooking, or the bubbling is the sound in your tummy followed by the squeak as the gas comes out the other end.

A very good days diving, and fantastic to dive somewhere new and exciting.



Sheltered from the wind, the RHIB is moored over the drop off at Grehornish Point

### **Friday 25<sup>th</sup> March 2005**

Final day of the expedition and the weather was still not great so decided to dive in the Kyle of Lochlash and Camas Crouise. Planning was not helped by the fact that there are few suitable launching slips down this side of southern Skye. Finally collared Andy Hunt into writing today's diary entry for the expedition.

I thought I'd escaped writing up a days expedition diving but alas not. Its now 10pm, my body has that 'I've been diving for a week ache', I've just eaten an excellent home made quiche and bread and butter pudding cooked by Sabrina and had a couple of glasses of wine, and now I'm expected to write something. Here goes...

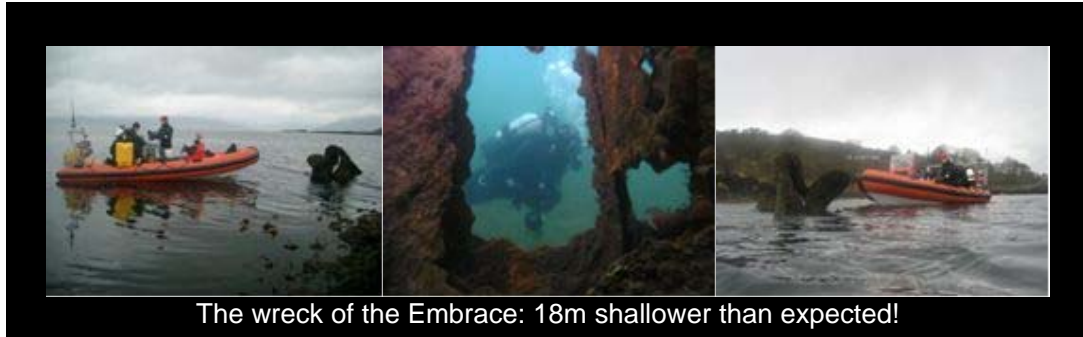
The cunning plan today was to investigate a very small wreck called the 'Embrace' which was not marked on the chart. We had obtained a hydrographic printout which mentioned that the Inverness Dive Club had requested to buy the wreck in 1975 and had supplied some information on its position. The position they had provided we thought was probably suspect, but a new position had been given in 2002 which looked a bit more promising but it wasn't clear who had updated the position. We thought we'd check it out anyway.

One problem was that the nearest suitable launch site was 13miles away at Kyleakin. This would eat into the reserve tank of the RHIB if we drove it that distance fully laden with divers. We therefore drove the RHIB around empty to rendezvous with Nick and Alan at Camas Crouise to load dive kit.

On the final approach to Camas Crouise we looked for the wreck. The echo sounder showed up nothing but a flat muddy bottom in the given location. Fortunately Nick and Alan had helped a local fisherman to launch his boat and got some more precise co-ordinates. As the boat arrived with everyone looking glum, Nick was waiting with a Cheshire cat smile on his face. It was low water and he pointed to an object in the distance. It was the prop of the wreck we think we were looking for just sticking out of the water next to the shore.

One hour and 6m of water later we had recovered an abandoned Bruce anchor, found the ship's toilet and some .303 ammunition. The wreck was only 20m long, upside down and badly collapsed. Although we probably wouldn't deliberately set out to dive this site again, it was worth the effort to find it.

We finished the day by dropping in on the Port Napier again as it was conveniently on the way back. Just because a site is well dived does not mean that should be omitted from an expedition. We had after all had our exploration for the day by diving a new site!



The following day we returned to the North East of England – leaving a Skye and its liquid sunshine behind us!

### Expedition Summary

A number of objectives had been set for the expedition.

#### Objectives of the Expedition:

- To dive challenging sites
- To look for and dive undived/virtually undived wrecks off the small isles and the West of Skye and/or in the Sound of Sleat.
- To allow divers of Sports Diver grade to increase their expedition experience.

I think that most were met all of these to varying degrees despite pretty horrendous weather conditions. We dived challenging sites, found a wreck and increased the experience of the sports divers.

Not all the sites in the original plan were dived. Had the conditions been more favourable, I would have liked to look for some wrecks off the Small Isles and Skye such as Nordhuk, the unknown wreck off Canna or the Sapphire.

However, I felt that expedition still provided challenging dives although the challenges were different for each member of the team.

For instance the Port Napier was good experience for those who had not experienced much wreck diving. The more experienced divers to whom the Port Napier was just another wreck found diving a multi-level wreck a completely different experience on a rebreather.

Part of the Expedition challenge, especially for those not experienced in RHIB diving, was reaching and locating dive sites such as the splendid wall ones near Grehornish Point.

As Expedition Leader I was concerned that the participants firstly enjoyed themselves and secondly increased their experience, in a number of areas such as planning, boat skills, diving in remote locations and working as a team. Part of my strategy to achieve this was to involve them as much as possible in the preparation for the expedition (e.g. planning transport, food) and having at least one opportunity to help plan a days expedition diving.

The informal feedback that I received from the expedition members, especially those that have not been on expeditions before, was that it has given them a lot of experience in diving in remote areas out of RHIBS and an appreciation of the work that is required in advance to do so safely and successfully. The testimonies of the individual divers included in this report I think backup their words.

I hope any new skills learnt by Expedition members will be put to good use in their respective clubs.

The final part of the expedition involved updating the Hydrographic Department's records. One of the expedition members visited the Hydrographic Office and supplied the information in person.

I would like to go back the Skye and visit some of the sites that we were unable to dive because of the weather. As weather was the main problem is there anything that could be done about this in future? Well, yes and no. The expedition was early in the year and perhaps later would be better, but even in the summer the weather can still be atrocious.

I might also choose different accommodation. Shore Cottage was very nice, clean, welcoming and had superb views. Unfortunately travelling to some sites from here took considerable time and I'm sure contributed to diver fatigue. Next time I'd probably find some accommodation a bit nearer the launch sites and with more parking space.

The Skye Expedition provided the basis for potential future expedition. I would like to dive off Canna and the slip way at Elgol could be used as home port. However, I think heading there later in the year would be wiser but I would still ensure that there were adequate back up plans in case the weather struck again.

## Expedition Statistics

1. Nick Foster, NE REDS Organiser, ADV, OWI, Rb
2. Sabrina Butcher, Neptune North BSAC, SD
3. Andrew Hunt, BSAC Expeditions Officer, FC, Rb
4. Fiona Hunt, Tyneside 114, DL, OWI, Rb
5. Alan Young, Marine & Tech, DL
6. Fran Mudd, Newcastle University, SD
7. Katie Jordan, Newcastle University, DL, OWI

1 First Class, 1 Advanced Diver, 2 Dive Leaders, 2 Sports Divers from 4 different BSAC branches.

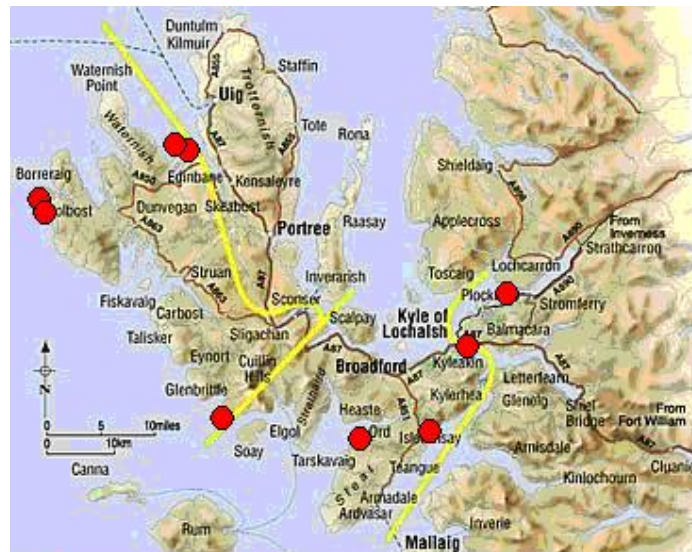
3 Rebreather divers (all on AP Inspirations, nitrox only)

Number of Dives: 48 (All with Buddy or as a 'three')

Number of Dive Locations: 9

Typical Dive Time: 45min

Depth Range: 15m to 50m



● Dive Locations

*Locations dived around Skye*

**Summary of Costs**

<b>Equipment</b>	
GPS Numbers - Hydrographic Dept	£25.00
Charts	£45.00
New GPS For boat	£350.00
Minor Boat and Trailer Repair	£70.00
<b>Accommodation</b>	
Shore Cottage, Isle of Sleat	£390.00
Electricity	£25.00
<b>Food</b>	
Food - Supermarket, Newcastle	£122.72
Food - Skye	£9.29
Food - Skye	£7.00
Restaurant Meals & Taxi	£239.65
<b>Transport</b>	
Fuel towing Boat to Skye	£55.00
Towing on Skye	£55.00
Fuel towing Boat back from Skye	£55.00
Equipment Van Fuel	£89.10
Car	£70.00
<b>Diving Costs</b>	
Boat Fees	£150.00
Boat Fuel - Sun	£37.63
Boat Fuel - Mon	£29.53
Boat Fuel - Tues	£18.86
Boat Fuel - Wed	£8.00
Boat Fuel - Thurs	£12.00
Boat Fuel - Fri	£0.00
Air Fills	£50.00
Total Cost	£1,913.78
Less BSAC Expeditions Grant	£1,000.00
Cost minus BSAC Grant	£913.78
<b>Final Cost Per Diver</b>	<b>£130.54</b>