

Diving the SMS Brummer Wreck

An Overview

Brummer is a firm favourite amongst the divers and offers very rewarding diving on a prime example of a dreadnought-era warship. The wreck is of a scale that is easy to swim around in one dive, navigation is easy due to her orientation and there is plenty to see from her arsenal.

The wreck is ever changing so it is important to have an understanding of the ship as she was and how she is now before entering the water. With that knowledge, the Brummer has a lot to reveal.

There are many really significant details to be discovered that bring home the scale and beauty of this class of historic warship. We all change with age, but the changes on the Brummer have added nourishment to an enthralling and impressive shipwreck.

Today the Brummer lies in 36 metres of water, on her starboard side, on a flat sandy seabed with her bow pointing roughly north. The wreck rises up to around 22 metres at the shallowest point and offers an involved, rewarding 35-metre dive without any overly technical commitment.

The Brummer shared a class with the Bremse, some remains of which can still be found at Swanbister, Orkney. They were designed as fast mine-laying cruisers. They were slightly lighter in construction and less heavily armed than the other cruisers. Many of the rails used to shift the mines around the ship can still be seen.

Bow Section

The bow of the Brummer was much more curved and graceful than the other cruisers which had largely straight stems. The tip of the bow rests on the seabed, perhaps weighed down by the starboard anchor which remains housed, adding weight to the underside of the hull.

The anchor chains run across the deck and around the two anchor capstans before disappearing down spurling pipes to the chain lockers.

The Brummer had four 5.9 inch guns, all mounted on the centre line. The forward gun now lies on its side on the seabed, still pointing to the bow.

The passage of time has seen the deck peel away from the hull and it now curves over the superstructure all the way back to the bridge. Many of the ship's distinctive features are confused by this change so care and concentration are needed to pick out the details from the debris.

Armoured Control Tower

The Armoured Control Tower would have sat upright but has fallen with the deck and now sits, almost on her roof, at a 45-degree angle. The door is open and the contents have long since been removed. The collapse has opened up the ship's spaces above and easy access is now possible to some of the exposed areas of the below-deck area. The internal access hatches are on view showing clearly how crew could have moved about the ship whilst at sea.

The bridge itself is one of the iconic sights of Scapa. Constructed of brass, so as not to interfere with the magnetic compasses, it remains in good condition. The top deck sits on top of a cross-lattice of supporting girders that made a distinctive run of "X" shapes along the side of the bridge. A quick glance at the structure is enough for it to be evident that this is indeed the bridge.

When the Armoured Control Tower collapsed it took the forward part of the bridge with it. There was a protruding section, about the width of a man's waist, from the front-middle of the bridge. The brass handrails are still intact and the base of what would have probably been a binnacle supporting a

sighting compass remain marked by a large circular indent. Further aft, in the body of the bridge, four large circles remain that would have been the mounting point for other binnacles, now long gone. The mast sits just behind the bridge and supports two searchlight platforms. The two shut-off irises from the searchlights remain and resemble the giant aperture leaves of a camera. The corroded remains of the searchlight body and glass fragments lie around, still sitting in the wishbone of their original gimbal.

There are a few small details that still remain in the main body of the bridge, human touches that give a connection across the time since the ship's sinking. On the front wall is a segmented, compartmentalised storage box which it is thought would have been used to store the array of naval flags used for signalling.

Boiler Rooms

All three of the Brummer's funnels have rotted away. The first of the three funnels was sited directly behind the bridge. Made of thin steel, it corroded quickly and fell to the seabed where it left an impression that can be seen today.

At the base of the last funnel it is possible to see the grating at the top of the boiler rooms that would have prevented any battle damage going down into the belly of the ship.

The second of the 5.9 inch deck guns has also fallen from the deck and now sits pointing aft. The distinctive "C" shape of the breach is recognisable as it emerges from behind the gun shield. The ship's pinnaces (boats) would have been stowed and manhandled in this area so there are the remains of a number of davits and derricks around, though nothing of the scale that can be seen on some of the other cruisers.

The port side of the hull is starting to belly inwards between the two top decks, weakened by the blast area in the engine room. Eventually the deck will fall away from the hull, from the blast area forward, exposing the top of the boiler rooms.

Also evident is the mount for a high-elevation gun, now absent, that protrudes from the deck. Moving towards the stern it can be hard to understand the wreckage of the superstructure. There was a flying deck that ran across the top of the accommodation areas, making a walkway that stretched from aft of the bridge to the stern gun. This structure, easy to mistake for the deck itself, nevertheless lies as a recognisable feature running aft.

Stern Section

The stern mast lies on the seabed, running out from the ship and marking the start of the stern section that is largely free from blasting.

Much of the top deck and superstructure have fallen over on themselves, away from the ship, so the last two 5.9 inch deck guns lie near overhanging deck plates, making them easy to miss. Inset into the roof of the aft accommodation superstructure is a strange triangular shape that looks like a mounting point. This is probably the support for a sighting structure of some kind, akin to the trig points found on many peaks around the UK, and perhaps used to calibrate the aiming instruments. Here the supporting deck ribs are exposed, free from the decking that has fallen away, so the view back at the wreck appears to be through the ribs of a strange skeleton.

A final capstan sits just aft of the stern gun, while the sides of the deck are marked by a series of mooring bollards and fairleads.

The kedge anchor remains housed and marks the aft-most point on the Brummer. The hull is open here and it is possible to swim back along the top deck, peering through hatches that would have been internal when the ship was floating. The steering room and the steering engine inside are easily found, and the route goes past wires and heating coils hanging down.

Alternatively, it is possible to swim down the hull and over the rudder to the keel. The remains of the supporting A-frame are still overhead, though the propellers have been salvaged. Some of the hull plates have rotted away here exposing the steering engine from below. Eventually the keel breaks down into where the engine room blast area starts and all the engine parts have spilled onto the seabed.

Engine Room

The salvage teams followed their usual routine and blasted the top side of the hull in order to remove the valuable non-ferrous components in the engine rooms. Despite their efforts, there are still some massive components left: large gear wheels; turbines; valves and pipes.

Swimming around such large-scale engineering feels like being one of The Borrowers: everything is recognisable, just bigger!

Destructive Forces

Most of the salvage effort on the Brummer was concentrated on the engine room which was blasted, with much of the machinery removed. Apart from this main area, the workers largely left the rest of the ship alone so most of the present changes are due to the corrosive effects of time and immersion.

There has been a number of notable, visible changes in recent years that all follow roughly the same theme. The wreck lies on its side and the net effect of the destructive forces has led to the deck peeling away from the hull, especially in areas where there is additional weighting such as the armoured conning tower. Once the dynamic of these forces is understood, the wreck is much easier to navigate. Structures that are not where they should be can easily be found by imagining where they would end up.