

## Diving the SMS Cöln Wreck

### An Overview

Cöln is the most intact of the four cruisers and looks exactly how you would imagine her shipwreck. Her engine room was blasted during the salvage operation but little else was touched so that, after more than 90 years of immersion, her structure is reasonably intact and she is easily recognisable as a warship.

It is easy to imagine her turned 90 degrees, floated up to the surface and sent on her way. If this dive doesn't put a smile on a diver's face, nothing will!

She lies on her starboard side on a flat, even seabed in 36 metres of water, with the bows pointing roughly north.

The top of the wreck is around 22 metres, making her a good mid-30 metre dive well within the grasp of most competent sports divers. Easy to navigate, with all the main structures intact and recognisable, the Cöln swiftly becomes most people's favourite after a week's diving.

### Bow Section

One of the delights of Scapa is to swim into the Cöln from mid-water and see the bow emerge from the sea. The straight stem sweeps away to the right on its journey to the keel, whilst the tip of the bow is shaped to house the mooring ropes on their journey to the quay.

Set into the side of the ship is a distinctive moulding that would have once housed the massive forward anchor. A row of portholes runs along the hull.

Swimming further towards the stern, the deck is a flat vertical wall of steel on the diver's right shoulder. Anchor chains run up and out of the hawse pipes, circle the capstans, then disappear down spurling pipes to the chain lockers below. Between them sits the mount for the control assembly.

The two forward 5.9 inch deck guns that were originally located side by side on the fore deck have been removed during salvage, leaving just the stub of the mounting shaft. A shield from the forward side of a 5.9 gun lies where it was abandoned on the side of the hull, for reasons long since forgotten. Set in the deck are the skylights that would have ventilated the crew quarters. The hatches on the lower edge hang open, allowing a view into the deck space below.

### Armoured Control Tower

The Armoured Control Tower on the Cöln is very distinctive and has retained its structure well, especially considering it is now at 90 degrees to its intended orientation and comprises of a thick armoured steel cylinder unsupported apart from deck. A line of viewing slits span the front face, each with a heavy eyebrow to prevent water running down and inside.

The tower comprises two rooms, a lower, forward room housing steering helm and compass, and an aft, slightly elevated room within which operators could view targets through powerful sighting optics. The gimbals for these optics can still be seen through the circular hole in the roof. On top is the remains of what looks like a radar but is actually the protective clam-shell housing for those optics. As the ship turned on her side, the weight of the doors on one side of the tower ensured they stayed shut, whilst on the other swung open. The steering binnacle remains inside, though is tricky to see

within the tight confines.

To the port side of the Armoured Control Tower are the shield and gun mount of a 5.9 inch gun, the barrel of which is absent.

### **Bridge**

The bridge itself retains much of its original structure but is deceptive in appearance, as it defies what you would expect to see. In its day, this would have been an open structure, more akin to scaffolding, and covered in tarpaulins for protection rather than the enclosed room we would expect today. It is largely complete and feels quite small considering the importance of what would have gone on in this area.

Surprisingly, there is a gun barrel wedged in the superstructure of the bridge. This is thought to be the starboard gun, pushed up when the ship hit the seabed.

The mast runs out of the top of the bridge with two searchlight platforms now lying on the seabed. The supporting wires can still be seen in the seabed where they have landed, forming a triangular structure.

### **Boiler Rooms**

Moving aft, the three openings at the base of the funnels are easily seen. The view into them is blocked by what, at first, looks to be steel plate but when touched moves like a very heavy-woven cloth. It is thought this would have been part of the heat shielding at the base of the funnels. The gratings into the boiler rooms are obscured though there is plenty of evidence of coal spilling from open coal scuttles which would have been bunkered down the outside edge of the ship as additional protection.

All the ship's pinnaces (boats) would have been stowed on the deck in this area. Two massive davits hang down over the deck and an array of lesser davits and derricks dot the area. The boiler of one of these pinnaces can be found on the seabed, the rest of the boat having long since rotted away. Further aft a torpedo tube sticks up vertically from the seabed under a distinctive high-elevation gun that still stands proud of the deck. The shield and accommodation superstructure that would have originally encased this gun have gone, leaving it strangely exposed.

### **Stern Section**

The engine room has been extensively blasted and efficiently cleared but there is a path toward the stern along the remains of the superstructure. The wreck starts to reform after the blast hole and takes shape again at the officers' accommodation. The stern mast sticks out across the seabed here too. In keeping with the other cruisers, there are two 5.9 inch guns at the stern, both visible and both pointing aft. The penultimate gun is mounted on the roof of the superstructure, high enough to fire over the stern-most gun.

A capstan is mounted on the gun just below the barrel of the stern gun and the edge of the deck is dotted with mooring bollards and fairleads. The plans of the Cöln show a seaplane mounted on the deck. Whether or not this ever occurred is debatable but the derrick lies distinctively on the seabed at this point.

Finally the wreck culminates in a kedge anchor, still housed as if ready for use. The seabed at the stern is littered with the remains of broken bottles sticking up in the silt.

The stern sweeps down to the keel with a beauty of line where form follows function. Both the propellers have been salvaged though broken parts of the A-frame still litter the seabed and the hull still retains the moulded form to accommodate the water flow. The rudder is still present, a large distinctive steel rectangle jutting from the hull. Holes between the ribs in the hull allow sight of the manual steering controls and the steering engine.

## **Engine Room**

The keel breaks up where the blasting to access the engine room restarts on the lower side of the ship. The salvage operation was particularly efficient in the engine room of the Cöln, leaving only a mass of twisted plates, pipes, valves and cables.

The shape of the hull reforms at the forward bulkhead of the engine room and continues to the bow, largely unchanged from when she was constructed.

## **Overall Impression**

There is something both angular and straight-edged about the hulls of these ships, strangely at odds with the sweeping curve at their cruiser sterns.

The design holds a beauty, contradicting its warlike intent, but, however the aesthetic is appreciated, this is a style and shape of ship rooted in an era of history that the world will never see again.

Scapa is a living museum underwater and nowhere is this more evident than in the grace and characteristic lines of the Cöln.