

x-Entry/exit point for shore dives

ST ABBS

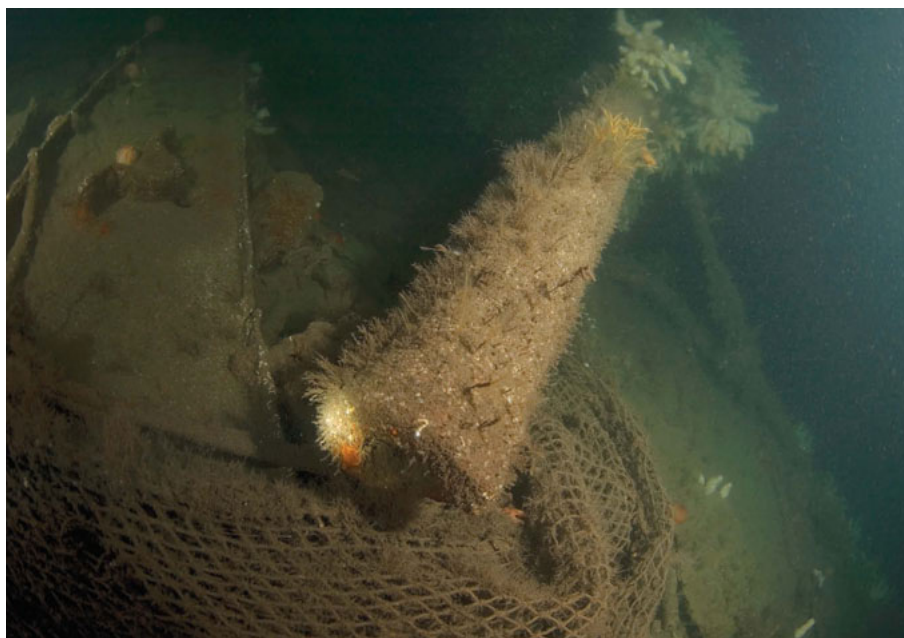
St Abbs, which lies 45 miles southeast of Edinburgh, is a charming place and a fantastic dive destination, held in high regard around the world. It is probably the best shore-diving destination in Scotland, if not the whole of the UK, and certainly offers my favourite shore dive, around and about Cathedral Rock. There are currently four dive boats operating out of St Abbs which will visit the sites in the immediate area, from Ebb Carrs to the sites around St Abbs Head and Pettico Wick. The sites further afield are visited by Marine Quest based in Eyemouth and only some of the St Abbs boats. Check when you book if you wish to visit these sites. The diving is generally scenic diving of superb quality but there are a couple of scenic shipwrecks of note. St Abbs itself is a quaint village nestled around a picturesque harbour. Most of the dive boat operators offer accommodation either at St Abbs or in the nearby village of Coldingham, around a mile away. St Abbs itself has a couple of cafés that are open only during the day but Coldingham has a few pubs where you can get bar meals. It's also in Coldingham that you will find Scoutscroft Holiday Park and Dive Centre. Air is available both here and at St Abbs harbour itself. St Abbs Head also forms part of the St Abbs and Eyemouth Voluntary Marine Reserve. Protected waters stretch south from Pettico Wick to Eyemouth.

Parking charges apply at the harbour. Rates are per hour but whole day parking currently costs £7



St Abbs harbour

Dive no. #7



Exploring HMS Pathfinder

Name

HMS *Pathfinder*

Location

10 miles off St Abbs Head

GPS coordinates unavailable. Contact Marine Quest to arrange dive

Depth

61 metres to the deck, seabed 67 metres

Conditions

Superb historic wreck covered in artefacts. Average visibility a dark 6 metres

Access

Boat only. Contact Marine Quest

Diver experience

Technical diver

Dive site

HMS *Pathfinder* was a 2940-ton, Scout-class light cruiser and is another of the extremely important historic shipwrecks in the Firth of Forth. She was the first warship ever to be sunk by a torpedo fired from a submarine.

The morning of 5 September 1914 dawned clear and the conditions made the belching black smoke from HMS *Pathfinder's* three funnels visible for miles around. She was patrolling the outer Firth of Forth with a flotilla of destroyers and torpedo boats. The patrol was to last for five days, which caused problems for HMS *Pathfinder*. Coal shortages at the outbreak of World War One and the poor endurance of this class of ship meant that HMS *Pathfinder* needed to cruise at five knots to complete her patrol, or else run out of fuel. The sea was mirror calm and the afternoon sunlight shone down. The gentle progress of the light cruiser had been monitored for some time by Kapitänleutnant Otto Hersing, who was in command of the German submarine *U-21*. He had soon tracked the vessel by the black smoke from her stacks. HMS *Pathfinder* was a sitting duck and Hersing fired a torpedo from around 4000 yards off HMS *Pathfinder's* starboard bow. The torpedo was seen and tracked by the lookouts as it raced towards the ship but they were powerless to evade it. At five knots, HMS *Pathfinder* was making so little headway that when orders to avoid the torpedo were given, the ship would not respond to the helm, unable to steer effectively at such slow speeds. The torpedo struck just below the forward guns and ignited the cordite in the magazines. The bow vaporised and HMS *Pathfinder* started to settle very quickly. Fearing that the explosion had not been observed by the remaining ships of the flotilla, the captain ordered that a blank shell be fired from the stern gun. All but nine of her 268 crew lost their lives.

Diving the wreck, which lies at 60–67 metres, requires technical diving skills. HMS *Pathfinder* is the main reason I undertook such training, as this ship's history drew me like a magnet to explore its remains. Visibility is usually 5–10 metres, but dark. Descending the shotline, it's a long way down and all ambient light is left behind as the depth increases. Divers usually stop to attach a strobe to the shotline to assist in relocating it after the dive. At a depth of 61 metres, the diver lands on the deck just aft of the remains of the bridge. Voice pipes and levers can be seen here. Finning aft along the port side of the wreck takes the diver past torpedo tubes, and shells lie on the deck. Some are packed in groups of six, their wooden box having rotted around them. Portholes also lie on the deck. There are more mundane items to be seen as well, such as mooring bollards and capstans. Nearing the stern, a large 4-inch gun points towards the surface in an elevated position. This could be the gun that fired the blank shell to try to alert nearby ships to the plight of HMS *Pathfinder*. At the stern, a large anchor lies on the deck, and if the diver drops over the stern they will be able to view the twin screws in a depth of 67 metres. Returning to the shotline, back up the starboard side of the wreck, more ordnance is noted as well as guns pulled from their mounts. This is most likely the work of trawl nets and there are the remains of some nets on the wreck.

Just aft of the bridge is one of the most poignant sights I have ever seen underwater. On the deck a brass sextant glowed green in my torchlight. Guns and portholes are all magnificent sights but this sextant would have been used by one of the ship's crew, who most likely lost his life on that day. It really brought home the human aspect

of the dive. HMS *Pathfinder* is obviously a war grave and should be treated with the utmost respect.

Very recently, Iain and Jim Easingwood of Marine Quest have located and put divers onto the remains of the bow section of HMS *Pathfinder*. This was thought to have been completely destroyed in the explosion. Reports from Iain suggest that there is a section of the wreckage rising out of the seafloor to a height of one metre. I have not yet visited this site and it has been added to my ever-expanding wish list of dives to be completed in the Firth of Forth. For the technical diver, HMS *Pathfinder* makes an outstanding dive.

Dive no. 48

Name

Fast Castle

Location

North of St Abbs Head

GPS coordinates N5556.02

W0213.43

Depth

12–22 metres

Conditions

Superb gullies. Average visibility 10 metres

Access

Boat only. Contact Marine Quest

Diver experience

Ocean diver

Dive site

Not much remains of Fast Castle today, but what is left will allow an imaginative person to picture how it may once have looked. The history of this small castle is impressive. While King James V was still too young to take the throne, Cardinal Beaton became Regent and ruled Scotland. In his time he did much to save Scotland from the English king, Henry VIII: these were the dangerous times of Rough Wooing, with Henry attempting to win Scotland through a combination of military might and then later in the minority of Mary Queen of Scots matchmaking. Soon Cardinal Beaton was in hiding in a cave directly beneath Fast Castle. Rumour had it that he held a vast fortune in gold there.

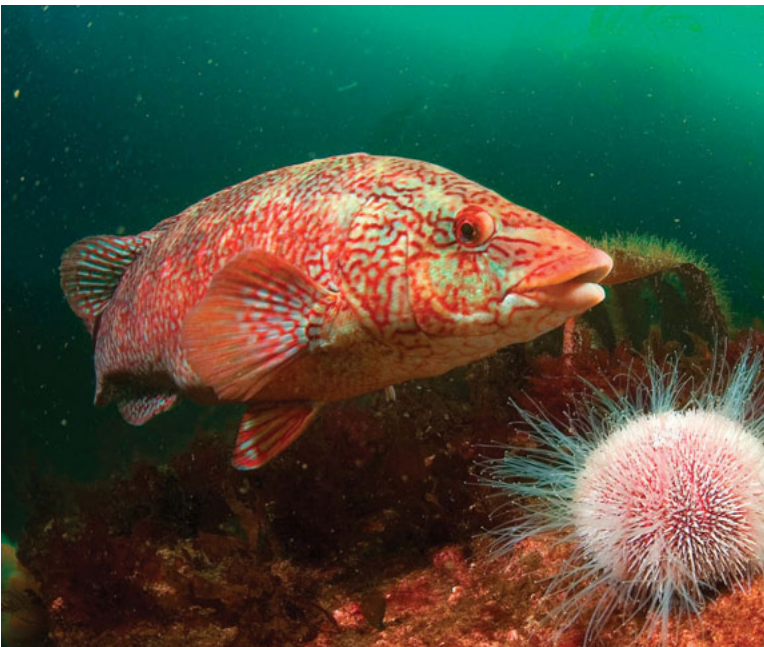
I had a snorkel into the cave and a look around inside, but the slippery rocks were too dangerous for a diver on his own.



Wolfish at Fast Castle

With this wonderful mixture of history and scenery colouring the scene, divers can't wait to get into the water. The first site, right under the castle, doesn't warrant a mention. It's just a kelpy boulder-filled scour, with a complete lack of life and – honestly – no gold.

Move offshore 200 metres and it's a different story. Here, beautiful sand-filled gullies, full of life, run down from 12 to 17 metres. I found five wolffish on a single dive here recently and this is now one of the best places to see these fish. As you pass 18 metres, the seafloor flattens out somewhat and becomes overrun by brittle stars interspersed with fantastically-coloured dahlia anemones. This continues down to a depth of around 22 metres, but it's likely that the diver will wish to return to the superb gullies and explore for wolffish amongst the dead man's fingers. Cod and ling are common here too, and the diver should always keep a lookout for smaller Yarrel's blennies that are common at this site. If you are diving with Marine Quest, Jim and Iain will know exactly where to drop you in the water. The rule of thumb here is to get into slightly deeper water of, say, 15 metres: optimum wolffish-spotting depth is 15–18 metres. After experiencing a few poor dives around the castle, I was delighted to dive the reef 200 metres offshore. It is a fantastic site and rivals the Brander (dive site 51) as the best dive in the area.



Ballan wrasse and sea urchin on Nyon wreck

Dive no. 49

Name

Nyon

Location

Between The Souter and Fast Castle
GPS coordinates N5555.93
W0212.98

Depth

Wreckage at 6–15 metres

Conditions

Nice shallow site. Average visibility 10 metres

Access

Boat only

Diver experience

Ocean diver

Dive site

On 17 November 1958, the Swiss motor vessel *Nyon* didn't get very far on her voyage

from Leith to Dakar. After only 40 miles, 5000 tonnes of potential shipwreck was sitting high and dry on Meg Watson's Rocks, just north of The Souter. Over the next 11 days, salvage experts tried to save the ship, but bad weather hindered the tugs' attempts to drag the *Nyon* free. Rather than have the ship become a total loss, it was decided to cut her in half amidships. This was completed successfully and the intact stern section was towed to Tynemouth shipyard, where it was fitted to a new bow section. This ship would sink three years later in the English Channel. The original bow remained on Meg Watson's Rocks until the first storm of December swept the bridge from the wreck and broke the ship up. The bow section was sold to salvagers who took it piece by piece up the cliff, but what was left behind now lies at 6–15 metres. It's a very scenic spot, with red fronds of kelp wafting above the gullies. Ballan wrasse fin about, using the huge steel girders that litter the sea floor as cover. I soon found winches and a fire hose reel, and then one of the *Nyon's* massive anchors. Examining a photo of the stranded ship, it was easy, by looking down the anchor chain, to pinpoint exactly where I had been diving. There was certainly plenty of wreckage to see and with information gained from the photo, there appears to be potential for even more wreckage further out. It would also be more visible in the deeper water, as it would not be shrouded in kelp. I really enjoyed this dive because of its scenic beauty, and diving the wreckage of a ship whose loss was extremely well-documented is always interesting. She makes a cracking second or third dive of the day and there is certainly potential for making new finds after the winter storms have shifted the sandy seafloor.



The Souter nudibranch

Dive no. 50

Name

The Souter

Location

4.5 km northwest of Pettico Wick. Highly visible sea stack.

Depth

10–20 metres

Conditions

Easy diving. Average visibility 8 metres

Access

Boat only

Diver experience

Ocean diver/sports diver