

The “Aarhus” wreck

John Kelley

A Web site note: Aarhus. Danish barque, iron, 640 tons. Built Hamburg, Germany, 1875. Laden with kerosene and general cargo from North America, struck Smiths Rock, off Cape Moreton, Queensland, sank within minutes, 24 February 1894. Crew saved. Remains found in 1979 by Ben Cropp and members of the Underwater Research Group of Qld.

Linton Holroyd related the story of the discovery of the Aarhus wreck to me recently. This was more like the discovery of the wreck for the diving community as the local fishermen knew where it was but would not tell the divers. Linton and others used to take visiting members of foreign warships out for dives when they were in port. On one occasion they had, as company, the helicopter mechanic from a US Navy Destroyer. Part of the Destroyer’s tasks was to detect submarines and consequently it had helicopters equipped with sophisticated “magnetometers” and “dunking sonars”. As Linton was being shown around the helicopters on board ship he asked if they would do a search for sunken wrecks in the Cape Moreton area. The mechanic asked the pilot who was enthusiastic and sought permission from his superiors. The Navy subsequently searched the whole area and mapped all the wrecks and bits of iron – St Paul, Marietta Dal and the Aarhus and others – around the Cape Moreton area. They sent Linton their original chart from Tahiti with the wrecks marked. Linton gave this to the local Maritime Archaeology organisation that later showed it to Ben Cropp. Cropp had the sophisticated radar for bearings and sounders on his boat and located the Aarhus quickly in 1979. Since that time URGQ members have spent 10-15 years mapping, measuring and surveying the wreck. A permit, which we had, is required to dive the wreck.

On my weekend dive on the Aarhus wreck the current was very strong to the point where I did not take my camera although part of that decision was that I was trialling a new second-hand BC and was unsure of its operation. I dragged myself down the anchor line into the current being wrenched now and then by the surge and, as the bottom came into sight, a wonderland of fish materialized before me. Trying to find my button to inflate my BC (the tube had been blown over my shoulder by the current) I sank into a flashing school of bait fish. I finally made neutral buoyancy at 20m and had another chance to look around. A school of large Amberjack (a deep-bodied species of Kingfish and very similar to the familiar Yellow-tail Kingfish) headed towards the wreck from the distant gloom in the east along with an attendant eagle ray. My attention went elsewhere for the minute and the Eagle Ray was gone. Not so the school of enormous Amberjack which swirled around the bait fish like cattle dogs around the herd.



Yellow-tail Kingfish



Phil Marshall

I swam onto the wreck (there’s not a lot left but enough to hang onto and shelter from the current), cleared my mask, and found myself surrounded by the bait fish (a Hardyhead species I

think – Oligby's Hardyhead). Where were my dive buddies, Phil and Chris? – oh yes, I could just make them out through the fish. There were a number of schools of bait fish and they massed and darted and flashed as they negotiated the wreck and avoided the Amberjack and the divers. At times the little fish hung like a suspended mobile, disorientated and confused, some facing the others. Then, in a snap, they coalesced, turned in the same direction, as if directed by some hidden conductor, and speed off. I could have watched them for hours although this was not possible on my small tank.

The school of Amberjack patrolled the outskirts of the paddock keeping a watchful eye on their delectable food source (and presumably us). A huge, old, turtle was lying on the sand with his head obscured by the wreck. He was not to be disturbed. We shook his front flipper in a friendly hello but he did not move at all – I hope he remembers to breathe sometime. Apparently turtles can tolerate a lot more carbon dioxide than we can as they have a different heart system. As well, they store a lot of oxygen in their blood and muscles. As a consequence they have been observed to stay underwater, sleeping, for about 6 hours!

There were other macro delights on the Aarhus although it was hard for me (normally a macro man) to attend to them even though my buddies pointed and gestured. Lovely coral shrimp with their long antennae and a "naked" (well, out of its hole) moray eel and a huge stone fish. Coral Rockcod and Sweetlip gently nestled in the lee of the current behind some of the rusted ribs of the Aarhus. Huge bat fish cruised by in small groups (haven't they heard of current?) and a large grouper stood point on the wreck. He was not fazed by an approaching diver. I understand that divers from the Club on the previous weekend had seen a school of the large Cobia or Black Kingfish. I had little time to ponder the fact that the Aarhus is an historic wreck.

Continually the fish schooled, parted, darted and cruised. Schools of different species joined and parted. The schools floated over the wreck and then streaked to another spot. They hung close then rose up. They formed next to you and then all around you. What a pity I was running out of air.

We covered barely 15m from the anchor but it was a mesmerising dive.