

GOLD COAST DIVING - 25 Aug 01

John Kelley

DIVE 1 – “Scottish Prince”

“Just a bit this way. Now right hand down. Now follow that line. See the hamburger shop lines up between the two small high rises”. “Now look out for fish”.

Well I said to myself, “there’s a lot of fish in the ocean”, and sure enough I saw some. I suspect they were frightened by some bigger critter and flashed their little bodies on the surface in utter confusion and disarray. They certainly didn’t pinpoint the wreck.

As for the hamburger shop - well it sure lines up but it’s the wrong hamburger shop and the wrong high rises unless, of course, we are looking for another wreck and not the “Scottish Prince”.

The other way to find the Prince is to watch the other diver boat zoom past us by several hundred metres and anchor right on her. Good work navigator.

I finally got to dive the “Scottish Prince” an historic wreck - a 64 metre long, 910-tonne three master, which sank (due to poor navigation) in 1887 with a boot load of whiskey. Well, let’s not get too excited. There’s a pile of metal rusting away, half-buried in the sand.

The surge from the well-developed surfing waves that were breaking on the beach nearby helped to churn up the sand and grit around the hulk. Rusted and covered in sea squirts as it is, the shape of a ship *is* distinguishable. It’s bow faces East and the other end West.

Although in ten metres, I should have taken my surfboard down instead of the camera. In fact I only took seven shots with the camera and it konked out. It wouldn’t fire. I did everything I could think of, short of giving it a shot of Viagra, but it would not fire. Later, on the surface, I saw the little flashing “dead battery” sign. In any event the pictures were full of sand and grit.



The Southern side of the wreck appears to have the more attractive life. Pretty octocorals with their white feathery polyps abounded. Ascidians, hydroids (fern-looking animals) were well represented and a bushy Bryozoan.

The bryozoan, often called a sea mat/moss, is a fascinating animal much higher up the food chain than it looks. There are over 500 species and a huge variety in their form. However, each has a little sculptured box in which it lives and joins with others. You can't see the little box with the naked eye but fortunately the bryozoans are a friendly bunch and their little "zooids" always form up with others to make a colony. In this case the colony looks like a small bush of fine curled net.

Other species of bryozoans foul boats and pipes and are not man's favourite little pet animal. This particular one on the "Scottish Prince" has zooids that live in a little box that looks like a Batman mask (drawing below magnified about 80 times).



There is just so much you can't see with the naked eye. In fact, with the bifocals and water leaks in my mask, I see sweet FA most of the time. The bryozoans also are frequented by yellow sea spiders, which eat them. I sat and looked at this bryozoan, searching for sea spiders, for some time. I think Alan, my dive buddy, thought I had caught my fin in something or was trying to hypnotise a fish (or had fallen asleep). I found none.

The surge finally got me and I cut lose and went for another roller coaster swish with all the other garbage in the water. The schools of fish were plentiful and often circled us. Under the ledges were the inevitable schools of bullseyes and the odd wobbegong.

After a couple of times around the ship dragging my non-firing camera we surfaced.

DIVE 2 – Gold Coast Sea Wall

The next dive was along the rock wall of the seaway out of the Broadwater.

As it was about two hours before the high tide the water was running fast and it was a drift dive. We crossed two pipes enroute and clung to them with vigour. We went out along both of them but the tidal flow increased the further out we went making it difficult going. I clung desperately to the algal-covered sea squirts and started to appreciate what a lure must feel like as it's reeled in at fast speed.

However, the animal life looked interesting. There was an abundance of the soft coral with the white polyps and feathery (pinnate) tentacles. The soft coral liked it under the pipe. One had to be a little wary of what one clung to as there were a variety of spent fish hooks and the odd little Fortesque-like fish - the ones that are likely to stick a poisonous hypodermic in your hand as it lands on them.

Various divers surfaced to get picked up by the boat. Most went down with little air but I had a full tank. Having lost sight of all the divers I drifted along in the shallow water. Generally it looks pretty dull with scungy algal-covered rocks and sandy bottom.

At one point though there were over a hundred Toadfish in a school swimming just above the sand. They were difficult to see at first with their spotted tops looking so much like the sand. I was enthralled by their presence. They appeared to follow me like the Pied Piper (or out of idle curiosity). At one stage I stopped drifting and swam back to see what they would do. They all stopped and faced my way. Then I turned and they all turned. It's a bit like Alice's Restaurant and the church pew.

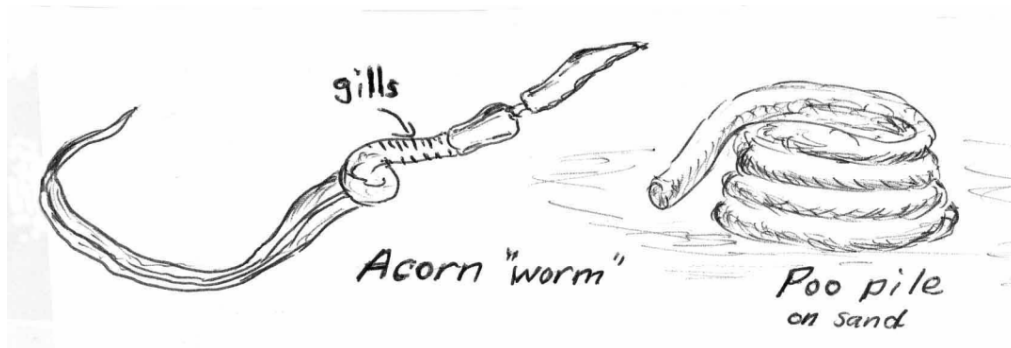
So engrossed was I that when Donovan drifted by he startled me. He later told me he hadn't seen the toadfish (100s) and it shows how well camouflaged they were swimming just above the sand. He had seen a few squid which I hadn't, even though I was expecting them in such waters. I was starting to feel the toadfish were imprinted on me like Lorenz's ducks but I finally gave them the slip (or they got bored?).

The leatherjackets were docile and very attached to their bit of scungy algal growth on some isolated little rock. You could almost touch them. One species had a rough skin with little tentacled protuberances all over it.

A huge colonial mass of zooanthids was growing out on to the sand. It had cracks and folds like the first few rolls of baker's dough. Zooanthids are like little anemones and this lot had joined together to form a tough, leathery mass.

There were parchment-tube worms with their tubes just above the sand, a delicate egg string (probably from a nudibranch type) on some seaweed and strange piles of "mud rope" on the sand.

The "mud rope" looked like someone had neatly dropped a metre of finger-thick rope in a pile, only it was made of dark grey mud. This happens to come from the Acorn "worm" and the mud-rope, that I so happily played with, is faecal-sand (a poo pile). I'm having my gloves laundered. The club's \$2-50 specials are also looking good.



The interesting thing about the Acorn "worm" is that it is not really a worm at all. In fact it's more like one of the missing links. That is, the link between the invertebrates (animals without backbones) and the vertebrates (animals with backbones). Now I know you're saying you know a lot of vertebrates that don't have backbones but this is not the time or place to discuss them.

This half-a-metre long animal has a number of gills like fish but in its larval development is just like a sea star! It churns through the sand feeding and puts out a nasty mucus which is apparently distasteful to other animals. No wonder it lives alone and thank goodness my regulator doesn't have a smell device.

I could have stayed longer only I had the feeling I was the last one down and the rest wanted to get home. I surfaced, as I didn't fancy the long swim and final walk home. I was right. After this article I think some will swear I was on drugs.