

Tyneside BSAC has long been intrigued by a cannon site in the Farne Islands where members have recently set up an underwater trail that is available to all. Diving Officer **Nicola Faulks** takes us on a tour

The Gun Rocks cannon site has been under investigation by BSAC club Tyneside 114 since 1970, not just to map and document the site, but to try to determine the origin of the wreck that deposited the cannon there. The history of the wreck still remains a mystery, but each year new artefacts, including cannon, are found.

Current thinking is that the wreck that deposited the mixture of Swedish and British cannon is of Dutch origin. Thirteen of the 22 cannon found so far can be seen on the Gun Rocks dive trail. The remaining cannon lie adjacent to the trail site, in Staple Sound, but as this is an area of strong tides, they do not form part of the roped trail. The rocks give the site shelter, so the trail can be dived on slack or a flood tide.

In 2017, funding from the Jubilee Trust and National Heritage Lottery enabled the Gun Rocks Project to clear kelp away from the cannon and lay a rope trail. Divers can now drop on to the site using the marker buoy, then follow the three radial lines, fixed to the seabed, to seek out the cannon and other artefacts.

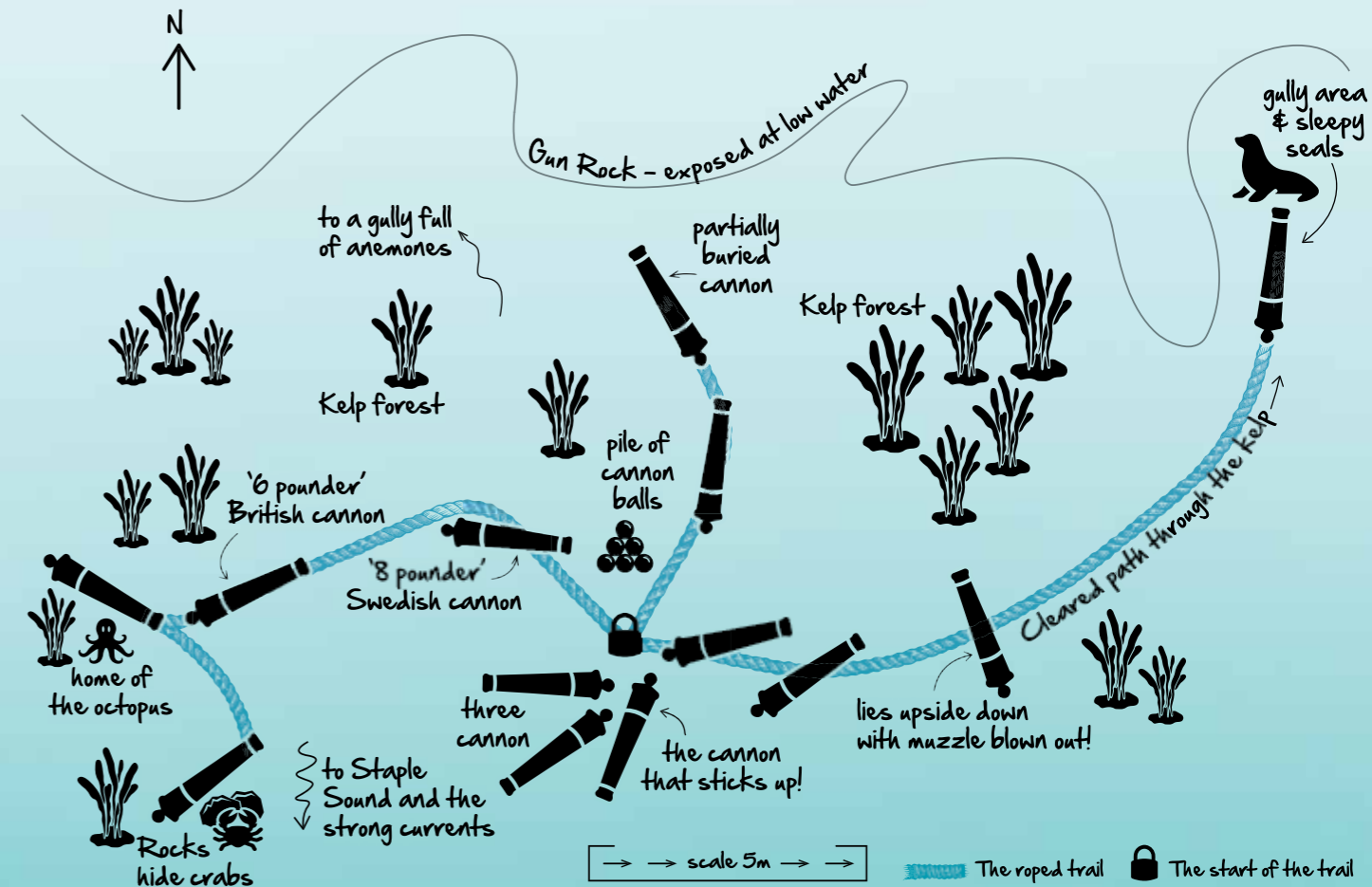
The shot line leads you down on to the pile of three cannon, one of which sticks up at 45°. This cannon is affectionately known as 'sticky-uppy'. If there is a bit of swell running, the swaying of the kelp around you can be a bit disorienting but, if you focus on the static cannon, you should be fine. From here heading east, following the roped trail, you pass two cannon in quick succession. The first of these is an eight-pounder and is 2.4 metres long. The muzzle on this gun



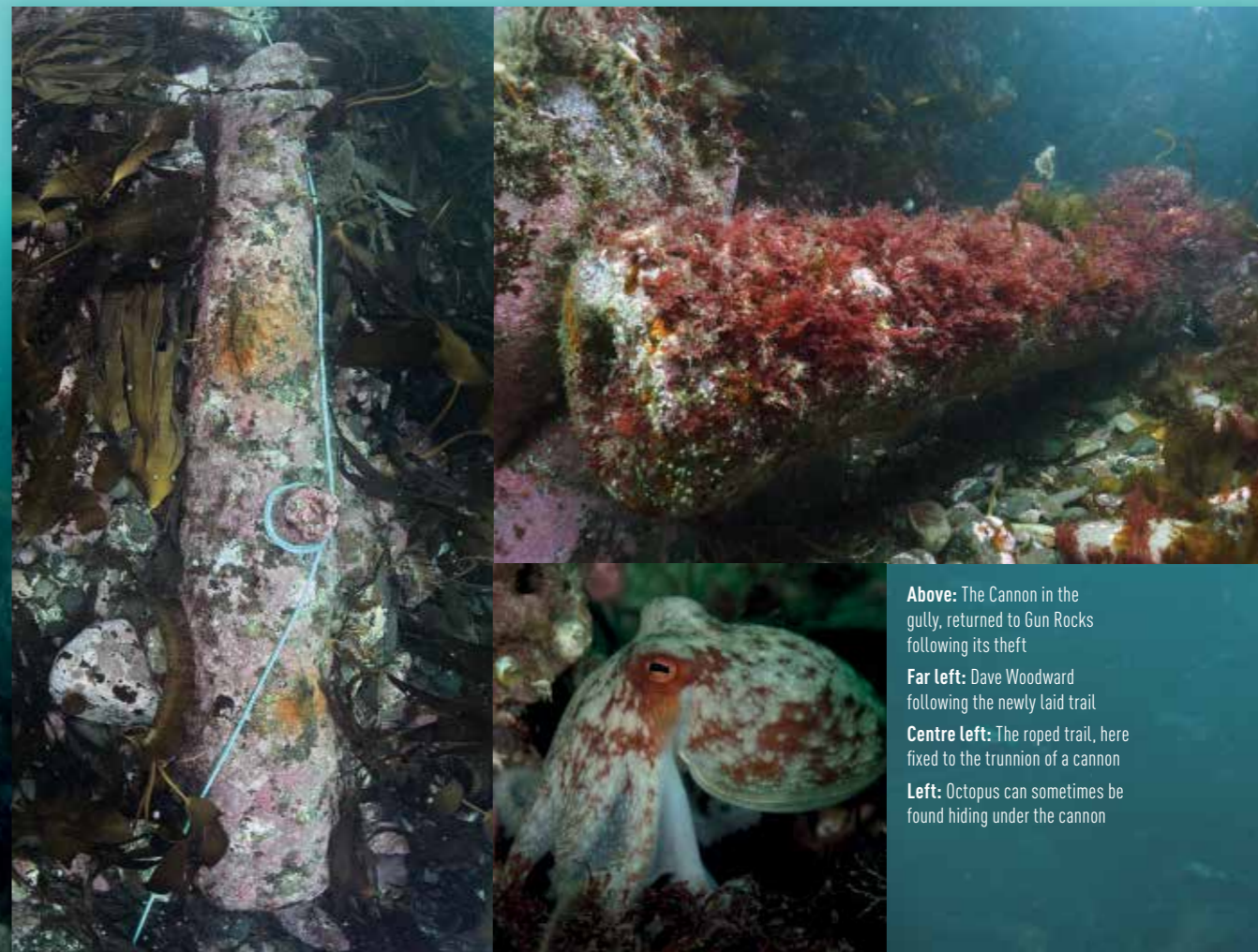
Location: Farne Islands, Northumbria  
Depth: 5-10m  
Visibility: 4-8m

has been blown out and the cascabel [a place to attach arresting ropes to deal with the recoil of firing] is missing from the breech end; this may be battle damage, or could have occurred during the wrecking event.

A short swim over cobbles takes you to a cannon that sits perpendicular to the trail and stands proud of the seabed. The trunnions [cylindrical protrusions used as a mounting or pivoting point] are noticeable here – as the gun lies



# Gun Rocks Dive Trail



Above: The Cannon in the gully, returned to Gun Rocks following its theft

Far left: Dave Woodward following the newly laid trail

Centre left: The roped trail, here fixed to the trunnion of a cannon

Left: Octopus can sometimes be found hiding under the cannon





Richard Moss, seeing the cleaned cannon for the first time

upside down, the muzzle on this gun has also been blown out – possible battle damage again. Five or so metres beyond this, there is a cannon, resting on a rock in a gully. This cannon was apparently stolen in the 1990s; the thieves were caught and told to return it, so they did. They brought it back by boat and just dumped it in one of the gullies that form Gun Rocks. The rope from its brief adventure is still tied around the muzzle and sometimes, a grey seal can be found dozing atop the cannon.

On following the trail back to the shot line, next you can head north, following the rope past a pile of cannon balls on your left-hand side. If you keep a keen eye out, you may well find more cannon balls, as they are scattered across the site. They are often covered with concretion, making them look pink

and less round. Heading north, you pass two more cannon. The one at the end of this section of rope is partially buried. Periodically it is uncovered by the storms, but just as quickly it gets covered up again. Beyond this, you are off the trail, but there are some narrow, wave swept gullies full of anemones and often pretty nudibranchs eating hydroids.

Heading back to the trail and back to the start, there is a third line, this time heading in a westerly direction from the shot line. The first cannon you pass is of Swedish origin; it is a 2.6m long eight-pounder. Just for contrast, the next cannon on the trail (to the west) is a British cannon, a 2.3m long six-pounder. As you follow the roped trail, the furthest west cannon lies next to a large rock. It is worth checking under the cannon and the rock, as there is often an octopus here. When at home, he isn't shy and will often hang around for a photograph or two.

The final cannon lies to the south-west of this. Positioned proud of the seabed on two rocks, it is still dwarfed by the kelp towering above, so watch out for any dangling kit, or the kelp will have it. Due to the damage and shape of this cannon, its calibre could not be determined. But in common with all the other cannon, it is made of cast iron and is longer than most divers are tall.

From here, if you are diving the site on slack water, you can leave the trail and head south, to find the top of a small

## GUNS THAT ROCK

### THE SMALL OUTCROP OF ROCK KNOWN AS

Gun Rocks has been marked on maps since 1778, likely earning its name after a shipwreck. Archive data provides evidence of a 40-cannon Dutch merchant ship having foundered here in the late 17th or early 18th century. But none of the evidence is conclusive.

Since 1970, Tyneside 114 club members have been investigating this wreck, using a range of techniques including photogrammetry, and social media appeals for salvaged artefacts from the site. In the last five years, Dutch and British cannon have been identified, further lending intrigue about the origin of the wreck(s). In the 1970s some sword hilts were found, which have been dated to between 1500 and 1720, but remain of unknown origin.

The work to determine the history of Gun Rocks continues to this day. It was initiated by Bill Smith, Diving Officer of Tyneside 114 in the 1970s, with the first surveys being undertaken on the site. Sadly, Bill has since died and his ashes have been laid to rest on Gun Rocks. Solving the mystery of the cannon would be a great tribute to Bill.

The pile of three cannon which now mark the start of the trail, with 'sticky-uppy' standing proud of the seabed



Sue Hadfield admiring one of the cannon on the trail



wall (at 8-10m depth). Using the wall as a guide at your right shoulder, you can head west. After 10m you should find a large cannon, located on the top of the wall, just below the kelp. It does not form part of the trail but is considered likely to be part of the same wrecking.

From this point, you can continue to follow the wall around, and admire the marine life, or head down the boulder slope and into Staple Sound. Within the sound, the maximum depth is 16-18m, but this area should only be dived on slack, or you may end up in Norway.

The cannon lying in Staple Sound are considered to be from the same wrecking, and form a line leading roughly from the shallower dive trail site, out into the sound. So far, seven cannon have been found in this area, plus an anchor and various other artefacts. Tyneside BSAC suspect there is still more to find.

Each year, members work hard to clear the kelp from the cannon and maintain the trail. The work is licensed by the Marine Management Organisation to continue for the next 10 years. The speed at which the kelp grows back is quite amazing, but we try to keep the cannon visible and to maintain the roped trail. We do not clear the entire site of kelp, only the cannon and the roped areas; this is to allow nature, history and divers to co-exist in one place. ●

# Essentials

**DEPTH RANGE:** Across the dive trail the depth ranges from five to 10 metres.

**FINDING THE WRECK:** The trail is to the west of Gun Rocks. The buoy that marks the start is at 55°37.815N 001°37.750W

**TIDAL INFORMATION:** The dive trail can be dived on slack or a flood tide. Slack water occurs at one hour and 30 minutes before, to two hours after high or low water at Seahouses. (See [www.gunrocks.co.uk](http://www.gunrocks.co.uk) for further details.)

**GAS:** Air and nitrox are available from the Sovereign Diving air station at the North Sunderland Industrial Estate just outside Seahouses (NE68 7UP, 01665 721 554). Alternatively, Glad Tidings dive charters (Billy Sheil) will pick up and return your cylinders to Seahouses harbour by arrangement (01665 720 308, or contact them at the Glad Tidings kiosk at Seahouses harbour).

**RIB LAUNCHING:** Seahouses harbour has a public slip, which can be used by visiting RIBs, who pay a launch fee at the nearby harbour master's office. The slip opens at 9:00am and shuts at 6:00pm. RIBs can also be launched by tractor from Beadnell beach (fee payable on site, 07949 704 116)

**ACCOMMODATION:** Seahouses offers various hotel and B&B establishments as well as opportunities for camping at various local sites. Try: Farne Diving Services, St Ebbas House, The Haven, Beadnell, Chathill NE67 5AW (01665 720615); the Links Hotel, 8 King St, Seahouses NE68 7XP (01665 720 062); The Old School House, 17 North Lane, North Sunderland, Seahouses NE68 7UQ (01665 720 760).

**EATS AND TREATS:** Seahouses has numerous fish and chip shops. For those with more exotic tastes, there has been a recent influx of curry houses. The three best pubs in the area are: Black Swan Inn, 2 Union St, Seahouses (01665 720 227); Bamburgh Castle Inn, Seahouses (01665 720 283); or slightly further afield the Craster Arms, The Wynding, Beadnell (01665 720 272).

**BLOWN OUT:** Explore nearby Bamburgh Castle or tide permitting, take a drive up the coast and cross the causeway to Holy Island, or explore some of the beautiful beaches that can be found along this part of the coastline. Alternatively retire to the bar at the Olde Ship Inn, Seahouses, and admire some of the numerous brass artefacts recovered from local wrecks. The RNLI Grace Darling Museum at Bamburgh is worth a visit. Its exhibits include a number of artefacts recovered from the wreck of the steamship Forfarshire.

**CHARTER BOATS:** There are a number of local dive charters: Farne Diving Services, who run Farne Diver 2 (Lee Hall, Beadnell, 01665 720 615/07534 988 445); Billy Shiel Farnes Islands Boat Trips runs the Glad Tidings dive boats (01665 720 308); Sovereign Diving runs two large catamarans (01665 720 760).

**FURTHER INFORMATION:** Maps, guides, links to past reports on work done at Gun Rocks, and more can be found at [www.gunrocks.co.uk](http://www.gunrocks.co.uk)