

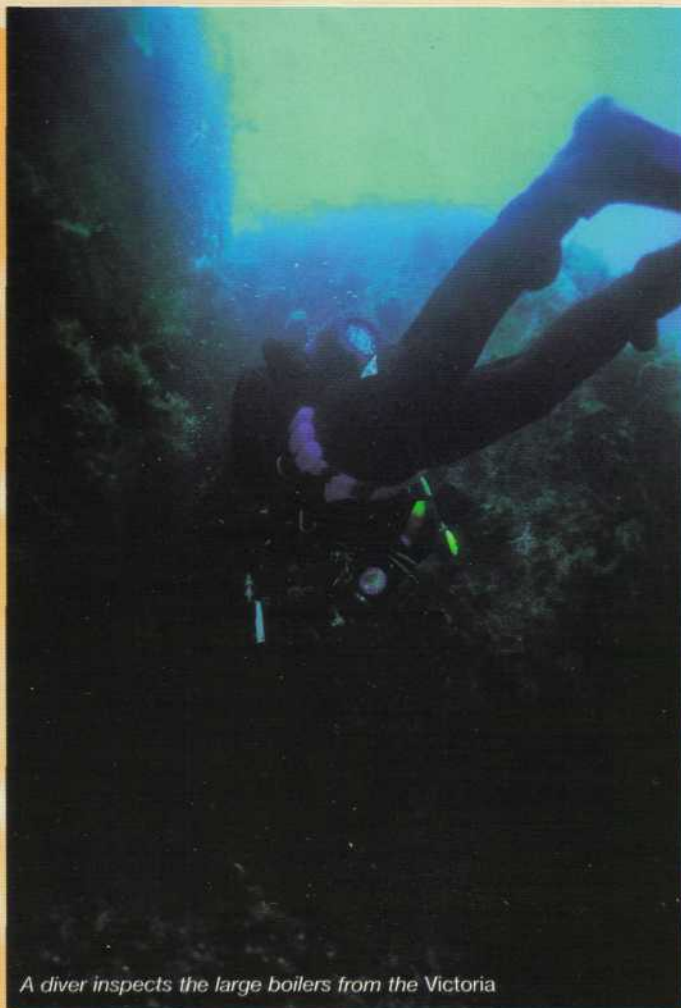
St Paul Island: Ship graveyard

By Ned Middleton

"Cannon to the right of them, cannon to the left of them."
(Alfred, Lord Tennyson)

It was a blistering hot day in September and I was diving in Nova Scotia. All around me were cannon balls, deadeyes, blocks and other items from another age of shipping. One of the divers even found a coin – it was an old English penny and one of several just sitting there for anyone to pick up. Unbelievably, I watched as he put it back under a rock and then shook his finger as though to reinforce the Canadian law – which permits divers to "Look, but not touch!"

The previous day we had driven from Halifax to Dingwall in convoy. It had taken seven hours and we then spent what was left of the night on board the *Meg & Kell*, a lobster fishing boat all ready and waiting for us alongside the wharf at Aspy Bay. Fishing boats are



A diver inspects the large boilers from the *Victoria*



Sam Millett shows me around the wreckage of the *Norwegian*

always very interesting, no matter where you are in the world, simply because their design is always determined by local conditions at sea. The *Meg & Kell* is a powerful, well-kept and very sturdy craft – in these latitudes, she has to be – and her skipper Scott Fitzgerald is as experienced as they come. After very little sleep, it was an early start for all and, before long, the boat was loaded and we were on our way – and it was not even first light. Almost as soon as we cleared the harbour breakwater my guide and host, Terry Dwyer, pointed to a speck on the distant horizon and said: "That is St Paul Island and we will be there in under three hours."

A short time later, he then asked all of us 'first-time visitors' how we liked our breakfasts. "Two eggs over-easy with ham," said an American accent. "Just as it comes," said another voice. I was also taken in and ordered a breakfast that makes me feel hungry just to think about it. "Toast?", "Tea?", "Coffee?" said Terry with an enquiring look on his face, as he continued to conjure up an image of the world's most spectacular made-to-order meal.

Then, suddenly, the penny dropped and I began to wonder where a galley capable of producing such a feast might be located on this, a fishing vessel. Of course, the joke was on us – and such humour is typical of a man who knows the waters of Nova Scotia better than most.

As the journey progressed, Terry told us all about St Paul Island, with continual references to the chart to make his point. Names of lost ships tripped off his tongue as though he had witnessed the demise of all 350 recorded wrecks around her shoreline. It soon became obvious that the individual details of each ship lost on this small, and somewhat bleak, speck on the horizon was firmly entrenched in the memory of this man – and it was fascinating to listen to the many accounts of tragedy and hardship long ago.

ST PAUL ISLAND

St Paul Island is approximately three miles long and never more than one mile wide. It is located 13 miles north of Cape North in Nova Scotia and 50 miles southwest of Cape Ray in Newfoundland. In Terry's own words: "The coastline is one that commands respect. In front of a back-drop of high, rocky cliffs, there are jagged rocks sticking out of the water like spears – everywhere! Add to this the currents and the tides from the Gulf of St Lawrence and, well, you have one treacherous piece of real-estate. This is a place where nature remains undefeated!"

And 'treacherous' is the right word because, as far as shipping is concerned, the island is right in the path of the many hundreds of vessels which visit the busy sea-lanes of the Gulf on a daily basis. If that is not enough, whenever the colder Arctic air reaches these slightly warmer seas, they create the famous Nova Scotia fog banks, an additional hazard that has cost many a master mariner his ship – and his life. Little wonder, therefore, that Nova Scotia is the shipwreck capital of the world!

While the waters immediately surrounding the island are relatively shallow, they soon drop away and, in no time at all, one is able to find very deep water and currents as strong as anywhere on earth. Being so close to the earth's Magnetic North Pole, this entire region commands some of the highest tides in the world and, when that water is moving, it is easy to understand the perils to shipping. It is the supreme irony that this very peril, coupled with the island's