An Introduction to Foreshore and Underwater Archaeology
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The main emphasis of this lecture was the difficulties and dangers in getting to underwater sites. Pressure on the body, particularly lungs, increase with depth. Even at 10 metre depth the pressure is double atmospheric. The amount of nitrogen in the blood increases with depth and can cause disorientation and sickness. Returning to the surface has to be done slowly, otherwise the diver gets 'the bends' when the nitrogen forms bubbles on the body which are painful and dangerous.

The lecturer went on to describe what can be done to investigate at different depths and what might be found. At great depth, 200 metres or, so, a pressurised submersible or a remote operation vehicle with no crew, surface controlled, has to be used. These are large scale projects, usually fell financed because they are very expensive. At this depth the visibility is usually very good but all that is there archaeologically are wrecks. These can be examined and may tell a story - the Titanic, the Bismark, the Lusitania for example.

At intermediate depths, 100 to 200 metres, the diver uses a mixture of gases for breathing. Wooden wrecks at these depths now have an accepted timetable for the decay seen , so helping to date them.

Some shallower sites in coastal waters are where to find archaeology and use some of the techniques you could use on dry land. Underwater archaeology at this depth was more to do with position than stratigraphy. A lot of time is spent measuring with tapes, recording measurements on 'slates' (plastic sheets) using chinograph pencils. On small scale sites it is common practice to use fixed metal or wire grids laid over the surface from which to take measurements to locate the archaeology. Some coastal waters accessible to SCUBA divers are now starting to get protected status to prevent them being exploited.

The main problem in coastal waters and rivers is visibility. Off Scotland the visibility can be 25m to 30m but off the Essex coast it is very poor, and in rivers and estuaries 'It's often like working in a fog and all you can do is feel what's there'.