

THE BLACKNESS ADMIRALTY BATTLE PRACTICE TARGET

In my quest for new places to visit close to home I thought I might explore the abandoned hulk of an Admiralty target barge in the bay east of Blackness castle. It is an attractive spot to lie. The trees come down to the top of the beach, there are views of the castle and the bridges and much birdlife feeding on the mudflats. The nautical archaeology is a bonus. Lack of road access makes the site is quite secluded. The barge hides the silhouette of ones boat from the curious and gives some shelter from the west but being in poor condition there are dangers.

There is a fine line between being adventurous and hazarding ones boat but I thought this visit might be a reasonable proposition if I did a careful low water recce. I did so the evening before, going onto the mud wearing mud boards to find a clear patch to take the ground.

The barge lists to the west so most of the debris field lies in that direction. The sloping deck is green and very slippery. One can lie along the port (east) side of the forecastle head and remaining 25ft of main deck, avoiding a small pile of chain on the port beam and a spike in the mud at the after end of the section of main deck. There are many of these spikes, originating from wasted iron fastenings, exposed where timber has rotted away.

Other nearby obstacles are a large stockless anchor with its flukes sticking up and a pole leaning at an angle, both about two cables to the north east. These show at low water. They are not charted but probably lie just within the pecked lines of an exclusion zone for passage and anchoring.

When I came alongside at high water on a 5.1m tide (Leith) the upper edge of the main deck was just above the water. Going down river on the ebb in the gathering gloom, cold and overcast, going alongside suddenly didn't seem such a good idea but I pressed on knowing I had done careful preparation. I lassooed a deck fitting with the bight of a stern warp and ran a bow line to the forecastle head with the dinghy. The wind was westerly, holding me off and remained so.

I had taken two pointed 13 ft scaffolding boards. Once alongside I stuck these into the mud vertically and lashed them to the barge so I wouldn't touch its structure. My initial hurried lash up I later re-tied with nylon so it would last a while. I carry a heavy fender board on Blue Spindrift. Later this was a handy gang plank for boarding the barge.

As the tide fell an expanse of calm water spread to leeward. When the boat settled I was listing a few degrees away from the barge, my starboard keel having come down on something, perhaps a stone or piece of plating.

Our Vice Commodore told me the barge was beached in the 1950s. By comparison with my boat it is 100 ft long by about 10 ft beam. From the degree of the corrosion of its riveted plating it is probably nineteenth century. Much of its plating has rusted away leaving the internal reinforcement, a massive lattice of wooden cross beams and longitudinal iron girders. Clearly it was built to withstand learner gunnery. The main deck is wood a foot thick and the forecastle head up to three feet thick with plating reinforcement under the deck fittings.

Stud link chain hangs from the forecastle head and a towing point on the stem. On deck there are various bits, cleats, eye bolts and a tabernacle. The forecastle head is nine feet from the mud and the vertical 16 links of stud link serve as a handy depth gauge.

Before my recce the deck was occupied by eider, one drake and six females. While I sat on the shore watching, waiting for the mud to dry, they sat tight till the last minute, jumping off and swimming away just before the tide receded. When I returned with the boat, cormorants were roosting on the barge. I could hear lots of geese but only saw one, they were probably grazing beyond the trees. The one I saw was walking on the mud guzzling up something on the surface. There were numerous swans and eider at the mouth of the Midhope burn, attracted by the freshwater.

I stayed for the next two tides, taking photographs and snoozing in the sunshine. Taking ones time one notices more. At the west end of the beach columns of sand topped by a crown of turf indicate a zone of erosion and further east banks of shell at the top of the beach, a zone of deposition. I took bearings for a precise position but the barge must have been too magnetic as when I plotted them my cocked hat was small enough but much too far from my EP. I later returned with a GPS which gave $55^{\circ} 59'.93 \text{ N } 003^{\circ} 29'.69 \text{ W}$.

On the shore there are the rotten remains of two Admiralty mooring rafts and various mooring strong points. After the war many ships lay here awaiting the breakers yards of Bo'ness, Charlestown and Inverkeithing. "Target: Falkirk" has a picture of U boats at nearby Bridgeness. Also on the shore was an assortment of gas cylinders in various states of decay. No doubt this is due to a combination of local hydrography and the relatively unfrequented nature of the site. I brought two usable ones back in the dinghy but didn't get much thanks for returning them to the supplier. To judge by the response I received it is not global warming causing sea levels to rise but Scotland sinking under the weight of empty gas bottles. From the middle of the beach the remains of a substantial dry stone structure run out to the low water mark, probably once a low water landing.

In the 18th century there was a tide mill in this bay, I would guess at the east, at the mouth of the Midhope burn. There were other tide mills on the south side of the Upper Forth, one at Pocknave, west of Grangemouth, and one at Higgins Neuk, west of the Kincardine bridge. A little stonework at Higgins Neuk is all that remains of these as far as I can see. Having visited the working 18th century tide mill at Eling, near Southampton I am on the look out for them in Scotland. The Eling tide mill is not far from the new RYA HQ on the Hamble.

Colloquially known as a target barge, my 1932 Admiralty Manual of Seamanship Volume II calls these barge type targets a 'battle practice target'. Smaller raft targets were known as 'Targets Pattern V, VI and VII'. BP targets came in various sizes. The Manual is illustrated with drawings of one of 145 ft LOA with two towing pad eyes on the stem, reproduced here. For ocean towing of BP targets the towing warp was attached to three pendants, two to the stem and one to a necklace of 6 1/2" wire that ran all round the gunwhale so the tow would not be lost if the bow was shot away. There would have been another towing eye on the stern so that targets could be strung together. Speeds of around 10 knots were usual. The raked stem, low attachment and special flexible wire would permit higher speeds and 16 knots was obtained towing with a battleship. The tow was up to 1,000 yards long but doubtless the target felt quite close enough when being shelled from 16,000 yards at night.

One begins to admire the skill involved in towing, in particular the matelot handling long wires round bollards and capstan.

The manual shows a mast and one can see its tabernacle but the tow was unlit. The tug had to be ready to shine a search light to illuminate the tow on the approach of other vessels. The target carried a sail of open weave lattice work of black hessian strips up to 30 ft high. This comprised upper and lower sections. To prevent capsize in strong winds only the lower sail would be used. A painted strip at full height of the mast assisted ranging.

This was an interesting exploration and a most welcome addition to the list of trips close to home. Berthing alongside is for bilge keelers with local knowledge. It could be a dangerous trap in an easterly. A shore side low water recce is preferable to surveying from a dinghy as one needs to see the area dried out. An inflatable dinghy would be vulnerable to sharp debris.

Details of this target have been passed to the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland and the vessel is now listed on their database, with photographs. See entry NT07NE 8003 within their CANMORE public access system at www.rcahms.gov.uk An archaeological survey is on the cards.

References

1. Target: Falkirk, Falkirk and District in the Second World War by John Walker, Falkirk Council Library Services 2001, ISBN 0906586 925.
2. Admiralty Manual of Seamanship Volume II 1932.

Paul Shave yacht Blue Spindrift
29 December 2004

SUBJECT TITLE: ADMIRALTY BATTLE PRACTICE TARGET BARGE

Warning: This vessel lists to the west and is substantially broken up. There is an extensive debris field, especially to the west. A low water recce on foot wearing mud boards is recommended before bringing a boat alongside, failing that binoculars from shore. Most of the vessel covers. It would be a dangerous trap in an easterly. Fender board advised.

Location description: Vessel lies north - south on drying mud, approximately one mile east of Blackness castle. On a 5.1 metre tide (Leith) the upper edge of the main deck just breaks the water. The forecastle head is a foot higher.

Chart No:	Lat/Long:
737 Oxcars to Rosyth Imray C27 Firth of Forth	55 ⁰ 59'.93 N 003 ⁰ 29'.69 W.

OS 1:50,000 sheet number	National Grid Ref.:
Sheet 65	NT 794069

Subject description: An unknown 19th century Admiralty target barge, c.100 ft LOA x 10 ft beam, left in its present location in the 1950s. The barge is constructed of timber cross beams and iron girder longitudinals. It was clad with riveted iron plating, much of which has rotted away. The forecastle head and 25 ft of main deck remain. The main deck is wooden cross beams a foot thick. The forecastle head is similar, up to three feet thick. On deck there are various bits, cleats, eye bolts and a tabernacle. The rest of the structure is skeletal. Stud link chain hangs from the forecastle head and a towing point on the stem. The forecastle head is 9 ft from the mud and the vertical 16 links of stud link serve as a depth gauge. The barge would have carried an open weave lattice of black hessian strips up to 30 feet high.

Approach by sea: Approach from the north avoiding the stern frames of the vessel and a stockless anchor and pole beacon 2 cables to the north east. These hazards cover.

Directions by land: Cars may be left in the village of Blackness from where the barge can be reached on foot along the foreshore. Mud boards are necessary to reach the V/L.

Anchoring / Mooring: Berth on the port (east) side of the forecastle head and remaining section of main deck. Avoid a pile of stud link chain on the port beam and a spike in the mud at the after end of the section of main deck. Two scaffolding boards were set vertically in the mud and lashed to the barge in 2004 for berthing.

Landing: Along the shore – mud then large stones and heavy weed growth.

References / weblinks: Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland public access CANMORE system. See entry NT07NE 8003 at www.rcahms.gov.uk
Admiralty Manual of Seamanship Vol II 1932.

Photographs / weblinks: RCAHMS website above.

Author: Paul Shave, yacht Blue Spindrift, February 2005.