

# Historical Diving Society: Exploring the UK's Rich Diving History

**Intro:** Hello and welcome to Hampshire HistBites. Join us as we delve into the past and go on a journey to discover some of the county's best and occasionally unknown history. We'll be speaking to experts and enthusiasts and asking them to reveal some of our hidden heritage, as well as share with you a few fascinating untold tales.

**Julie:** Hi, and welcome to Hampshire HistBites. My name is Julie, and today I'm talking with Gary Wallace-Potter, diver and archivist at the Historical Diving Society. Today, we're going to talk about the Historical Diving Society and diving in Hampshire.

## Introduction

**Julie:** Can you tell me a little bit about what the Historical Diving Society is and how it started?

**Gary:** Right. The Historical Diving Society was founded in 1919. And there were a number of individuals which were doing research or were collecting diving memorabilia, whether that be books or anything printed or diving equipment. And a guy who was researching the diving history of Siebe Gorman at the time, was corresponding with some of these people and realised that there was an interest in the history of diving. And obviously, England's got a very important maritime history – and we have a very important diving history as well. The original diving helmet was developed by two English brothers and Siebe Gorman was one of the most famous diving companies in the world when it was around. So, we had a lot of diving history, but it wasn't really recognised officially. So they suggested forming a society, the Historical Diving Society, with the idea of us to preserve and promote the diving heritage of our country. So when the society was formed, at that time I was working as a commercial diver, and unlike some of them – a lot of the divers I worked with, it was a job, and they weren't particularly interested in the history of diving, unlike myself. So when the society founded, I joined, and we had an annual conference started. We would arrange for meetings and visits to somewhere like a museum or a collection to see diving memorabilia or maybe books and things like that. And over the years the society grew and grew and grew. And our activities as well. One of the main activities was to start using the old hard-hat gear doing demonstrations using the same equipment which William Walker would have used. So people could see it being used because it was no longer used for diving. It had been replaced many years before by more modern diving equipment. And then probably about eight years ago, we finally managed to find a premises for the society's museum, which houses quite a substantial collection of diving equipment, some very unique exhibits as well, which is based down in Stokes Bay in Alverstoke in Hampshire. And we have an annual conference every year, we've published a number of publications over the years as well. So it's, it's an interesting thing. And then all the members come from such a broad background. Even non-divers, they might just have an interest in diving history or maritime history. So people come from all different backgrounds. I suppose you can say everybody brings something to the party.

## Global Members

**Julie:** So the members, are they Hampshire based all of them or are they based around the UK?

**Gary:** They're global. When we first started the society we had immediately members from all over the UK, but also a lot of international members as well. And this has led to some of our international members establishing their own branch, if you like, of the Historical Diving Society. And over the years, it's grown and grown and grown. So we've certainly, I'll probably going to forget a couple here, but certainly we've got the branch of the Historical Diving Society in America, in Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and Finland, Germany, Holland, Italy, Australia to name a few. And we've all got alike interest, we correspond. We don't always get to meet everybody, but you know, in this day and age where you can do online conferencing and online telephone calls and emails, we tend to sort of correspond with each other and help each other out with research and whatever.

**Julie:** So is the Historical Diving Society still expanding abroad then?

**Gary:** There's been a few new branches. One in Poland, about three or four years ago, and then another smaller branch in Slovenia. Some of the other branches, they're sort of very small in numbers from member point of view, but it's important that they're all promoting diving heritage. The Italians are very, very active. The Australian groups are very, very active. As are all the Scandinavian groups. The Scandinavians have a diving exhibition every year and they take it in turn. So, one year is in Norway and the following year it'll be in Sweden. Conferences as well. A lot of research is being published and shared, so a lot of the other branches are equally active, if not more, than the UK.

## The Museum

**Julie:** Do they contribute to the museum here in the UK? Or do you exchange collections?

**Gary:** Yeah, obviously historically there's never been a diving museum or it's been a couple of diving museums over the years, or maybe a museum with maybe a gallery with some diving exhibits in. So the National Maritime Museum at Greenwich had a gallery, which had some diving exhibits in for a number of years, the Science Museum some years ago, one of the galleries had diving apparatus in as well. And obviously this stuff is sometimes not displayed all the time. So when the society acquired our building for the museum, and once we'd gone through all the accreditation of being a museum and things like that, and what it enabled us to do was to then borrow some of these exhibits from other museums. And in some of the cases, these exhibits were being stored, so they weren't on display. So in the museum of Gosport, we've got one of the oldest diving helmets in existence and some other very rare pieces, which are on long-term loan from the Science Museum. So we've got some very unique pieces in the diving museum and, in a way it's probably the best way to see it because it's all about diving. And we've had a lot of support locally as well from where the museum's situated, it's not very far from Portsmouth, so obviously a very important naval

port. So we've had a lot of assistance from various areas within Hampshire, but also further afield as well.

## Diving in Hampshire

**Julie:** Do you have any interesting diving stories that comes to mind about diving in Hampshire?

**Gary:** I mean, over the years there's obviously been some important diving done in Hampshire. Historically, in 1908, you had the HMS Gladiator, which was a Royal Navy battle cruiser, which collided with a steamship in a snowstorm. And the battle cruiser came off worse and she actually sunk, off the Isle of Wight. That was worked on for many months by divers and they eventually managed to refloat her and then towed her into Portsmouth. More historically obviously, we have the Mary Rose, just off Portsmouth. Some of the members of the Historical Diving Society, but before there was one, were members of Southsea branch, which went looking for the wreck of the Mary Rose with Alexander McKee. And some of our members were also involved in then the later recovery of the Mary Rose as well. Earlier than that, another British Naval battleship which had sunk in the same vicinity called the Royal George. And the Royal George had sunk in 1780s. And, there had been various attempts to try and salvage her at the time, which had unfortunately all failed. And eventually they cut the rigging off the ship, so it was no longer a hazard to shipping. But many years later, in the late 1820s and early 1830s, some of the first helmet divers got permission to try and salvage anything else off the wreck of the Royal George. And really that would be probably some of the earliest diving work using helmets. So, there's a lot of diving history in Hampshire in its own right.

**Julie:** And a lot of that can be found in the museum?

**Gary:** Yeah. The way the museum's laid out is it's like an historical trail. So, they cover a lot of the local history. There's things like the story of Commander Buster Crabbe who was a naval frogman and mysteriously disappeared in 1956. Plus some of the other things I've just referred to as well. So, if you go to the museum and have a tour around the museum and the guides there are very, very good, and a lot of them have got a diving background, so they really know what they're talking about and put their own little stories in as well. And you can walk around the museum and see some of the earliest diving equipment up to some of the most modern diving equipment, which is being used in this day and age, in the gas and oil industries.

**Julie:** It truly is a history of diving then.

**Gary:** It really is. It's a very, very unique collection, something which everybody who's involved with the museum are very proud of. And they're all volunteers, they all work incredibly hard, but they do it because they love to do it. One of the things about the society is it's not just sharing the history, it's quite a camaraderie among the members and that's including partners, whether they be diving or non-diving partners as well. We have an annual conference and dinner and that's always, usually well attended by, well, all parties. But everybody sort of shares that common interest.

**Julie:** Thank you so much for joining me today, Gary.

**Outro:** We hope you enjoyed listening to today's episode. If you'd like to find out a little bit more about what we've been talking about, then please visit the website, [winchesterheritageopendays.org](http://winchesterheritageopendays.org), click on Hampshire HistBites, and there you'll find today's show notes as well as some links to more information.

Thank you for listening.