

## Information sheet no 076

# Robert F Scott and his Antarctic expeditions

Robert Falcon Scott was born in Plymouth on 6 June 1868 and was educated at Stoke Damerel and later at Stubbington House at Fareham. He joined the officer training college HMS *Britannia* in 1880 and on completion of his training in 1882 joined HMS *Boadicea* as a Midshipman. Six years later, he was appointed Sub-Lieutenant in HMS *Spider* and was later promoted to the rank of Lieutenant in 1889, joining HMS *Amphion*. Nine years later, he joined the flagship of the Channel Squadron, HMS *Majestic* when he was appointed as Lieutenant for Torpedoes.

He did not spend a long time with the flagship as in 1899, on the recommendation of Sir Clements Markham, he was offered the command of an expedition being organised by the Royal Geographical Society and the Royal Society to the Antarctic. The expedition was being arranged to explore the South Victoria Land and the ice barrier discovered back in 1841 by James Ross and to explore further into the Antarctic continent. A survey ship was purchased in 1901. The majority of the crew and team members were seconded from the Navy but as the organisation was sponsored by two civilian societies, the ship flew the merchant ensign. Scott was promoted to Commander on taking up his duties with the expedition ship *Discovery*.

The expedition team left Cowes on 6 August 1901 after an inspection by King Edward VII and Queen Alexandra. During their visit, Scott was invested as a Member of the Royal Victorian Order. The ship's handling was not quite as Scott had desired. Defects in the hull had not been discovered before the ship had been launched and this slowed down the voyage considerably.

On 8 February 1902, the ship anchored in McMurdo Sound at Ross Island at the foot of Mount Erebus. The team made camp at a spot that became known as Hut Point. This was to be their base camp for the next two years. In November 1902, Scott set off southwards with a party including Ernest Shackleton and Adrian Wilson to explore the Antarctic interior. The journey was hard and the team suffered physical and mental hardships, including an attack of scurvy. They returned to base camp on 3 February 1903 having discovered that the South Victoria mountain range continued southwards and having been the furthest south that human beings had ever been. On the same day, supplies and mail arrived on the relief vessel *Morning*. On 2 March, *Morning* left the still ice-bound *Discovery* and sailed for Lyttelton in New Zealand. Due to lack of supplies and deteriorating health, some members of the original team left with the relief ship. This number included Shackleton as his health had suffered during the southern expedition.

In October, Scott set off on a second expedition. This time, he headed west to explore the polar ice cap. His team included Petty Officer Edgar Evans and Leading Stoker William Lashly; both of them were to join him in his later expedition. Like his previous expedition, this one was also encountered problems and hardships, not least the loss of the navigation tables. On 30 November, they turned back with little idea of where they were in relation to the base camp. They eventually arrived back at Hut Point in mid-December to find the remaining team members trying to crack the ice that was still holding the ship. On 5 January 1904, *Morning* returned to Ross Island, accompanied by a whaling ship, *Terra Nova*. Scott received orders from the Admiralty to return, and if necessary, abandon the



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*Discovery* if it could not be released from the ice. During the first week of February, the ice began to break up and all three ships departed on 16 February. The following day a severe gale hindered progress but they eventually arrived in New Zealand in April.

The expedition had been a tremendous success. As well as Scott's explorations, the team had been able to take soundings of the Ross Sea, investigate the structure of the continent, fix the position of the South Magnetic Pole and observe the natural life of the continent, including the colony of Emperor penguins at Cape Crozier. Scott had proved his great leadership skills and an ability to undertake scientific research. The expedition returned to Britain in the autumn of 1904, arriving at Stokes Bay, near Portsmouth on 10 September. The ship was escorted into Portsmouth harbour by many small vessels and marked by guards of honour from the naval ships moored there.

Scott received many national and international honours in recognition of his work on the southern continent. These included the French Legion of Honour, Commander of the Royal Victorian Order (CVO), the Polar Medal and promotion to the rank of Captain, dated from his return to Portsmouth. Scott asked the First Sea Lord for a leave of absence in order to write up his narrative of the expedition. During this period, he was attached to the Admiralty as an Assistant Director of Naval Intelligence.

On 21 August 1906, he returned to a sea-going naval post as Flag Captain of Rear-Admiral Egerton on HMS *Victorious*. Scott's thoughts continued towards further exploration and the ultimate goal of reaching the South Pole, while at the same time Shackleton was already making plans for an expedition of his own. In early January 1907, Scott was transferred to HMS *Albemarle*. In the same year, he met Kathleen Bruce and on 2 September 1908, they were married at the Chapel Royal at Hampton Court, special permission having been granted from the King. Before this, in May 1908, he was appointed to HMS *Bulwark*, flagship of the Nore Division, following a brief period in command of HMS *Essex*.

In March 1909, Scott was appointed as Naval Secretary to the Second Sea Lord, Sir Frances Bridgeman. This was a post normally held by a civil servant and Scott the first naval officer to be appointed. Any free time away from his duties was spent working on plans for a second Antarctic expedition. News came of Shackleton's expedition having reached the magnetic South Pole, getting to within 100 miles of the South Pole and the discovery of the Beardmore Glacier. On 19 June 1909, while chairing a dinner in honour of Shackleton, Scott declared the intention of another expedition to claim the South Pole for Britain. An office for the British Antarctic Expedition 1910 was set up in London's Victoria Street in September and the plans and goals for the expedition were published. A fundraising campaign was launched soon after. During this time, his wife gave birth to a son, Peter Markham Scott on 14 September.

The ship chosen for the voyage was the *Terra Nova*. The ship sailed from Cardiff on 15 June, heading for the Cape. Scott travelled separately for the Cape a day later, accompanied by his wife and two other officer's wives. They arrived at Cape Town on 2 August and on arrival of the survey vessel, Scott sailed on to Australia. On their arrival at Melbourne, Scott received the news that the Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen was also heading south for the Pole. The race was on to get there first.

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*Terra Nova's* last call was at New Zealand and left civilisation on 29 November 1910. The expedition arrived at McMurdo Sound on 5 January 1911 and made camp. Scott began his journey to the Pole on 11 November, following Shackleton's 1909 route. On 4 January 1912, the last supporting team left and Scott continued on the journey with a small team of four: Dr Wilson, Captain Oates, Lieutenant Bowers and Petty Officer Evans. The journey was an arduous one with the team having to cope with blizzards and temperatures as low as minus 23 degrees. On 16 January 1912, Scott and his party reached the South Pole, only to find a Norwegian flag and a note from Amundsen stating that his party had reached the Pole on 14 December 1911.

The return journey began well and they made good progress despite the prevailing weather conditions. Soon, exhaustion and frostbite began to set in. Evans and Oates were the main sufferers. Food supplies dwindled and there were no supplements from the depot camp.

On 17 February, the first member of the team died. Petty Officer Evans had been losing strength and was lagging behind the sledge team. The others went back to carry him on a sledge. He lost consciousness and died at 10pm and was buried in the surrounding area. Conditions got worse as they carried on and supplies were running out. Oates was becoming severely affected by frostbite. On 17 March, after asking Scott to leave him behind while the team continued, he walked out of the tent and was never seen again. Unknown to Scott, eleven miles northward, the team at One Ton Depot camp was preparing to leave after waiting a week for the Polar team's return. With their own supplies running out, they retraced their route for the winter base at Cape Evans.

A gale force blizzard made further travelling impossible and the Polar team remained in their tent. On 29 March 1912, Scott made his last entry in his diary. "We shall stick it out to the end, but we are getting weaker, of course, and the end cannot be far. It seems a pity, but I do not think I can write anymore." It is supposed that he may have remained alive for one or two days more after that, alongside the bodies of Wilson and Bowers.

Eight months later a search party, led by Dr Atkinson, discovered the tent and bodies of the comrades, along with the diaries and last letters of Scott. Scott had written a message to the public explaining the reasons for the failure. Important specimens from the Beardmore Glacier were also found, which, being heavy, must have hindered the progress of the team, who had refused to abandon them, even in the face of their difficulties. The rescue party left the tent where it was and built a snow cairn headed by a cross in tribute to the lost explorers. Later, a memorial was put up at Observation Hill, at Hut Point with the words "to strive, to seek, to find and not to yield."

News of the demise of the Polar team reached Britain in February 1913. A memorial service was held in St Paul's Cathedral. Scott was posthumously awarded a Knight Commander of the Bath and Kathleen retained the rights and privileges of the rank. A campaign was launched to raise a memorial fund to continue with the scientific work Scott had been actively involved with and the Scott Polar Research Institute was founded.