

Information sheet no 081

Ernest Shackleton

Ernest Shackleton was born on 15th February 1874 at Kilkee in County Kildare. He was sent to a preparatory school in Sydenham and continued his education at Dulwich College until leaving in 1890. After leaving college, he was apprenticed into the merchant navy, sailing with the White Star Line before joining the Shire Line. He qualified as First Mate in 1896 and within two years, became Master. He then joined the Union Castle Line as Third Officer. During the next two years, the company was employed in carrying troops to South Africa for the Boer War and he co-wrote a book about these experiences. This probably led to his desire for adventure and possible fame as an explorer.

In 1901, he enlisted in the Royal Naval Reserve as a Sub Lieutenant, and applied for a place on the National Antarctic expedition that was being put together by Robert F Scott. He was successful in his application as a junior officer and was also chosen as one of the small team to explore the Ross Barrier, the most southerly point ever explored at the time in 1902. However, Shackleton was weakened by scurvy on the return journey but he refused to give up and the team arrived back at the ship, HMS *Discovery* in February 1903. On their return, Shackleton was invalided on to the relief ship HMS *Morning Star* and returned to Britain via New Zealand. After this, he made it his ambition to lead an Antarctic expedition of his own with the aim of finding the South Pole.

On his recovery, Shackleton decided to leave the merchant navy and took up the position of secretary at the Royal Scottish Geographical Society in January 1904. In April of that year, he married Emily Dorman at Westminster and moved to Edinburgh. He returned to London to greet the returning Antarctic expedition. In 1906, he unsuccessfully stood for Parliament as a Liberal-Unionist candidate in Dundee and, subsequently, took a post as secretary of the Technical Committee at Beardmore's engineering works in Glasgow.

In February 1907, he finally realised his ambition by announcing his own expedition to the Antarctic with the objectives of further exploration of the Ross Barrier and the goal of reaching the South Pole. The British National Expedition left Britain in August 1907 in a small whaler *Nimrod* and reached the Antarctic in January 1908. In March 1908, a team climbed to the summit of Mount Erebus. In January 1909, Shackleton led a small team over the Beardmore Glacier and reached a point only 100 miles from the Pole. At the same time, another team reached the south magnetic pole (this party being led by T W Edgeworth).

The Expedition returned to Britain in March 1909. On his return, Shackleton received numerous honours including a knighthood, a Commander of the Royal Victorian Order, elected a younger Brother of Trinity House and other awards from geographical societies, including the Livingstone Gold Medal from his former employers, the Royal Scottish Geographical Society. In addition, Parliament voted a grant of £20,000 for the expenses the expedition had incurred. He also undertook an extensive international lecturing tour.

At the end of 1911, news arrived that Norway's Roald Amundsen had reached the South Pole, followed in 1913 of the demise of Captain Scott's Antarctic team early in 1912. This did not diminish Shackleton's ambition of Antarctic

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exploration and on 29 December 1913, he announced a Trans-Antarctic expedition to cross from one end of the continent to the other. Preparations for departure were almost completed when Great Britain declared war on Germany in August 1914. Shackleton's first response was to offer his ships to the war effort. This was declined and he was permitted to proceed with the expedition. He joined his ship, *Endurance*, at Buenos Aires and departed for the Antarctic on 26th October.

However, things began to go wrong early on in the expedition. On 18th January 1915, the ship became stuck in a heavy icepack and was unable to break free during the following months. In July, the situation deteriorated when the pressure of the ice began to cause the ship to leak and list. Eventually, in October, there was little hope that the ship could be saved and the team had to abandon ship before it was crushed. They were 200 miles from the nearest land and well over 1,000 miles from any sort of human rescue team.

The team managed to take off valuable equipment from the ship before it was lost and set up camp on the ice pack. They remained there for four months, during which time the stores dwindled and they were eventually forced to sacrifice the dog team in order to survive. Once the ice thawed, the team left camp and using sledges and the ship's lifeboats began to move forward. On April 15th 1916, they reached Elephant Island - the first piece of dry land that they had stood on since leaving Buenos Aires eighteen months previously. They set up camp in the small ice free area.

Shackleton knew it was essential that they tried to reach South Georgia in order to alert a search party. This meant a journey of 800 miles across the South Atlantic in the only vessel available to them - the ship's twenty-two feet long open lifeboat. Shackleton named it *James Caird*. Five men accompanied Shackleton on this voyage, and left on 24th April. The remaining team were left at Elephant Island under the command of Frank Wild. The plan was that they would be picked up once the boat team had made contact at South Georgia.

The voyage was made in treacherous conditions, enduring hurricanes and 100 foot waves. Sixteen days later on May 9th they arrived at South Georgia but it was not the end of the voyage. They had landed on the other side of the island away from the nearest settlement at Stromness, leaving them with a trek of 30 miles through icy mountains. Three of the men were left with the boat where they landed and Shackleton led the other to towards the station. They had to improvise climbing boots by driving nails into shoes in order to get through the mountains. The mountains were deceptive and three times they reached the top only to find there was no way down on the other side. On the fourth attempt, it became imperative just to get to the station, so they slid down and landed in snow drifts. They reached Stromness on 20th May and were able to then rescue the three men left with the boat. Next, they had to rescue the team left on Elephant Island; this was not such an easy matter and it took three attempts before they were finally rescued on 30th August. The survival of the whole team of twenty-two was very much due to Shackleton's leadership and resourcefulness.

After recovering from the rigours of the expedition, Shackleton was employed by the British Government in 1917 to brief neutral countries in South America on the Allied war aims. On his return, he was posted to the North Russia Expeditionary Force during the winter of 1918-19. He was ranked as a Major and was put in charge of organising the



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winter equipment. In February 1919, he resigned his commission and received the Order of the British Empire. After embarking on a few unsuccessful commercial ventures, he began to plan yet another expedition to the Antarctic to explore Enderby Land. On 18th September 1921, he left Britain in the *Quest* and arrived in South Georgia early the following year on 4th January. The next day, 5th January 1922, he suffered a heart attack and died suddenly. He was buried at the Grytviken whaling station. A memorial service was held at St Paul's Cathedral in London, attended by the King and Queen.