

# Sir Ernest Henry Shackleton

February 1874 – January 1922



## **Early Life:**

Shackleton was born on 15 February 1874, in Kilkea, County Kildare, Ireland. His father, Henry Shackleton, having failed on health grounds to enter the British Army, became a farmer instead. Originally the family were Quakers from Yorkshire, moving to Ireland in 1726. Second of 10 children and the eldest son, The second, Frank, achieved notoriety as a suspect, later exonerated, in the 1907 theft of the so-called Irish Crown Jewels from Dublin Castle, which have never been recovered.

In 1880, the family moved to Dublin, so his father could study medicine at Trinity College. Four years later they moved to Sydenham, Kent, to further his father's new career as a doctor. However, Shackleton took lifelong pride in his Irish roots, and frequently declared, "I am an Irishman". A voracious reader, but school (Dulwich College) bored him, and he left at 16 to join the Merchant Navy.

Starting "before the mast" on a square-rigger, within four years he was rated 2<sup>nd</sup> Mate, 1<sup>st</sup> Mate 2 yrs. later and Master by 1898.

## ***Discovery Expedition (1901-03):***



Joined the National Antarctic Expedition (the “Discovery Expedition” after its ship) as 3<sup>rd</sup> Officer, and was commissioned into the Andrew as Sub-Lieutenant in the RNR.

Commanded by Robert Falcon Scott, the Discovery Expedition (1901-03) landed at McMurdo Sound (south of NZ) in January '02. After mapping a safe route onto the Great Ice Barrier, and wintering in an ice-bound Discovery, Scott, Shackleton and Edward Wilson set out in November '02 and marched to 82deg South, establishing a record. The dogs got sick from tainted food, and all 22 died. Shackleton too got sick and was unable to carry out his share of the work. Arriving back at Discovery in Feb '03, Scott invalided him out on the relief ship Morning.

Although outward relations remained cordial, it is thought that Scott got rid of him because of his great popularity with the rest of the expedition, and Shackleton smouldered with scorn and dislike of Scott and wanted to outdo him in the Antarctic. Different people have different opinions on all this.



**McMurdo Sound - 1904**

Having convalesced in NZ, he returned to England in late '03. Became involved in the plans to rescue Discovery, which had become trapped in the ice, principally by fitting out Terra Nova for a rescue voyage. He didn't take part in the voyage, but Discovery was finally freed and made it back to the UK in September '04.

## ***Nimrod Expedition (1907-09):***



Various activities followed, including marrying Emily Dorman in April '04 (3 children). In '07, he managed to put together an expedition intended to reach both Geographic South Pole and Magnetic South Pole, heavily supported by Clydeside Industrialist William Beardmore. Formally called the British Antarctic Expedition, more commonly the Nimrod Expedition, it left NZ on 01/01/08 aiming for the Ross Sea area. Pressured before leaving the UK into agreeing with Scott not to use McMurdo Sound, he tried to find a wintering spot either at Barrier Inlet or King Edward VII Land. Ice conditions precluded using these alternatives, leaving him no option but to use the Sound. Again, ice conditions forced their winter base to be set up at Cape Royds, some 24 miles north of Scott's base at Hut Point.

The party was in high spirits, despite the difficult conditions; Shackleton's ability to communicate with each man kept the party happy and focused.

The "Great Southern Journey", as [Frank Wild](#) called it, began on 29 October 1908. On 9 January 1909, Shackleton and three companions ([Wild](#), [Eric Marshall](#) & [Jameson Adams](#)) reached a new Farthest South latitude of 88° 23'S, only 112 miles from the Pole. En route this party discovered the Beardmore Glacier (after Shackleton's patron) and became the first persons to see and travel on the Antarctic Plateau (9800ft). Their return journey to McMurdo Sound was a race against starvation, on half-rations for much of the way.

The expedition's other main accomplishments included the first ascent of Mt. Erebus (highest active volcano in Antarctic), and the discovery of the approximate location of the Sth Magnetic Pole,

On Shackleton's return home, public honours were quickly forthcoming. King Edward VII raised him to a Commander of the Royal Victorian Order and later knighted him in his Birthday Honours list in 1909. He was honoured by the Royal Geographical Society, who awarded him a gold medal. Shackleton was also appointed a Younger Brother of Trinity House, a significant honour for British mariners.

## Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition (1914-1917):



Shackleton spent most of the five years trying to make money to pay off his considerable debts. Took no part in Scott's ill-fated attempt on the Pole. After Amundsen and Scott, he devised the idea of crossing the Continent.

Two ships would be employed; *Endurance* would carry the main party into the Weddell Sea, aiming for Vahsel Bay from where a team of six, led by Shackleton, would begin the crossing of the continent. Meanwhile, a second ship, the *Aurora*, would take a supporting party under Captain Aeneas Mackintosh to McMurdo Sound on the opposite side of the continent. This party would then lay supply depots across the Great Ice Barrier as far as the Beardmore Glacier; these depots would hold the food and fuel that would enable Shackleton's party to complete their journey of 1,800 miles across the continent.

In his interviews of potential crew members, Shackleton was very unusual, even asking a physicist if he could sing! 28 crew were selected for each ship.

Despite the outbreak of the Great War on 3 August 1914, *Endurance* was directed by the First Lord of the Admiralty to "proceed" and she left British waters on 8 August. Shackleton delayed his own departure until 27 September, meeting the ship in Buenos Aires.



## Loss of Endurance

*Endurance* left South Georgia for the Weddell Sea on 5 December, heading for Vahsel Bay. As the ship moved southward through ice, 1st-year ice was encountered, slowing her down until on January 19, 1915, she became frozen fast. By the end of February it was realised she would be trapped until the following spring. But, when spring arrived in September, the breaking of the ice and its later movements put extreme pressures on the ship's hull. Shackleton had hoped that the ship, when released from the ice, could work her way back towards Vahsel Bay, but on 24 October, water began pouring in. After a few days, with the position at 69°5'S, 51°30'W, Shackleton gave the order to abandon ship, saying, "She's going down!"; and men, provisions and equipment were transferred to camps on the ice. On 21 November 1915, the wreck finally slipped beneath the surface.

For almost two months, the 28 men camped on a large, flat ice-floe, hoping that it would drift the 250 miles towards Paulet Island, where there were known to be stores cached. After failed attempts to march across the ice to this island, Shackleton decided to set up another more permanent camp (Patience Camp) on another floe, and trust to the drift of the ice to take them towards a safe landing. [By 17 March, their ice camp was within 60 miles of Paulet Island, but separated from it by impassable ice. On 9 April, their ice floe broke into two, and Shackleton ordered the crew into their 3 lifeboats and to head for the nearest land.

Five days later, the exhausted men landed their boats on Elephant Island, just north of the South Shetland Islands, 346 miles from where the *Endurance* sank. This was the first time they had stood on solid ground for 497 days.

## The Voyage of the James Caird

Elephant Island was an inhospitable place, far from any shipping routes; so rescue by chance was highly unlikely. Consequently, Shackleton decided to risk an 800 mile open-boat journey to South

Georgia and its whaling stations The strongest of the tiny 20-foot lifeboats, christened James Caird (after the expedition's chief sponsor) was chosen for the trip. Endurance's carpenter, Harry McNish made various improvements, including raising the sides, strengthening the keel, building a makeshift deck of wood and canvas, and sealing the work with oil paint and seal blood.



Shackleton chose five companions for the journey: Frank Worsley, *Endurance's* captain, who would be responsible for navigation; Tom Crean, who had "begged to go"; two strong sailors in John Vincent and Timothy McCarthy, and finally the carpenter McNish, chosen not just for his carpentry skills, but also because he was a troublemaker. He needed to keep him under his eye, since the attitudes of his men were a point of emphasis in leading them all back to safety.

Refusing to pack supplies for more than 4 weeks (if they didn't reach South Georgia within that time, they never would). The *James Caird* was launched on 24 April 1916 and for the next fifteen days, it sailed through the waters of the Southern Ocean, at the mercy of the stormy seas, in constant peril of capsizing. On 8 May, they sighted South Georgia, but hurricane-force winds prevented the possibility of landing and the boat was forced to ride out the storm offshore. (They later learned that the same hurricane had sunk a 500-ton steamer bound for South Georgia from Buenos Aires).



Finally able to land the following day on the uninhabited south shore, Shackleton decided not to risk the stormy seas but to cross the island on foot, to reach the whaling stations on the north shore. For their journey, the survivors were only equipped with boots they had pushed screws into to act as

climbing boots, a carpenter's adze, and 50ft of rope. Leaving McNish, Vincent and McCarthy at the landing point, Shackleton travelled 32 miles with Worsley and Crean over extremely dangerous mountainous terrain for 36 hours to reach the whaling station at Stromness on 20 May. The island was not to be crossed again until 1955.

## Rescue



He immediately sent a boat to pick up the three men from the other side of South Georgia while he set to work to organise the rescue of the Elephant Island men. His first three attempts were foiled by sea ice, which blocked the approaches to the island. He appealed for help to the Chilean government, which offered the use of a small sea-going tug, *Yelcho*, which along with the whaler *Southern Sky* reached Elephant Island on 30 August 1916, at which point the men had been isolated there for four and a half months, and all 22 men were quickly evacuated, arriving in Valparaiso a few days later.

Finally, there remained the men of the Ross Sea Party, stranded on the other side of the Continent in McMurdo Sound, after *Aurora* had been blown from its anchorage and driven out to sea, unable to return, but managed after a drift of many months, to return to New Zealand. Shackleton travelled there to join *Aurora*, and sailed with her to the rescue of the Ross Sea party. This group, despite many hardships, had carried out its depot-laying mission to the full, but three lives had been lost, including that of its commander, Aeneas Mackintosh.

### **War Service (1917–1919):**

Despite a heart condition, exacerbated by heavy drinking, and being too old for conscription, Shackleton volunteered for the army.

He was not to go to the Front, but to Buenos Aires in late 1917 to boost British propaganda in South America. He was unsuccessful, and returned in April 1918, and was sent to Spitzbergen to establish a British presence, but was taken ill in Tromsø (a heart attack?) on the way.

Appointed next to the North Russia Expeditionary Force in July 1918, with the temporary rank of Major, his job was to advise on equipment and training of British troops in Arctic conditions. Mentioned in Despatches, and appointed an “Officer of the Order of the British Empire” in the King's 1919 Birthday Honours list, he was discharged from the army in October 1919, retaining his rank of Major.

### ***Final Expedition and Death (1921-1922):***

Tiring of the Lecture Circuit, Shackleton thought of an expedition to the Beaufort Sea and bought a Norwegian Sealer, which he renamed Quest. The destination changed to a circumnavigation of Antarctica, but quite vague in its objectives, and left the UK on September 16, 1921. Arriving in Rio de Janeiro, he suffered a suspected heart attack. Refusing proper medical examination, he continued the voyage south., arriving in South Georgia on January 4, 1922. The next morning he suffered a fatal heart attack. Leonard Hussey, a veteran of the Imperial Trans-Antarctic expedition, offered to accompany the body back to Britain; but while he was in Montivideo, en route, a message was received from Emily Shackleton asking that her husband be buried in South Georgia. Hussey returned to South Georgia with the body on the steamer Woodville, and on 5 March 1922, Shackleton was buried in the Grytviken cemetery, South Georgia, after a short service in the Lutheran Church.

