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British Naval Northwest Passage Expedition 1845-1848

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Summary

- The aim of the expedition was to search for a potential sea route through the Arctic's northwest passage.
- Led by [Sir John Franklin](#), 129 men sailed aboard two ships, **HMS Erebus** and **HMS Terror**.
- The ships became trapped in the ice and the men began a journey on foot; from here we do not know what happened to the men or to the ships.
- Many search parties were sent to look for the men; they found some clues to what had happened, but questions still remain today as to their fate.
- Research parties still travel to the Arctic today to try and establish the fate of Franklin's expedition.

[View stereoscopic photographs of British Naval Northwest Passage Expedition relics](#)

Please note the photographs for this expedition are forthcoming.



The British Naval Northwest Passage Expedition (1845-1848), led by Sir John Franklin, was searching for a northwest passage in an unexplored region southwest of Barrow Strait. If a way through the ice could be found a shipping route could be established which would be much quicker than the trading routes. Sailing from London in May 1845, **HMS Erebus** (captained by Franklin) and **HMS Terror** (captained by [Crozier](#)) were well equipped, with food for seven years, silver cutlery, and 1000 bound editions of **Punch**. They were last seen heading for Lancaster Sound by two whalers in northern Baffin Bay in late July 1845. After that, the expedition disappeared and Europeans never again saw Franklin. What happened to the 129 men and their ships is still a mystery.

In February 1847, when there was still no news from the expedition, James Clark Ross (who had originally been offered and turned down the command of the expedition) suggested to the British Admiralty that a search party should be sent to establish the fate of the expedition, in the hope of rescuing the men. However, the Admiralty were of the opinion that the expedition would still have enough supplies and so a rescue mission was not yet necessary. Finally, in the summer of 1848 when there was still no news of the expedition, the Admiralty decided to send a search party to establish whether there were any survivors.

In the following ten years many ships were sent to the area to investigate the fate of Franklin and his men. Lady Jane Franklin, wife of Sir John, offered a £5000 reward and the British government £20,000 for the discovery and possible recovery of the expedition.

During the course of many search expeditions the main facts regarding the route taken and final fate of the expedition were established. It is believed Franklin turned into Lancaster Sound, travelling west until he reached Cornwallis Island, where he steered into Peel Sound. The various rescue attempts took a similar journey. However, when they came to Peel Sound they found it blocked by ice and impassable. It never occurred to them that at one point the Peel Sound entrance had been clear, as it had been when Franklin sailed through in an unusually warm season. Furthermore, as many of the search parties had a secondary goal to their mission, the desire to be the first to reach the North Pole, they tended to direct their rescue attempts northwards rather than southwards.

Through the efforts of the many search parties that travelled to the region some details regarding the fate of the expedition were established. In 1850, at Beechy Island off Cornwallis Island the first winter quarters of Franklin's expedition were found. Here remnants of a camp were discovered, including over 600 empty tin cans, and the graves of W. Braine, J. Hartnell, and J. Torrington. However, a message saying where the expedition had gone could not be found. Later, in 1854, when John Rae was commissioned to explore the region for the Hudson's Bay Company, he met a group of Inuit who told him they had seen a large party of white men dragging a boat in the Pelly Bay and Repulse Bay areas. From these Inuit Rae was able to purchase items which proved they had been in contact with the expedition. These included a small silver plate with 'Sir John Franklin K.C.B.' engraved on it. However, Rae also brought back with him the news that the Inuit claimed **starvation** had caused the men on the expedition to resort to cannibalism. Such accusations against British naval men proved to be extremely controversial and whether the men did or did not resort to cannibalism is still hotly debated today.

Sir John Franklin's wife, Lady Jane Franklin, was not happy with Rae's tale of cannibalism or the lack of documentation concerning the fate of the expedition. So, in 1857, Lady Jane commissioned an expedition using her own steam yacht **Fox**, commanded by Captain F.L. McClintock. He found remnants of the expedition scattered along the western shore of King William Island, including a sledge boat containing two skeletons and, most importantly in a cairn at Victory Point, a written record of the expedition's fate.

Here an original message left by Franklin saying all was well had been amended to show the situation was now the very opposite. From this we now know that the expedition had wintered at Beechy Island between 1845-6. **HMS Erebus** and **HMS Terror** then sailed southwards to the entrance of Victoria Strait. Here, on 12 September 1846, the two vessels were beset in the ice north of King William Island. They spent two winters here between September 1846 and April 1848. Franklin died on 11 June 1847 (the document does not give the cause of death) and the command passed to Francis Crozier. Abandoning the two vessels on 22 April 1848, 105 survivors led by Crozier set out toward the Back River. Here the written record ends, Inuit accounts suggest that some of the survivors returned to the stricken ships, which sank at different times. It is thought some survivors may have lived as late as 1850. Eventually all perished from a combination of exposure, **scurvy**, and starvation.

We shall never know exactly what happened to Franklin's expedition but the mystery and controversy still holds a grip on our imagination today. There have been a number of hypotheses to account for its disastrous outcome, but more than likely it was a combination of some of the following factors:

- Unusually warm weather at the start of the voyage allowed Franklin to sail into an area which was usually icebound, then unusually cold weather resulted in his vessels becoming frozen into the ice.
- The ships were too large for the depth of the channels and unable to withstand the impact of ice on the ship, causing them to be crushed and to sink.
- When leaving Beechy Island the expedition failed to leave a note which later search parties may have found. They also failed to mark their route with cairns and so search parties had no idea where they had gone.
- The Admiralty were far too slow to respond to the requests to send an initial search party.
- Travelling on a single escape route may have increased their chances of failure. They would have needed to feed

the men from an area relatively poor in resources. This tactic also reduced the number of opportunities to raise the alarm.

- Scurvy was a huge problem for sailors in this period. The standard antiscorbutics of the time such as lemon or lime juice lost their effectiveness after a while. Fresh meat was required to provide vitamin C, but there was not a source large enough for a big group of people in such a concentrated space.
- There is a possibility that the **tin cans** had been soldered with lead, resulting in lead poisoning from solder which had leached into their contents.
- From the items found alongside the bodies in the sledge boat it seems there was no insistence that the men travel as lightly as possible. This would have reduced the amount of energy required on the already weakened party.

It is more than likely that several of these hypotheses jointly account for the terrible fate of the expedition.

However, the expedition did unknowingly succeed in their aim. By discovering a channel of communication between known points in Barrow Strait and on the north coast, Franklin's men had effectively discovered the Northwest Passage. Much of the early mapping of the northern coasts of Canada was achieved by the expeditions sent in search of Franklin. Most of the expedition's documents remained missing and this encouraged some later searches, such as that led by Lieutenant Frederick Schwatka of the US Army in 1878.

The majority of Rae's finds were given to the Admiralty by the Hudson's Bay Company. They were then donated to Greenwich Hospital for display in the Painted Hall in 1854. Initially, the McClintock material was displayed at the Royal United Services Museum in Whitehall. Lady Franklin thought the catalogue of the **Franklin relics** 'a vulgar catchpenny publication', but the exhibition was the sensation of its age.

Timeline of events

1845: July, **HMS Erebus** and **HMS Terror** set sail.

1845-6: **HMS Erebus** and **HMS Terror** winter at Beechy Island.

1846: The ships sail southwards to the entrance to Victoria Strait.

1846-8: The vessels become frozen in the ice north of King William Island and are forced to winter there.

1847: Ross offers to send a search party for the expedition; the Admiralty declines.

1847: 11 June, Franklin dies. Command passes to Crozier.

1848: 22 April, the 105 survivors abandon the ships and set off toward the Back River.

1848: Summer, the Admiralty decided to send their first search.

1850: The first winter quarters at Beechy Island are found.

1854: Rae meets with Inuit, from whom he buys items from the expedition. They also tell him stories of the survivors driven by starvation to cannibalism.

1857: Jane Franklin dispatches McClintock on the final search expedition.

1859: McClintock finds a sledge boat containing two skeletons and a strange selection of miscellaneous items. He also finds the cairn with the message that has been amended to tell of the death of Franklin.

Further Information:

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- Woodman, D.C. (1995) *Strangers Among Us*. McGill-Queen's University Press.

Links

The Scott Polar Research Institute has made a catalogue of its [Polar Art Collection](#) accessible online. The art collection includes portraits of Sir John Franklin and artworks from the Franklin search expedition.

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