

# Freeze Frame

historic polar images

Leigh Smith, Benjamin (1828-1913)

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Benjamin Leigh Smith, 1828 - 1913, was a British yachtsman and Arctic explorer. Between 1871 and 1882 he undertook five scientific expeditions to Svalbard and Franz Josef Land.

Benjamin Leigh Smith was born on 12 March 1828 in East Sussex into a wealthy and politically progressive family. His father, also named Benjamin, was a Member of Parliament for three years and encouraged his children to independent travel as well as thought. Leigh Smith entered Jesus College, Cambridge at twenty, where he was reputed a good shot and yachtsman. He earned BA (1857) and Master's (1861) degrees, and was admitted to the Bar but did not practice. Leigh Smith married at the age of 59, to Charlotte Seller, a woman thirty years his junior. They had one son, Philip. Despite the active scientific research practiced on his polar expeditions, Leigh Smith published no detailed account of his expeditions. A very private individual, he published no memoir and was, despite his accomplishments, largely forgotten by the time of his death in Hampstead on January 4, 1913.

Benjamin Leigh Smith was shipwrecked at Cape Flora, Northbrook Island (Franz Josef Land), in 1881. He discovered and named Brochøya, Foyneya, and 31 other points in northeast Svalbard.

Among the geographical features named for him are a kapp (cape) and breen (glacier) in Svalbard, a sound in Franz Josef Land, as well as Ostrov Li-Smita (Leigh-Smith Island), lying east of Hooker Island in (Franz Josef Land).

## Arctic Exploration Career

Leigh Smith made early geographical surveys of Svalbard and Franz Josef Land between 1871 and 1881. Unlike other contemporary yachtsmen, who organized sailing trips to the Arctic to engage in hunting exotic species and navigating in high latitudes, Leigh Smith was preoccupied with the scientific exploration of the Arctic. A financially and politically independent graduate of Cambridge, he earned a Master's certificate to gain the competence to sail his own ships. His five expeditions all sought to engage in detailed surveying of uncharted Arctic coastlines, conduct oceanographic research, and gather geological and biological specimens for natural history collections in Britain.

In the summer of 1871, Leigh Smith launched his first Arctic expedition, a geographic and oceanographic exploration of the north coast of Svalbard from the decks of an eighty-five-ton ice-strengthened ketch named **Samson**. **Samson** was guided by a Norwegian sealing skipper and explorer by the name of Erik Andreas Ulve (1833-1896). The **Samson** cleared Bjørnøya and Prince Karls Forland before rounding the northwest corner of Svalbard, sailing across the northern entrance of Hinlopenstretet, and thence along the northern coast of Nordaustlandet as far as a point later named for Leigh Smith. After charting several small islands, Leigh Smith raised his yacht club's ensign on the flagstaff erected on Parryøya by Parry's 1827 expedition. The five-month expedition returned to England after gathering an extended series of data on seawater temperatures.

Leigh Smith had **Samson** fitted out for another voyage to the Arctic in 1872. The expedition left Hull on 13 May and at Jan Mayen Land mapped several craters. Sailing for Svalbard, harpooners on board killed and processed two whales and 250 seals. Ice conditions were considerably worse than a year earlier, and **Samson** was damaged and beached for repairs at Widjefjorden. Leigh Smith was forced to make for England in September, without sailing nearly as far to the north and east as during his first expedition. On the latter of these two Arctic voyages Leigh Smith was joined by a Royal Navy Captain, John C. Wells, who collected much of the oceanographic data in the form of soundings, dredgings, ocean temperature readings, and measurements of currents.

In 1873, Leigh Smith chartered James Lamont's Arctic steamer **Diana**, and with **Samson** in reserve attempted to round Svalbard and survey Kong Karls Land. Before being stopped and forced to turn back by ice at Kapp Platen, Leigh Smith succeeded in relieving A.E. Nordenskiöld's Swedish expedition, beset the previous year near Mosselbukta. In addition to their pioneering Arctic oceanographic research, these three expeditions were critical in establishing the coastline and eastern extent of Nordaustlandet. Leigh Smith's experiences with varying ice conditions north of Svalbard, as well as his apparent desire to see how far north he could force a properly equipped screw steamer, likely factored into the design and construction of the **Eira**. This 125 ft screw barquentine would take Leigh Smith on two pioneering expeditions to Franz Josef Land, so recently discovered by the Austro-Hungarian Tegetthoff expedition of 1872-74.

For a detailed account of Leigh Smith's later expeditions, included in the Freeze frame archive, see the [Expedition Resource](#) page.

## Further information

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