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British Graham Land Expedition 1934-37

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Summary

The British Graham Land Expedition (BGLE), 1934-37, was undertaken by sixteen keen, predominantly young, explorers, scientists and military officers. Led by the Australian John Rymill, the expedition's aims were to reassert British sovereignty in the British Antarctic Territory, as well as to undertake exploration, scientific research and to assess the economic potential of the area.

Despite modest financial resources, treacherous sea ice and difficult terrain, the BGLE was a great success: solving a geographical mystery, collecting significant scientific data and establishing the foundation of Britain's ongoing scientific endeavours in Antarctica.

- An Antarctic expedition had originally been envisaged by Gino [Watkins](#), who had died on an expedition to the Arctic. Rymill put together a team to investigate Graham Land, which was one of the least well known areas of the British Antarctic territorial claim.
- 16 men, led by Rymill, left Britain on board *Penola*, with *Discovery II* also transporting their supplies, including dogs and two aircraft.
- Sledging journeys were carried out between September 1936 and January 1937. They had many significant findings, discovering that Graham Land was not an island as previously thought but was a peninsula.
- The expedition surveyed and mapped the Graham Land coastline and undertook zoological and geological observations.

[View photographs from this expedition](#)



In 1931, Arctic explorer Gino Watkins (1907-32) proposed an expedition to cross the Antarctic continent, if funds permitted, or a smaller expedition to undertake exploration and scientific research in British Graham Land. Unable to raise the necessary support and funds, he subsequently returned to Greenland to continue the work of the British Arctic Air Route (BAARE), 1930-31. Whilst out hunting for food during the **East Greenland Expedition (1932)** he disappeared. Only his kayak and some clothing were found. John **Rymill** led the expedition after Watkins's death. On his return to Britain, Rymill began the preparations for an expedition to explore Graham Land.

Rymill developed Watkins's idea for an expedition to Graham Land into an expedition plan that was endorsed by the Scott Polar Research Institute, the Royal Geographical Society and the Colonial Office. The British Graham Land Expedition (BGLE) had three major goals: reassert British territorial claims in Antarctica, explore along the west coast of Graham Land and find channels that led to the Weddell Sea (using these as a route to explore the west coast of the Weddell Sea) and undertake scientific research for academic and commercial purposes.

When the British Graham Land Expedition (BGLE) was planned in 1933, Graham Land was believed to be the largest of a group of islands lying to the North-West of the Antarctic mainland and separated from it by three channels, the main one being the Stefansson Strait. Graham Land was one of the least well known sectors of the British Antarctic territories.

Funds were provided by the Royal Geographical Society (£1,000) and the Colonial Office (an initial grant of £10,000), as well as individual sponsors. Various goods were also donated. Despite this official endorsement and support, the BGLE occurred during the Great Depression and was desperately short of funds. Whilst a small number of the expedition were seconded from the military and paid, the majority of the expedition's sixteen members were unpaid volunteers, although only a few of the expedition had sailing experience. The Royal Geographical Society, Royal Navy, Army and Royal Air Force loaned scientific, navigation, photographic and surveying equipment to the BGLE.

The expedition team comprised 16 men led by John Rymill, who also acted as surveyor and second pilot. The shore party of 9 included several Cambridge graduates, some of whom had acquired experience of polar conditions in Greenland on expeditions with Watkins and Rymill. They left Britain on 10 September 1934 onboard the expedition vessel, **Penola**.

The **Penola**, a small Breton fishing schooner named after the Rymill's family farm in South Australia, was purchased for the expedition. On 10 September 1934, Penola departed from England.

The budget for the expedition had enabled them to buy the boat and an **aeroplane** but not enough to pay a crew. **Penola**

was the main transportation for the members of the expedition, with the aircraft, dogs and stores brought south separately.

A de Havilland Fox Moth biplane, equipped with skis and floats, was obtained for aerial photography, reconnoitering routes for the ship and dog sledges, and transporting supplies. With floats attached, the plane could fly for 5 ¼ hours and, in still air, travel approximately 450 miles. With skis attached that range could be doubled. The aeroplane was used extensively for reconnaissance.

At the end of November in the Falkland Islands, the *Penola* made rendezvous with the BGLE's members who had sailed south with the plane and dogs aboard freighters. Additional dogs from Labrador were sent south after many of the original dogs from Greenland died from canine distemper, a viral disease, en-route. Bingham, Hampton, the plane and dogs were all transferred to *Discovery II*, sailing ahead of *Penola* to Port Lockroy.

An inspection of the *Penola* revealed that the timbers on which the engines were placed had warped while travelling through the tropics. Despite repairs, the engines began to move as the *Penola* sailed from the Falklands. The ship returned to collect concrete (so that a solid foundation could be made for engines when time allowed) and then set a course for Antarctica under sail. *Penola* reached Port Lockroy on 22 January 1935.

On the 27th January, the plane flew south with Hampton at the controls, and Rymill and R.E.D. Ryder onboard whilst seeking a site for the Northern Base. They saw several possibilities among the Argentine Islands. Returning aboard *Stella*, Quintin Riley's motor launch, they chose 'Winter Island' with its sheltered mooring, as a suitable area for the hut. A prefabricated two-storey building was swiftly erected. This included a hangar within which the plane could be stored with its wings folded. Attached was a two-story area containing a kitchen, workshop and wireless area downstairs, with sleeping and living quarters above.

By February 1935 the hut was completed, and the men hunted seals and collected penguin eggs to supply them through the winter. On 21 June 1935, the BGLE celebrated the Antarctic Midwinter with good company, fine food, excellent drink and enthusiastic singing.

In their first year the sledging season was short; treacherous sea ice conditions prevented any major sledging journeys further south, so a detailed survey of the area between the Argentine Islands and Cape Evenson was undertaken instead. In early January 1936, *Penola* sailed north to collect timber from Deception Island for a new base further south. On 27 January 1936, she returned to the Northern Base, and on 17 February 1936 the entire expedition moved south to the Debenham Islands in Marguerite Bay. Barry Island was chosen as the site for a hangar and single storey building and preparations for major sledging journeys began.

Once the second base had been built, on 12 March 1936, *Penola* sailed north to the Falklands, with a minimal crew. Once there, B.B. Roberts' appendix was removed, and the ship then sailed on to South Georgia where a floating dock was available for repairs. An inspection of the propeller shafts revealed that they had worn so badly that they could have snapped, allowing water to pour in and sink the ship.

The rest of the party remained to winter in the Antarctic. Several journeys were undertaken by dog sledge, the longest lasting 10 weeks exploring the coast 340 miles south of the Southern Base at Marguerite Bay. The sledges were pulled by dogs; however, they found the going difficult due to soft snow and often had to relay their loads in halves. At other times one of the group would walk ahead, testing the ground with a 3 metre whip; if the whip failed to hit solid ground they would try somewhere else and alter the course accordingly.

From 11-27 June 1936, a major effort was undertaken to sledge south, across the sea ice, and lay depots for the coming summer. A storm broke up the sea ice around the sledge parties. After hours of navigating breaks in the ice and sea ice being swept into large obstacles, they clambered onto a group of islands, naming them Terra Firma. Abandoning the depot-laying plan, two survey groups moved north, concentrating on Laubeuf Fjord region, and the channel between Adelaide Island and the mainland.

On 5 September 1936, the major southern sledge journeys commenced. The initial snow and ice conditions are so difficult that Rymill and Bingham transferred their supplies to Stephenson, Fleming and Bertram, allowing them to keep moving south while Rymill and Bingham returned to Base for new supplies.

Stephenson, Fleming and Bertram sledged south along King George VI Sound (now ?King George Sound?) as far as 72°S. From here they were able to map to 72° 30'S, but were unable to ascertain how much further south the Sound continues. On their return journey they landed twice on Alexander I Land (now ?Alexander Island?) where Fleming collected rocks and fossils at Fossil Bluff and Ablation Camp.

En-route south, Rymill and Bingham met the returning party from the Sound and were informed that neither the Sound nor Alexander I Land could provide a route to the Bellingshausen Sea, as planned. Rymill and Bingham then went east across Graham Land in the hope of reaching the Weddell Sea. They observed ?about 50 miles of coast? but could not reach the sea due to ice cliffs and glaciers.

On 5 January 1937, the sledge parties were reunited at Southern Base and on 23 February. **Penola** arrived to collect the wintering men on 23 February 1937 and left for South Georgia on 14 March. From here, most of the shore party returned to the United Kingdom onboard a whaling transport ship. **Penola** arrived back in Portsmouth on 4 August 1937. Their surveying made some significant discoveries; for example, Alexander I Land was shown to be longer than first thought, at over 150 miles in length. Their major discovery was to disprove a theory made by Ellsworth and Wilkins which claimed that whilst undertaking aerial flights they had seen channels between the Bellingshausen and Weddell Seas, making Graham Land an island. However, surveying this area on foot proved that such channels do not exist and that Graham Land is one landmass and part of the Antarctic continent and, therefore, is not an island. This demonstrated that flights over an area are not sufficient enough to tell the lie of the land and that land excursions were necessary in order to back up aerial surveying.

Alongside this discovery the members of the expedition were also responsible for the mapping of the Graham Land coastline, and various scientific experiments and zoological and geological advances.

Science

The BGLE was highly commended for the quality of its meteorological and survey work. B.B. Robert's and Bertram's field work provided research material for their PhDs. Fleming's clerical duties prevented his writing up the geological aspects of the expedition but the specimens were carefully catalogued for future researchers.

From the aerial observations, by Hubert Wilkins and Lincoln Ellsworth, it was thought that major channels existed across Graham Land. Rymill was adamant that aerial observations had to be confirmed by observations at ground level. As the BGLE moved further south it was clear that the channels did not exist. In 1934, they had travelled to the Graham Land archipelago. In 1937, they returned from the Antarctic Peninsula. Further Information

BGLE Epilogue

The members of the British Graham Land Expedition were awarded the Polar Medal, silver clasp, with the clasp ?ANTARCTIC 1935-37?, and several of them had the honour of addressing the Royal Geographical Society.

During World War II, the members of the BGLE served in a variety of roles. Rymill joined the Royal Australian Navy Volunteer Reserve (RANVR) before returning to the family farm Penola. Commander R.E.D. Ryder RN was awarded the VC for his leadership of the Operation Chariot raid on the St Nazaire dry dock. In 1940, Lieutenant J.H. Martin RANVR, who served for a time with R.E.D. Ryder, was lost at sea. Major L.C.D. Ryder and his men held back a section of the German advance on Dunkirk, providing extra time for the evacuation on the beaches, until their ammunition ran out. Upon surrendering, he and his men were shot by the Waffen-SS at the Le Paradis massacre.

The Scott Polar Research Institute (SPRI) supported the war effort by providing information and expertise on the Polar Regions and how to operate these extreme environments. Bertram and Roberts, drawing heavily from their experience on the BGLE, wrote the military Handbook on Clothing and Equipment Required in Cold Climates - 1941. At the end of the war, Riley and Roberts, who had both undertaken intelligence work during the war, visited Germany to oversee the relocation of German polar and hydrographical records and to establish contacts with polar specialists. Roberts served in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office as a polar expert and was involved in formulating the Antarctic Treaty (1959), as well as the Convention for the Conservation of Antarctica Seals (1972). Roberts was also a part-time Research Fellow at SPRI.

The Right Reverend Launcelot Fleming served as a Royal Navy Chaplain during the war and was director of the Scott Polar Research Institute from 1946 to 1949. In 1959, he was enthroned as Bishop of Norwich and retained a keen interest in rowing at Trinity Hall, Cambridge. In 1971, he became the Dean of the Windsor and domestic Chaplain to the Royal Family. In the House of Lords he sponsored a bill for British ratification of the Antarctic Treaty.

Bertram developed cold weather clothing for the military at the beginning of the war, and was Chief Fisheries Officer for Palestine (1940-44). He served as director of the Scott Polar Research Institute from 1949 to 56, and was a Fellow of St John's College, Cambridge.

In 1945, Bingham was appointed Commander of the newly established Falkland Islands Dependencies Survey (FIDS), the forerunner of the British Antarctic Survey (BAS). Within eighteen months he had equipped FIDS and transferred his skills to a new generation of polar explorers and scientists. Bingham was one of an elite group awarded three clasps to their Polar Medal.

Carse served in the Royal Navy during the war. Afterwards, he undertook six expeditions to South Georgia (1951-57), with four as leader of the South Georgia Survey. Carse also worked at the BBC for over four decades. His most famous role was 'Dick Barton, Special Agent'.

The other members of the BGLE all made significant contributions in their community and professional lives. Many of their descendants have travelled south as artists, scholars, scientists and advocates for Antarctica as a continent of peace and science.

Southern Lights, by J. Rymill, is the official account of the British Graham Land Expedition.

An accompanying booklet for the 2011, ***Return to Antarctica: The British Graham Land Expedition, 1934-37***, exhibition at the Polar Museum, Scott Polar Research Institute, is available for purchase.

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