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British National Antarctic Expedition 1901-04

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### Summary

- The aim of the expedition was to undertake an extensive exploration of the Ross Sea region of Antarctica.
- Led by [Robert Falcon Scott](#), 49 officers and men sailed onboard the *Discovery*.
- The first Antarctic [balloon flight](#) was undertaken by Captain Scott.
- One man was to perish on the sledging trips after falling over an ice-shelf into the sea.
- Scott, with [Shackleton](#) and Wilson, undertook a southern sledge journey, they were forced to turn back due to the effects of [scurvy](#). They had however, reached the furthest south of 82°17'S setting a new record.
- With *Discovery* frozen in the ice the expedition spent two winters in the Antarctic.

[View photographs from the relief expedition](#)

***Please note the photographs for this expedition are forthcoming.***



Recruiting a company of Royal Navy and Merchant seamen aboard the purpose built expedition ship *Discovery*, and with a strong scientific team, the expedition sailed from London on 31 July 1901.

Robert Falcon Scott of the Royal Navy led the 49 officers and men. The expedition was funded by the Government, the

Royal Society, the Royal Geographical Society, and private donations.

Of the officers Armitage and Koettlitz had been members of the Jackson-Harmsworth Arctic Expedition in 1894, while Bernacchi had overwintered in the Antarctic as a member of the British Antarctic Expedition (1898-1900) (Southern Cross) led by Borchgrevink.

The **Discovery** headed for Cape Adare, there they explored the coast, sailing south along the shore of Victoria Land and landing at Cape Crozier. Whilst there Royds and Wilson climbed 1350 feet and saw the Great Ice Barrier stretching out in front of them. They travelled along the edge of the barrier to its outer reaches, there they found areas of rock rising 2000 feet above them. Scott named this area the King Edward VII Land after the king at the time.

Before returning to McMurdo Sound where they intended to winter the **Discovery**, they paused to allow first Scott and then Shackleton to undertake the first Antarctic flights in **Eva**, a tethered hydrogen balloon. They reached 250m, however, the balloon was unable to be used again as it developed a leak. A site was found to winter at the southern end of Ross Island, they named this area Hut Point. A large **hut** was built but the men's living quarters would still be onboard the warmer **ship**, two smaller huts and a thermometer screen were constructed to house the scientific instruments. This meant that the men had to leave the ship with just a candle for light every two hours to read the thermometer. One problem with this was that high winds would blow out the candle which was almost impossible to relight without returning to the ship. Life was slightly more comfortable inside the **Discovery** as lighting was provided initially by electricity generated from a windmill until this was destroyed in a storm in May 1902.

Before the winter set in, short preliminary sledging trips were planned to carry out reconnaissance and to test the equipment. Wilson, Shackleton, and Ferrar man-hauled to White Island. This journey took longer than they had anticipated teaching them that distances are deceptive; they thought they could reach the island within a day and a half's sledging, it took them two days where they were then hit by a blizzard. This taught them how little they knew about the Antarctic.

On 4 March 1902 a party led by Royds, with three officers and eight men using four sledges, set out for Cape Crozier to leave a record of the location of their winter quarters. They had taken **dogs** with them but soft snow made their progress very slow. By the fourth day most of the dogs were lame, slowing progress, and so Royds reduced his party to himself and two officers (Koettlitz and Skelton) sending Barne and the men back. The reduced party still found the going very tough, unable to reach the penguin rookery they too turned back, reaching the **Discovery** on 19 March.

On their return Royds reduced party discovered that the party sent back earlier had a terrible journey. Reaching the summit of Castle Rock the men were caught in a storm, having managed to pitch their **tents** but unable to make any warm food, they began to suffer from the effects of **frostbite**. The thought of being so close to the ship was too much and they struck out for the **Discovery**. This was a serious error and the group became separated. Hare lost the group when he returned to get his boots, whilst Evans, Barne, and Quartley found themselves trapped on a snow patch at the edge of a precipice over the sea, unable to go up or down. Meanwhile the rest of the party continued on believing they were heading towards the ship to get help, instead they walked to the edge of a sea-cliff, a warning was shouted but Vince had a poor grip and slid over the edge of the cliff. Slowly the remainder of the party were able to climb uphill and made it back to the ship to raise the alarm.

The ship's siren was blown, and a search party was sent out to look for the missing members. Vince, sadly was never found, it is believed he was washed out to sea. Barne, Evans, and Quartley were found wandering confused on Castle Rock, very frostbitten, and were brought back to the ship. Two days later, Hare who had been given up as lost, was spotted coming down a hill. He had survived by making himself a shelter of rocks, where he fell asleep and was buried by the snow. When he woke 36 hours later he was able to kick himself free of the snow, miraculously he was unhurt.

A further sledging trip to lay depots for the spring sledging parties was undertaken before winter set in. On Easter Monday, Scott started off with Armitage, Wilson, Ferrar, and eight men with three sledges and nine dogs. They had a very difficult trip with the dogs refusing to work as the temperatures fell, after two days Scott decided they should return to the camp.

In April the sun was seen for the last time for four months. Strong gales made sight difficult, and lines were run between the ship and the huts to prevent the men getting lost when taking measurements. To prevent monotony a winter routine was established with each man having a task assigned. To entertain themselves the men played football, formed a theatre group, and learnt to ski and toboggan. Shackleton started, edited, and published a newspaper called '**The South Polar Times**', to which men would submit articles of a scientific or humorous nature written anonymously.

At the start of the summer in September four preliminary sledge parties were sent out, however, bad weather forced them to return. A second attempt later in September succeeded in laying a depot of a weeks worth of food. By now the crew were showing signs of **scurvy**, luckily this was abated for some time with the arrival of half a ton of seal meat with one of the sledging parties.

On the 30 October the support party for the Southern Journey set out, followed on 2 November by Scott, Shackleton, and Wilson. From the 15 November the main party travelled unsupported. This became perhaps the most famous of the sledge journey's undertaken by the expedition despite being beset with problems. The dog food had become contaminated as the **Discovery** travelled through the Tropics and so they would not eat it, this vastly reduced the dog's energy and so also reduced the capacity for the journey's achievements.

All they could do was go as far south as the dogs could manage and then resort to man-hauling their sledges. As the dogs became increasingly useless the sledge load had to be carried forward in halves. On 10 December the first dog died, and was fed to the others. It was decided the best nine dogs would be saved by feeding them the others, Wilson took on the job of killing the dogs.

It was not just the dogs that suffered, the men suffered badly from the effects of their trip. Food was strictly rationed and was not in large enough quantities, Shackleton was the first to show the early signs of scurvy. **Snow blindness** also affected them; at one point Wilson suffered so badly he had to haul his sledge blindfolded. They celebrated Christmas Day in their tent, finishing with a Christmas pudding Shackleton had hidden in a sock. On the 31 December having reached the furthest south of 82°17'S, a new southern record, they turned back. At the beginning of January they gave up driving the dogs and set them free to follow behind. On the return journey all the men were showing signs of scurvy, Shackleton suffering particularly badly was ordered not to pull the sledge but walk alongside it. On the 2 February 1903 they returned to the **Discovery**.

On their return they learnt that the relief ship, the **Morning**, was in McMurdo Bay to re-supply the **Discovery**, which was still frozen in the ice. They would need to wait until the summer when the ice would melt freeing the ship, all except eight of the crew volunteered to spend another winter in the Antarctic. The eight who wished to leave and Shackleton (who was invalided home against his will) left for Britain on 2 March 1903.

Sledging plans were made for when the sun returned, the sledging season was to be short if the **Discovery** was still icebound at the beginning of summer, they needed to ensure enough men were available to help free the ship. The first sledging party left to make a trip to Cape Crozier to collect penguin chicks, they arrived back safely at the ship, suffering from nothing other than a little frostbite and bringing with them penguin chicks and eggs. The other two major trips were to be Scott leading a party west up the Ferrar Glacier, and Barne leading a party to explore an inlet south of McMurdo Strait.

Scott's team began their journey on 12 October, however, they were forced to return to camp when the rough terrain damaged the sledge runners. The sledges were fixed and they set out again within the month. They were badly affected by winds and blizzards but made it to the top of the glacier 8900 feet above the sea. Here the party was split into two groups, the advance party of Scott, Lashly, and Evans continued to march until 30 November when they turned back. On their return journey all three slid down a valley, they were badly bruised but fortunately no one was injured. For the next cascade they attempted they roped themselves together, Scott and Evans fell into a crevasse, with Lashly left hanging onto a sledge. Scott was able to use his crampons to get a foothold and was able to drag himself to safety, Evans could then be hauled upwards.

They returned to the **Discovery** to find it still ice bound. On 5 January 1904 the ships the **Morning** and the **Terra Nova** came into view, they brought with them the unwelcome news that if the **Discovery** could not be released in time she

would have to be abandoned. Luckily after five weeks the ice broke up and the ship was free.

On his return the Royal Geographical Society awarded Scott the Patron's Gold Medal. He also received an honorary degree of Doctor of Science from Cambridge University.

## Further Information

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Baughman, T.H (1999) Pilgrims on the Ice. Robert Falcon Scott's First Antarctic Expedition. University of Nebraska Press.

Scott, R.N. (1905) The Voyage of Discovery Volumes I & II. London: Thomas Nelson and Sons. Republished, Dublin: Nonsuch Publishing 2005.

Headland, R.K (2009) A Chronology of Antarctic Exploration, A synopsis of events and activities from the earliest times until the International Polar Year, 2002-2009. Bernard Quaritch Ltd.

## Links

The Scott Polar Research Institute has made a catalogue of its [Polar Art Collection](#) accessible online. The art collection features artworks by explorers such as Edward Adrian Wilson, and more modern pieces by Keith Shackleton.

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