British Arctic Expedition 1875-6

Summary

- An expedition arranged by the Admiralty to try and reach the North Pole, with the hope of settling the debate as to whether there was an open polar sea situated there.
- Led by Sir George Nares, 120 men on two ships, the HMS Alert and HMS Discovery, wintered in the Arctic.
- When they found the sea frozen they sledged across the ice, exploring an area unknown to the western world. They did not reach the Pole, but did reach the furthest north for the time and disproved the open Polar sea hypothesis.
- Most of the men suffered badly from scurvy through a fault in the concentration process and the expedition was aborted.

View photographs from this expedition

The British Arctic Expedition 1875-1876, led by Sir George Strong Nares, was arranged by the Admiralty in an attempt to reach the North Pole by Smith Sound and to explore the coasts of Greenland and adjacent lands. Sailing from Portsmouth on 29 May 1875 in two ships, HMS Alert (Captained by George Nares) and HMS Discovery (Captained by Henry Stephenson), with a combined crew of 120 men. They left amid jubilation and deafening cheers, as Nares was to record 'No one on board our two ships can ever forget the farewell given to the discovery vessels on that occasion'. Queen Victoria had sent a telegram wishing them success and safety as well as congratulating them on their bravery. Britain viewed this as the country's triumphant return to exploration after the disasters of the Franklin expedition.
In late August 1875 the two ships looked for suitable areas to winter, the *Discovery* wintered on Grant Land, north of the Kennedy Channel, whilst the *Alert* went a further 80km and wintered on the western coast of the Robeson Channel. On the 1 September 1875 Nares reached a farthest north by ship of 82°24’N, and within 15 days he had reached 82°27’N, here the freeze started and he moved into a bay safe enough to winter in.

Nares had not been a keen supporter of the 'Open Polar Sea' hypothesis and as the ice closed in around him he concluded that they had reached the edge of a frozen polar ocean and therefore the ships would be unable to sail to the pole. In the case of such a finding Nares had been equipped with *sledges* and so he began the process of laying depots ready for the summer sledging trips. During the winter months Nares kept his men busy to prevent monotony setting in. An ice-skating rink was made, firework displays were held, boxing matches put on, evening classes were run, and a newspaper was organised. Nares also restarted 'The Royal Arctic Theatre' in which the officers dressed up to entertain the crew.

Sledging began in spring 1876, with the first party leaving the *Alert* to make contact with the *Discovery* 80km away. They found they had started the sledging season too soon and the men returned a few days later all terribly frostbitten and having only covered 26km. A party was sent out again a few weeks later in improved weather conditions, they managed to make contact with the *Discovery* and ascertain that all was well.

In April the major sledging journeys began, seven sledges, and 53 officers and men began the *haul*. Two boats on sledges, plus three support sledges, went north led by Markham and Parr, and two sledges went to Grant Land led by Aldrich and Giffard. Later in the season Beaumont and three sledges were sent to explore Greenland, making a total of three exploration groups. They found the trips very hard going, each man was hauling a load of over 100 kilos, over hummocky ice and waist-deep snow.

The teams found their *clothes* unsuitable for Arctic travel; their clothing absorbed their sweat which froze making the clothes stiff. Some mornings they had to beat their trousers with an axe to make them flexible at the knee. Furthermore, bad weather often forced the groups to spend days in thin *tents* in communal sleeping bags. In such conditions their clothes would thaw and saturate the sleeping bags which would then freeze in the cold. This increased the weight on the sledges being pulled, and made the following nights sleep even more uncomfortable. Two weeks into the journey some of the Markham's and Aldrich's parties began to feel unwell, with what Markham assumed to be exhaustion. To make things easier Markham's group left one of the boats and continued on. However, the journey was very rough going with many high hummocks and a number of deep snowdrifts, making the going very difficult. Just over a month into the trek and a third of the party were ill, not with exhaustion but with *scurvy*.

Markham's party turned back but only four men were at full strength, they abandoned the second boat and one of the sledges. When they were 40miles from the *Alert* Lt Parr went ahead to get help. Three sledges were sent back to rescue the party.

Aldrich's sledging teams had a very similar experience with many of the party developing scurvy. They were rescued by a search party in June, without the rescue party they would have never have made it back, as the ice was already beginning to melt and illness was reducing their hauling speed.

Beaumont's team were also developing scurvy, out of seven men only two were still fit. They dragged the sledges with the others strapped to them and three crawling behind, hampered by bad weather and difficult terrain. To lighten the load all nonessentials were abandoned including their tent. Beaumont left his men huddled under a strip of canvas whilst he went to get help at Polaris Bay. On his way he met a rescue team driven by dogs, they had been sent out to look for him and took him back to his stricken men. With them they had seal meat which is a good *antisorsbic*, once the men had eaten this they were able to continue onwards to Polaris Bay.

By the end of June, the *Alert* had 53 crew on board, nine of which were capable of service, the rest had also succumbed to the effects of scurvy. The *Discovery* had been hit by scurvy too, Nares needed to return home but his ship was still surrounded by ice. Using gunpowder he blew the ice apart creating a gap by which he could reach the open water.
Nares led the ships down Smith Sound and in September they emerged into the ocean, by November they were back in Portsmouth. The expedition may have been unsuccessful in its attempt to reach the Pole but they did reach the furthest north for the time, making many geographical discoveries and returning with a large quantity of scientific data. In total they explored 480 km of the coastlines of northern Ellesmere Island and northern Greenland, which until that point had not been explored by Europeans. They also discovered that an open Polar sea did not exist and that the North Pole was covered by a frozen Arctic Ocean.

On his return Nares received a mixture of congratulation and criticism for his expedition. There were debates as to the reasons for the expeditions failure; ultimately it was the outbreak of scurvy, which caused Nares to abort the expedition and return to Britain. An investigation committee decided that the outbreak was due to the failure to include limejuice in the sledge rations, Nares refused to accept this and diaries show that limejuice was taken on the sledges. Since the discovery of vitamin C we now know that the distilled lime juice taken on the expedition had a very low vitamin C content as the process of distillation in large copper pans destroys vitamin C. Had fresh limes or lemons been taken instead then scurvy may have been abated, but Nares and his contemporaries could not have known this.

Further Information:


Links

The Scott Polar Research Institute has made a catalogue of its Polar Art Collection accessible online. The art collection includes artworks by Dr Edward Lawton Moss of the British Arctic Expedition, 1875-76.