



## **THE HISTORY OF THE BRITISH ANTARCTIC EXPEDITION 1898–1900 OCCUPATION OF CAPE ADARE**

**AND**

## **THE HISTORY OF THE NORTHERN PARTY (PART OF THE BRITISH ANTARCTIC EXPEDITION 1910–13) SUBSEQUENT OCCUPATION OF CAPE ADARE**

Extract from the Conservation Plan for Cape Adare.

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### **THE BRITISH ANTARCTIC EXPEDITION 1898–1900**

In the last years of the nineteenth century Antarctica must have seemed as remote and forbidding a place as space does today. Only a few hardy travellers, whalers and sealers had ventured into Antarctic waters and, aside from mapping portions of the coastline, none of them had really explored the Great Southern Continent. The idea of spending an extended period of time in Antarctica, particularly the long, dark winter there, was something to be dreamt about by only the bravest, most driven – or most rash – explorers.

Carsten Borchgrevink, leader of the British Antarctic Expedition 1898–1900, was a man who embodied all three characteristics. Although not nearly as well known as Scott or Shackleton, Borchgrevink remains a key figure in Antarctic history.

Even though Borchgrevink's expedition was marred by controversy and a measure of conflict, his team did make many noteworthy achievements. They conducted significant scientific and meteorological observations, mapped the Cape Adare region, made sledging journeys over the sea ice, and completed a ski journey to a point further south than anyone had previously reached. More importantly they proved that people could survive the long Antarctic winter living on the continent itself. The ten men spent the last winter of the century living in a tiny, cramped hut (with another hut for their supplies), perched on the edge of a narrow wind-swept spit, surrounded by towering cliffs at remote Cape Adare at the northern reaches of the Ross Sea. Today, those huts still stand on Cape Adare, making Antarctica the only continent in the world where the first buildings to be constructed still exist.

Cape Adare was first discovered by James Clark Ross in 1841, but, the real story begins with the momentous landing there on 24 January 1895, from the whaler *Antarctic*, an event that was to mark the start of the heroic era of Antarctic exploration. There are varying accounts as to who was first ashore, but Carsten Borchgrevink, who had convinced the captain of the *Antarctic* to take him on board in the combined role of seaman, seal shooter, skin curer and naturalist, recorded the moment as follows:

*I do not know whether it was the desire to catch the jelly-fish (seen in the shallows), or from the strong desire to be the first man to put foot on this terra incognita, but as soon as the order was given to stop putting the oars, I jumped over the side of the boat, I thus killed two birds with one stone, being the first man on shore, and relieving the boat of my weight, thus enabling her to approach land near enough to allow the captain to jump ashore dry-shod.*

It would seem Borchgrevink's claim was somewhat optimistic because there is some evidence that there had been at least five earlier landings in Antarctica by sealers. Regardless of who made the first footfall, the visit ignited an enduring desire within Borchgrevink to return and explore Antarctica more fully.

Borchgrevink was born in Christiania (now known as Oslo) in 1864 to a Norwegian father and an English mother. He emigrated to Australia in 1888 where he had worked with survey teams in the bush and as a teacher before joining the *Antarctic*. Little is known of his early years, during which he claims to have attended Christiania University, but it is clear Borchgrevink was not a man who was easily deterred. Having failed to raise funding for his proposed Antarctic expedition in Australia, Borchgrevink headed to England to continue his quest. There he met with rejection after rejection until, in 1897, he met the wealthy magazine publisher, Sir George Newnes, who granted him some £40,000 towards the expedition.

At the time, this stunning success infuriated the British establishment, particularly the esteemed gentlemen of the Royal Geographical Society who were preparing to mount a Society-endorsed expedition to Antarctica. Although Borchgrevink's expedition flew the Union Jack there were, in fact, only two Englishmen in the team. The remainder of the ten-strong party was made up of two Lapps, an Australian and five Norwegians.

Borchgrevink purchased a former sealer, the *Pollux*, which was renamed *Southern Cross* and equipped with new, more powerful, engines. He then began to outfit the expedition with a wide range of equipment and supplies. Many items were purchased from the Military Equipment Stores and Tortoise Tents Company Limited in London. Included were aluminium cooking utensils, 53 camp stoves (the Primus stove was invented in Sweden in 1892 and these were the first Primus stoves to be used in Antarctica), mining tools, gunpowder, silk tents, Eau de Cologne as a deodorant, 500 Union jacks for "purposes of survey and extension of the British Empire" and between 70 to 90 dogs of Greenland and Siberian origin. These were the first dogs to be taken south for sledging operations and, for their sustenance, there were 28 tons of cod-liver oil, fish, meat and oatmeal biscuits containing 58% fat. The dogs were also provided with coats, fur boots and brass chains. The expedition even took 12-gauge paradox guns for protection against any big game, assuming that Polar bears might exist in Antarctica as they did in the Arctic.

For the Shore Party the range of provisions included five tons of bread, one ton of Irish butter and two tons of compressed vegetables, including potatoes – the first dehydrated food prepared for an Antarctic expedition. Clothing included suits of reindeer skin, Jaeger camel hair costumes and fleece-lined slippers.

The objectives of the expedition included the collection of scientific data and achieving the first winter-over on the continent, but Borchgrevink had not ruled out the possibility of reaching the geographic South Pole or South Magnetic Pole. He also intended to investigate the commercial possibilities of the region, which included whaling, mineral prospecting and the mining of the large quantities of penguin guano at Cape Adare for fertiliser. The Shore Party, to be led by Borchgrevink, was originally planned to be nine, but was later increased to ten. The party consisted of:

Carsten Borchgrevink (34), Norwegian, Expedition Leader  
Louis Bernacchi (24), Australian, Astronomer and Physicist  
William Colbeck (27), British, Magnetic Observer and Cartographer  
Kolbein Ellifsen (23), Norwegian, Assistant and Cook  
Hugh Evans (23), British, Assistant Zoologist  
Anton Fougner (30), Norwegian, Scientific Assistant  
Nicolai Hanson (28), Norwegian, Zoologist  
Herlof Klovstad (30), Norwegian, Medical Officer  
Ole Must (22), Laplander, Dog Handler  
Persen Savio (22) Laplander, Dog Handler

The *Southern Cross* departed from St Katherine's Dock, London on 22 August 1898, where a large crowd assembled to see the expedition off.

Public interest in the departure was stirred by the thought that the men might not return, and the ship was given a rousing send-off as she glided down the Thames. Sailing via Hobart the *Southern Cross*, loaded with stores and with dogs tethered on the deck, arrived at Cape Adare nearly six months later, during a storm, on 15 February. When the storm abated, a landing was made and a beach ridge selected as the site for the two prefabricated huts, and their arrival was celebrated with champagne and speech making.

Unloading began on the 18 February, but further storms meant the operation, which should have taken four days, took 12. Boxes and other goods were lowered into small whaleboats, which were hauled to the beach along a strong hawser between ship and shore. The men landing the equipment worked knee-deep in cold water and had the arduous task of dragging much of the equipment up the beach. The job of establishing the winter quarters was interrupted by another storm on 19 February when a whaleboat and dog kennels were blown out to sea and wrecked amongst the ice floes. Remnants were later washed ashore and salvaged for firewood, and the bow of the whaleboat was up-ended and placed near the huts. Twice the *Southern Cross* broke free of her anchors and nearly foundered in the fierce gales.

With a site levelled for the huts and a foundation scraped out in pebbles to a depth of two feet, the huts were assembled. The numbered planks of Baltic pine were interlocked and tied together with steel rods. Cables were passed over the roofs and secured to ship anchors embedded in the ground. On the windward side, the roofs were extended down to the ground by means of a wooden framework and covered with seal skins. Later, the space between the huts was enclosed with a flimsy structure clad in seal skins, and used

to store sledging equipment, provisions and Fougner's workbench and tools. On the windward side of this space, a wooden framework was constructed and covered with seal skins thereby providing a protected way between the buildings and increasing storage space considerably. Sacks of coal and equipment were stored in this area.

Each of the two huts measured just 5.5 x 6.5 metres. One was selected as a dwelling, the other became a storeroom. The Living Hut had a double floor and walls lined with sheets of papier-mâché as an insulating material. A small cold porch had a cramped room off each side. One room, originally intended by Borchgrevink as an office, was used for taxidermy, the other as a photographic darkroom and to store instruments. The ceiling, which was just 2.1 metres high also formed a double layer and a trap-door provided access to a loft used for storing instruments and bottled provisions. Borchgrevink later used the loft as an office. Inside the hut at one end, was the 'mess stove' on wheels, manufactured by the Military Equipment Stores and Tortoise Tent Company Limited. An L-shaped table was against the west wall and bunks, two high, each with their own shelves, were constructed along the north and east walls and against the darkroom. The bunks were designed so that they could be closed with sliding panels about which Borchgrevink wrote:

*... the bunks were closed after the plan followed by the sailors on board whaling vessels, with a special opening, leaving yourself in an enclosure which can hold its own with our modern coffin; and, like this, it is private ... It was by a special recommendation from the doctor that I made this arrangement ...*<sup>1</sup>

In the end, only the bunks occupied by the Lapps were constructed in this manner, the remaining men being content with curtains, although the English surveyor and magnetician, William Colbeck, isolated himself from Borchgrevink and Fougner by vertically attaching a mattress to his bunk.

Supply depots were established on top of Cape Adare and at the base of the cliff behind Ridley Beach. The Stores Hut consisted of a single uninsulated room. It also had a loft in which were stored tents, stoves and additional clothing while the main area contained provisions, clothing, medical stores and a pantry. It was occupied from time to time by the Norwegian, Nicolai Hanson, when he became sick.

Finally, with the Shore Party ensconced in their huts, and winter fast approaching the *Southern Cross* sailed north. The ten men were alone, an entire continent to themselves with no chance of rescue until their ship returned. Through sheer tenacity Borchgrevink had finally got his expedition to Cape Adare and his attention now shifted to his grandiose plans for the great feats they would achieve. But, as winter set in, the reality for the men was life in a crowded, dirty hut surrounded by piles of equipment whilst outside the weather raged and the savage sled dogs fought and killed one another.

The expedition was plagued with personality problems from the outset. As any psychologist, looking at the makeup of the Shore Party, would point out, there was nothing homogenous about the team. They were from different nationalities and social positions, which was very important at those Victorian times, with correspondingly

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<sup>1</sup> *First on the Antarctic Continent*, CE Borchgrevink FRGS, C Hurst & Co, London (1980) (first published 1901 by George Newnes Ltd, London).

different outlooks. These differences were a recipe for disaster. There were numerous quarrels – one of the Lapps even made threats with his knife.

Much of the time the ‘English element’, as Borchgrevink referred to the two Englishmen and the Tasmanian physicist, Louis Bernacchi, kept together and spent many hours walking along the beach. Cards, chess and drafts were played and the men indulged in shooting contests. Bad weather sometimes meant the party stayed indoors for days and tension developed.

There were more practical problems too. On one occasion, Colbeck nearly set fire to the lining and mattress beside his bunk with a candle and survival packs were subsequently made up for each member of the party. On the evening of 31 August some of the men were nearly asphyxiated with carbon monoxide from the coal range.

Still, the pioneering expedition achieved a great deal, with sledging trips over the sea ice to the Duke of York Island near the head of Robertson Bay, where a rock hut was erected during visits in August and September. Here, rock specimens were gathered that included gold-coloured crystals that Borchgrevink hoped would prove the existence of rich deposits of gold. Many new zoological discoveries were made, a detailed record was obtained of meteorology and magnetism, and Colbeck drafted a new map for the region that was to prove useful to subsequent expeditions.

The first known death on the Antarctic Continent, that of 26-year-old Nicolai Hanson, who had been ill since July, occurred on 14 October. It is thought that he died from the effects of the disease beriberi. His body was placed in the Stores Hut and, six days later, was buried on top of Cape Adare where a boulder served as headstone. Hanson’s death had a profound effect on the others who had respected the zoologist and enjoyed his company.

As January 1900 drew to a close, the men became restless and anxiety prevailed in the camp, many were concerned that the *Southern Cross* might not make it back. In his diary entry for 21 January Bernacchi, who felt as if he were incarcerated, noted:

*Blowing incessantly last three days, with not one hour’s intermission ... All packed together in this miserable, dirty hut – unable to go out and the only diversion the musical box grinding out incredibly sad melodies.<sup>2</sup>*

Then, at 8.00am on 28 January, the men were woken with the shout of “Post!”. It was Captain Jensen who had returned on the *Southern Cross*. Relief was finally at hand. Mail was handed round and, during a break in loading, a start was made to dismantle the Stores Hut, which Borchgrevink planned to re-erect at Coulman Island, further south. When almost ready to depart, he decided that he did not want the hut and, in the end, only the roof was removed.

On the morning of 2 February, the last day at Cape Adare, a visit was made to Hanson’s grave during a snowstorm where an iron cross with inscribed brass plaque was mounted on a large boulder. In a world far away, the Boer War (1899–1902) had already been

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<sup>2</sup> *That First Antarctic Winter*, Janet Crawford, South Latitude Research Limited, Christchurch, New Zealand (1998).

underway five months. The two huts and a quantity of stores were then left to the elements and Bernacchi recorded in his diary:

*May I never pass another 12 months in similar surroundings and conditions.*<sup>3</sup>

From Cape Adare, the *Southern Cross* continued south into the Ross Sea and entered a large indentation in the edge of the Ross Ice Shelf, then called The Great Ice Barrier. Two parties skied about ten geographic miles to a point at about 78° 45' or perhaps as much as 78° 50' South – 35 miles further south than Ross with his ships in 1841. As with the over-winter, this was an outstanding achievement and ensured that Borchgrevink would make his mark in polar history. Turning north, the expedition finally arrived at Stewart Island, New Zealand, on 31 March.

At the close of the expedition, Hanson's zoological notes on seals disappeared mysteriously and became the subject of numerous letters to the editor of *The Times*. They have not been seen since. Borchgrevink's hopes of commercial success were doomed to failure. The penguin guano on Ridley Beach was mixed with gravel and unable to be mined, the 'gold' he found on Duke of York Island and thought might lead to another Klondike, turned out to be iron pyrites.

Borchgrevink returned to England but his return was not greeted with the acclaim he hoped for. The public was more interested in the Boer War in South Africa, where many had relatives fighting, and in the Boxer Rebellion in China. For Sir Clements Markham, now engrossed in preparations for the National Antarctic Expedition, Borchgrevink's return was important in that it proved that humans could survive the winter within the Antarctic Circle, but the other achievements of the Expedition went unacknowledged.

Borchgrevink lectured on the expedition and Sir George Newnes published his book, *First on the Antarctic Continent*. Soon afterwards, Bernacchi's book, *To the South Polar Regions* gave his account of the expedition. The zoological collections arrived in London on the *Southern Cross* at the end of October 1900. They were deposited at the Natural History Museum and an important monograph was subsequently published on the collection. It was the slow accumulation of scientific data by Bernacchi and his scientific colleagues that had the most importance for future expeditions and for developing an understanding of the Antarctic continent.

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<sup>3</sup> *That First Antarctic Winter*, Janet Crawford, South Latitude Research Limited, Christchurch, New Zealand (1998).

## THE HISTORY OF THE NORTHERN PARTY (PART OF THE BRITISH ANTARCTIC EXPEDITION 1910–13) OCCUPYING CAPE ADARE

After Scott's first expedition there were no visitors to Ridley Beach until 1911. The Eastern Party of Scott's second expedition had originally intended to be based on the Ross Ice Shelf where they were charged with exploring King Edward Land. This idea was abandoned and the wintering party of six led by Lieutenant Victor Campbell RN, was put ashore on Ridley Beach from the *Terra Nova* at midnight on 18 January. They then became known as the Northern Party and embarked on a number of biological, meteorological and geological studies. The party consisted of:

Lieutenant Victor Campbell (35), Party Leader  
George Levick (33), Surgeon RN  
Raymond Priestley (24), Geologist  
Frank Browning, Petty Officer RN  
Harry Dickason, Able Seaman RN  
George Abbott, Petty Officer RN

Borchgrevink's huts were still in good condition although the supplies had deteriorated. According to Davies, the ship's carpenter, there were scores of cases lying about the huts that had become weathered and bleached with no markings to indicate their contents.

As Davies recorded:

*I stuck a pick into one end and found it was ball ammunition ... there was a solitary dog chained to a wire jackstay.*

Their hut of Baltic pine, and of a more conventional design using weatherboards rather than interlocking boards, was erected about 20 metres north of Borchgrevink's huts. Thirty tons of stores and equipment, including five tons of Patent fuel (coal) was put ashore and a beach ridge was levelled for the hut. To help combat the pungent smell of guano, the surface was sprinkled with chlorine-enriched bleaching powder.

While their own hut was being constructed, Campbell and his men occupied Borchgrevink's Stores Hut. A roof of canvas was put over the top and anchored down with battens nailed to the exterior surface of the walls. Inside, it was partitioned with boxes of supplies, sleeping platforms of match-boarding were made around walls and a small blubber stove and ice-melter were installed. Using supply cases, a latrine was built outside against the west wall of the hut. The stove in the Living Hut was found unsatisfactory and the hut was later used for photography and recreation.

Unlike Borchgrevink's huts, the single-roomed 6.3 x 6.15 metre hut was oriented west-east and by the end of the first day, the framing was completed. It had a double lining and was insulated with Gibson Quilting, which consisted of finely shredded seaweed within two layers of hessian. An Allen acetylene generator provided lighting, and a stove incorporating some of Borchgrevink's stove flue, was used for heating and cooking. Numerous other items including a ship's anchor, to which roof cables were attached, were commandeered from Borchgrevink's supplies. At the other end of the hut a barrel of Colza oil was frozen into the ground.

A stores annex, erected around the south-east corner, enclosed the cold porch to which a windbreak was added, and a latrine was later constructed on the lee side by the east wall. Later, an icehouse for meat storage was built nearby from packing cases and may have also served as a laundry. On 4 March, Campbell and his party moved in to their new hut where they had, “a great house warming, gramophone concert [and] whisky toddy”. But, within two weeks, a severe storm resulted in the men having grave fears for the future of their hut and, in June, the first components of the building came off.

Some sledging was undertaken in winter and a cave they named the ‘Abbey Cave’ at Penelope Point (after Captain Pennell of the *Terra Nova*), on the west side of Robertson Bay, was occupied on two occasions. Valuable scientific observations were made in meteorology and the first detailed study of the Adélie penguin rookery was undertaken by Dr Levick. In December, while a lookout was being maintained for the *Terra Nova*, a depot and camp was established on Cape Adare. At this time, Browning, one of three seamen in the Northern Party, made an inscription of white quartz pebbles on Hanson’s grave.

On 3 January 1912, the *Terra Nova* arrived and collected the party, moving them further south to Evan’s Cove in Terra Nova Bay. However, the *Terra Nova* was unable to uplift the party before winter and they passed the brutal winter sheltering in a cave lined with seaweed and pebbles, the three officers on one side, the three seamen on the other. The six men eventually trekked down the coast subsisting on seals and penguins until they made it to Cape Roberts where they picked up a depot, eventually crossing the sea ice to the comparative safety of Hut Point on 6 November. They then marched on to Cape Evans where they met the *Terra Nova* on 18 January 1913.