



## THE HISTORY OF THE BRITISH ANTARCTIC EXPEDITION 1907 - 09 OCCUPATION OF CAPE ROYDS

Extract from the Conservation Plan for Cape Royds.

Written by David Harrowfield.

Lyttelton, New Zealand, New Years Day 1908 – Ernest Shackleton bade farewell to friends and colleagues and boarded his 40-year-old converted Norwegian sealer *Nimrod*. Cheered on by a crowd of many thousands who had come to the port to farewell them, Shackleton and his men were heading into the unknown, to a place with the harshest climate of anywhere on earth, where the first wintering over had been made less than 10 years before – Antarctica.

What drove men like Shackleton to endure extreme hardship and risk their lives in the discovery of the last continent? The Norwegians describe it as the yearning forever to go to the far, dark cold places. Shackleton had his own answer. In the first paragraph of *The Heart of the Antarctic*, his account of the *Nimrod* expedition, he writes:

*Men go out into the void spaces of the world for various reasons. Some are actuated simply by the love of adventure, some have the keen thirst for scientific knowledge, and other again are drawn by 'the lure of little voices', the mysterious fascination of the unknown. I think in my own case it was a combination of these factors that determined me to try my fortune once again in the frozen south.*

Since being invalided home with scurvy in 1903 from Robert Falcon Scott's *Discovery* expedition, on which he was a Third Officer, Shackleton had been consumed by a passion to get back to the Ice. But organising an expedition was far from an easy task, even for one with Shackleton's famously charming and forceful personality. Since his return from Antarctica he had held a variety of jobs. He had been a magazine journalist, secretary of the Scottish Royal Geographical Society, stood unsuccessfully for Parliament and worked in public relations for a large Glasgow steelworks owned by William Beardmore. But his desire to get back to Antarctica never dimmed. The day after his first child was born he wrote a letter to a friend: 'What would I give to be out there again doing the job and this time really on the road to the Pole'.

However his determination was tested from the outset. For more than a year he drew up cost-cutting schemes and engineered introductions to rich businessmen and by late 1906 he was close to giving up. As he wrote, 'the difficulty that confronts most men who wish to undertake exploration work is that of finance, and in this respect I was rather more ordinarily handicapped'. But Shackleton was an exceptionally determined man who lived by his family motto 'Fortitudine Vincimus' – by endurance we conquer. Finally, with a promise from his erstwhile employer William Beardmore, and several other influential businessmen, to guarantee a bank loan for some £20,000 pounds, Shackleton was able to announce his plans on 11 February 1907 at a dinner lecture held at the Kosmos Dining Club of the Royal Geographical Society. He was leading an expedition to Antarctica, and its primary objective was the greatest geographical prize of the time – to reach the South Pole.

This was to be the third British expedition to the Ross Sea region within 10 years, the first being Borchgrevink's British Antarctic Expedition 1898-1900, and the second, Scott's National Antarctic Expedition 1901-1904. Shackleton stated that he intended to establish his base in King Edward VII land at the eastern end of the Ross Ice Shelf, and from this location to undertake the journey to the South Pole. He assured Scott that he did not intend to enter McMurdo Sound or make use of Scott's old base at Hut Point, since Scott claimed rights not only to the hut he had built in 1902 but also to the route to the Pole that he had pioneered.

Although finance was tight, Shackleton proceeded to recruit a group of 14 men, including scientists, who would make up the Shore Party of the expedition, and he purchased the 200 ton *Nimrod*. He also procured a specially designed, prefabricated hut, 15 Manchurian ponies (10 were taken south), nine dogs and an air-cooled, four-cylinder 11kw (15 hp) motorcar, the New Arrol-Johnston. *Nimrod* sailed from Torquay, England, bound for New Zealand on 30 July 1907.

Departing from Lyttelton, New Zealand, on 1 January 1908, *Nimrod* was cheered on by a huge crowd, the shriek of steam whistles and the crash of guns. But behind the cheers and celebration Shackleton was beset by anxiety: *Nimrod* was dangerously overloaded with 255 tons of coal, equipment and food, and had just one metre of freeboard! To save her limited cargo of coal, she was towed south by *Koonya*, a steel built steamer of some 1,100 tons. Within days *Nimrod* was taking on water through the scupper holes and wash ports. It was an arduous trip and Shackleton later wrote that *Nimrod* performed under tow 'like a reluctant child being dragged to school.' Finally the tow, of some 1,510 miles (2,410 km) finished on 15 January with the sighting of the first icebergs.

Shackleton headed for an inlet on the edge of the Ross Ice Shelf where he intended to establish his base, but, since his last visit to the area, many kilometres of the ice shelf had calved into the sea, obliterating his planned landing place. Faced by impenetrable pack ice, he also had to abandon his second choice for a base, King Edward VII Land, and was forced to head for McMurdo Sound, despite his promise to Scott. Again he was frustrated by pack ice and was unable to reach Hut Point near the site of the present-day United States McMurdo Station. Instead, he selected a site to winter-over at some 32km further north at Cape Royds, named by Captain Scott's *Discovery* expedition after its meteorologist, Lieutenant Charles Royds RN.

A camp had previously been established at this site by Scott and Wilson in January 1904 when a lookout was maintained for the relief ship *Morning*. Shackleton hoped the bare black rocks of the Cape would offer some protection against the storms. On 3 February he, Jameson Adams and Frank Wild ran their whaleboat into a natural ice dock and scrambled ashore. Shackleton, nicknamed 'The Boss' by his crew, was 34 years old when *Nimrod* arrived at Cape Royds.

The men immediately set to work constructing their base. They finished the basic construction of the hut in the first 10 days, although insulating it against the cold went on for another three weeks. The hut would be their only refuge from the fury of the blizzards and their only home through the dark months of the Antarctic winter. It was also the base for various journeys that Shackleton's expedition undertook.

These journeys were highly successful. Six of his men led by Professor Edgeworth David made the first ascent of Mount Erebus, the 3,794m active volcano that stands like a sentinel over Ross Island and which had been discovered by the Englishman Ross's expedition in 1841. Professor David's party reached the crater rim on 10 March 1908 after a rugged five-day climb. In the spring and summer of 1908-09, while the Polar party was out, three of the expedition's members – Douglas Mawson, Alistair Mackay and Professor David again leading – reached the South Magnetic Pole on 16 January 1909 after an epic 1,600km trudge.

The expedition was also the first to test a motor car in Antarctica, finding the New Arrol-Johnston no good in snow but useful for transporting loads from *Nimrod* across the sea ice and for trips as far as south as the Erebus Glacier Tongue. Further, in the winter of 1908, a book called *Aurora Australis*, was the first book to be produced and published in Antarctica. The whimsical collection of essays, stories and poems was printed by Wild and Joyce on a printing press they had only just learnt to use. The ink was kept warm by a candle being held beneath the inkplate. Some 60 to 70 copies were bound using packing cases and leather by Bernard Day, the expedition's motor mechanic.

As fair as their main objective – the quest for the Pole – sledging commenced in the spring of 1908, the polar team being Shackleton, Adams, Wild and Marshall. Although the expedition had started with ten ponies, two had to be shot during the voyage, four died at Cape Royds from poisoning, and four – Socks, Grisi, Chinaman and Quan – began with the polar party; the death of all four ponies by early December 1908 meant man-hauling with a sledge weighing 1,000 lbs from that time. The team forged a new route up to the polar plateau via the Beardmore Glacier, which they named for the expedition's patron. On 9 January 1909, after nearly two-and-a-half-months of trudging, they had reached a point of just 97 (156km) from the South Pole. In his diary entry for that day Shackleton recorder: *'We have shot our bolt, and the tale is latitude 88° 23 South...Homeward bound at last. Whatever regrets may be, we have done our best'*.

The decision to turn around with the Pole almost in sight was the hardest of Shackleton's life and has subsequently been called the finest decision ever made in Antarctic exploration. Although it was likely that the team could have made the Pole, Shackleton knew they would probably not make it back and opted to ensure the survival of his men. He later told his wife Emily: 'I thought you'd rather have a live donkey than a dead lion'.

It was the sort of decision which prompted the Polar explorer, Apsley Cherry-Garrard, to day of 'the Boss': 'If I am in the devil of a hole and want to get out of it, give me Shackleton every time'.

Still, they had beaten Scott's furthest south point by 589km, discovered 800km of new mountain range, and found coal and fossils at Mount Buckley at the top of Beardmore Glacier. More importantly, they had shown a possible route to anyone who would attempt the Pole after them.

*Nimrod* collected the expedition on 3 March 1909 and arrived back in Lyttelton on 25 March 1909; it continued on to England where, in acknowledgement of the success of the expedition, Shackleton was rewarded with a knighthood.

### **The Expedition Base**

Shackleton and his men probably never envisaged that their humble hut at Cape Royds would still be standing after 100 years, but they built it to be as robust as possible. Indeed, it had to be; it was their refuge, their base and the centre of their lives for some 14 months, providing shelter, light and warmth through the blizzards and extreme cold of an Antarctic winter. It was the place in which extensive preparations were made for the spring journeys for which the expedition became justly famous. The fact that the main part of the hut is still standing today is testament to their efforts, and to the skill of the designers. But the hut is far more than the physical structure of weather beaten timbers. It is the symbol of the hopes and dreams of Shackleton and his men, and of their remarkable achievements of discovery and endurance.

The hut is a timber structure prefabricated by Humphreys Limited of Knightsbridge in London, in 1907 at a cost of £155-0-0. It was first erected in London and all parts of the structure were marked for re-erection on site. As Shackleton writes in *The Heart of the Antarctic*:

It was made of stout fir timbering of the best quality in walls, roofs and floors, and the parts were all morticed and tenoned to facilitate erection in Antarctica. The walls were strengthened with iron cleats bolted to the main posts and horizontal timbering, and the roof principals were provided with strong iron tie rods.

Shackleton shipped the hut to Antarctica on *Nimrod* and it was erected in a sheltered area, below a ridge of volcanic rock; nearby, to the south-west, was Pont Lake, the southernmost Adelie penguin rookery, and Cape Royds itself.

Erection of the hut began, with the digging of 22 holes for the foundations, on 6 February 1908. This work was made difficult by permafrost beneath a veneer of scoria and it was necessary to use a hammer and chisel to prepare the foundations. Erection of the hut was supervised by First Engineer Harry Dunlop, and was completed in a little over two weeks – nearly all the walls were up and windows installed by 13 February, and quarters in the hut were allocated on 24 February. Although it was intended to paint the exterior, this was never done. Before the hut was completed, the team built a 'fodder hut' a short distance to the north-west – from bales of fodder and roofed with canvas. It was initially used to store cases of bottled fruit, and also for cooking and temporary accommodation for the men.

The space beneath the hut varied from ground level to four feet (1.2m) at the south-west corner. To enhance the insulation of the hut, it was decided to build an outer wall around the south and east sides. According to Shackleton (1909), 'to make certain that no air would penetrate from these sides, we built the first two or three tiers of cases a little distance out from the walls of the hut, pouring in volcanic earth until no gaps could be seen, and the earth was level with the cases. Then the rest of the stores were piled up to a height of six or seven feet (1.83-2.13m)'. Before winter the windows on the south side were boarded up.

On either side of the porch two other buildings were gradually erected. One, built of biscuit cases, the roof covered with felt and canvas, was a storeroom for Wild, who looked after the issue of all foodstuffs. The building on the other side of the porch was a much more ambitious affair, and was built by Mawson, to serve as a chemical and physical laboratory. It was destined, however, to be used solely as a storeroom.

The lee side of the hut, ultimately became the wall of the stables....a double row of cases of maize, built at one end to a height of five feet eight inches (1.73m), made one end and then the longer side of the shelter was composed of bales of fodder. Over all this was stretched the canvas tarpaulin which we had previously used in the fodder hut, and with planks and battens on both side(s) to make it wind-proof, the stable was complete. A wire rope was stretched from one end to the other on the side nearest the hut, and the pony's head-ropes were made fast to this.

The north wall of the hut was covered with flat galvanised iron sheet to protect it from damage by the ponies.

Day built a garage and workshop adjoining the stables, for the New Arrol-Johnston motor car.

This structure had outer walls of bales of fodder and provision boxes, and was roofed with canvas. Sledges were stored on the roof of the garage and stables.

'On the south-east side of the hut a store-room was built, constructed entirely of cases, and roofed with hammocks sewn together. In the first strong blizzard this structure collapsed. A further hut, made of cases, was built by Joyce a short distance away, near the south-east corner of the hut. The dog kennels, of which two remain, were placed about the slope near the porch of the hut, and the meteorological screen was erected on a small ridge nearby and held in position with rocks. On top of the ridge, east of the hut, Mawson erected his anemometer, which regularly recorded winds of over 160km per hour.

With the exception of Shackleton, who had his own small canvas-lined room to the right of the door in the south-west corner of the hut, the other 14 men were housed in the very cramped interior. In his room Shackleton kept the library, chronometers, barograph and an electric recording thermometer.

Scientific and surveying equipment was stored on top of the ceiling above. The other room, opposite Shackleton's, was the darkroom, above which the photographic equipment and cases of wine were stored. On a small platform between the two rooms was the acetylene gas-plant which provided gas to seven lights distributed around the hut and hung from flexible steel tubes.

Shackleton's men lived in two-men cubicles divided by canvas suspended from wires. Each man constructed his own bed. They used boards of old packing cases or petrol cases and upholstered the boards with wood shavings covered with blankets and a wool sleeping bag. Other beds were made from bamboo and canvas. Many of the hut's occupants went to considerable effort to decorate their cubicles. Adams and Marshall's, with their Dickens novels in bookshelves hung with gauze curtains, was 'No. 1 Park Lane'. Professor David and Douglas Mawson with the collection of microscopes, spectroscopes and straw wrappers lived in 'The Pawn Shop'. And Joyce and Wild inhabited 'The Rogues Retreat'.

A combination pantry, bakery and store-room in the south-east corner of the hut measured six feet by three (1.83 x 0.91m) and walls were lined with shelves. These continued along the east wall behind the stove and this area also had a small biological laboratory. Along the north wall was the printing press and type case.

The eastern end of the hut was dominated by the large Mrs Sam cast iron cooking range, in which bread was baked each day and on which three hot meals a day were cooked and ice melted for water. There was also a table constructed from packing cases. The legs were detachable and when the meal was over, the table was slung from the roof structure to a height of eight feet (2.44m) above the floor.

With the departure of the expedition, on 3 March 1909, the hut was locked up. It was then visited during Scott's British Antarctica Expedition (1910-13) and lived in for short periods. Griffith Taylor, a member of that expedition, noted that the outer door was missing and that the interior was unkempt. He observed that 'boots were scattered on the floor, books over the bunks, socks on drying lines. In one corner a roulette machine, in another, a packet of paper used in their printing press.

On several occasions, members of Shackleton's Ross Sea Party (1914-17) foraged in the hut for necessities of life.