

With Scott to the Pole (Part Two)

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Daily life on Expedition

The polar huts

The huts the men built were home for the shore party for the duration of the expedition. It was here that all of the Expedition's life could be found. You would see the men repairing and checking equipment, writing up diaries and papers, collecting scientific records, playing cards, smoking, having a hair cut from Anton - the ponies' groom - or simply occupying their time.

Here are the 'tenements', the five bunks which were home to Cherry-Gerrard (l), Bowers (standing), Oates (middle), Mears (top r), and Atkinson (bottom r).



The tenements, bunks in the huts of Bowers, Cherry-Gerrard, Oates, Meares and Atkinson, by Herbert Ponting, 1911

In 2005, Sir Neil Cossons, former Chairman of English Heritage, visited Scott's huts. He writes, "I was struck by how timeless they are. Their timber walls were never built to last and are showing signs of the harsh environment. Yet they still stand proud as one of the few human landmarks on Antarctic landscape. It was in these huts that Scott's men lived, worked and relaxed during the long Polar winter - in preparation for the journey South. A hundred years ago you would have smelt bread baking, heard the piano or watched one of Ponting's slide shows. And today, as you face the untouched shelves of familiar foods – Tate and Lyle sugar and Coleman's Mustard - you are simply transported back into another time."

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Diet

Thomas Clissold, the Expedition's cook, is baking bread surrounded by his supplies. In the polar huts the men dined on a wide variety of foods. For example, the menu for the dinner to celebrate Midwinter's Day in 1911 ran to several courses. This was in stark contrast to the monotonous rations eaten by the sledging teams, an unchanging diet of biscuits, tea and pemmican (preserved meat).

Menu for the Midwinters Day 1911 – Cape Evans McMurdo Sound

- Consomme - Seal
 - Roast beef & Yorkshire pudding
 - Horse Radish Sauce
 - Potatoes a la Mode & Brussels Sprouts
 - Plum Pudding – Mince Pies
 - Caviar Antarctic
 - Crystallised Fruits – Chocolate Bonbons
 - Butter Bonbons – Walnut Toffee
 - Almonds and Raisins
 - Wines
 - Sherry – Champagne – Brandy Punch – Liqueur
 - Cigars – Cigarettes & Tobacco
 - Snapdragon
 - Pineapple custard – Raspberry jellies
 - Buszard's Cake
- God Save the King!



Clissold the Cook making bread, by Herbert Ponting, 1911

● In the name of science

Surveying the landscape

When the team arrived in Antarctica relatively little of this continent had been surveyed. Only parts of the coastline had been properly recorded and, with the exception of Shackleton's 'furthest south' record (reaching within 155km, 97 miles, of the Pole), the interior of this landmass had barely been seen.

Here Frank Debenham, one of the Expedition's geologists, is surveying the landscape. Following his return from Antarctica he was to become the first Director of the Scott Polar Research Institute – which continues to promote research about Antarctica to this day. The Institute was founded in the 1920s from funds donated after the news of Scott's death reached Britain.



Frank Debenham making a Plane Table survey, by Herbert Ponting, 1911

Wildlife

Antarctica is home to unique wildlife: its penguin colonies, the flocks of birds which arrive to breed at the end of the polar winter, and its marine mammals – the seals and whales. Four species of penguin breed on the continent itself – the Adelie, Emperor, Chinstrap and Gentoo and over 100 million birds breed along the Antarctic coast and its offshore islands - including skuas, petrels, albatross, terns and sheathbills.



Adelie Penguin attitude study, Herbert Ponting 1911

Antarctica's seas are home to seals such as the Ross, Crabeater, Weddel and Leopard seals alongside whales including the Blue, Fin, Humpback, Orca, and Sperm. During the early 1900's many species of seals and whales were hunted to near extinction, with a whaling station established on the island of South Georgia. Today these animals are protected by the Convention for the Conservation of Antarctic Seals and International Whaling Commission respectively.

The men went to great lengths to collect new scientific information about Antarctica's wildlife. Perhaps the most celebrated example is the journey made by Bowers, Wilson and Cherry-Gerrard to collect Emperor Penguin eggs. Cherry-Gerrard immortalised their experiences in his book 'The Worst Journey in the World'. Penguin eggs were believed to demonstrate important evidence linking the evolution of birds with dinosaurs. However, Emperor Penguins only lay their eggs during the depths of the polar winter. So the three men set off – with temperatures falling to -61 degrees centigrade – on a 92 km (58 mile) expedition to collect the eggs from the nearest colony.

During this horrendous five-week ordeal their tent was blown away - and luckily retrieved - they struggled against frost bite and cold, and yet they returned with three intact eggs. Ponting captured the dramatic 'before and after' images of this journey and wrote on the men's return *"their faces bore unmistakable evidence of the terrible hardships they had endured. Their looks haunted me for days."*

Sadly, once inspected by experts at the Natural History Museum, the eggs they had collected provided no scientific breakthrough.

Discoveries

The biologist Dennis Lillie spent most of the Expedition on board the Terra Nova gathering a remarkable collection of biological specimens. Here he displays siliceous sponges which had been collected by dredging the ocean bottom.



D Lillie with a large glass sponge, by Herbert Ponting 1912

Dr David Barnes, a marine zoologist at the British Antarctic Survey, has recently reviewed the scientific reports produced by Scott's expedition. There are 25 volumes covering Antarctica's zoology, alongside its meteorology, glaciology, magnetic conditions and environment.

He says, *"The great thing about this data is that it comes from a century ago. There have been two big phases of climate warming – one is now and one was between 1910 and 1945 – so if we could choose when we would like to have historic data, these reports are exactly what we'd pick. We can compare growth rates of marine animals 100 years ago to how the same species is now. We can also use the old specimens to peer back into the 19th Century. I'm looking at 20 or so species in my research, and six or seven of them are recorded here in Scott's work. The descriptions have stood the test of time."*

● 35 days too late...

On New Year's Day 1912 Scott divided the party into its final teams. To the pole he was to take Evans, Oates, Bowers and Wilson. The remaining men of the support party returned northwards back to the safety of the huts.



On the Polar Plateau Evans, Oates, Wilson and Scott on skis and pulling a sledge, by Herbert Ponting, 1912

This photograph shows the final team heading towards the Pole. Here (l to r) Evans, Oates, Wilson and Scott are hauling the heavy sledge. The photograph was taken by Bowers, the fifth member of the party. The wheel just visible to the left of the sledge provided a record of the distance they had travelled, which could be compared with sightings taken with a sextant to record their position. Caroline Hamilton recalls the conditions that Scott's team faced as they got closer to the South Pole.

She writes, "Having led the first British all-women team to ski to the South Pole, this picture reminds me of the vicious, biting wind which found its way through the tiniest chink in our headgear every day. Also, the constant tugging and jerking of our sledges as we hauled them, more than our own bodyweight, so slowly for 60 days. The sheer size and strength of Antarctica was overwhelming. Incredibly beautiful in its simplicity, the flat, grey ice stretched like a blank canvas in which our thoughts and minds roamed free."

In 2004 Simon Murray, with his colleague Pen Hadow, became the oldest person to walk to the South Pole unsupported aged 63. He writes, *"ninety years on we followed in Scott's footsteps and often thought of the men in his crew; the bravery of Oates, the tenacity of Scott himself, and young men such as Cherry Gerrard. Sometimes exhausted, as we rested with hands on our ski poles leaning forward with our chests resting on top of our hands peering into the distant horizon of nothing, we must have been replicas of them - the same position, the same thoughts, only 95 years apart."*



Left to right Wilson, Scott, Evans, Oates, Bowers with Amundsen's tent behind them, by Herbert Ponting, 1912

Despite their remarkable achievement Scott's men discovered that Amundsen had reached the Pole 35 days before them. The men's disappointment is evident in Scott's diary record, *"Great God! This is an awful place and terrible enough to have laboured to it without the reward of priority."*

Having reached the South Pole the impetus was to reach the safety of their supply depots. When they left they took with them a number of small items and papers that Amundsen had left in a tent. Jorgen Amundsen writes, *"my great uncle, Roald Amundsen, left the eye piece of a sextant in a tent at the Pole with a letter addressed to King Haakon of Norway and a note to Scott. My belief is that Amundsen regarded the sextant as the ultimate symbol of the quest for the Pole and deliberately left it behind to symbolise, to Scott and to the world at large the conquest of the South Pole. I also believe that Scott, recognising the symbolic significance of the first sextant to reach the Pole, felt that it was his duty to return it to civilisation."*

On the return journey, Evans collapsed and died on the descent of the Beardmore Glacier. Then Oates, who was suffering terribly from frost bite, famously sacrificed himself by leaving the team's tent with the words "I am just going outside and may be some time". Scott and his two remaining companions, Bowers and Wilson, finally died trapped in one of Antarctica's ferocious storms barely a day's walk from the safety of a supply depot.

Some of Scott's final words were written in his 'Message to the Public' at the end of his journal. He wrote, *"had we lived, I should have had a tale to tell of the hardihood, endurance and courage of my companions which would have stirred the heart of every Englishman. These rough notes and our dead bodies must tell the tale."* R. Scott, 25 March 1912.



Adelie penguin tracks crossing sledge tracks, by Herbert Ponting 1911

● Credits

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