The Antarctic Treaty was an agreement in 1959 between 12 countries who had scientists or explorers active in the region at the time (represented by the inner circle of 12 flags). The treaty is a solution to the practical difficulties of an isolated, largely uninhabited continent. The treaty recognises Antarctica as 'a global commons'.

A global commons refers to areas that lie beyond the political reach of any one nation state or a resource domain. Sometimes described as 'supranational spaces' these areas are unclaimed and unexplored fully. Antarctica is one of four global commons (the others being: outer space, the high seas and the atmosphere).

This treaty has now grown to include a total of 54 participatory nations with 14 Articles which are observed as de facto laws for the continent. These laws are international and are guided by the principle of the common heritage of mankind. This principle asserts that Antarctica belongs to all of humanity and that the resources there are available for everyone's benefit, including both for those alive now and for future generations. It applies to the entire region south of 60° South Latitude.

The central key Articles are Art. I, Art. II and Art. III which state Antarctica shall be used for peaceful purposes only, scientific investigation shall be allowed, and scientific observations will be exchanged and made freely available. The continent has become a model example of international collaboration as scientists from a multitude of different countries share research without the complications of privatisation or nationalism.

The first substantial multi-nation research programme occurred during the International Geophysical Year of 1957-1958.

You can find out more information on the Antarctic Treaty System (ATS), which has been described as 'surprising short but remarkably effective', by visiting www.discoveringantarctica.org.uk/treaty.