

SCIENCE ON ICE

An Antarctic Adventure!

Robert Falcon Scott, Great Britain – Expeditions of 1901-1904, 1910-1912

After travelling to the South pole over a period of three years in 1901 – 1904, where he reached the furthest south that any man had been, Robert Scott returned to England hungry for more adventure. Several years later, in 1911, he set out to be the first person to ever reach the South Pole. This time, however, he had competition – two other explorers, Ernest Shackleton and Roald Amundsen, where out to beat him. And so begins the great race to the South Pole!

First they set sail from Cardiff in a ship called the Terra Nova with all of the equipment, including ponies and dogs, that they thought they would need.

Once they arrived in Antarctica and started their overland journey they immediately struck some problems. The weather was far too cold for the ponies to cope with, and even their equipment wasn't working properly because of the temperature! Oh dear. I wonder what was going through Robert's mind then. They still had sooo far to go!

Luckily, the dogs could still manage to help with pulling sledges, so they trudged on across the harsh terrain, in worse weather than they had ever experienced before. Unfortunately, it kept getting colder and colder as they were now getting deep into winter. Eventually, the poor dogs couldn't even cope and had to turn back, meaning that only Robert and four other men were left to push on towards the South Pole. They had no way of communicating with anyone, and no real option but to press on. It must've been lonely out there, surrounded by nothing but snow and ice.

They finally made it to the South Pole – what joy! – only to find that they hadn't won the race! There was already a Norwegian flag flying in the sky. Roald Amundsen had got there first, just over a month earlier. The joy must've very quickly turned to disappointment.

And the challenge wasn't even over. They still had to make the journey back across land, a journey of well over 1000km, and only on foot with no animals to help! The temperatures dropped so low and the weather got so bad that they could hardly move. This meant they were quickly running out of food and suffering from frost bite. The first man of the five died about a month after they set off for the return journey. Soon after, the second of the five was so badly frostbitten that he could hardly keep up with the other three. He realised he was slowing everyone down and decided to sacrifice himself by walking out into the freezing cold alone, never to return. The remaining three trekked on, but the pace was slow and they were very weak. Unfortunately, they didn't manage to make it to the supply depot where food was stashed for them. All of them died inside their tent just 20km away. Before dying, Robert had managed to write a letter to his wife, expressing his love for her and indicating that he had no regrets. That they pushed on for as long as they could but, in the end, were just unlucky. What a brave, inspiring explorer!!

Sir Ernest Shackleton, Great Britain – Expeditions: 1907-1909, 1914-1917

Shackleton had been to Antarctica twice before. The first time he was actually part of the team for Robert Scott's first expedition, but he was sent back early from that due to ill health. The second time he led his own expedition, but they had to turn back due to harsh weather. But it was his third expedition that was the most amazing.

He set off with his team from London in 1914 on a ship called the Endurance, intent on being the first person to cross Antarctica overland, via the South Pole. They sailed first to a small island in the southern Atlantic Ocean called South Georgia. From here they headed towards Antarctica. Believe it or not, they didn't step foot on land again for 497 days! Not long after leaving South Georgia the Endurance got trapped in ice and couldn't move. I wonder if Shackleton wanted to give up now – would you? The crew escaped from the ship and set up their camp on some floating ice. This was just as well as later that year the ship sunk! They thought the ice would eventually melt and let the ship go free but, unfortunately, as it melted it put extra pressure on the ship resulting in serious damage.

This meant the group of men were now completely isolated, floating on a large block of ice with limited supplies and no way of communicating with the outside world. They had already been there for many months. How do you think they stayed positive? Apparently they played football and hockey to help pass the time.

Over a year later, they were forced to abandon the ice as it melted and became thinner and thinner. Luckily, they had saved the lifeboats from the Endurance before it sank and they could all bundle into them. They finally reached solid land when they arrived at Elephant Island - not at all where they were hoping to go, but I think, by this stage, they wouldn't have minded where they landed.

The group decided to split – some men stayed behind on Elephant Island, turning two of the lifeboats into huts for shelter, while some of the men set off back to South Georgia in the best lifeboat to organise a rescue mission. This journey was probably one of Shackleton's hardest. They passed through incredible storms, had to constantly bail water out of the boat, everything, including their sleeping bags were damp, it was freezing cold and they were navigating by the sun which only appeared four times during the month long journey! They finally arrived at South Georgia where they were hoping to get help from men at a whaling station. Unfortunately, the place where the boat landed was 35km from the whaling station, and there were mountains, glaciers and snow slopes in between... they had to dig deep for their last remaining scraps of energy and determination, I'm sure!

When they finally made it to the whaling station, the men looked so unrecognisable and scary that the two small boys they first encountered ran away as fast as they could! I bet the men enjoyed their shower, shave and hot meal that day!!

After four rescue attempts, in four different boats, Shackleton finally made it back to his team at Elephant Island, where everyone was still safe and well. Imagine their relief to see the rescue boat arrive!

What a hero Ernest Shackleton was!

Sir Edmund Hillary, New Zealand – Expeditions: 1955-1958

Sir Edmund Hillary was already well known as an explorer before he had his Antarctic adventures, having reached the top of Mt Everest just a couple of years earlier. Unlike the other two explorers, Scott and Shackleton, he didn't actually have the goal of reaching the South Pole. In fact, he led a support team helping another explorer from England (Sir Vivian Ernest Fuchs) to cross the South Pole overland. This expedition was called the Commonwealth Trans-Antarctic Expedition and it was supported by the governments of the United Kingdom, New Zealand, United States, Australia and South Africa.

Sir Edmund Hillary and his team's role was to travel backwards from Scott base, the end point of Fuchs' planned route at Scott Base, finding a route for the other group to follow on the second half of their journey. They had three converted tractors and another vehicle especially designed for Antarctica, which enabled them to carry extra supplies which they left at several points along the route for Fuchs and his team.

Hillary and his team managed to complete their work and travel to the pre-planned meeting point long before Fuchs, and so Hillary took the opportunity to continue on to the South Pole, and therefore beat Fuchs by 16 days. This meant that he became the third explorer to reach the South Pole by land, and the first to do so with vehicles. Another great explorer!