



PRESS RELEASE

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Historic former whaling building has opened for the first time

Following sympathetic restoration, South Georgia's 'Main Store' depicts what life on the subantarctic island was like during the mid-20th century

The original Main Store on the subantarctic island of South Georgia has opened to visitors for the very first time, after almost five years of sympathetic restoration and curation by the Government of South Georgia & the South Sandwich Islands (GSGSSI) and a UK charity, the South Georgia Heritage Trust (SGHT).

This small but significant British Overseas Territory, which lies in the Southern Ocean over 1,500km east of the Falkland Islands, was at the centre of the whaling industry but is now famed for its remarkable environmental recovery.

The Main Store is at the heart of the island's principal settlement of Grytviken, an abandoned yet atmospheric former whaling station which ceased operations in the 1960s after decades of whaling. Built in c.1920, the Main Store is one of the few remaining original structures to survive at the site, and the restoration of this important historic building now adds another layer to the rich cultural heritage that is being preserved on the island.

Between 1904 - 1965 over 175,000 whales were processed across South Georgia. For the whalers the hours were long, the work unpleasant and the weather harsh. But despite the island's dark past, GSGSSI and SGHT are working to ensure that South Georgia's human story is told. Alongside the South Georgia Museum, which is owned by GSGSSI and managed by SGHT, the preservation and reopening of the Main Store mean that the 10-15,000 annual international visitors to South Georgia will get a rare insight into what life was like during the height of the whaling era in the mid-20th century.

There are lots of never-before-seen objects in the Main Store that visitors will be able to see for the first time, including harpoon grenades, bone saws, blubber hooks and flensing knives, all essential tools used by whalers throughout the hunting and production process. There's also thousands of rivets, nuts, bolts, pipes and steam pumps used to maintain and repair the factory, boilers, vessels and machinery.

Visitors can also see a mysterious small ceramic figure named 'Nisse', whose provenance and age is unknown. A firm favourite with the team on South Georgia and visitors alike, he's the unofficial guardian of the Main Store, keeping a watchful eye when the team leaves over winter. During the restoration every heritage item was retained, cleaned, and photographed and any modern items removed. The catalogue is available to view in the South Georgia Museum.

Jayne Pierce, SGHT Curator of the South Georgia Museum says: “The Main Store is one of the oldest and largest buildings to survive at Grytviken. Given South Georgia's remote location it played an essential role in storing the many supplies needed to keep the whaling station and its fleet of vessels running, including feeding and supporting the many men that formed the whaling crews, which was a huge undertaking.

“We've worked incredibly hard to ensure that the building remains true to its roots, but also to make sure it is preserved for many years to come. The building is presented as closely as possible to how it would have looked during the height of the whaling era in the mid-20th century, a period South Georgia is synonymous with.”



*The Main Store at Grytviken (L) and again next to an abandoned whaling vessel 'Petrel' (R).
Credit South Georgia Heritage Trust. [High-res images, and others, are available]*

Laura Sinclair-Willis, CEO of GSGSSI explains: “The Main Store is central to South Georgia's intriguing history, and thanks to the support of a team of experts, it is now an accessible time capsule capable of receiving visitors, as well as an important part of the work we are doing to explain the rich cultural history of the island.

“Following a Condition Survey and Structural Report of the Main Store that was published in 2018, our Heritage Build Team, SGHT's Museum Curator and an Advisory Panel of heritage experts worked over the summer seasons between 2018 – 2023 to remediate the building's structure. This included repainting the entire exterior, removing modern equipment and materials, installing electrical wiring and period lighting fixtures, and replacing windows, giving us the fully accessible building we have today.”

Iconic wildlife from humpback whales and southern elephant seals, to vast colonies of king penguins and an array of seabirds call South Georgia and the Southern Ocean home. South Georgia is celebrated for its remarkable environmental recovery following several Habitat Restoration projects run by both GSGSSI and SGHT. GSGSSI removed reindeer that had been deliberately introduced to the island by the whalers as a source of fresh meat and sport, and SGHT ran a successful decade-long rodent eradication project to tackle invasive mice and rats, which came over in whaling vessels and decimated local seabird populations. Now the island is a rare example of an ecosystem in recovery. South Georgia is also famous for its links with world-famous explorer Sir Ernest Shackleton who is buried at Grytviken.

The restoration of the island's Main Store would not have been possible without the generous support of the many organisations and friends with a close affinity to South Georgia. These

include Øyas Venner (The Norwegian Friends of South Georgia), the Hurtigruten Foundation, the Friends of South Georgia Island and the British Antarctic Survey.

To find out more about South Georgia, the work of its government and of SGHT, visit www.gov.gs and <https://sght.org>.

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For high-res images and footage, or to arrange interviews or for more information, please contact the Culture Communications Collective:

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Notes to Editors

Available for interview

- Laura Sinclair-Willis, CEO, Government of South Georgia & the South Sandwich Islands
- Jayne Pierce, Museum Curator, South Georgia Heritage Trust
- Deirdre Mitchell, South Georgia Director, South Georgia Heritage Trust

The Government of South Georgia & the South Sandwich Islands (GSGSSI)

- South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands (SGSSI) are a UK Overseas Territory, situated 800 miles SE of the Falkland Islands.
- The government administration is located in the Falkland Islands, with satellite teams on South Georgia and in the UK.
- The Territory is financially self-sufficient and draws no funding from the UK Treasury. The government enjoys close links with Polar Regions Department, FCDO.
- Tourism visits to South Georgia occur aboard expedition-class cruise ships. Tourism is highly regulated to minimise environmental impact and maintain some of the world's strictest biosecurity standards.
- The government's 5-year values driven framework for management of the territory: *Protect, Sustain, Inspire* lists "Accessing Cultural Heritage" as one of the 7 priority areas for development.
- The main island of South Georgia is approximately 170 km long and between 2 and 40 km wide and occupies an area of 3,755 km². A permanent UK sovereign presence is provided by a cohort of government staff and representatives of the British Antarctic Survey.
- SGSSI are of global significance as a relatively pristine and rich environment that sustains major populations of seabirds and marine mammals.
- The islands are home to about five million seals of four different species, and 65 million breeding birds of 30 different species. Amongst these is the world's only sub-Antarctic songbird, the endemic South Georgia pipit.
- Eleven of the 30 species of breeding birds on South Georgia are considered by the World Conservation Union (IUCN) to be threatened or near-threatened species.
- Following world-leading habitat restoration projects to remove invasive species such as reindeer, rats, mice and weeds, South Georgia is an ecosystem in recovery and GSGSSI are committed to safeguarding this legacy.

About the South Georgia Heritage Trust (SGHT)

- For further information visit: <http://www.sght.org>

- SGHT was founded in 2005 to help preserve the sub-Antarctic island's natural, human and cultural heritage; raise awareness of the island's endangered flora and fauna through research and public engagement and manage practical conservation programmes to protect native species.
- SGHT and its USA counterpart Friends of South Georgia Island (FOSGI) work closely with the Government of South Georgia & the South Sandwich Island (GSGSSI)
- In 2018, Scottish-based charity the South Georgia Heritage Trust and GSGSSI officially declared the British Overseas Territory of South Georgia free of rodents for the first time since humans arrived on the island over 200 years ago, following a decade-long rodent eradication programme carried out by SGHT.
- SGHT and FOSGI raised £10 million to finance the Habitat Restoration Project to eradicate invasive rodents.
- Covering 108,723 hectares (1087 km²), the Habitat Restoration Project is more than eight times larger than any other rodent eradication area ever tackled anywhere in the world
- The legacy of this Habitat Restoration Project is maintaining the rodent free status. Fundraising by SGHT and FOSGI contributes to the work of Samuri (Sammy), Hunter and King the sniffer dogs and a permanent GSGSSI rodent detector dog team, a £90,000 a year programme run by GSGSSI.
- This globally significant rodent eradication was dependent on the completion of the GSGSSI project to eradicate reindeer from South Georgia (another human-introduced species). The removal of reindeer and improving bird numbers have contributed to a resurgence in invasive plant species. GSGSSI has recently recommitted to a £250,000 programme of invasive plant management.
- South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands is one of the UK's most remote and environmentally pristine Overseas Territories and is administered by GSGSSI. It is internationally recognised for its biological importance, including its biodiversity, breeding populations of seabirds and marine mammals and has featured in BBC series such as Frozen Planet, Frozen Planet II, Blue Planet and Planet Earth.
- SGHT manages and operates the South Georgia Museum on behalf of GSGSSI. Visit: <https://sgmuseum.gs/>
- SGHT has a YouTube account full of engaging videos about the island and its wildlife. Visit: <https://bit.ly/3MnePJC>

About the South Georgia Museum

- For further information visit: <https://sgmuseum.gs/>
- The museum is located in Grytviken, a former whaling station. The museum is housed in a heritage building, once the whaling station manager's villa.
- The South Georgia Museum was opened to visitors in 1992.
- In 2006 South Georgia Heritage Trust took over the management of the museum