

South Georgia - Sir Ernest Shackleton: Centenary of The Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition

The Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition, also known as the Endurance Expedition, is considered by some the last major expedition of the Heroic Age of Antarctic Exploration. By 1914 both Poles had been reached so Shackleton set his sights on being the first to traverse Antarctica.

By the time of the expedition, Sir Ernest Shackleton was already experienced in polar exploration. A young Lieutenant Shackleton from the merchant navy was chosen by Captain Scott to join him in his first bid for the South Pole in 1901. Shackleton later led his own attempt on the pole in the *Nimrod* expedition of 1908: he surpassed Scott's southern record but took the courageous decision, given deteriorating health and shortage of provisions, to turn back with 100 miles to go.

After the pole was claimed by Amundsen in 1911, Shackleton formulated a plan for a third expedition in which proposed to undertake "the largest and most striking of all journeys - the crossing of the Continent". Having raised sufficient funds, he purchased a 300 tonne wooden barquentine which he named *Endurance*. He planned to take *Endurance* into the Weddell Sea, make his way to the South Pole and then to the Ross Sea via the Beardmore Glacier (to pick up supplies laid by a second vessel, *Aurora*, purchased from Sir Douglas Mawson). Although the expedition failed to accomplish its objective it became recognised instead as an epic feat of endurance.

Endurance left Britain on 8 August 1914 heading first for Buenos Aires. Here Shackleton, who had travelled on a faster ship, re-joined the expedition. Hurley also came on board, and William Bakewell and stowaway Perce Blackborow were added to the crew. On 26 October the ship sailed for the South Atlantic, arriving at South Georgia on 5 November. After a month-long halt in the Grytviken whaling station, *Endurance* sailed into the Weddell Sea. They steamed along the coast for a few days making slow progress until 19 January 1915 when *Endurance* was beset in consolidated pack ice which had closed in around the ship.

Whilst stuck in the ice the men lived comfortably but the ice was slowly crushing *Endurance*. After she sank, her 28-man complement was stranded on the ice. They spent 15 months trapped in the ice, in makeshift camps first at 'Ocean Camp' and then at 'Patience Camp' from whence the party took to the lifeboats to reach the inhospitable, uninhabited Elephant Island. Shackleton, Frank Worsley, Henry McNish, John Vincent, Tom Crean and Tim McCarthy then made an 800-mile open-boat journey, which they were fortunate to survive, in the *James Caird* to reach King Haakon Bay, South Georgia. After a short period of recuperation Shackleton, Crean and Worsley set out on the now legendary crossing of South Georgia to Stromness whaling station and safety. From there Worsley was able to pick up McNish, Vincent and McCarthy on a whaler. After four attempts in different vessels, Shackleton was able to rescue the men waiting on Elephant Island who were brought home aboard the Chilean steamer *Yelcho* without loss of life.

On the other side of the continent, the Ross Sea party overcame great hardships to fulfil its mission. The *Aurora* had broken away from its moorings and had eventually reached New Zealand; the fate of the shore party was unknown. After the Elephant Island party had been rescued, Shackleton joined the *Aurora* as it left New Zealand to rescue the men, reaching McMurdo Sound on 10 January 1917. Of the ten members who had been stranded, three had died, including the leader Aeneas Mackintosh. The ship returned to New Zealand on 9 February 1917, bringing all the remaining members of the expedition to safety. Upon their return many would serve in the First World War.

South Georgia & the South Sandwich Islands has chosen to mark the centenary of the arrival of Shackleton, Crean and Worsley at Stromness whaling station with this special stamp issue featuring portraits of Sir Ernest Shackleton from the period of the Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition.

70p Ernest Shackleton photographed on board *Endurance* at Millwall Docks, London, before leaving for the Antarctic in 1914. Topical Press Agency/Getty Images.

80p Ernest Shackleton with dog on board *Endurance*. Frank Hurley, Royal Geographical Society (with IBG).

£1 Ernest Shackleton during the Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition. Frank Hurley/Scott Polar Research Institute, University of Cambridge/Getty Images.

£1.25 Ernest Shackleton at Patience Camp. Frank Hurley, Royal Geographical Society (with IBG).

FDC Ernest Shackleton (1874-1922) photographed prior to the Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition. Hulton Archive/Getty Images.

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