

Ernest Shackleton



Ernest Henry Shackleton was born in Ireland on 15th February 1874, at a time when exploration was very important. He was the second of ten children born to Henrietta Gavan and Henry Shackleton, a landowner at the time; however, when Ernest was six years old, his father began training to become a doctor and four years later, the family moved to Sydenham, London, in search of better jobs for his father - now a newly qualified doctor.

As a young boy, Ernest was schooled by a governess at home and showed great enthusiasm for reading - he particularly enjoyed books about fictional adventures, which inspired him to plan his own escapades. At 11, he began at Fir Lodge Preparatory School in Dulwich, in southeast London before moving on to Dulwich College at the age of 13. Although Ernest was very clever, he found school boring and did not enjoy learning about the world by reading about it; Ernest wanted to experience everything for himself so continued to plan his great adventures, including to his favourite place – The Antarctic.

In order to explore the world, Ernest left school at the age of 16 when he joined the merchant navy (the ships which transport produce to and from a country), becoming an apprentice (a beginner who is learning a trade) on a ship and spending four years learning how to sail before becoming a Second Mate (an assistant on a merchant ship). Four years later, in 1898, Ernest achieved the title of Master Mariner, which meant that he was able to sail a British ship anywhere in the world. His job took him across the globe, but he still didn't reach the Antarctic.

Expeditions

As Ernest knew the son of one of the main organisers of the National Antarctic Expedition, he managed to obtain an interview and his enthusiasm gained him a job as third officer to the expedition's ship, 'Discovery'. This was to be a voyage of scientific and geographical discovery led by Robert Falcon Scott and would be Ernest's first, much awaited, expedition to the Antarctic. The team set sail on 31st July 1901, arriving at the Antarctic Coast over five months later on 8th January 1902. After landing, Ernest took part in an experimental balloon flight and also completed the first sledging trip, with



two scientists, from the expeditions winter quarters to the Great Ice Barrier (the largest ice shelf of Antarctica) to establish a safe route.

With Scott and one other team member, Ernest trekked towards the South Pole in extremely difficult conditions, getting closer to the Pole than anyone had come before (reaching the Farthest South latitude of $82^{\circ} 17'$). Unfortunately, the team experienced many hardships during the expedition, including snow blindness, frostbite and scurvy (a disease caused by a lack of vitamin C). Due to becoming very poorly, Ernest was sent home early on 4th January 1903, never having reached the South Pole.

Back in Britain, Ernest spent some time as a journalist before he attempted his second Antarctic expedition and set sail aboard a ship named 'Nimrod' on 1st January 1908.

On this expedition, Ernest and his team discovered the Beardmore Glacier, climbed Mount Erebus – the second-highest volcano in Antarctica – and, on their 'Great Southern Journey', came even closer to the South Pole than they had before (reaching the Farthest South **latitude** of $88^{\circ} 23'$, a point only 180 km from the Pole). Their return journey was a race against starvation, on half-rations most of the way and they arrived at Hut Point just in time to catch the ship.

On Ernest's return home, he received an award from King Edward VII and a few months later, the King made him a knight – so he became Sir Ernest Shackleton.

Determined to go on another expedition, Ernest put an advertisement in the newspaper asking for men to join him; more than 5,000 people applied and in 1914, Ernest selected a crew of 56 men, who were split between two ships named 'Endurance' and 'Aurora', which set sail on 8th August.

Conditions in the Weddell Sea were slow and hazardous and on 19th January 1915, the ship 'Endurance' became stuck in a large ice floe (a sheet of floating ice). Ernest and his crew abandoned the ship (which eventually sank ten months later) and lived on top of the Antarctic ice for almost two years before, in April 1916, Ernest took five crew members to find help. They spent 16 days crossing 1,300km of ocean in a small boat to reach the island of South Georgia, where they trekked to a whaling station for help. The remaining crew were finally rescued on 30th August 1916.

Ernest planned a fourth expedition in which he aimed to circumnavigate (travel all the way around) the Antarctic continent. Sadly, on 5th January 1922, Ernest died of a heart attack off South Georgia; he was buried on the island.