

# the fate of franklin's expedition

Mark Wilson continues with the third instalment of *Edinburgh Surgeons in search of the North West Passage*

Harry Goodsir, the College Museum's Conservator in 1843, was a ship's surgeon for the ill-fated Franklin expedition to find the North West Passage in 1845. Goodsir and the 129-strong crew of two vessels were lost in the Canadian Arctic. John Rae; another Edinburgh surgeon, who later became the Chief Trader for the Hudson Bay Company, was instrumental in discovering their fate. Rae, to the shock of Victorian Britain, claimed that the crew had resorted to cannibalism in their final moments. Surely this could not be true. What was the fate of Sir John Franklin's expedition to find the North West Passage?

It was not until 1858 that the full horror began to unfold. Lady Jane, Franklin's wife, wanted proof that John Rae's allegations of cannibalism were not true. She sent out many more expeditions. She used her own money, raised money from other sources and pressurised the government into sending out search parties. It was one of Captain Francis McClintock's ship's sledging parties, under Lieutenant Hobson, who made the most significant discovery. In a cairn at Victory Point on King William Island he found a ship's record:

*28 of May 1847. H.M. Ships Erebus and Terror wintered in the ice in Lat 70°5N, Long.98°23W*

*Having wintered in 1846-7 at Beechey Island in Lat 74°43'28"N, Long 91°39'15"W after having ascended Wellington Channel to Lat 77° and returned by the west side of Cornwallis Island*

*Sir John Franklin commanding the expedition. All well Party consisting of two officers and six men left the ships on Monday, 24<sup>th</sup> May 1847*



The last ship's record – found in a cairn at Victory Point

From this it would appear that they had simply spent the second winter iced in off the coast of King William Island. However, around the edges was a sinister, hastily scribbled and confused note:

*25<sup>th</sup> April 1948. H.M. Ships Terror and Erebus were deserted on the 22<sup>nd</sup> April, 5 leagues NNW of this, having been beset since 12<sup>th</sup> September 1846. The officers and crew consisting of 105 souls under the command of Captain F.R.M. Crozier landed here...*

*Sir John Franklin died on the 11<sup>th</sup> June 1847 and the total loss by deaths in the expedition has been to this date 9 officers and 15 men.*

*F.R.M. Crozier Captain and Senior Officer*

*And start tomorrow 26<sup>th</sup> for Back Fish River*

So they had spent yet another year frozen in ice. Between October and January there would have been no light. Forty-two men would have lived in the fore hatch of each ship, an area just 36 feet long by 28 wide. Outside temperatures would easily have dipped below  $-60^{\circ}\text{C}$ . Fuel for lighting and warmth would have been severely limited. But was it just the cold that was killing them? Each officer had his own cabin and should have been able to keep warm and away from disease. So why were a disproportionate number of them dying? What had killed Franklin? More importantly, why were they abandoning their ships? Were they simply being crushed or might there have been an outbreak of disease? Maybe they realised they would not survive another year trapped in ice.

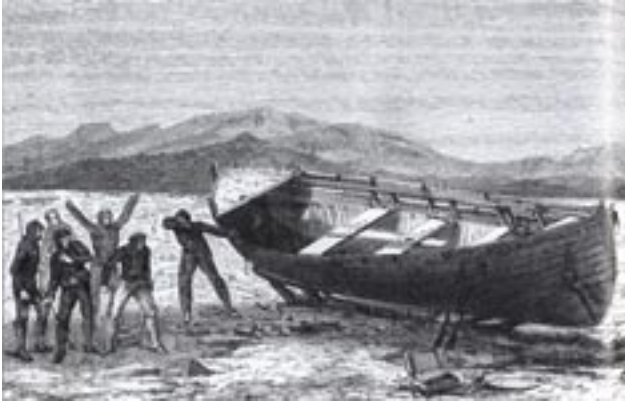
The record shows they were planning a very brave bid for survival. Back Fish River was 200 miles away – and from there it would be another 830 miles to the Hudson Bay Company outpost at Fort Resolution. To add to that, the area south of Victory Point was not mapped. (They were the first there.) It would have been three years since clocks were set in Greenwich, so a sextant for navigation would have been of little use. They were standing on top of the Magnetic North Pole, so not even



*A map showing the route sailed and the presumed route taken trying to get to Canada (based on the position of relics and bodies)*

a compass could act as a guide. There is no wood in the arctic so there would be no opportunity to improvise rafts once at Back Fish River. Hence, they would have to pull their 1,400lb lifeboats with them.

McClintock and subsequent explorers found bodies and relics along the entire west coast of King William Island. The most notable discoveries were at Erebus Bay, on the Todd Islands and in Starvation Cove. At Erebus Bay, a life boat (pointing north east) was found. In it were two bodies, one apparently ravished by animals, the other intact and warmly wrapped with two loaded double barrel shot guns next to it. Saws, lead sheeting, boots and 40lb of chocolate lay in the boat. Around the boat were later found over 400 bones estimated to be from between 8 and 13 men. Keenleyside *et al* found that these bones had been disarticulated at major joints and had cut marks consistent with cannibalism. The adjacent diagram shows the cut marks superimposed onto one skeleton. Why so many cut marks over the fingers? Were they defending themselves? Either way, John Rae's gruesome report appeared to be accurate. On the Todd Islands, skeletal remains belonging to seven men were found. Local Inuits testified that they saw men carrying limbs and dying in their tracks. They claim that they offered them food, but food in such

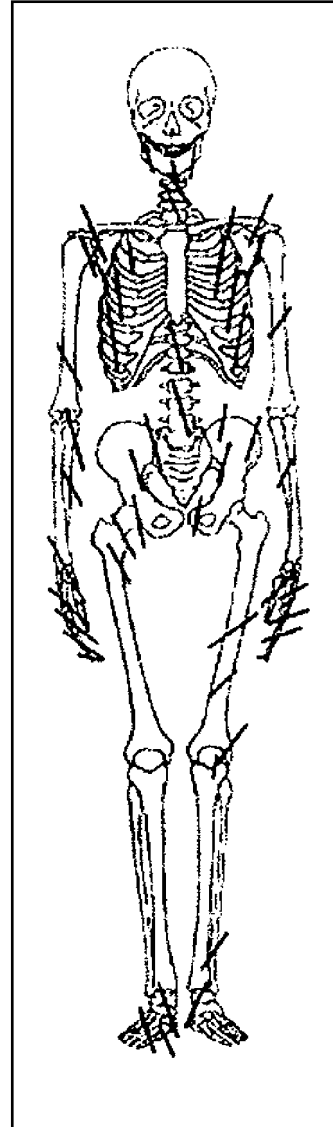


*The discovery of a boat in Erebus Bay – this boat contained, amongst other things, two bodies, guns, saws and, rather oddly, 40lb of chocolate. It was surrounded by over 400 cannibalised bones*

parts was incredibly limited. Interestingly, these bones have also been found to have very high lead levels, 10 times the levels found in local Inuit remains.

Why the high lead levels? To answer this we must go back to the beginning of the story – Goldner's newly patented tinned food. In his bid to win the tender for supplying the tinned food for the ships, Goldner's work was substandard. The tins had been made with poor quality lead solder. Small gaps meant the food went off and lead leaked inside. (*Clostridium* was found in some of the remains on Beechey Island). It may well have been a combination of lead poisoning and gastroenteritis that forced them to abandon their ships. In a time when little was known about lead poisoning or bacteria, these invisible killers may well have been extremely difficult to diagnose or even distinguish.

The Franklin Expedition has been called the greatest polar disaster of all time. In the fourth and final part of this series, Mark Wilson describes the final fate of the expedition and what was learnt when following their footsteps.



*A single skeleton demonstrating the position of cumulated skeletal marks found on around 10 skeletons*

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