

edinburgh surgeons in search of the north west passage: part four

In 1845 Sir John Franklin set out to find the North West Passage, a potential trade route between the Atlantic and the Pacific. It was the biggest polar disaster of all time. Two Edinburgh surgeons were involved; Harry Goodsir, one of the ship's surgeons and John Rae, a Hudson Bay Company surgeon turned trader who discovered the expedition's fate. In this final episode, Mark Wilson explains the last days of Franklin's expedition and describes his own experience following in their footsteps

Harry Goodsir's body has never been found. A new book, however (*Ice Blink* by Steve Cookman), claims that he was carrying out cannibalism in the last few days:

From his medicine chest, Goodsir would have probably first selected a capital saw - a long, full-bladed saw, like a carpenter's. With this, he removed the head, sawed off the arms at the shoulder, and sawed through the pelvic bone to remove both legs...The flesh from the trunk of the body - pectorals, shoulder blades, back and sides was next carved off and possibly laid in the sun to dry

The gruesome account is not based on evidence bar the fact that bodies have been found which bear marks of cannibalism. It paints a grisly picture embellished with artistic licence; you can't lay meat out to dry when the temperature is below freezing! If Goodsir did resort to cannibalism it was purely for the survival of himself and those remaining.

Franklin's grave and the ships have never been found. We will probably never know what actually happened to Harry Goodsir.

The last remains discovered were in an area now called Starvation Cove, 135 miles from where the ships were



Skull of one of the crew, still present on the Todd Islands

abandoned. Here, five bodies were found in a boat. Another body was found face down and is believed to belong to Thomas Armitage, a gunroom steward. On him was found a note book belonging to Harry Peglar, Terror's Captain of the Foretop. In it was written the last man's words:

O death whare is thy sting, the grave at Comfort Cove for who has any douat how...the dyer sad and whare traffelegar



Our team arriving in Starvation Cove – a typical day in the region

the franklin memorial expedition 2003

In early 2003 I was asked if I could be the doctor on an expedition retracing the steps of Franklin's men from Victory Point to Starvation Cove. At that point I had never heard of Franklin, Goodsir or Rae. The idea of an arctic expedition though (with all the costs covered by American Express) was probably as exciting to me as it was to Harry Goodsir, a fellow Edinburgh surgeon in his 20s, 150 years earlier. I jumped at the chance.

We were to be the first team to walk the route of Franklin's men, and were to set out on the same day as they did, so the arctic weather ought to be similar. But that was where the similarities ended. We were not starved or diseased. We had the best clothing, skis, pulks, GPS, EPIRB, two satellite phones and a lap top. They didn't even have a map!

They were in an unmapped land so close to the magnetic north pole (less than 50 miles away) that a compass would have been useless. Their clocks had been set three years previously so not even a sextant would have been much use.

We flew to a very small Inuit community in Gjoa Haven on King William Island. From there it was a full day's skidoo ride to Victory Point. On arrival it became clear that the land was incredibly flat. Differentiating between land and sea was often impossible. After our first night sleeping on the frozen sea we awoke to find three polar bears a few hundred yards from our tents. It was not just the cold that made this land dangerous.

Over the following 18 days we trudged our sledges south. The ground was white, the sky was white;



Map demonstrating the journey from Victory Point to Starvation Cove, the furthest destination reached. The mouth of the Back Fish River is due South

the occasional pressure ridge in the sea was the only feature. Our pulks weighed around 90kg, their boats over 1,400lbs. If we had any doubts, our GPS confirmed our position. For Franklin's men, however, it must have seemed like the end of the earth. They knew Canada was south and they even knew of Back Fish River, but starving, cold, with symptoms of lead poisoning and with no real idea of how much further they had to go, it must have been an appalling way to die.

But despite having everything against them, they had done incredibly well. They were aiming across unmapped land and sea for the mouth of the Great (Back) Fish River. The adjacent map shows how close they were. They were nearly bang on in longitude. Did they think though that they should have been in the larger mouth to the east? In such a desperate landscape, the thought of being lost would have been a terrible psychological blow. Or had they just reached the end of their physical endurance?

To walk in the footsteps of these men was an incredibly humbling experience. The conditions they survived would pale Shackleton's story; however, with no one

living to tell the tale, this disaster has been largely forgotten.

acknowledgements

I am heavily indebted to Steve Kerr of the Royal College Library who did an amazing amount of research into Harry Goodsir and others on the original expedition. During my research I discovered that Professor Matthew Kaufman of the Department of Anatomy, Edinburgh was writing a biography on Harry Goodsir and I am very grateful for him sending me a copy of his work.



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**References are available on the website:
www.surgeonsnews.info**