

Scott's Antarctic expedition - tragedy and legacy

13 March 2012 - A century ago, in the first few months of 1912, the British effort to put the first men at the geographical South Pole was reaching its tragic conclusion.

Captain Robert Falcon Scott and his team had made it to the pole on January 18 only to learn they had been beaten there by the Norwegian team, led by Roald Amundsen.

As they set off on their "wearisome return... 800 miles of solid dragging" they faced unusually cold weather and by 29 March all of the men had perished on the ice.

The fate of Scott and his team is well known, but what many do not realise is that scientific discovery was at the heart of the British Antarctic Expedition and left a powerful legacy.

Rather than being one sustained push for the pole, the expedition team spent many months studying the Antarctic continent - which at that time was a great unknown.

Not least among Scott's scientific objectives was to get a better understanding of the weather and climate of this frozen wilderness.

For this purpose he appointed a select team of meteorologists, chief amongst whom was George Simpson - known to the rest of the team as 'Sunny Jim' and who later served as Director of the Met Office.

Weather observations were taken throughout the expedition - right from the start on the long voyage from Britain. Even as Scott and his team struggled on in their final days returning from the pole they took note of the weather. Scott's diary entry for 17 January gives an idea of the conditions they faced: "We have had a horrible day - add to our disappointment a head wind 4 to 5, with a temperature -22 [degrees Fahrenheit, about -30 degrees Celsius] and companions labouring on with cold feet and hands."

Because of their enduring historical and meteorological value, much of the documentation from the expedition - including diaries, ship logs, letters, registers and autographic records - are permanently stored at the National Meteorological Archive in Exeter and are available for the public to view by prior appointment.

As the news of the death of Scott and his team filtered through in early 1913, Simpson began work on his account of the weather and climate using data he and his colleagues had gathered.


The first volume was published in 1919 to great acclaim, with Simpson concluding that Scott met with exceptionally low temperatures on his return from the Pole. He also discovered that the transition from Antarctic summer to winter was much more rapid than previously thought.

Whilst Captain Scott's extraordinary adventure still compels, fascinates and inspires people today, the real legacy of the expedition lies in Scott's recognition of Antarctica as a place of special scientific interest.

The expedition established a long tradition of detailed scientific research on the continent which continues to this day and has enabled a greater understanding of the climate and world around us.

Some of the written records from the expedition are on display at the National Meteorological Library in Exeter for the next three months.



 [Scott's Antarctic Expedition \(video transcript\) \(PDF, 143 kB\)](#)

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Scott's Antarctic Expedition

Robert Falcon Scott's expedition to the South Pole is most well known for its tragic conclusion, but what a lot of people don't know is that it was primarily a scientific expedition. The extensive records that Scott's team made are kept at the National Meteorological Archive in Exeter, as well as other archives across the country, and allow scientists to use the detailed data to gain a better understanding of the polar regions and the climate there. But what did Scott and his team discover on this expedition and why is this data so useful?

Many civilisations from the ancient Greeks onwards believed in the existence of a great undiscovered southern land, the *terra australis incognita*, or more communally known as Antarctica, but it was not until the nineteenth century that people actually set foot there. The later years of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century saw the great heroic age of Antarctic exploration, most famously the expeditions led by Ernest Shackleton and Robert Falcon Scott. In June 1910, Captain Scott and his team set off on the long voyage from Britain to Antarctica. The main aim of the expedition was "to reach the South Pole, and to secure for The British Empire the honour of the achievement." But Scott also had another aim for the expedition. He hoped to conduct important investigations into the biology, zoology, geology, glaciology and oceanography of the continent on a scale not seen before. One aim was to conduct regular meteorological observations for the entire duration of the expedition and the Met Office provided many of the instrumentation used. For this purpose Scott appointed a select team of meteorologists, including George Simpson who later served as the Director of the Met office from 1920 to 1938. The expedition had an ominous start, with the ship being struck by a terrific storm after leaving Port Chalmers, New Zealand. This storm produced 35 foot waves and is dramatically captured in the Terra Nova ship logs stored in the National Meteorological Archive.

Shortly after arriving at Ross Island, Antarctica, George Simpson constructed one of the continent's first weather stations. Here, regular weather observations were made and recorded. Shortly after, three additional outlying screens were erected to help record the micro-climate of



the area during the Antarctic winter. Weather observations were also taken while out on sledging journeys. Alongside these observations are numerous other records, such as letters, photographs and diagrams. These records provide an important source of baseline meteorological data and are amongst the most historically significant records we have in our collection.

Despite the difficulties and set backs they faced, Scott and his companions did reach the pole on 18th January 1912 only to find that the Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen had beaten them by 33 days. The team were now faced with a treacherous return journey to main base at Cape Evans, during which they experienced unusually cold temperatures and severe blizzards. Sadly, by 29 March 1912 all five members of the Polar Party had died. The observations they recorded in the notebook register indicate that the men encountered sustained minimum temperatures that were more than 10°C lower than average. These conditions would have no doubt contributed to the frostbite and extreme fatigue the men experienced.

As the news of their deaths filtered through in early 1913, Simpson began work on his account of the weather and climate using data he and his colleagues had gathered. In 1919 his pioneering three volume treatise on Antarctic meteorology was published to great acclaim. In this, Simpson concludes that Captain Scott met with exceptionally low temperatures on his return from the Pole. He also discovered that the transition from Antarctic summer to winter was much more rapid than previously thought. In memory of Captain Scott and his colleagues, the Scott Polar Research Institute in Cambridge University was set up in 1920. This institute provides a single point at which material of polar interest can be collected and made accessible for future research. The Amundsen-Scott South Pole Scientific Station has been inhabited by a community of international scientists since its foundation in 1956. Its unique position has resulted in a long and distinguished history of scientific research, in particular the discovery by the British Antarctic Survey of the depletion of the ozone layer and its impact on global temperatures. The Met Office has a close working relationship with the British Antarctic Survey and some of our forecasters are seconded to their main base at Rothera on the Antarctic Peninsula every summer to engage in collaborative research.



Captain Scott's extraordinary adventure still compels, fascinates and inspires people today. But the real legacy of the expedition lies in Scott's recognition of Antarctica as a place of special scientific interest. The expedition established a long tradition of detailed scientific research on the continent which continues to this day and has enabled a greater understanding of the climate and world around us.