

# The Wilson Art Gallery & Museum

## Information Sheet



## The First World War: Ernest Henry Shackleton

Shackleton is best known for his extraordinary achievement in leading the men of his *Endurance* expedition safely out of the Antarctic after their ship had been crushed in the ice. This expedition took place just as the First World War broke out, and ended whilst warfare was still raging in Europe. Shackleton and his men returned for the last eighteen months of warfare.

In 1914 Shackleton made his third trip to the Antarctic with the ship *Endurance*, aiming to cross Antarctica from the Weddell to the Ross Sea.

Shackleton spent most of 1913 and 1914 preparing for this journey, which was officially known as the Imperial Transantarctic Expedition. He had to hiring the team, equip the ship and endeavour to raise funds to support the trip. The *Endurance* left London on 1 August 1914, and on 4 August docked at Eastbourne. At midnight England declared war on Germany. Shackleton was in turmoil. He had poured the greater part of the last two years into preparations.

If the ship did not sail immediately the team would miss the summer season ice in the Antarctic. But there was a duty to the country too. He consulted his men. Four decided to enlist, the rest opted to follow Shackleton's lead and ask the Admiralty for orders. A one word telegram was received from Churchill: 'Proceed'.

The ship sailed via Buenos Aires to South Georgia, the final stop for refuelling before entering the Antarctic seas. It was also the last place where the men could hear news of the war in Europe. One man, Daniel Gooch on learning that his house had been requisitioned as a hospital, returned to Essex, but the remaining 26 men under Shackleton's leadership, sailed south to the Antarctic. The rest of the story is well known: *Endurance* was crushed in the ice, but, after some extraordinary experiences, Shackleton brought every one of his men out alive. Shackleton's first words on reaching the whaling station in Stromness after 18 months in the ice were, 'My name is Shackleton. Tell me when was the war over?' The reply: 'The war is not over ... millions are being killed.'



An advertisement for Burberry coats playing on the reputation of the polar explorers.

## Shackleton in Australia

Shackleton found it much more difficult to rescue the other half of his expedition, the men that had travelled in *Aurora* and were stuck in the Ross Sea. The Admiralty in London were not interested in a few explorers' lives when so many thousands were being killed in the war in Europe. The Australian and New Zealand governments took much the same line. Shackleton had to exert all his charisma to win over sufficient help to mount the rescue. Once achieved, he embarked on a frantic round of lectures, giving all the money raised to the Red Cross.



A commemorative stamp bearing the portrait of Shackleton in military attire

## Shackleton in South America

Shackleton had achieved remarkable things in the Antarctic but Europe had changed while he had been away. He was too old to enlist and was not a well man (though he never admitted this). He begged the Government for a suitable job. He had good standing in Argentina and Chile: the people there had lined the streets in their hundreds to welcome the polar explorers back from their ordeal in the ice, and Shackleton had been lauded wherever he went. So he was sent on a mission to South America to promote Britain's interests, and find out exactly how Britain was regarded. He returned in April 1918, but it is doubtful if his report was ever acted on.

## Shackleton and Spitsbergen

His next posting was to prospect for mineral wealth in Spitsbergen on behalf of the Northern Exploration Company, a job that in peacetime would have appealed to the treasure hunter in him. He was given shares in the company as an incentive and allowed to have some of his former comrades join him, and they set off to Norway to investigate. The real reason for the trip was undoubtedly to preserve mineral assets for the allies; Russian exploitation was believed to be a real danger. But Shackleton had only reached Tromsø in Norway when the War Office recalled him for a more urgent job.

## Shackleton and North Russia

The War Office thought Shackleton was the ideal man to equip allied troops with suitable clothing and equipment for overwintering 150 miles north of the Arctic Circle. Murmansk in North Russia was the only port in the area to remain open throughout the winter, and the Government wanted to ensure it was available for the allies to use. The troops were also deployed to assist the counter revolutionary White Russians. Shackleton was delighted as he could at long last hold a military post, with the associated uniform – he was appointed a Major – and the posting held the prospect of danger, sledging and possible fighting. He was also able to recruit some of his former crew and also Scott's. But the posting was not needed long, two weeks after his arrival in Murmansk the armistice was signed. He returned to London in December and resigned from his role in February 1919.

To find out more about the collections held by the museum contact:  
Collections Team, The Wilson, Clarence Street, Cheltenham GL50 3JT

Tel: 01242 387488 Email: [collections@cheltenhamtrust.org.uk](mailto:collections@cheltenhamtrust.org.uk)

Visit our website: <http://www.cheltenhammuseum.org.uk/>