

The Wilson Art Gallery & Museum

Information Sheet



Edward Wilson's pipe

In March 2016, The Wilson was able to purchase a pipe originally belonging to Edward Adrian Wilson, as a valuable addition to its Wilson Family Collection. Not only is the pipe a very personal possession, but it reflects something of the complex personality of its remarkable owner. It is probable that this pipe was one of those presented to members of Robert Falcon Scott's Discovery expedition to the Antarctic (1901–1904).

Where did the pipe come from?

The pipe was offered for sale by a London dealer together with a leather carrying case. In December 2015 it was among items sold at an auction of contents from Hooton Pagnell Hall, near Doncaster. Edward's elder brother, Bernard, had been estate manager at the Hall. It is likely that Oriana, Edward's widow, gave the pipe to Bernard at a time when she was distributing mementoes of her late husband among his family and friends. The initials EW are elaborately engraved on a silver band around the pipe.



The Pipe

Made of polished rose briar, the pipe is of the classic 'Billiard' shape. The bevel-edged silver band is designed to protect the joint where shank and stem meet. The stem is made of vulcanite, a type of rubber. Its condition suggests that Edward Wilson was a careful smoker who did not chew hard on his pipes. It bears only a single tooth mark! The initials GBD, appearing both on the wooden shank and on the silver band, identify the pipe's maker as the Paris-based firm Ganneval, Bondier and Donninger. The band is stamped with London hallmarks, dating it to 1900, and with the initials AO for Adolphe

Oppenheimer, the London distributor of GBD pipes at that time. The pipe comes with a well-worn, stud-fastened, leather case that appears to have travelled a good deal with Edward Wilson in his pocket.

Edward Wilson and Pipe-smoking



Wilson smoking a pipe, 1893, detail from a group image

Edward Wilson started smoking a pipe at Cambridge. His first biographer, George Seaver, claims that as a young man Wilson smoked 'to excess' and tried several times to break the habit:

At intervals, for periods often of weeks and even of months, he gave it up; he would, for instance, at the beginning of Lent fling his pipe away in Crippetts woods, but always remembered when Lent was over where to find it. [Crippetts Woods surrounded The Crippetts, the Wilson family's Leckhampton home.]

In 1898 Wilson became seriously ill with tuberculosis, and spent part of the following year recovering at a sanatorium in Davos, Switzerland. He was frustrated by not being allowed to do anything, but after what he called 'five weeks' total abstinence' he was permitted to go skating. Eventually he was allowed to take up his pipe again: 'Smoked all day!' he reported with relief. Nevertheless, Edward was by temperament an ascetic. While smoking he struggled with the sense that he ought to give up his pipe for good and, while not smoking, with the urge to be reunited with it.

According to Seaver, Wilson did not smoke on either of his Antarctic expeditions with Scott. This must have been a severe test of his resolve, as the other members of the team all had their pipes and cigars. Tobacco was seen as an essential item of the expedition's stores: smoking mitigated the extreme cold and helped suppress the appetite. Writing in the *South Polar Times* (May 1902), Scott explained how much a man's pipe could mean:

The day's work is nearly over; but a solitary joy remains; throughout your recent adventures you have always kept your mind's eye on the pipe, tobacco and matches that are distributed about your person [...] The solace of that pipe [...] is a thing that only the true smoker can appreciate. Scott's own pipe, very similar to Wilson's, is now on display in RRS Discovery, which is today a floating museum in Dundee, her home port.

In the years after the Discovery expedition Edward Wilson devoted himself to research into the causes of disease in highland birds. He spent the summers in Scotland on the grouse moors, and may well have gone back to his pipe partly as a defence against the mosquitoes that plagued him during his work. By 1908, however, his love-hate relationship with smoking had ended: the pipe was abandoned and never taken up again. He joined the Terra Nova expedition in 1910 as Chief Scientific Officer, reached the South Pole, but in 1912 died alongside Scott, who wrote of him, 'I believe he really is the finest character I ever met'. They were eleven miles short of the depot that held the supplies that could have saved their lives: food, fuel – and pipe tobacco. Edward Wilson's pipe was purchased with the support of the Friends of the Wilson. Thanks to Adrian Barlow for his help with this information sheet.

To find out more about the collections held by the museum contact:
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