



Sir Ernest Shackleton

Members of the Haywards Heath & District Probus Club were treated to an excellent talk by Michael Smith on the life of Sir Ernest Shackleton: Michael Smith is a retired journalist and an author whose main area of interest is Antarctic and Arctic exploration.



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Michael gave the early history of Shackleton before presenting details of just a few of the exploits of this remarkable man. After his expeditions to Antarctica in the early nineteenth century, he became a household name only to sink into obscurity. It was not until probably the nineteen fifties that he was "rediscovered" and was to become a role model for leadership and responsibility in the most extreme conditions.

Ernest Henry Shackleton was born in County Kildare in Southern Ireland where his father farmed. When Ernest was six, his father moved the family to South London and trained to be a doctor. Shackleton endured school but was no great scholar and persuaded his father to allow him to leave Dulwich College as soon as possible - this being at the age of sixteen.

Shackleton joined the Merchant Navy and to his father's surprise, made a success of his time, and travelled to many parts of the globe. His sea experience enabled him to be part of Scott's expedition to Antarctica in 1901 – 1903 and there were further visits to the area in the coming years.

During the periods when Shackleton was at home in London, he became involved in various business ventures but sadly none of these were financially successful. However, he had friends in high places and his wife was very wealthy in her own right, and as a result he was able to commence his Trans-Antarctic expedition in 1914.

Shackleton left South Georgia for the Antarctic in his vessel *The Endurance*, but the ship became frozen fast in an ice flow in the Weddell Sea. When the vessel was released from the ice in the Spring it sank but three lifeboats and stores had been saved. For several months, the party camped on various ice flows and finally they sailed in the lifeboats to Elephant Island. Due to this being far from any shipping routes Shackleton decided to make the open boat journey, with a crew of six, to South Georgia some 720 nautical miles away where there was a whaling station on the north side of the island. After some 15 days, they landed on the south side of the island and then crossed the rugged terrain, including sliding down a glacier on coils of rope! and reached the whaling station. A whaling ship returned Shackleton and his small party to Elephant Island and all 22 men who had been left there for four and half months were rescued, a truly amazing feat. Many were on the point of starvation and hyperthermia was also a major problem.

It is difficult to imagine the conditions under which Shackleton and his men existed for so many months in the intense cold, the darkness, and the fierce winds. Shackleton's bravery and care for his men in such conditions, was very impressive.

It is interesting to note that Shackleton's failure in the business world was part of a general inability to deal with financial matters in an orderly way. For example, it was said that on various expeditions suppliers and crew were not paid what was due to them. Despite this, he was a man of immense integrity and ability.

In 1921, he commenced his final expedition to the Antarctic and arrived in South Georgia in January where he died of a heart attack. At the request of his widow, he was buried on the island, the end of a truly amazing life – he was only 47 when he died.