

# Zoom Talk: The Franklin Expedition

Delivered on: 10<sup>th</sup> February 2021

Haywards Heath & District Probus

Given By: Michael Smith



## The Franklin's Expedition

Sources: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Franklin's\\_lost\\_expedition](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Franklin's_lost_expedition) • <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/news/2017/04/franklin-expedition-ship-watson-ice-ghosts/> • <https://www.history.com/news/franklin-expedition-mystery-northwest-passage> • <https://www.whitehousehistory.org/photos/treasures-of-the-white-house-resolute-desk> • <https://www.christies.com/features/The-story-of-HMS-Resolute-11188-7.aspx> • [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Resolute\\_desk](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Resolute_desk)



The Franklin Expedition, or more precisely, *Franklin's Lost Expedition* holds great interest and mystery. What really happened to the 129 men aboard HMS Terror and HMS Erebus as they attempted to explore the unknown territory of the Northwest Passage? Their fate is one of the enduring mysteries of the age of exploration. There are many theories and hypotheses about what might have taken place, but still nobody yet knows what really happened.

Picture Credit: "Sir John Franklin, explorateur de l'Arctique / Sir John Franklin, the Arctic Explorer" by BiblioArchives / LibraryArchives is licensed under CC BY 2.0

Franklin's lost (and last) expedition was a British voyage of Arctic exploration. It was led by Captain Sir John Franklin and departed from the River Thames, England in 1845 aboard two ships - HMS Erebus and HMS Terror. It was Franklin's fourth Arctic expedition and his third as commander. Franklin had three attempts to find the Northwest Passage. His final voyage in 1845 ended in tragedy for him and his men, becoming the worst disaster in the history of British polar exploration. Yet, the plan was simple: to traverse the last unnavigated sections of the Northwest Passage through Canada's ice-strewn Arctic inlets to find the long-sought pathway from Atlantic to Pacific. But things obviously did not work out as planned.

Some two months after setting sail, the *Erebus* and *Terror* were spotted in Baffin Bay, just east of the Northwest Passage's entrance. Then, the expedition met with disaster after both ships and their crews, a total of 129 officers and men, became icebound in Victoria Strait near King William Island, in what is today the Canadian territory of Nunavut. After being icebound for more than a year, both ships were abandoned in April 1848, by which point Franklin and nearly two dozen others had died. The survivors, led by Franklin's deputy Francis Crozier and *Erebus'* captain James Fitzjames, set out for the Canadian mainland, but they were never seen again.

### Finding the lost ships

Pressed by Franklin's wife and others, the Admiralty launched a search for the missing expedition in 1848. In the many subsequent searches in the decades afterward, several relics from the expedition were uncovered, including the remains of two men that were returned to Britain. A series of scientific studies in modern times suggested that the men of the expedition did not all die quickly. Hypothermia, starvation, lead poisoning or zinc deficiency and diseases including scurvy, along with general exposure to a hostile environment whilst lacking adequate clothing and nutrition, killed everyone on the expedition in the years following its last sighting by Europeans in 1845. Cut marks on some of the bones recovered during these studies also seem to support allegations of cannibalism reported by Franklin searcher John Rae in 1854.

In 2014, a Canadian search team led by Parks Canada equipped with the latest marine archaeological equipment located the wreck of HMS Erebus in the eastern portion of Queen Maud Gulf. Two years later, the Arctic Research Foundation found the wreck of HMS Terror south of King William Island. Research and dive expeditions at the wreck sites, now protected as a combined National Historic Site, are currently ongoing but it could take up to 10 years to reach completion as the environment is as hostile as they come.

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Despite the expedition's infamous status, it did explore the vicinity of what was ultimately one of many Northwest Passages to be discovered. Robert McClure led one of many expeditions to investigate the fate of Franklin's voyage, and finally ascertained an ice-bound route that connected the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific Ocean and made it out alive. This trip was similarly beset by immense challenges and controversies. In 1906 Roald Amundsen traversed the passage on the Gjøa (Amundsen was the first explorer to transit the Northwest Passage, the first to reach the South Pole (in 1911), and the first to fly over the North Pole in an airship (in 1926)).

## A Series of Clues to the Fate of the Franklin Expedition

The History.com website ([here](#)) records:

*'Rescue expeditions turned up tantalizing clues: A [trio of graves](#) at one site. A [note at another site](#), dated April 1848 and indicating that Franklin and 23 others were dead, the ships had been trapped in the ice for 18 months, and the survivors were abandoning ship and striking out across land. Other clues trickled in: An abandoned sled, with two skeletons and numerous personal effects. Letters from one of the men, some written phonetically and some backward and [few fully deciphered](#). Stories from local Inuit tell of 'white men who had slowly perished'; of ships that had been caught in, and then disappeared beneath, the ice.'*

## The Inuit

The Inuit (sometime previously known as Eskimos) live throughout most of Northern Canada in the territory of Nunavut, Nunavik in the northern third of Quebec, Nunatsiavut and NunatuKavut in Labrador and in various parts of the Northwest Territories, particularly around the Arctic Ocean, in the Inuvialuit Settlement Region.

## The Resolute Desk



The Resolute Desk (aka the Hayes Desk) is a 19<sup>th</sup> century desk used by several presidents of the United States in the White House Oval Office. It was a gift from Queen Victoria to President Rutherford B. Hayes in 1880 and was built from the oak timbers of the British Arctic exploration ship HMS Resolute. The desk has been modified twice. Franklin Roosevelt requested the addition of a door with the presidential seal to conceal his leg braces and a safe, but it was not installed until 1945, after his death. A two-inch tall plinth was added to the desk in 1961 and replaced in 1986.

Picture Credit: "Resolute Desk used by the President of the United States" by redskins5926 is licensed under CC BY-NC 2.0

You might be wondering what this has to do with Franklin's Expedition. HMS Resolute was abandoned in Melville Sound in 1854 while searching for Sir John Franklin and his lost expedition. The Resolute was found in 1855 floating in Davis Strait by George Henry, an American whaling ship. It was repaired and returned to England as goodwill gift from the United States. After serving in the British Navy for a further 23 years as a supply vessel, the ship was decommissioned in 1879 and subsequently broken up in Chatham Dockyard in Chatham, England. A competition was held to design and build a piece of furniture that Queen Victoria could gift to the American president, built from the timbers of Resolute. Morant, Boyd, & Blanford won this contest, and this desk was constructed shortly afterwards. It has been used by every US president since Hayes during their period in office, except for Presidents Johnson, Nixon, and Ford.

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## Recommended Reading

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*Icebound in the Arctic: The Mystery of Captain Francis Crozier and the Franklin Expedition* is Michael Smith's latest book. It comes out, in paperback on 12 April 2021. The book can be ordered from Amazon, [here](#).

## About the Speaker

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Michael Smith, who previously spoke to us at the Lindfield golf club about Sir Ernest Shackleton, delivered his Zoom talk to Haywards Heath & District Probus Club on “*The Franklin Expedition*” on 10<sup>th</sup> February 2021. It was extremely interesting and well presented with a superb array of graphics and pictures. Michael has undertaken several such talks during the Covid-19 lockdowns. He is an authority on Polar exploration and his 10 books have sold over 250,000 copies worldwide.

He has appeared in TV and radio documentaries and lectured at many prestigious venues, including: The Queen's Gallery Buckingham Palace, Royal Geographical Society, National Maritime Museum, National Museum of Ireland, Princess Grace Memorial Library Monaco, the Royal Scottish Geographical Society and Scott Polar Research Institute Cambridge. Michael has appeared at many literary festivals across the country and is a regular speaker to local history societies, U3A and Probus groups, WI, Townswomens' Guild, and schools. He is a former award-winning journalist with *The Guardian* and *The Observer*.