

Endurance descendants to mark centenary by completing ancestor's unfinished business

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Left: James Wordie was chief scientific officer in Shackleton's Weddell Sea party, which sought to walk across Antarctica via the South Pole in 1915. Right: Members of the Endurance South Pole 100 team training in the Cairngorms. Credit: Frank Hurley via Wikimedia Commons / Tim Holmes

The family of the chief scientific officer from Ernest Shackleton's famous Endurance expedition are to mark its centenary by completing part of his intended route to the South Pole and by digitising unpublished journals kept by their ancestor, James Wordie.

A century after Sir Ernest Shackleton's plan to cross Antarctica was dashed on the ice, the relatives of his party's chief scientific officer are planning to complete their ancestor's unfinished journey.

Next week, members of the family of James Wordie, geologist and chief scientific officer on Shackleton's ill-fated Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition of 1914-1917, will mark its centenary by setting out on an expedition to the frozen continent. The group of 12, led by noted explorer David Hempelman-Adams, plan to walk and ski the final leg of Shackleton's intended route to the South Pole, arriving on December 15, almost 100 years after Shackleton hoped to do so himself.

As well as commemorating the anniversary of one of the most dramatic episodes from the heroic age of Antarctic exploration, the project - Endurance 100 - has been devised to encourage fundraising for the creation of a digital legacy that will benefit future generations. The intention is to raise enough money to digitise Wordie's diaries, and relevant papers belonging both to him and other members of the Endurance expedition. These will be made available for public research with the help of St John's College, Cambridge, where Wordie was a student, Fellow, and later Master; and the Scott Polar Research Institute in Cambridge.

Enough has already been acquired to begin work on a pilot stage of the project, which involves digitising Wordie's Weddell Sea diary, which he kept whilst aboard Shackleton's ship, Endurance. Famously, the crew were forced to abandon ship after the Endurance became icebound. They then drifted on ice floes for several months before reaching Elephant Island, which was uninhabited. From there, Shackleton and five others made a daring, 800-mile sea crossing to South Georgia, from where a rescue was mounted. Wordie's account concludes in November 1916, when all 28 of the crew returned home.

The remarkably detailed volumes capture the spirit, courage and determination of men trapped in gruelling conditions in Antarctica for nearly two years. They also include Wordie's scientific considerations and environmental observations, which it is believed will be of significant interest to historians and the scientific community today.

The digitised records will be held by the Scott Polar Research Institute, while a printed copy will be kept at St John's College. Both institutions have actively supported the project, in particular by hosting fundraising events for the initial digitisation.

The South Pole expedition marks the next phase of the fundraising campaign. It was conceived by Tim Holmes, head of Cambridge property company Endurance Estates, and his wife, Alice, who is Wordie's granddaughter and an alumna of St John's. The campaign has also been supported by the novelist and former SAS Sergeant Andy McNab, who has helped to train the group and will be part of the expedition.

While in Antarctica, the team will carry out their own studies, including a psychological evaluation of stress and mood in extreme environments by Medical Officer, Dr Patrick Gillespie, who is another graduate of the College.

"In walking the last 100 miles to the South Pole, this completes some unfinished family business, but it is also a way to understand the hardships and to remember the heroism of those who set out 100 years ago," Mr Holmes said.

"As a team we feel that one of the best legacies of our trip would be the creation of an archive covering Wordie and the other members of the Endurance expedition, so that their narrative can be available to anyone interested in polar science, its history, and climate change."

Originally from Glasgow, Wordie was just 25 when Shackleton recruited him for the trans-Antarctic expedition, which he described as the final, "one great main object of Antarctic journeying." Wordie was fit, young and an experienced Alpine climber, and hoped to be chosen as part of the shore party crossing coast to coast via the Pole.

Instead, the expedition became a famous tale of adventure and survival. Wordie, who was one of those waiting on Elephant Island for four months, is credited with having played a vital role in maintaining morale, and also continued to record scientific findings in his notebook throughout.

It was merely the first chapter in a distinguished career that included eight further polar expeditions, active service in the First World War, an intelligence role in the Second World War, roles at SPRI and the Falkland Island Dependency Survey, and numerous publications. The Wordie Ice Shelf, which broke away from the Antarctic continent due to global warming in 2009, was one of several polar landmarks named in his honour.

In later life, he became one of the more prominent figures in British polar exploration. Most expeditions sought his counsel before departure and he supported and inspired a younger generation of adventurers, including Gino Watkins, Launcelot Fleming, and Vivian Fuchs. Fuchs, a graduate of St John's, in 1957-1958 led the expedition team that completed the first overland crossing of Antarctica, finally realising the ambitions of Wordie's own party more than 40 years previously.

Provided by University of Cambridge

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