

HERITAGE CIRCLE

Robert Burridge, Scott, Amundsen and the Race to the Pole

Robert Burridge gave a very detailed and interesting account of the conditions in Antarctica, the personalities of both Scott and Amundsen and how they approached their prospective expeditions when he spoke to the June meeting of the Heritage Circle. He explained that Antarctica is the fifth largest continent. It is uninhabited as it is so cold as the temperature drops to -60°F, and have been known to drop to -126°F. It has 90% of the world's snow and experiences 200mph gales.

Robert Scott was appointed by the Royal Geographical Society to lead the Terra Nova expedition to the South Pole. At the time, the British attitude toward expeditions was both amateurish and arrogant. There was a common belief that the qualities required of explorers were innate. As a consequence was ill-prepared, Scott knew very little about the weather conditions and the terrain of the Antarctic. His provisions, equipment and clothing were woefully inadequate. He did not take into account that the team would need high protein/fat diet, along with fresh fruit and vegetables in order to sustain them and to prevent scurvy. They needed a daily intake of 6,000 calories in order to cope with the extreme conditions. In addition, the group was often dehydrated.

Similarly, Scott's expedition faced further difficulties. His ship, *The Discovery*, was not built to sail through ice and developed various problems during the journey. He chose to take ponies which were ill suited to the Antarctic. His motorised sledges were heavy and did not function well in the extreme cold. His team was not trained to use skis which made their journey even more arduous. The depots of supplies that his team left for the return journey were never found because the markers were inadequate.

Sadly, Scott was not a good leader. He did not create a positive team spirit. He could be indecisive as he did not consult or include others in decision making. His team became resentful. This was compounded by Scott's character as he tended to be humourless and a loner. He had poor navigational skills and certainly did not understand the psychology of living in the Arctic.

Scott's rival in the 'Race to the Pole,' the Norwegian Roald Amundsen, arrived at the South Pole on 15 December 1911, a month before Scott. His team was able to cover 40 miles in 9 hours, a distance which took Scott a week. Before he left for the expedition, Amundsen prepared carefully as he went to the North Pole to learn about the currents in Arctic Sea and lived with Eskimos who taught him survival skills. He learnt to ski. He built light sledges and coated the runners with ice and moss so that they glided more easily. He took dogs to pull sledges. He also understood the importance of diet and took whale meat, caribou, and animal fat as well as fresh fruit and vegetables. By contrast, Scott who took tinned meat, crackers, cheese and port. His ship was built to move through the ice. Amundsen read everything he could on Antarctica as well as studying aspects of leadership. He promoted autonomy and independence. He took responsibility for his actions and understood the psychology of living in extreme cold and darkness, and resolving the tensions created when being in a group together for long periods of time.

Tragically, Scott and his team perished and were buried where they died. A cross was erected in their memory. His expedition was regarded as a heroic failure. Similarly, Amundsen is considered to be a hero in Norway. He died in 1928 flying on a rescue mission that disappeared in the Barents Sea.

The next meeting of the Heritage Circle will be at 7.30pm on Wednesday 24 July when David Phelan will give a talk entitled *Sutton Hoo and its Treasures*. New members and visitors are very welcome. Further information about the Heritage Circle is available on its website, www.heritagecircle.onesuffolk.net.

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