

Chivalry at the Poles: British Sledge Flags

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In 1999 Captain Robert Falcon Scott's sledge flag was sold by the family and purchased at Christies on 17 September by the National Maritime Museum. This is what we may call Scott's official sledge flag recognizable in the photographs of the ill-fated polar party at the South Pole and subsequently recovered from their tent by Atkinson's search party on 12 November 1912. The flag is in heavyweight silk sateen, machine-stitched with a cross of St. George at the hoist, the rest of the flag divided horizontally, white over blue. The Scott family crest of a stag's head and the motto "Ready Aye Ready" are embroidered in brown in the centre.



Captain R F Scott's Sledge Flag

This is not the only surviving sledge flag belonging to Scott, another of similar design, carried on his first expedition in *Discovery* was presented to Exeter Cathedral by his mother and now hangs on the south wall of the nave¹. A second Scott sledge flag from the *Terra Nova* expedition was bought in the 1999 sale by a private collector. This flag appears hung behind Scott, in the photograph of the Midwinter Day Dinner 22, June 1911 and is described by Frank Debenham in his diary "One flag presented to Captain Scott has a nicely worked pair of grey wings on a white background with the words 'Wings stretched towards the South'². The inscription in fact reads "Stretched wings towards the South" in other respects the flag is the same as the others. An offer to purchase the flag by the National Maritime Museum was refused by the owner who had to withdraw his application for an export license.³

This may be an opportune moment to re-examine sledge flags. There were never very many of them as they were a British phenomenon with a short history. The topic was fairly thoroughly covered in an article in "Mariner's Mirror" by H. G. Carr⁴ to which this is something of a footnote.



Photograph of one of Scott's Expeditions

Various types of flags were used on polar expeditions... ensigns, depot marking flags and the Union flag taken to plant at the Pole should a sledge party arrive there. There is quite a close relationship between sledge flags and boat flags. British expeditions were seeking a route through the Canadian archipelago or attempting to reach the North Pole over the sea ice of the Arctic Ocean- a complicated mix of ice and water. William Edward Parry's North Pole expedition of 1827 used sledges and boats constructed with runners to cross the hummocky pack ice and the channels of water which opened up in summer. Boat ensigns were sometimes made of silk at this time, and such ensigns were made by Parry's wife Isabella for the expedition boats⁵. A silk Union Flag presented to the surgeon and naturalist of the expedition, Charles James Beverley, went through the salerooms in July 1999 and was sold to a private bidder.⁶ Though Parry achieved a record for furthest north that stood until 1876, his seaman made very little progress in dragging their boats over the sea ice drifting in the opposite direction.

Much nineteenth century Polar exploration was undertaken by ship. With vessels beset for much of the year, commanders began to turn their attention to ways of extending their journeys by sledge. Techniques of naval sledging were largely developed during the search for the missing ships of Sir John Franklin's 1845 expedition. Over forty expeditions took part, some were privately financed, others were naval expeditions financed by the government. In addition to the now traditional book aimed at the general reader, lengthy official reports were produced to justify the expenditure to Parliament and the taxpayer. The report produced by the expedition led

by Captain Horatio Austin and Captain William Penny in 1850 was generously illustrated.⁷

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have been able to make, are to be transmitted to me as soon as practicable after your return.

Given under my hand on board Her Majesty's ship "Resolute," in Winter Quarters between Cornwallis and Griffith Islands, the 7th of April 1851.


(Signed) HORATIO T. AUSTIN.

The Six Men referred to.

George S. Malcolm, Captain hold,
Thomas Brown, Blacksmith,
John Davis, Bombardier, R.M.A.,
Benjamin Strutt, A.B.,
John Wright, Private, R.M.,
John Heeles, Private, R.M.,
limited party, provisioned for 42, and equipped for 28 days, with 1 runner sledge.

H.M. ship "Resolute."

EXCELLENT.



LIMITED TO MR. A. R. BRADFORD, Surgeon.

Names.	Rank or Rating.	Age.	To what Ship belonging.
Mr. W. W. May	Mate	21	Resolute.
Geo. F. Malcolm	Capt. hold	33	Resolute. Discharged to "Hotspur" from a severe frostbite, and obliged to return to the ship.
John Davis	Bombardier		Resolute.
Thos. Brown	Blacksmith		Resolute.
Ed. Heeles	R.M.		Resolute. Discharged to "Perseverance," Melville Island sledge.
Wright	R.M.	26	Pioneer.
Wm. Elliott	Carpenter mate		Pioneer. In lieu of Malcolm, from the "Dashier."
Ben. Strutt	A.B.		Resolute.
John Urquhart	R.M.		Intrepid. In lieu of Heeles from "Perseverance."

Abstract of Weights.

Standing weights	390 lbs.
Depot for Dr. Bradford	328
28 days provisions	588
Total weight	1,306
For each man	217

JOURNAL of the PROCEEDINGS of the "EXCELLENT."

Having equipped my sledge as a limited, attached to Dr. Bradford, being part of western division, with a 7-day depot for two parties, and 28 days provisions for our own consumption, I proceeded, under the orders of Lieutenant McClintock, to the N.W. end of Griffith Island, with the intention.

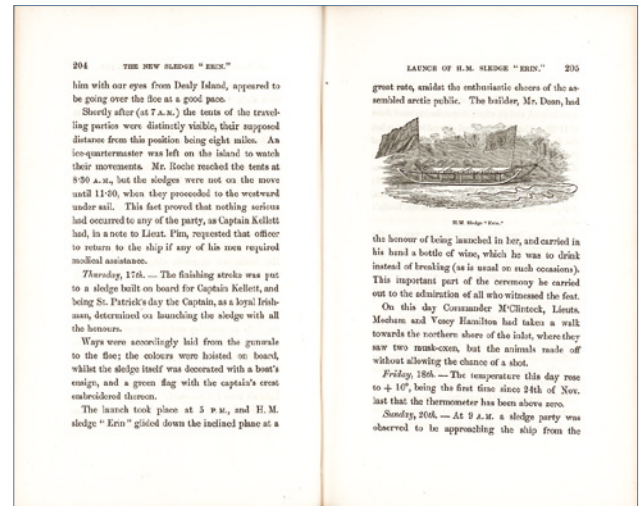
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A Page from the 1850 Report

This was perhaps due to the presence of an enthusiastic artist in Sub Lieutenant William Walter May. Sketching was a skill expected of naval officers, particularly before the advent of photography. May had real talent and his style at this time shows the influence of contemporary cartoonists. The report contains a table indicating the names of the expedition sledges, their mottos and drawings of their flags. The sledges were man-hauled by naval seamen, used the tent floor cloths as sails when the wind was in the right direction and were generally treated in a slightly tongue-in-cheek way as boats. The names were an aid to esprit-de-corps and competition; they also made life easier for readers of reports giving an account of particular sledge journeys. The illustrations of the sledge flags on the table differ slightly from those on individual sledge reports which are generally more detailed.

George McDougall describes the "launch" of one of the sledges attached to *Resolute*, one of the vessels in the last naval search expedition led by Sir Edward Belcher. "The finishing stroke was put to a sledge built on board for Captain Kellett and being St. Patrick's Day the captain, as a loyal Irishman determined on launching

the sledge with all the honours. Ways were accordingly laid from the gunwale to the floe; the colours were hoisted on board, whilst the sledge itself was decorated with a boats ensign, and a green flag with the captain's crest embroidered thereon. The launch took place at 5 P.M. and H.M. Sledge "Erin" glided down the inclined plane at a great rate amidst the enthusiastic cheers of the assembled arctic public"⁸.



George McDougall's Description of the Sledge Erin

Naval ships were traditionally launched dismasted with the Union flag, Admiralty flag and Royal Standard on flagstaffs. Captain Kellett's green flag, had the Union in the canton, the Irish harp in the fly and his crest in the centre (an arm holding a staff).



Print of the Sledges

The sledge flag was always a personal badge of the officer stumping on ahead with the gun. Francis Leopold McClintock, referring to two of Kellett's other sledges says, "The sledges were named by their crews "Star of The North" and "Hero". Also very handsome appropriate banners were given them by Captain Kellett, which had purposely been made for them by a few young ladies (the friends of Sir Edward Belcher) whose highly commendable zeal cannot be sufficiently admired."⁹ McClintock harks back to an age of chivalry in which ladies embroider tokens for their favoured knights. Though many

of the Austin and Belcher expedition sledge flags look like house flags or signal flags and are referred to in the sledge packing check lists as 'distinguishing flags', some, like Commander George H. Richards's flag, incorporate personal heraldry - his lamb and flag crest on a blue background with the motto "LAUS DEO". This flag has survived in private hands.



Commander George Richard's Flag

The sledge flag made for Lieutenant Bedford Pim by Lady Franklin is preserved in the collections of the National Maritime Museum. This is made of ribbed blue silk, with a gold foul anchor, and the motto "HOPE ON HOPE EVER" in appliqué on one side only. The lettering and motif are picked out in narrow gold-coloured silk. The motto is that of Sir John Barrow, late Second Secretary of the Admiralty and an enthusiastic promoter of exploration. The flag was flown by the sledge "John Barrow" which Pim took on the journey to rescue the crew of the trapped *Investigator*. This vessel sailed into the North West passage via Bering Strait and its crew left it via Lancaster Sound and Baffin Bay, the first Europeans to do so. The same flag was also used by another sledge, the "*Murchison*".



Lieutenant Bedford Pim's Flag

Walter May's sketches of man-hauling seem to indicate that sledge flags were not flown all the time, perhaps only when sledges set out or on other special occasions.

McClintock, who was perhaps the most influential developer of naval sledging techniques, had three differ-

ent sledging flags during the 1850's. The flag of the sledge "*Perseverance*" which he commanded during Austin's expedition had a blue cross on a white ground. The flag of "*Star of the North*" was blue with a seven-pointed star and the motto "BE THOU OUR GUIDE". The McClintock family retained the flag for many years, mounted as a fire screen. When the British government eventually abandoned the search for Franklin, Lady Franklin sent her own expedition, funded in part by public subscription and commanded by McClintock.



Print of the Lady Franklin Expedition

The flag of his sledge "*Lady Franklin*" is now at The Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre, Yellowknife. Worked by the sisters of Captain Collinson, it is made of red-coloured silk with the Franklin family motto "NISU" (by struggle) in the centre, worked in gold silk thread; above in an arc is the inscription "THE LADY FRANKLIN" and round the edges a floral border and a gold fringe.¹⁰ The sledge flag of his second in command Lieutenant William Robertson Hobson is now at St. David's Cathedral, Hobart¹¹. This is blue, embroidered with the same inscriptions and laurel branches. Sledge parties led by McClintock and Hobson were to confirm the deaths of Franklin and his men, whose remains were scattered across the hitherto uncharted west coast of King William Island.

Crucial to the continuing use of the sledge flag, was the presence on the Austin expedition of Midshipman Clements Markham. In spite of his enjoyment of polar exploration Markham left the navy shortly afterwards and pursued his interest in exploration on other continents as a civilian. By the 1870's Markham was Honorary Secretary of the Royal Geographical Society. At this time the society supported a campaign to explore Smith's Sound and the North Pole region. The government eventually decided that this should be carried out by a Treasury funded naval expedition but Markham still involved himself in the details of planning, including the designs of the sledge flags. These had hitherto been rectangular or swallow-tailed. Markham, an enthusiast for genealogy

decided they should resemble medieval standards and bear the personal heraldry of the officer concerned.

H.M.S. "ALERT." AUTUMN TRAVELLING, 1875.			
<p>MARCO POLO</p> <p>Comd. A. H. Markham, R.N.A.S. Thomas Sawley (1st Class S.A.) Jas. Hall (A.S.) W. Malby (A.S.) Thomas Ashby (1st Class S.A.) Thomas Simpson (A.S.) John Shilby (A.S.) Thos. Smith (A.S.)</p> <p>Left the ship September 25th. Returned October 10th - 16 days after the ship had disappeared. Temperature +12° to -27°. Number of days out, 20. Number of days in, 12. (Frost, 10½ inches (26.7cm).)</p>	<p>VICTORIA</p> <p>Comd. A. C. Parr Wm. Lawrence (1st Class S.A.) John Gordon (Sergeant) William Marshall (A.S.) Wm. Whalley (A.S.) Wm. Palfrey (A.S.) Wm. G. Smith (A.S.) Wm. Dyer (A.S.)</p> <p>Under the orders of Commander Markham.</p> <p>Left the ship September 25th, and returned October 15th.</p>	<p>HERCULES</p> <p>Comd. Wm. H. Metcalf (Sergeant) James Bridgley (Sgt. Major) Frederick Chas. (Sergeant) John Patten (A.S.) Wm. Whalley (A.S.) Robert Symonds (A.S.) Chas. Chubb (A.S.) Stephen Foxon (A.S.)</p> <p>Under the orders of Commander Markham.</p> <p>Left the ship September 25th, and returned October 15th.</p>	<p>CHALLENGER AND ALERT</p> <p>Comd. A. H. Markham and James Fyfe and James Hall the ship on September 25th. On the 26th the ship was blown up by wind, and the party returned, having been absent for 20 days. Left and returned 10th.</p>
<p>CHALLENGER AND ALERT</p> <p>Comd. A. H. Markham (Sgt. Major)</p> <p>John Christian Peterson (Danish Interpreter)</p> <p>Adam Ayles (1st Class S.A.)</p> <p>Frederick (A.S.)</p> <p>John Bennett (A.S.)</p> <p>The ship to cross 87° 45' Perry's Barometer.</p> <p>Left the ship September 25th. Returned October 10th. Number of days out, 12.</p>	<p>HELLESPON</p> <p>Comd. G. L. C. Bennett Rich. Shilby (Sergeant Major)</p> <p>Wm. Law (Sergeant)</p> <p>John Shilby (A.S.) Wm. Marshall (A.S.) John Smith (A.S.)</p> <p>Left the ship September 25th. Returned September 25th.</p>	<p>DISCOVERY</p> <p>Comd. and Master's Mate of the "Discovery" that returned on the 26th.</p> <p>Comd. Wm. H. Metcalf, R.N.A.S. George Bayard (1st Class S.A.) George Stone (1st Class S.A.) Albert Hanks (A.S.) Henry Hand (A.S.) Thomas Whalley (A.S.) Michael O'Hagan (A.S.) Edgar Bayard (A.S.)</p> <p>Left on 14th of October (10 days) returning to command with Discovery.</p> <p>Left with Expedition to Discovery and back, March 20th to April 6th.</p> <p>Left with Expedition to Discovery and back, March 20th to April 6th.</p> <p>April 20th, started for Greenland with Lt. Markham.</p>	

Markham's Designs

They all had St. George's cross at the hoist "this was to denote that whatever family the bearer may belong to, he is first and foremost an Englishman."¹² The fly was of the colours of the arms, swallow tailed with overall the owner's crest or principal charge. Equipment from this expedition survives in some quantity and the Scott Polar Research Institute holds sledge flags belonging to Wyatt Rawson, Pelham Aldrich and George Egerton. The expedition, led by George Nares, wintered at a record furthest north and a sledge party with Clement Markham's cousin, Albert Markham in charge headed towards the pole. The sledges "Marco Polo" and "Victoria" carried boats to deal with the gaps in the ice. Markham says that

each sledge carried its commander's standard and "in addition the two boats displayed from their mast-heads Captain Nares's Union Jack and a white ensign"¹³. The National Maritime Museum holds three of the flags above mentioned. A. A. C. Parr's flag from the sledge "Victoria" is silk hand-sewn and embroidered with the crest of a queen's head (not Queen Victoria) in the centre. We also have the White Ensign from the boat, again hand-sewn in silk with the name "Victoria" and a leafy bough embroidered in the second canton. The dimensions are only 89 x 60 cms. The Union Jack from "Marco Polo" is hand-sewn silk with flowers embroidered in the centre surrounded by the words "GOD" and "COUNTRY". The dimensions are 61 cm x 99 cm.



Captain Nares's White Ensign



The Most Northerly Encampment by Richard Bridges Beechey



A.A.C. Parr's Flag from the Sledge "Victoria"



The Union Jack from "Marco Polo"

Markham's sledge flag is in the collections of the Royal Geographical Society. The usual red cross of St. George is embroidered onto the silk fabric, the fly is divided yellow over blue with the lion of St. Mark embroidered in the centre. The flag is bordered with yellow and blue cord. These flags can be seen in the painting of the party's most northerly encampment by Richard Bridges Beechey and the lithographs of the sledge party's return after watercolours by Dr E.L.Moss. A combination of Arctic pack ice and scurvy eventually defeated the polar party though they broke Parry's previous farthest north record. Beechey's painting does not represent their final point, ten men traveled a little further to ensure being within 400 miles of the Pole, taking with them all their colours and banners.

Markham began campaigning for the renewal of Antarctic exploration. When he was elected President of the Royal Geographical Society in 1893 planning began in earnest. In 1898, the first expedition to set up a base and winter on the continent was led by Carstens Egeberg Borchgrevink, this was privately financed and quite independent of Markham's plans. Although the expedition did not travel very far, Lieutenant William Colbeck, and Borchgrevink established a record furthest south. Colbeck's sledge flag has been lent to the National Maritime Museum by his family. It is actually the burgee of the Pirate Yacht Club, Bridlington, made of machine-sewn wool bunting, printed with a skull and cross bones. The Pirate Yacht Club is no longer in existence having gone out of business before the First World War.



The Burgee of the Pirate Yacht Club

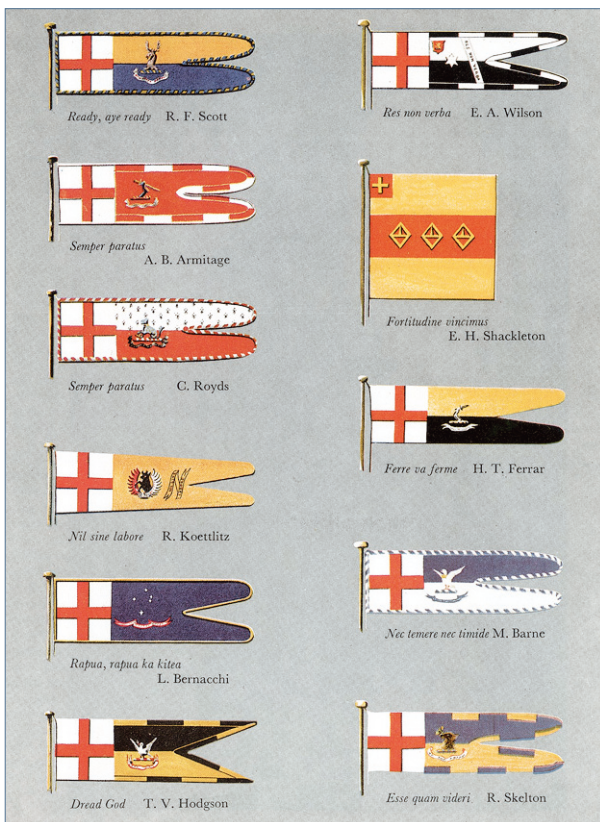
The National Antarctic expedition of 1901 was organized in much the same way as the large naval expeditions of the 1850's and 1875. Markham wrote a brief biography of each participant illustrated with their arms and sledge flags. The sledge flags were of the same sort of design as those of the Nares expedition. Expedition members were quite enthusiastic. Debenham's diary says... "I have learned quite a lot about sledge flags that I had wished I had known before. As it is, the only part that Griff and I got right is the shape, but it doesn't matter and I was jolly proud of my two and they were much admired. The proper design is something like this - the flag of pennant shape about 2½ ft long and 1 ft wide, the square nearest the lanyard being filled with the Cross of St. George whereas Griff and I have a Union Jack there.... Each officer of the landing parties has one, whether he is likely to go sledging or not".¹⁴ The flags were hung out for special occasions back at base, displayed at the start of major sledge journeys, and during photo opportunities en-route.



The National Antarctic Expedition of 1901

A coloured chart of the various flags was produced by Edward Wilson for the expedition internal newspaper *The South Polar Times*. Surgeon and zoologist, Wilson acted as expedition artist on both the *Discovery* and *Terra Nova* expeditions as Walter May had done in the 1850's. Shackleton and Wilson accompanied Scott on his first sledge trip towards the Pole. Wilson writes "On

each of the three sledging excursions I have been on so far I have flown my flag, but the Captain has taken a dislike to his and says there will be no flags on the long southern journey. I said I should certainly not go without mine, if I have to sew it into my shirt.”¹⁵ As an Irishman, albeit of Yorkshire extraction Shackleton’s sledge flag was completely different from everyone else’s. It was square, yellow with a red stripe across the centre charged with three buckles, lozengy, tongues upwards, palewise; on a red canton a yellow cross humettee. In the event, members of the sledge crews on both of Scott’s attempts on the pole took their sledge flags. A photograph of the start of Shackleton’s own attempt on the Pole in 1909 shows that his men also took sledge flags, although predominantly square ones.



Sledge Flags from the South Polar Times

The only example I have so far come across of a sledge flag made during an expedition rather than by wives and mothers beforehand, is recorded by Raymond Priestley, a member of the northern party of the *Terra Nova* expedition. “As I had joined the expedition at the last moment, I had not had one made at home, but, resolving not to be outdone, I borrowed a white silk handkerchief from Levick, cut it in two, sewed the two halves together, and then trimmed it to the correct shape. The St. Georges Cross was then made out of two pieces of bright red braid off some dog-coats we found in Borchgrevink’s hut, and the flag looked quite respectable from a distance”¹⁶.

The sledge flag of Engineer R W Skelton is now at Dundee with *Discovery*. William Colbeck’s second sledge flag as commanding officer of relief ship *Morning* was on

loan to the National Maritime Museum for several years from the Colbeck family. The Scott Polar Research Institute has the flags of Edward Wilson and Charles Royds from the *Discovery* exhibition, and those of Wilson and Henry Bowers from the *Terra Nova* expedition¹⁷. E.L. Atkinson’s flag is at Forest School London E17, Gonville and Caius College, University of Cambridge has another Wilson sledge flag, Victor Campbell’s is at the Memorial University of Newfoundland¹⁸, and Canterbury Museum, New Zealand has Sir Philip Brocklehurst’s sledge flag from Shackleton’s 1907-9 expedition.



A Sledge Flag

The British Graham Land Expedition of 1934-37 was the last the use sledge flags. By now the British were using dog sleds, but then sledge flags had always occasionally been used by dog sleds even though they are chiefly associated with the man-hauling tradition and subsequent criticism of it.

A photograph the interior of the expedition hut shows an expedition member smoking a pipe whilst knitting a sock in the foreground with a Markham sledge flag pinned to the wall behind a bunk in the background.¹⁹ Brian Roberts flag from this expedition is preserved at the Scott Polar Research Institute.

The use of weighted silk in their construction is making surviving sledge flags increasingly fragile. Their rarity, and historical importance, I think justify any resources required to ensure their long-term survival.

1. Information from Alex. Chatwin
2. *The quiet Land, the Antarctic Diaries of Frank Debenham* J.D. Black (ed.) (Huntingdon, 1992) p31
3. *Export of Works of art 1999-2000* Department of Culture Media and Sport.
4. H.G. Carr *Sledge Flags; their origin and development* “Mariner’s Mirror” January 1941 pp 5-13.
5. Anne Parry *Parry of the Arctic* (London, 1963) p110
6. Phillips, Bath, 12 July 1999 lot 112.
7. *Additional Papers relative to the Arctic Expedition under the orders of Captain Austin and Mr. William Penny*, (London, 1852) p11 (table)
8. George F. McDougall *The eventful voyage of H.M. Discovery ship ‘Resolute’ to the Arctic Regions in Search of Sir John Franklin* (London, 1857) pp204-5

9. *Further papers relative to the recent Arctic expedition in search of Sir John Franklin and the Crews of HMS 'Erebus' and 'Terror'*. (London, 1855) p587
10. Information from Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre. F.L. McClintock *A Narrative of the discovery of the fate of Sir John Franklin and his companions* (London, 1859) p.247 says the embroidery is white.
11. Information from the Dean, Dr Stuart Blackler.
12. Sir Clements Markham *Antarctic Obsession: A personal narrative of the origins of the British Antarctic Expedition 1901-1904* (edited Clive Holland) (Harlesdon, 1986)p65
13. Captain Albert Hastings Markham RN *the great frozen Sea, a personal narrative of the voyage of the 'Alert' during the Arctic expedition of 1875-6"* (London, 1878) p292
14. Debenham p32
15. Edward Wilson *Diary of the 'Discovery' expedition to the Antarctic 1901-1904* (Blandford Press, 1966) pp189-90
16. Raymond E Priestley *Antarctic adventure; Scott's Northern Party* (London, 1974) p112
17. Information R K Headland
18. *The wicked mate: the Antarctic Diary of Victor Campbell* (ed. H.G.R.King (Harlesdon, 1988)
19. John Rymill *Southern Lights; the official account of the British Graham Land Expedition 1934-1937* (London, 1938) p116

