

The Mystery of the Franklin Expedition

In May 1845, when Sir John Franklin left Britain in command of the Royal Navy's most ambitious Northwest Passage expedition, no one could have imagined that one of the world's greatest mysteries was about to unfold.

Only a small portion of the Northwest Passage was uncharted by Europeans in 1845, and confidence in the Expedition's success was high. After two years without word, however, a desperate search for Franklin and his men began.

It took more than a decade to establish the main facts — that all 129 men were dead and their ships lost — although how and why it happened remains unknown.

Timeline

May 19, 1845 The Franklin Expedition departed from Greenhithe, near London, England; 134 men were on board HMS *Erebus* and *Terror*.

May 31 to June 3, 1845 The Expedition spent several days at Stromness, on the Orkney Islands, Scotland, where the ships picked up their last fresh supplies.

July 4, 1845 The ships arrived at the Whale Fish Islands, Greenland, after a stormy Atlantic crossing.

July 12, 1845 Officers and crewmembers mailed their last letters home. Five crewmembers were sent home due to illness, dropping the number of men on the two ships from 134 to 129.

July 29 or 31, 1845 HMS *Erebus* and *Terror* were sighted in Baffin Bay by whaling ships. This was the last time the ships and their crews were seen by Europeans.

Winter 1845 to 1846 The Expedition spent its first winter in the Arctic off Beechey Island. Three members of the crew died, and were buried on Beechey Island.

Summer 1846 The Expedition headed south into Peel Sound.

September 1846 to Spring 1848 The ships were beset — surrounded and stuck in ice — northwest of King William Island.

June 11, 1847 Sir John Franklin died. He was 61 years old and had served in the Royal Navy for 47 years.

April 22, 1848 The Expedition had been stuck off King William Island for more than a year and a half. During this time, HMS *Erebus* and *Terror* had moved only 31 miles, drifting with the ice. Fearing they would never escape, the men deserted the ships.

April 25, 1848 The men landed on King William Island. Nine officers and 15 crewmembers had already died. There were 105 survivors. Officers left a note stating their plan to trek to the Back River. The men started pulling ship's boats on heavily-laden sledges south along the coast. An unknown number of men died of exposure and starvation along the way.

January 20, 1854 Franklin's expedition, equipped with three years of provisions, had now been missing for more than eight years. The Admiralty announced that its officers and men would be declared dead as of March 31, 1854.

1847–1880 Thirty-six expeditions organized or supported by the Royal Navy, the Hudson's Bay Company and private sponsors sailed, steamed or sledged into the Arctic from the east, west and south. Very few found any trace of the Franklin Expedition.

2008 A renewed search for Franklin's ships began under the leadership of Parks Canada. The search involved a number of public and private partners, and drew from Inuit oral traditions as well as previous searches.

September 1, 2014 An important clue was discovered on an island in Wilmot and Crampton Bay. A Transport Canada helicopter pilot, working with Government of Nunavut archaeologists, found an iron davit pintle (fitting) behind a rock, where it had lain for generations. Parks Canada, already conducting a sonar search of the nearby ocean floor, refocused its efforts near that island.

September 2, 2014 One hundred and sixty-seven years after the British Admiralty's search began, the first wreck — HMS *Erebus* — was found.

2016 Almost two years to the day following the discovery of *Erebus*, *Terror* was located in Terror Bay, off the southern coast of King William Island. Found using information provided by Sammy Kogvik, an Inuk from Gjoa Haven, *Terror* was in deeper water than *Erebus* and was even better preserved.

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