

In The Wake Of Shackleton Expedition

Log of "Sir Ernest Shackleton" Elephant Island to South Georgia

24 December 1993 -16 January 1994

It all started in the autumn of 1991 when Robert and I were discussing what to do next, it was two years since we had kayaked across the Bering Strait, the first non-Eskimos to do this and possibly the first people ever to do this. We had not exactly been stagnating for the two years but we did feel that as we were both now over 40, it was time to get on and do another expedition. It was definitely time for me to do another sailing trip as I had not done any serious sailing since my single handed cruise back from the Azores in 1986 (Bulletin June 1987). It was decided that it had to be a trip in an open, engineless boat rather than a yacht. We were loosely talking about a trip up to the Bering Strait area, and a light shallow draft open sailing boat could be beached and pulled clear of the water, on some of the remoter uninhabited islands. Of course once we started to talk seriously about open boats Shackleton's Boat Journey immediately came to mind and the rest, as they say is history.

Shackleton had planned what he called the last great adventure, "To cross the Antarctic continent from one side to the other via the South Pole." During his 1908/9 expedition he marched to within one degree of the pole. Later Amundsen and then Scott had reached the pole, Scott and his companions perishing on their return along their outward track. Shackleton planned to cross from the Weddell sea to the Ross sea using food dumps that would be placed by a party marching south from the Ross sea. As we now know Shackleton's ship "Endurance" was crushed in the ice and the party never managed to get ashore. After about a year on the ice, the twenty eight men eventually managed to sail the three ship's boats to Elephant Island, off the North East of the Antarctic Peninsular. The only hope of rescue was to sail one of the boats the 800 miles to South Georgia to get help from the whaling fleet stationed there. They arrived at Stromness in May 1916. (See "SOUTH" - Ernest Shackleton and "SHACKLETON'S BOAT JOURNEY" - Frank Worsley, both in the C A Library)

The main objective of our expedition was to sail a "replica" of the "James Caird" from Elephant Island, to South Georgia a distance of about 800 miles. A secondary objective was to cross the mountains of South Georgia from King Haakon Bay to Stromness, following Sir Ernest Shackleton's route. The "replica" called the "Sir Ernest Shackleton" was a copy of the original hull shape and was rigged with a very similar sailing rig, of standing lug mizzen, dipping lug mainsail and a working jib, giving approximately the same sailing performance as the "James Caird". The interior and the decking of the boat however were totally different. A watertight deck was fitted in place of the canvas, packing cases and sledge runners that Shackleton had used. The rowing thwarts, which obstructed movement down below in the "James Caird" were left out and in their place watertight bulkheads were substituted to give structural strength. Bunks, navigation lights, a radio, batteries and a wind generator were also fitted. Half a ton of lead pigs were bolted below the cabin sole for ballast, rather than the stones that Shackleton



Going about

and his crew slept on. Originally we had planned to navigate by sextant but the thought of missing South Georgia in an engineless boat with doubtful windward ability was too frightening to contemplate seriously, and we borrowed a Magellan GPS. With a four hours on and four hours off watch pattern, the next twelve days tended to merge together into a long tiring cold slog. The lifeboat drogue had to be deployed for the first time on the 29th at 2000, after having been hove too for much of the day with NW force 7 which was impossible to beat into. The wind was up to the top end



Trevor at tiller (half way)

of a force 7 (at a guess) right on the nose and the seas were big and confused, we lay to the drogue for 23 hours and had made 3.3 miles according to the walker log. When we did get going at 1900 on 30th we had an easterly wind force 2/3 with a very confused sea, the wind eventually veered to a sw when we gybed at 0400 on the 31st. During the night we had a solitary seal playing around the log line, it was approximately 300 miles from the nearest land. Eventually at 1000 on the 31st we had to deploy the drogue again with a westerly force 8 it was a very uncomfortable day with a +3m swell fortunately the wind moderated back to a 2/3 after six hours when we could sail again but the swell had increased 5/6m which meant progress was slow and uncomfortable. During the early evening a school of about twenty hour glass dolphins (2m black with white markings in the shape of an hour glass) played around in the waves and showed us quite convincingly that they were in their element and we were most definitely not in ours. New years day dawned and we were flying along at 4/5 knots under full sail, surfing down a moderate 2m swell. During new years day the swell increased in size as the wind increased with frequent snow showers to about force 5/6, when we eventually progressively reefed down to three reefs in the main and one in the jib, with the mizzen down. The night of the 2nd of January was particularly bad with a very heavy but unseen swell in the dark, making life very uncomfortable.

There were frequent snow showers during the night making it very cold on deck with a fair amount of icy spray flying around, down below it was so incredibly bumpy and noisy sleep was impossible. On the 3rd of January we had to put the drogue out again in a southerly gale with very big seas up to 5m with breaking tops. During the evening a red ship was seen travelling south but we received no reply from the VHF (we found out later that it was not working owing to condensation inside). We managed to get the drogue up after only four hours when the wind moderated to a sw5 and sailed with reefed jib and mizzen in very steep broken seas. During the night it was again very, very noisy down below and extremely bumpy with the boat continually falling off waves or having broken waves surfing down both sides of the boat. For most of the voyage, conditions below were damp but not excessively cold (no ice), even though no heating was used. After a particularly cold night watch it was sometimes very difficult to get warm before turning out for the next watch four hours later.

The crew were not affected by seasickness, but the cramped fetid conditions sometimes made some of the crew a bit queasy especially at meal times. The largest waves encountered were 6/7m but that was only the occasional rogue, usually in a gale the main swell rarely rose above 4/5m. The cooking arrangements of a single burner camping stove set into a hole in the cabin sole, with a tubular metal surround for the pan were not interrupted at any time by the boat's motion. We were able to heat up tins of food for a hot meal at any time. As all the water had to be carried, very little dried food was taken, all the main meals were standard tins from the supermarket. We were surprised at the lack of sea mammal life observed during the passage, only seeing the occasional lone dolphin or seal away from land. Once or twice a fin was seen or at night a whale was heard blowing off. The one exception to this was a school of about twenty hourglass dolphins that played around the boat for a while.

Arrival at South Georgia

As we approached South Georgia we had had another rough night with very confused seas, with 5m waves coming at us from different angles. The sea had eventually died down a bit from the very steep and dangerous braking waves of the previous afternoon, when we were

lying to a sea anchor. It had been a very dark night, with total cloud cover making steering the boat even more difficult in the midst of the unseen monsters noisily crashing over the boat. We sighted the Willis Islands off the north west tip of South Georgia at 0600 on the 4th of January on our 11th day at sea. The snow clad tops rising majestically out of the mist about 30 miles away were our first sight of land for almost two weeks.

At first, as the dawn was breaking we could see a hazy white object on the horizon, in the distance it was impossible to tell whether it was the top of a snow capped mountain, a low flat cloud or a huge tabular iceberg. A cold shiver ran down my spine at the thought of an iceberg, was it a huge tabular ice sheet, miles away on the distant horizon, or worse, was it a much smaller flat topped berg, much closer? The view through the binoculars gave nothing away. If it was land it should be at least thirty miles away and no danger, but if it was ice we would need a large alteration of course to avoid it, if only it would get light soon. As the dawn slowly broke it became obvious that what we could see were the clouds over South Georgia with the reflection of the snow on the mountains making them look white, like icebergs. Eventually as it became fully light the dark mountains became discernible under their snowy caps. The GPS gave us a fix and just before 8am the course was altered from E, to ESE heading straight into King Haakon Bay, 33 miles away. Four hours later we were lying to a sea anchor in a severe WSW gale with a horizontal blizzard driving across the water. This new course meant that we were sailing along the wave troughs, with the waves beam onto the boat. It was a very uncomfortable and noisy point of sailing especially for Vic and Robert trying to get some sleep down below, at times we were rolling our gunwales under as the waves crashed against the side of the boat. The wind speed gradually increased over the next four hours with each successive snow squall until eventually it was blowing a full gale with a blizzard.

Driving the boat into these conditions was extremely cold wet work, it eventually became impossible to open the eyes in the driving snow. Ski goggles helped in the beginning but eventually the snow was so thick that the build up of wet snow on them made it impossible to see anything. With a rising 15ft cross sea, there was no hope of making our planned land fall at King Haakon Bay. The breaking waves would surely have capsized us. We could only lie to the sea anchor and drift slowly downwind hoping to keep stern on to the breaking seas. Relative peace returned but it was short lived, the drift was taking us onto a treacherous lee shore, where after about 10 hours we would be dashed onto the rocks of the Willis Islands. It was ironic that the weather had forced Shackleton to land on the exposed South coast of the island, now we were being forced, for our lives to avoid it. The next 10 hours were a dangerous balancing act with the drogue holding us stern to the breaking sea, the storm jib driving us on for steege and the rudder trying to force us at about 30 degrees from our natural but fatal drift angle.

This was the longest day of my life, eventually after a nerve wracking day we cleared the islands by half a mile, and managed to tuck in behind the land at about 2100 hrs. After a further seven hours of sailing along the more sheltered north coast in a rapidly dying wind, we rowed the



Trevor with drogue

last two miles in the dark, escorted by a small group of fur seals, into the shelter of Elsehul Bay about 10 miles from the Willis Islands. After 12 nights at sea the boat journey element of the expedition had almost come to an end. It was not quite Shackleton's route, he had landed on the exposed south west side of South Georgia at King Haakon Bay. The weather was against him, in his desperate attempt to get help for his stranded expedition. Ironically by force of weather we had landed on the sheltered north west side, that Shackleton had been heading for. At 4am we gently lowered the anchor to

a cacophony of night time chatter from a multitude of roosting seals, penguins and sea birds.

It was a very emotional moment when after two years of planning with many set backs and financial hardships we had finally realised our dream and re-sailed Shackleton's Boat Journey. Fortunately it was dark when Robert and I shook hands and the tears welling up in my eyes could not be seen. As the first light of dawn was breaking we tidied up the boat prior to our first "night" at anchor, when it started to snow heavily. We had to empty the boat of personal kit and pile it onto the deck, before we could get everyone down below to sleep. When we finally surfaced about 10 hours later all our personal kit was covered in a two inch layer of snow, subsequent day time temperature was 4C, we had arrived at South Georgia! Early the following morning we tuned into world service radio for the first time for over a week, hoping to hear the news.

Just as I switched on the announcer said "and now we go over to the London Boat Show". The very first item was a report of our expedition from the "James Caird" (Shackleton's original boat) which was on display at the show. We spent a wet, muddy day, walking round the beach area trying to dodge the vicious fur seals guarding their territory and harem. On the beach we found three tri pots used for rendering down seal blubber, as evidence of a previous more barbaric age.

The secondary objective of crossing the island on foot from King Haakon Bay to Stromness would now be difficult as the expedition would have to get back to King Haakon Bay to start the land journey. NW winds for the next few days prevented any attempt to sail back round the headland and it was decided to sail the 40 miles downwind to Stromness, Shackleton's eventual destination. We had been warned that it could be very dangerous to sail down the NW coast as an offshore wind of gale force coming off the glaciers could easily blow us out to sea. This may not appear so terrible except that our little boat was basically a converted rowing boat with no deep keel and only had a draft of 56cm (22"). It did not beat to windward very well and it may not have been possible to regain land if we had been blown far out to sea. As it happened we were becalmed for some of the first day and only covered 18 miles in 8 hours. We took the opportunity to sail into Sitka cove and anchored for the night with a line ashore onto a rocky outcrop. One of the biggest problems for coasting on South Georgia is the giant kelp which can be 20/30m long and so thick and dense it can stop a ship. We managed to slide over the top of much of it, but it was hard work, and anchoring in it was fraught with danger.

Eventually after another days sailing we tacked very slowly into Leith Harbour passing the British Antarctic Survey ship the "James Clark Ross" as she was coming out. We tried to talk to her on the VHF without any success (we still did not know our radio was not working) but we all waved. The Whaling Station at Leith Harbour is one of the largest and best preserved on South Georgia and we spent a fascinating day looking around. The wooden flensing plan used for dismembering the whales is still in a remarkable condition. Lying forlornly high and dry on the side of the plan were three small whale catchers tugs, complete with rusted engine and steel and lead ballast pigs. The row of 10' tall pressure vessels for cooking the oil from the bones is still intact underneath the plan, directly below the big bone saws on the top level. The meat packing plant is still identifiable with conveyor belts and freezing plant and generating plant. There were whole sheds full of shaped firebricks to fit the wide



Trevor in Shackleton's original bath at the Whaling Station Master's house, Stromness.

range of coal fired stoves that heated the buildings. Although the plant was Norwegian run, most of the heavy equipment was British made with instruction labels in English.

In the 1960's the plant was run by the Japanese for a few seasons and there were many handwritten Japanese labels pinned up alongside machinery or on the shelves in the store rooms. The whole place had a distinctly eerie air about it as it creaked and groaned in its death throes. Standing alone at the small windswept graveyard, with its rows of white cement headstones above the graves of British seamen and Norwegian whalers was a particularly ghostly experience. The shivers were not entirely due to the biting wind on the back of the neck. In some ways I would be very glad to move on, away from the final death throes of this barbaric settlement with its reminders of a very bloody industry. Yet it had the fascination of a time capsule and my morbid curiosity knew no bounds.

Two days later we set off to sail the 6 miles or so into Stromness to where Shackleton had staggered up to the Managers Villa in 1915. As we tacked about two miles against a biting wind whistling down the mountainside from the small glacier hanging above the station, disaster nearly struck - the captain was momentarily knocked out. Vicky was at the helm pretending that it was a race for the line at the end of the north sea race, Chris was in the cockpit trimming, Robert and Trevor were at the mast manhandling the dipping lug. Having been extremely safety conscious whilst at sea, now having a relaxed sail between harbours, no one was wearing a lifejacket or harness when the gaff was dropped onto Trevor's head. Just as Robert was lowering the sail and Trevor was undoing the tack, a gust of wind caught the gaff and it hit Trevor's head rather like a large baseball bat. With a flush deck, no guard-rails, water temperature of 1 C and an unconscious person over the side, the consequences could have been disastrous. Fortunately there was no blood and no visible damage other than a big lump. Trevor was very quiet for the rest of the day!

The next day was spent sorting out the mountaineering equipment ready for the attempt to reverse Shackleton's forced march across the mountains. Trevor, Robert and Chris set out with 30kg packs containing ropes, Ice axes, crampons and enough food for six days, with the intention of completing a double crossing of the mountains and glaciers, ending back in Stromness. Mild, very wet weather with open crevasses, deep wet-snow on the glaciers, and a threat of wet snow avalanches eventually beat us. This coupled with heavy packs laden with a weeks supply of food and a shortage of time, resulted in us retreating after two nights camped on the Fortuna Glacier and a further night camped in a cave on the beach in Fortuna Bay. While we were enjoying ourselves on the glacier Vicki cleaned the ship re-packed stores and generally looked after the boat. She also managed to moor the boat across the corner of the old jetty at Stromness to catch the katabatic wind from the mountains. The LVM wind generator then fully charged the batteries ready for us to send telexed reports back to the newspapers on the INMARSAT C communication system. The INMARSAT C was very useful and allowed us to keep more or less in constant touch with the UK by fax or telex. The main problem with it, was that it would not work if the battery was less than about 75% fully charged as it needed a surge of power to send messages.

Arrival at Grytviken

After the attempt on the mountain crossing and a visit to the BAS summer station at Husvik the expedition sailed to Grytviken to visit Sir Ernest Shackleton's grave. Here first contact was made with officialdom when a "visiting yacht" charge of £40 was levied! Contact was made with the Khlebnikov when it arrived but unfortunately there was no one onboard who could make a decision to carry us back to Port Stanley. A public holiday in America prevented any contact with the only person at Quark Expeditions Inc. who could make the decision and she sailed without us. Arrangements were made with the Oil Mariner which was re-supplying the King Edward point garrison to carry the boat back. HMS Newcastle on routine patrol, agreed, after consultation with the MOD to carry the four expedition members back to Port Stanley

THE DAILY MIRROR, Tuesday, December 5, 1916.

THE REAL CRUX OF THE POLITICAL SITUATION—See Page 2

The Daily Mirror

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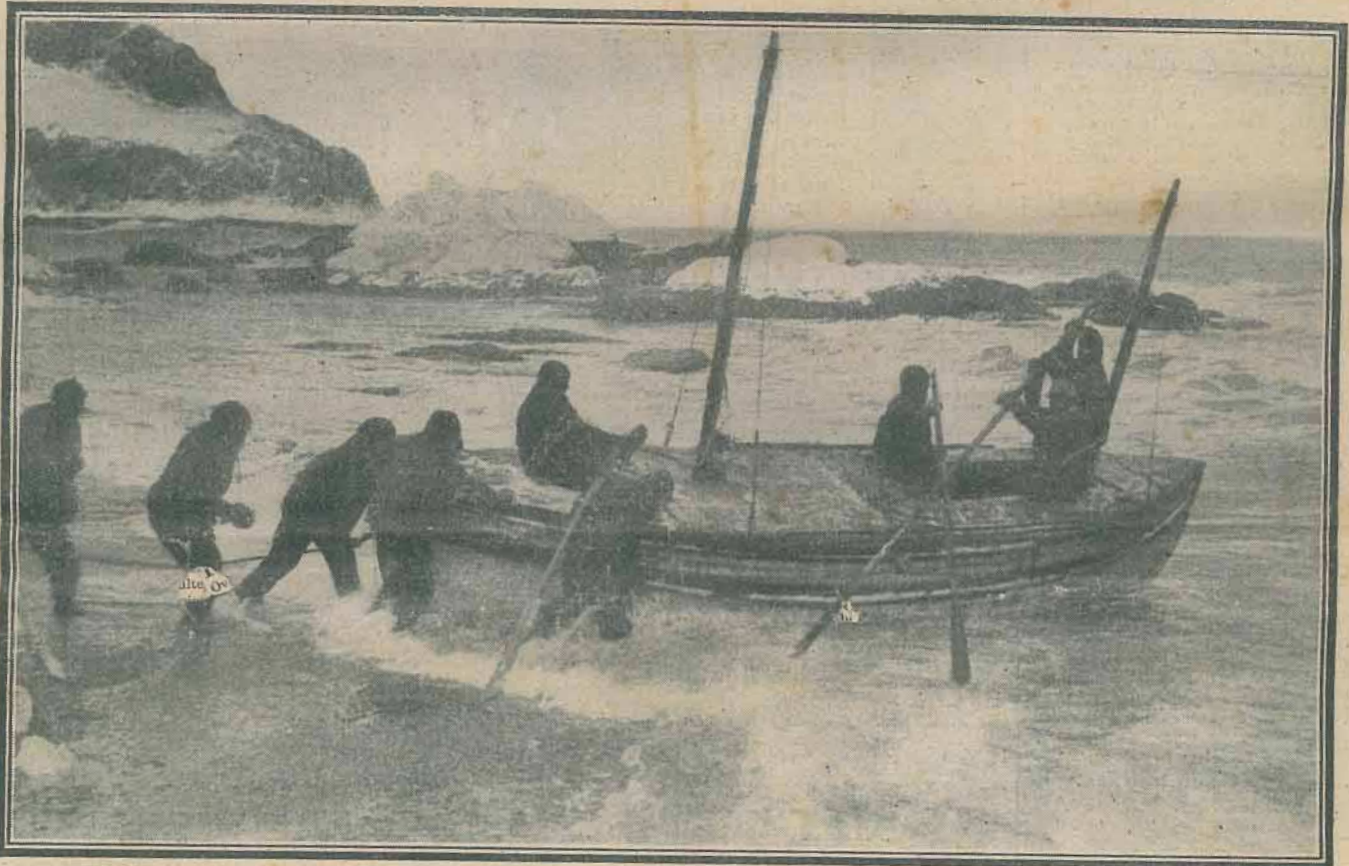
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TUESDAY, DECEMBER 5, 1916

One Halfpenny.

ONE OF THE MOST HEROIC RESCUES IN HISTORY: SIR ERNEST SHACKLETON'S 750-MILE VOYAGE IN A SMALL BOAT.



No writer of books of adventure has ever conceived such a wonderful story as that of Sir Ernest Shackleton's voyage across the Atlantic from Elephant Island to South Georgia. Four days after the expedition had landed he left in a small boat with five volunteers—Captain Worsley, Tom Crean, MacNish, Vincent and McCarthy—to seek aid for his comrades, and here the party are seen setting out on their perilous errand.

"We decked her with sledge runners, box lids, and canvas, and made her as seaworthy as we could, but she seemed a crazy craft in which to sail 750 miles through the ice and gales," said Mr. MacNish. They had to land on the wrong side of South Georgia, and Sir Ernest and two others marched to a whaling station over glaciers and across mountain ridges and snowfields. This is the first time the island has been crossed.



After being driven out of the ice hole, the party lived on this inhospitable spot on Elephant Island until rescued by Sir Ernest. In the background are glaciers from which avalanches were always threatening to break away and fill the bay and, by the

waves created, to sweep them off the spot. Here some of the explorers are seen skinning Gento penguins, their principal food for four and a half months. All the photographs of the expedition appearing in this issue are exclusive to *The Daily Mirror*.

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SAVED AT LAST! SIR ERNEST SHACKLETON RETURNS TO ELEPHANT ISLAND.



Fearing that the *Yelcho*, the Chilean Government steamer, might overlook the spot where they were sheltering, the men lit a smoke fire to attract attention, and conveyed to the water's edge the personal belongings which they had saved together with all records of the expedition, photographic plates, and cinematograph films.



Mr. Frank Wild, second in command. He has had a wide experience of Antarctic travel.



Mr. Frank Hurley, who took the wonderful photographs which are published exclusively in *The Daily Mirror* to-day.



Sir Ernest Shackleton, leader of the Imperial Transantarctic Expedition.

with other passengers from the garrison. A charge of £350 per person was levied with a further £350 for the boat, documents indemnifying the Navy were signed to this effect. During the passage back to the Falklands a signal was received by the Newcastle informing them that our boat could not now be carried back by the Oil Mariner for "operational reasons". Subsequent enquiries revealed that the Oil Mariner had space to carry the boat but were prevented from doing so because of this signal from the MOD.

Arrival at the Falkland Islands

During the week that the expedition was in the Falkland Islands waiting for the flight back to Brize Norton a number of attempts were made to find out what was happening to the boat, no one could tell us anything. One attempt was made to see the Governor but he was too busy to see us.

Arrival at Brize Norton

The team arrived back at RAF Brize Norton at 0630 on Sunday 30 January 1994. A press conference was arranged for 10am when interviews were given to the National Newspapers and the Press Association. On Monday 31 January there were reports in the Guardian, Telegraph and Times.

The Future

Nearly three thousand photographs were taken with six different cameras using a selection of lenses, also 7 hours of video tape were taken. There is plenty of material available to sponsors for publicity purposes. The main priority after the expedition has been to raise a further £15,000 to pay off the expeditions' debts. Much of this has been raised with the sale of photographs and video material. A major nautical book publisher has approached the expedition asking for discussions over the book rights. The video will be made into a 30 minute television documentary and a longer version will be available for sale. The boat arrived back in May through the generosity of an organisation who must remain nameless. The boat is now available for publicity purposes. The first booking was at the Wooden Boat Show at Greenwich on the first weekend in June when a number of slide shows were given.

Finally

The expedition could not have taken place without the support of a large number of people, who contributed much needed money and equipment but also the even larger number of people who contributed lots of time and energy in getting this project off the ground. Thanks also go to the very many people who offered advice and good wishes and finally a great debt is owed to family and friends for their continued support.

Crew

- *Skipper:* **Trevor Potts**
- *Navigator:* **Vic Brown**
- *Photographer:* **Robert Egelstaff**
- *Mountaineer:* **Chris Smith**

The "James Caird" is on permanent display at Dulwich College in South London, during term time it is usually possible to make arrangements with the college to see her.

"Sir Ernest Shackleton" was strip planked with 18mm Yellow Cedar and coated with epoxy resin and fibreglass. Length on deck 23' 10", Beam 6'6", sitting head room approximately 3', internal ballast 500 kg in 50 kg lead pigs. Sails by Hoods comprised of standing lug mizzen, dipping lug main, working jib, storm trysail and storm jib all of which were used at some stage. Paint was all supplied by International Paints Ltd. Waterproof were supplied by Splashdown and lifejackets by Crewsaver.

The main cash sponsors were the Gryphon Oil field Consortium, comprising of Aran Energy, Santa Fe, Clyde Petroleum and Kerr-Magee. Built by McNulty Traditional Boatbuilders of South Shields. For more information of her construction there is a four page photo article in issue No. 11 of the Boatman Magazine (Jan/Feb 1994)

Trevor went back to South Georgia in March 2000 as part of the Shackleton Memorial expedition and successfully completed the route Shackleton's party took from King Haakon Bay to Stromness, via the Trident Ridge and Breakwind ridge. In the spirit of Shackleton they completed the trek without skis, snow shoes or pulks. During the last 10 seasons Trevor has completed over sixty trips on various expedition cruise ships to the Antarctic Peninsula. At least 12 of these have included round trips to South Georgia and Elephant Island.

The replica of the James Caird is currently at Trevor's Croft Campsite on the Ardnamurchan Peninsula. Talks are underway with a view to the boat being donated to the newly refurbished Polar Museum at the Scott Polar Museum in Cambridge.

Trevor Potts November 2010



Trevor kneeling on top of 'Sir Ernest Shackleton'



In the Wake of
Shackleton
Expedition

Elephant Island to South Georgia

Please reply to: Trevor Potts; Expedition Leader

5 May, 1994

Mr. Harding McG Dunnett
4 The Close
Eliot Vale
Blackheath
London
SE3 0UR

Dear Harding,

Please find enclosed a copy of the May 1994 issue of the BOATMAN which has a ten page colour article giving details of the "In the Wake of Shackleton Expedition". Without the generous support of individuals like yourself expeditions like this would not be possible.

On behalf of all the expedition members please accept our grateful thanks for your support which did so much to enable the expedition to take place.

Your sincerely,

TREVOR POTTS
Expedition Leader.

COPIES TO:- Four Gryphon Companies, Zaz, Eddie Shackleton, Nick Barker, Andrew Harvey, Blashford Snell. I have two copies left which I may send to Gilkes, and Duncan Carse. Is there anyone I have forgotten? I asked the Boatman to send me 12 which they did at no charge. They are on the newstands at the larger John Menzies, W H Smiths etc and I am sure I could get some more complimentary copies from them when I see them at the Wooden Boat Show.

British Telecom are quite welcome to use the photographs free of charge for as long as they like. The expedition would like the originals back and would retain copywrite to use them or sell the use of them in the future to third parties.

In the Wake of Shackleton
Expedition Leader: Trevor Potts, 31 The Villas, St Mary's Stannington, Morpeth, Northumberland



The 'Sir Ernest Shackleton' stored at Kilchoan



Robert Egelstaff & Trevor Potts on 'Sir Ernest Shackleton'