

The William Scoresby, Oceanographic Expeditions and University College Hull

Modern whaling in the Antarctic commenced after Captain C.A. Larsen established a catching and processing station at Grytviken on the uninhabited sub-Antarctic island of South Georgia in 1904. Larsen's subsequent success encouraged more whalers to venture south, particularly as catches on the traditional North Atlantic whaling grounds were declining. Interest soon centred not only on South Georgia, where a string of whaling stations were eventually established, but also on the barren islands and archipelagos in the vast tracts of ocean further south that were soon effectively administered as part of the Falkland Islands Dependencies. The Antarctic whaling industry grew from almost nothing in 1904 to become the most productive on the planet in the 1920s and brought wealth to many of those who exploited the area. The British Government and the Governor of the Falkland Islands recognised the benefits that this enormous wealth, from a hitherto economically barren area, could contribute to reviving the Falkland Island's economy which had been languishing since the opening of the Panama Canal and the decline of sailing ship voyages around Cape Horn cut the number of vessels calling at Stanley for repairs and services.

However, even before the end of the Great War both the British Colonial Office and the Government of the Falkland Islands were very concerned about the numbers of whales that were being killed in the southern hemisphere and the effects this could have on the long-term viability of the whaling industry. There were calls for greater control of whaling but it was felt that much more research into the natural history of the whale needed to take place before effective regulation could be introduced. A report published in 1920 had called for the protection of the Southern Right Whale and further restrictions were also introduced in Falkland Island Dependencies and various initiatives were taken during the following few years. The work of the subsequent investigations was organized from 1923 by the Discovery Committee which included representatives of the Admiralty, Colonial Office, the Natural History Museum, Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries and the Royal Geographical Society. In response to the report of this Interdepartmental Committee, the Discovery Investigations were set up in 1925 to look into the biology and ecology of whales.

The money for the investigations had been taken from a fund raised from taxes levied on whaling exports from the Falkland Island Dependencies and on the whaling companies. It was decided that two vessels were needed to carry out the requisite oceanographic investigations and in 1923 Scott's old ship, *Discovery*, was purchased from the Hudson's Bay Company and rebuilt by Vosper's at Portsmouth. It was also agreed that the other vessel should be purpose built for working in the southern oceans but with a capability of working up to the edge of the ice. The vessel, designed by a firm of London naval architects, was described as part whale catcher, trawler and research laboratory. The contract to build the vessel was issued

by the Crown Agents and won by Cook, Welton and Gemmell of Beverley. She was named the *William Scoresby*.

The East Yorkshire firm had a reputation for building the finest of trawlers but found the specifications issued by the Crown Agents to be unclear. The work on the vessel proceeded slowly amidst disagreements and disputes between the shipyard and the Crown Agents but the vessel was eventually launched on the last day of December 1925 and floated down the River Hull for fitting out in Hull's Queen's Dock. Her triple expansion steam engines were built by Amos and Smith of Hull. Trials began on the 28th June 1926 and the vessel was handed over to her owners on the 14th June 1926. The disputes with the Crown Agents and the additional costs incurred by the builder pushed Cook, Welton and Gemmell into voluntary liquidation. However, the company was reformed after the Hull marine engineering firm of CD Holmes invested capital in the shipyard.

Whatever, the problems which had afflicted her construction, the *William Scoresby* proved a fine vessel. She had a powerful commercial winch and port side galleys which would allow her to tow a full sized otter trawl. She also possessed a sampling and sounding winch for oceanographic surveying together with a laboratory for carrying out scientific work on plankton and hydrology.

The *William Scoresby* sailed from Humber Dock on the 26th June 1926 and, after calling briefly at Brixham and Dartmouth for minor adjustments, she voyaged south to join up with the RRS *Discovery* at Cape Town on the 1st August 1926. At least two Hull men were in her crew on this, the first of her exploratory voyages: John Blanchard from Monmouth Street and Walter Baxter of Westbourne Avenue were both petty officers on the ship. The *William Scoresby* worked on *Discovery* Investigations, making seven voyages to Antarctica before being laid up through lack of funds in 1938. During these voyages she had marked about 3,000 whales and her work helped develop an understanding of their movement. She worked with the *Discovery* until the latter was replaced in 1929 by a specially built oceanographic research ship *Discovery II*.

The length of the *William Scoresby's* voyages was often around seven months in duration but some were much longer. When she returned to St Katherine's Dock, London in June 1930 she had been absent for two and a half years. During the course of that voyage she had pushed far into the ice pack and although rarely away from Stanley in the Falklands or Grytviken on South Georgia for more than six weeks she had worked in some arduous conditions, at one time being surrounded in an ice pack by over 2000 icebergs. During the course of this voyage she met with a succession of icebergs, one of them, over 150 miles long and eleven miles wide was then the largest then recorded.

During this voyage the *William Scoresby* also played an important role in the Second Wilkins-Hearst Antarctic Expedition, so called because it was led by Sir Humbert

Wilkins and financed in part by William Randolph Hearst, the US newspaper tycoon. Humbert had his two Lockheed planes from the first expedition still based at Deception Island and here they loaded one of these onto the *William Scoresby* and sailed just below the 67th parallel in an attempt to find somewhere suitable to take off for an attempted flight across Antarctica. They were unable to find a suitable place on the ice to take off with sufficient fuel to complete such a long flight but by fitting floats they were able to complete a number of successful flights in December 1929 and January 1930. On one of these flights in late December 1929, Humbert flew over an area until then known as Charcot Land but the flight revealed that the area was in fact a large island. Humbert duly dropped a flag and a document which claimed the land in the name of King George V. Such pioneering aerial endeavour, however, paved the way for the first successful flight across Antarctica later in the 1930s.

Following the Humbert interlude, the *William Scoresby* continued her survey and investigatory duties. A great deal of work was carried out marking and tracking whales, dredging oceanic seabeds and investigating all aspects of the oceans. During these years the work of the *William Scoresby* and her sister ships played a major role in extending the frontiers of knowledge particularly in the disciplines of oceanography and marine biology and the vessels also charted large sections of South Georgia whilst their discovery work in Antarctica contributed much to our knowledge of the continent.

In November 1930, a few months after returning from the Humbert voyage, the *William Scoresby* left London for the southern hemisphere once more and returned to the East India Docks in June 1932 after a further nineteen months of scientific investigations in the South Atlantic and on the West coast of South America. During this time she had carried out biological and hydrological work near South Georgia and the South Sandwich islands but finding the ice conditions to be favourable the vessel was able to extend observations as far as latitude 70 deg south. Later in 1931 she had undertaken a survey of the Humbolt Current on the west coast of South America, an area from which previously little precise knowledge had been obtained. The Humbolt Current and its contrary or opposing current, known as El Nino, plays, of course, a crucial role in the world's weather systems. Previously knowledge of the Humbolt Current had mainly been obtained from surface observations but the *William Scoresby*'s scientists obtained much new information on the physical characteristics of the water at different depths and on the associated marine fauna. Finally, the vessel also completed some of the survey work which she had begun during previous voyages on the trawling grounds in the vicinity of the Falkland Islands which were to prove invaluable in later years.

After the *William Scoresby* was laid up in 1938 she languished in St Katherine's Dock until requisitioned by the Admiralty in October 1939. She returned to the Falkland Islands as HMS *William Scoresby* in June 1940 and served in the area until 1943 when the vessel became part of Operation Tabarin and helped to establish

British bases throughout Antarctica. The vessel was released by the Admiralty in 1947 and underwent an extensive refit costing £11,900 in 1949-50. Her ownership was transferred to the newly formed National Institute of Oceanography which had taken over the role of the pre-war Discovery Committee. The *William Scoresby* sailed on her final ten month voyage which began with a preliminary survey of the Benguela Current off the west coast of Africa. Later, she called at Cape Town and Mauritius.

It was the old ship's final voyage of discovery and investigation. A further attempt to obtain official funds to recommission her failed and when a buyer could not be found it was decided to scrap the vessel. In 1954 the ship was sold to the British Iron and Steel Corporation and scrapped. Thus ended the illustrious career of the *William Scoresby*.

Although the work of the *William Scoresby* and the other Discovery Committee ships had not stopped the wholesale slaughter and destruction of many whaling stocks, the vessels had played a major part in increasing our knowledge of the world's oceans and paved the way for later conservation measures. Those who had carried out their investigations with these vessels were often to play a major part in extending our knowledge of the oceans. In 1924, for example, A.C. (later Sir Alister) Hardy was selected as Chief Zoologist on the Discovery on the first of the Discovery Expeditions. In later life, he was to write an account, *Great Waters*, of the expedition. He returned from the cruise of the *Discovery* and *William Scoresby* in 1927 with an enormous amount of data and brimful of ideas. Almost immediately, he obtained a post as the first Professor of Zoology at the newly formed University College of Hull. Here he initiated a first year and an honours Zoology course whilst embarking upon a unique research project based on his Continuous Plankton Recorder. This led to the opening of his 1931 Joint Department of Zoology and Oceanography.

Hardy remained at University College Hull throughout the 1930s and gradually extended his programme from the southern North Sea to Iceland and this continued until the war led to its closure. In 1942 he was appointed to the Regius Chair of Natural History at Aberdeen. He had an extremely distinguished career, later becoming Director of Field Studies Oxford. A deeply religious man, Hardy sought to bring about reconciliation between Darwin's theories of evolution and his own religious convictions. He died in Oxford in 1987.

The *William Scoresby* and its like have long ago gone to the scrapheap but the old *Discovery* still remains at Dundee and the legacy of scientific knowledge and investigation has endured and become ever more important to our world.

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