

# South Georgia Association Newsletter

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The Annual General Meeting will be on May 21, 2010.

## Ease for weary tourists

On Thursday 14 January, the Commissioner Mr Alan Huckle, on behalf of the South Georgia Association, handed over three handsome wooden benches to the South Georgia Museum. By happy coincidence our Secretary Fran Prince was visiting Grytviken while on the Albatross and Petrel Survey and could be part of the ceremony. It had been a rainy morning but the skies cleared just in time to dry the benches a little.

The benches were commissioned by the SGA in response to a suggestion that they would be a boon to cruise ship passengers waiting for a boat to return to their ship. They were designed and built by wooden boat builder Thies Matzen, who is currently living on his yacht *Wanderer III* at South Georgia. They are made of wood salvaged from the whaling station.



The benches are proving popular.



Mr Huckle, Fran, Ainslie and Thies taking a ceremonial first seat.

On behalf of the SGHT Ainslie Wilson, the museum manager, thanked the SGA for instigating the project and Thies for making such beautiful benches. She said they would be a huge asset to visiting passengers - not to mention the museum staff for sitting outside on fine days. We have since heard that both roles have been taken up enthusiastically.

## The AGM - Not to be missed!

### Mikhail Gorbachov - my part in his downfall

We are delighted to invite Caradoc 'Crag' Jones to talk about about his one-man efforts to control the might of the Soviet fishing fleet. Crag was despatched to King Edward Point in 1990 as the sole civilian to live with the military garrison and has returned there on many occasions. His 'Great Game', pitted against the Soviet Empire, was to re-establish civilian control of South Georgia's harbours and fisheries. The fleets needed to be licensed and regulated.

Many adventures both official and unofficial ensued. Crag happens to be a mountaineer and managed to conceal his glee and climbing equipment under hefty tomes of fisheries management and harbour law. Despite his seemingly impossible workload, he climbed Mt Paget as part of a two-man team. Should you need to know how to Arrest a Pirate, Hug an Albatross, Save an Elephant Seal from a Fate worse than Death, Exchange Rats for Beer and De-luxe your Snow Hole, then this lecture is not to be missed.

One civilian in the middle of 42 soldiers.



Managing Industrial Heritage  
SGHT Conference, 8-9 September 2011



One of the principal aims of the South Georgia Heritage Trust (SGHT) is to preserve, protect and promote an understanding of the historical heritage of South Georgia. With this in mind, SGHT is planning a two-day conference to be held at Verdant Works, Dundee, in September 2011 on the subject of Managing Industrial Heritage: South Georgia in Context.

The conference will be organised in co-operation with the SGA and the International

Committee for the Conservation of Industrial Heritage (TICCIH). The event will pick up on a recommendation, made at the SGA's The Future of South Georgia conference held in September 2003, that there should be 'a meeting to develop proposals for the protection, display and education of the cultural heritage of South Georgia'.

In addition to promoting a discussion that will focus on the industrial heritage of South Georgia, this event will hopefully inform future heritage strategy on South Georgia with respect to sites associated with whaling, sealing and maritime history. Sessions will explore aspects of recording, researching, interpreting and managing industrial heritage sites as well as the value of these sites as sources for research and locations of interest to tourists. Comparative perspectives from Svalbard and other remote locations will serve to set South Georgia in the wider context of industrial heritage research, protection and management.

A call for papers and further information will be circulated this summer and details will be available on the SGHT website: [www.sght.org](http://www.sght.org). Everyone at SGHT looks forward to welcoming SGA members to Dundee in 2011.

## Husvik Diaries

By Theoni Photopoulos

(In Newsletter no 10, April 2006, there is an account of work on the Husvik Villa that made it secure and more comfortable for research teams. This is an account of life there.)

Four of us, Dr Martin Biuw and Dr Aline Arriola Ortiz from the Norwegian Polar Institute and Dr Lars Boehme and me from the Sea Mammal Research Unit, University of St Andrews, spent six weeks in Husvik, from October to November 2009. This was the fourth and last fieldwork trip of the 'South Atlantic Variability Experiment' (SAVEX, see [www.st-andrews.ac.uk/~savex/](http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/~savex/)) to study the oceanography of the South Atlantic sector of the Southern Ocean by using elephant seals as 'research vessels'. We fix satellite tags on about 10 elephant seals each stay. The tags measure depth, water temperature, conductivity (=salinity) and time, and store the information until the seal surfaces and it can



*Cow elephant seal with her tag.  
Find another on Page 1!*

be transmitted to the Argos satellite.

This selection from my diary is a small window into life at Husvik.

Husvik, 6 October 2009

As I sit here typing, the most extraordinarily beautiful view is spread out before me. Today is our first day in Husvik, where we will spend the next six weeks. I have a room that looks out over the beach and it is probably one of the most spectacular views anyone could wake up to. Huge snowy mountains, the jetty of the old whaling station and the sound of southern elephant seals warming up for the breeding season.



*Husvik Villa in its heyday, about 1914. Second from left is Yngvar Thom who captained Southern Sky on the first attempt to rescue Shackleton's men from Elephant Island.*

We arrived here yesterday afternoon. After a brief stop at Bird Island, we started our last leg to Husvik on the *Pharos SG*. We quickly showered and did laundry while still on board because bathing and washing are rare events ashore.

My first view of Husvik was its rugged grey peaks disappearing into the cloud and fog, adorned with pretty patterns of white snow. Finally, it was time to go ashore. Many boat trips later, we waved goodbye to the *Pharos* and her crew. We started our trusty little Honda petrol generator, made our beds and settled down in the living room. A hot toddy celebrated a safe arrival with all our equipment and essentials for surviving six weeks of glorious isolation.

The house here is very homely and unique. It is the old whaling station manager's villa, and we live here with special permission from the SG Government. The villa has undergone considerable maintenance work in recent years, thanks to the South Georgia Heritage Trust, Øyas Venner (Friends of the Island) and many volunteers. It now has double-glazing in the lounge, which is heated by a gas panel-heater.

What a difference to when the villa was first used as a research base, back in 1986! The kitchen is also usually warm, but the rest of the house is rather nippy indeed. This is another reason why bathing is a weekly (or fortnightly!) ritual. Having a bath involves some premeditation. Step 1: don your wellies and fill two enormous kettles with water from the creek behind the house. Step 2: heave them onto the gas stove. Step 3: wait patiently for two hours while they heat up. Step 4: tip hot water into the bath and place kettles outside the bathroom for the next person to repeat Step 1. Step 5: wash and get your thermals back on as quickly as possible.

Today we spent the day sorting the food and putting it all



away. We even set up a 'fridge' - a metal drum which sits in the creek in front of the house, held down by some bricks. It is nice having a team of only four: I am used to having to cook for many more people while on fieldwork.

Husvik, 13 October 2009

Our first week has come and gone, and the villa has quickly become a comfortable home. We have had some absolutely spectacular weather, both good and bad. On the first calm day, we walked over to Carlita Bay to check on some seals. From here, we got a marvellous view of the Neumayer Glacier, whose scattered spawn floated in the still, glassy waters of Cumberland Bay West with effortlessly beautiful icy blueness. I have never seen a glacier before, and this one is, without a doubt, one of the most beautiful things I have ever set eyes on. As we sat having lunch, we could hear the deep rumbling groan of ice moving and subsiding within the glacier and the wind whistling its husky tune up in the peaks, while blowing plumes of fresh powder into the air.

On the way back, Husvik whaling station came into view in the distance across the flats, and the villa too as a little white speck. Fridays in Husvik are pizza day, so despite being tired from a long walk, the boys set to work making dough and digging out toppings, making tomato sauce for the base.

Husvik, 25 October 2009

We ran into the evening reindeer commute on the way home from 'work' today! Husvik is one of the few places on the island where you can find reindeer, and we often see them in big herds, especially in the afternoon or evening. Our route, from the main beach we work on to the villa, takes us straight through the middle of one of these reindeer highways.

Now Lars is resurrecting the wind generator, which fell over in yesterday's stiff breeze. The wind generator recharges the batteries that run our laptops. Out here, where we have a finite and limited supply of everything, wind power is free, inexhaustible and invaluable!



*Relaxing in the sunshine after a hard day.*

Luxury item on the menu tonight: two salads! Potato and red cabbage with carrot. We still have a lot of carrots, potatoes, swedes, beetroot, onions and cabbage, but the oranges and lemons are starting to dwindle, and the tomatoes are down to two. Luckily there are still plenty of apples.

Husvik, 11 November 2009

I usually write my diary entries by candlelight, once I am

tucked up in my sleeping bag and duvet, as there is no light in my room and the last person to bed gets to turn the generator off. Last night, I had to get up again as I realised I forgot to put the weight on top of the generator's housing. We always use the weight to stop the housing flying away, in case the wind picks up. It is especially important when it is blowing, like tonight. I always seem to forget when I am the one turning the generator off at bedtime. And then I have to get out of bed, sacrificing precious body heat, and go back outside, braving the elements. Luckily the generator is literally 6 metres from the back door. It's snowing now and blowing hard, still a southerly, and the barometer in the lounge says the pressure is dropping again.

Husvik, 16 November 2009

Today is a sad day - our last full day in Husvik. We are busy packing up, dismantling, sorting, listing, cleaning and organising. How quickly six weeks have gone. This is the last entry in my 'Husvik diary' of sorts but, with a lot of hard work and some luck, maybe I will return one day and enjoy it all over again. Until then, we leave the Husvik villa empty and ready for its next visitors, with only seals, penguins and reindeer for company. The stars are beautiful tonight. Orion is rising majestically out of the dark sea in the entrance to the bay. So many weeks, days and mornings later, it is time to say goodbye.

### **Scrimshaw coincidence**

Lyle Craigie-Halkett

During a particularly stormy day in Husvik in 1989, while conducting a survey to establish what hazardous substances, i.e. furnace fuel oil, asbestos etc., were to be dealt with the following year in a major clean-up, I was forced to take shelter in one of the derelict accommodation buildings.

I scrambled into the remains of the attic which still had a few sheets of corrugated iron covering it and noticed a dry pile of old clothing, books and papers. I rummaged through the pile hoping I might find a book or paper in English and in doing so tossed some heavy woollen socks aside, only to find they had something stuffed inside. It turned out to be two sketches: one of a whalecatcher towing a whale and the other much more detailed with a very busy whaling scene showing several whalecatchers at work and a factory vessel, buoyed-off whales, an ice floe with a few penguins and a fur seal on another.



After getting back on board *Endurance* I showed the two sketches to Nigel Bonner, who remarked that a previous Manager of Husvik was a well-established artist. These were



obviously not his work but more likely to be drawn by one of the whalers themselves. The signature at the bottom of one of the sketches was unknown to him or Rolf Casperson (ex chief engineer of Leith Harbour).

Two years ago at a maritime antiques auction near Salisbury, I was outbid on a sperm whale tooth with a 20th century scrimshaw whaling scene. It had the title 'Grytviken'. The winner was a Swedish dealer who was not interested in selling the tooth.



In 2009 my wife and I paid a visit to Portsmouth Dockyard and had a browse through the marine antiques store, where I discovered a scrimshawed tooth for sale also entitled 'Grytviken'. I quickly purchased the item for a reasonable price. I felt quite sure that, by some quirk of fate, it just might happen to be the ex-Salisbury auction tooth. I have since found out that the Swedish dealer has indeed sold his business and therefore it is possibly the same tooth.

The design of the scrimshaw looked rather familiar so, as I do with anything concerning whaling, I contacted the expert Klaus Barthelmeß. He promptly emailed me back to say 'It should look familiar because the scrimshaw was done by the same hand that had created those couple of sketches you sent me copies of'.

Klaus then quoted the name of the scrimshander as being Klaus Oscar Bjørndahl. He described him as a whale oil cooker at Husvik who unfortunately died there in 1956.

Klaus has images of other teeth scrimshawed by the same hand, and without doubt they have all the same characteristics. The signature on one of the sketches is misleading, as it would not appear to be Klaus Oscar Bjørndahl. I have tried several times over the years to see if this signature can be authenticated, but have not been successful. However it still seems like a great coincidence that the sketches and indeed the scrimshaw have finally come together again.

## South Georgia's Introduced Plants

Joanna Osborne

Looking back to last year, January 2009 saw a month-long survey of the introduced plants on South Georgia. The survey was carried out by a team of four Kew botanists: Renata Borosova, Marie Briggs, Stuart Cable and me working alongside two entomologists, Roger and Rosy Key, who surveyed for introduced invertebrates (see NL no 16). Our research base was the yacht *Seal* skippered by Hamish Laird, who took us around the island from Cape Rosa to Larsen Harbour. We visited 16 sites including popular tourist sites and many of the former whaling stations.



On board *Seal* pressing plants and taking DNA samples.

The survey yielded some interesting results. We recorded 24 introduced plant species overall, including one grass, *Trisetum spicatum* which had not previously been recorded on South Georgia. The introduced species show different patterns of adaptation to South Georgian habitats. Some, such as annual meadow grass *Poa annua*, have colonised rapidly and are now widespread around much of the island.

Others, such as cow parsley *Anthriscus sylvestris*, have persisted in one spot for many years but show recent signs of thriving, setting seed and increasing their populations. Changes like this are of particular cause for concern in the light of increasing summer temperatures on South Georgia. With warmer summers, introduced species that have not spread in the past may now start to produce viable seed and become invasive.

The last comprehensive study of introduced plants on the island was published in 1973 by David Walton and Ron Lewis-Smith. At that time 51 introduced species had been recorded on South Georgia. Some of these did not survive for long, such as potato *Solanum tuberosum* and caraway *Carum carvi* that were deliberately introduced for cultivation. Since 1973 a further 11 introduced plants have been recorded. Most recently, the wavy-leaved bittercress *Cardamine flexuosa* was accidentally introduced during building works at King Edward Point in 2000.

Following the survey we have recommended the eradication of all introduced plant species on South Georgia, though we recognise that some species are now so widespread that this would be impractical. However, there are a good number of introduced species for which timely intervention could prevent further spread. Some of these are currently restricted to small populations in Grytviken and should be fairly easy to remove manually by digging out. Of





Recording plants in a quadrat on Hestesletten.

the 24 introduced species recorded in 2009, those that appear to be spreading rapidly, either by seed or vegetative means (e.g. creeping rhizomes), should be the priority for eradication. We recognise the following seven introduced species as the top priority for eradication:

**Common bent *Agrostis capillaries*** - This grass is highly invasive in South Georgia's native grassland, herbfield and bog vegetation and is widespread at Grytviken, Ocean Harbour and Husvik. It spreads by creeping rhizomes and forms conspicuous, dense, bright green patches out-competing and displacing the native vegetation.



A bright patch of common bent stands out against the native vegetation.

**Cow parsley *Anthriscus sylvestris*** - At Grytviken a single plant of this species was first recorded in 1967 and persisted in the whaling station for several years, flowering each year but not setting seed. In 1995 it was noted that this plant had become more established, forming a group of several distinct plants. In 2009 we found population of three mature plants and numerous seedlings spreading along the edge of the former barracks' kitchens. This species is clearly producing viable seed and could potentially become invasive on South Georgia.

**Wavy-leaved bittercress *Cardamine flexuosa*** - This small herb was accidentally introduced during building works at King Edward Point in 2000. Since then it has spread rapidly around King Edward Point and to Hope Point and has now also been found on the south side of King Edward Cove.

It's a very successful plant, flowering and fruiting prolifically, producing large quantities of viable seed that is easily dispersed by humans and wildlife. Attempts to control this plant by spraying with herbicides and manual weeding began in 2004 and are ongoing.

**Creeping buttercup *Ranunculus repens*** - This well known yellow-flowered herb currently has a restricted distribution on South Georgia, occurring around the whaling stations at Grytviken and Prince Olav Harbour. However, it has become more abundant since previous records and may be producing viable seed. In the UK this plant occurs in wet grassland, streamsides and marshes and is also a successful weed on disturbed ground. There is likely to be a large area of suitable habitat on South Georgia and therefore creeping buttercup has a high invasive potential.

**Sheep's sorrel *Rumex acetosella*** - This herb is invasive and thriving at Husvik, Grytviken and Ocean Harbour, particularly in well-drained grassland and fell-field. It spreads by creeping rhizomes forming large patches spreading through the native vegetation. The patches are conspicuous in flower as it has dark red inflorescences. Numerous smaller patches recorded in 2009 suggest that it may be setting viable seed.



**Procumbent pearlwort *Sagina procumbens*** - This small, mat-forming plant is a well known weed of paths and gardens. In 2009 numerous patches were found within the whaling station at Grytviken. The population has clearly increased and spread since the 1970s and appears to be producing viable seed.

**Thyme-leaved speedwell *Veronica serpyllifolia*** - This small herb was found at Grytviken during the 2009 survey and like *Sagina procumbens* above, the population has increased and spread since the 1970s. As this herb grows well on dry gravel there are numerous areas of suitable habitat on South Georgia and it would be advisable to remove it while it still has a restricted distribution.



The survey was undertaken as part of the South Atlantic Invasive Species Project (SAISP), co-ordinated by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and funded by the European Commission through EDF-9.

The full survey report can be downloaded from [www.kew.org/gis/downloads/South\\_Georgia\\_Introduces\\_Vascular\\_Plants\\_2009.pdf](http://www.kew.org/gis/downloads/South_Georgia_Introduces_Vascular_Plants_2009.pdf)

## Sailing to South Georgia

Bob Burton

I told my wife that Bruce Pearson had phoned to say he was taking up Skip Novak's special deal on a cruise to South Georgia in his yacht *Pelagic australis*. 'Why didn't you go with him?' I could not think of a reason why not. And neither could my GP. So I went. And never regretted the decision.

I visit South Georgia every year in a large, luxury cruise ship fitted with stabilisers, so there were times when I questioned why I should be sailing there in a small yacht. There is a huge difference - in the latter's favour. The wildlife and scenery are the same but, with only a dozen on board, it is an intimate experience. We also had a better opportunity to pick our landing places and then explore at will (or sit and enjoy the atmosphere). Even sailing along the coast of the island was different because we were so close to the waves and the cape petrels were gliding around the boat almost close enough to reach out and touch. In early November there was still plenty of snow so the scenery was even more dramatic.



*The incomparable coastline of South Georgia.*

Our first landing was at Grytviken although we first stopped off near the snout of the Nordenskjöld Glacier to unload Skip, Julian Attwood and Crag Jones for their attempt on Mount Nordenskjöld. For an account of the epic, but unsuccessful, climb and even more epic, but luckily successful, descent, go to [http://www.pelagic.co.uk/masterframe\\_programme.htm](http://www.pelagic.co.uk/masterframe_programme.htm) and click on the link 'Click here to go to the full story>>' halfway down the page.

There cannot be many yacht berths no more than 100 m from a museum and we were made very welcome by Elsa, Ainslie and the South Georgia Museum team. (The newly-installed replica of *James Caird* emphasised the comfort we were enjoying on *Pelagic australis*.) Only 1 km farther around the cove, King Edward Point offered more hospitality.

Of the eight SGA members and friends, four of us, Bruce Pearson, Bruce2 Mair, Les Sturgeon and I, had worked on South Georgia for BAS in the 1970s, while John Alexander had, incredibly, worked for Salvesen's at Leith Harbour in the 1950s and early 60s. John was able to see his old home (from outside the 200m safety limit), but Bruce P and I were unable to visit Bird Island and Bruce2 was unable to climb the eponymous Mt Mair. But there was plenty more we could do.

For Bruce P, busy painting everything in sight, one of the highlights was the light-mantled sooty albatrosses. At this

time of year, these albatrosses had not yet laid their eggs and everywhere we looked pairs were performing their 'synchronised flying' displays along the cliffs or courting on the nest ledges and uttering the pee-ooo call that is so evocative of South Georgia.



*Studies of a light-mantled sooty albatross from Bruce's sketchbook.*

I was delighted to get to Larsen Harbour. It is a beautiful spot and at this time of year it is the home of the most northern breeding colony of Weddell seals, my favourite seals with friendly faces. The strange whistles of the bulls were audible inside the hull of the yacht. It was a sound I heard when I wintered in Antarctica in the 1960s and I never thought I would have the chance to hear it again.

The others had more physical aspirations. Bruce2 and Les had brought skis and were able to ski the 'Shackleton walk' from Fortuna Bay to Stromness, while David Maclean and Philip Sanders were keen to go camping. Well, it was an experience for them. They got wet the first time and blown away the second! John was happy to wallow in nostalgia and, with his fellow Dundonian Stewart Dodd, take as many photos as possible.

So we all had a marvellous time. Maybe the most magical moment for everyone was the morning we departed. We had spent the night at Rosita Harbour and the overnight snow had formed white pancakes on the flat-calm water. A leopard seal spent half an hour inspecting *Pelagic australis* at such close quarters that we could watch her swimming underwater. Even the return passage to Stanley was enlivened by tabular icebergs and dolphins. And it is worth coming a long way for breakfast at the Seaman's Mission. See below.





## Another SGA cruise on Pelagic Australis

Skip Novak

Envious of Bob and friends? Following the success of their expedition cruise last year, Pelagic Expeditions is again making a special offer to the SGA. One of the reasons I am making this offer is because it worked so well for both sides. It was very satisfying to take people who were passionate about South Georgia and knew exactly why they were going!

The 28 day voyage begins and ends in Stanley, coinciding with the weekly flight via Santiago. The start date is Saturday 9 October and end date is 6 November. In view of sailing time to and from the island, we expect to spend roughly 16 - 18 days at South Georgia, spending quality time ashore.

Take note, this adventure is entirely different from being on a cruise ship. Not to mention that you might have to volunteer to cook and do the dishes occasionally.....Rather than a fixed schedule, our the itinerary will be roughed out according to the wishes of the guests as much as possible, which might include ski-touring and trekking, with or without nights ashore. Plus several days at Grytviken and KEP to really annoy the museum and base personnel by cadging cups of tea and trawling for local gossip.

Fitness requirements are not age-related but, to appreciate the full value, guests must be agile enough to get in and out of a Zodiac and amble around on shore. They must also be able to hold a wine glass upright.

*Pelagic Australis* is a 23 m aluminum sailing vessel well known in Antarctic waters. It was certified for passengers by the MCA (Marine Coastguard Agency) in the UK and was built to certification by DNV (Det Norske Veritas). She can accommodate eight guests in comfort and carries a professional crew of three or four. Guests are supplied with all safety equipment and Sail Racing Goretex foul weather gear (a major expense otherwise).



The special price is a 50% reduction of our normal price of 12,000 Euros individually booked, to 6,000.00 Euros. It can be paid in a GBP equivalent negotiated on the due dates of three stage payments. This price is 'all found' once on board and includes food, wine and beer (BYO hard stuff) and the SG landing fee. Those wishing to spend nights ashore will have to apply and pay the Expedition Application fee of 500 GBP.

For details of our generic South Georgia cruise and *Pelagic Australis*, please to go [www.pelagic.co.uk](http://www.pelagic.co.uk) and access the October 2010 trip description in the Programmes Menu. The News Archive has the expedition report. Contact Skip Novak direct on [skipnovak@pelagic.co.uk](mailto:skipnovak@pelagic.co.uk)

No time to lose on this one.....

## Whirlwinds at South Georgia

Alan Beattie

I am hoping that some members of the SGA will remember fondly the orange-painted Whirlwinds which between 1955 and 1976 operated from HMS *Protector* and HMS *Endurance*. You may not be aware that you can rekindle these memories with a visit to AeroVenture at Doncaster.

In the hangar, on the former site of WWII RAF Doncaster, is XA870 a Westland Whirlwind Mk1. It was aboard HMS *Protector* in 1955/56, the first year helicopters went to Antarctica.

The Volunteers of the Yorkshire Helicopter Preservation Group have lovingly restored it in the orange and black colour scheme with the markings carried on this first trip. Also at the Museum is XN386 which was aboard HMS *Endurance* 1975/76, the last time Whirlwinds were taken South. The later Mk 9 with a 1050 hp lightweight Gnome turbine engine was far superior to the old Mk 1 with her heavy 650 hp piston engine.

YHPG's current restoration project is XN386. It will take several years to deal with the corrosion and damage suffered over the last 25 years of languishing in fields and elsewhere.

As well as the physical restoration we are very keen to put together the story behind these old machines and would welcome photographs, anecdotes and any other assistance you can give. XN386 has a permanent reminder of her visit to South Georgia: a stencilled seal surmounted by 'S. GEORGIA .76'. I wonder if anyone remembers that visit.

If you think you can help, please contact me: Alan Beattie, Yorkshire Helicopter Preservation Group, 18 Marshall Drive, Pickering YO18 7JT

Tel 01751-473180 email [alan@yhpg.co.uk](mailto:alan@yhpg.co.uk)

[www.helicopter-preservation-yhpg.co.uk](http://www.helicopter-preservation-yhpg.co.uk) with links to the Museum and other websites.

A visit to the museum is recommended. AeroVenture is at Dakota Way, Doncaster Leisure Park, Doncaster, DN4 7FB Tel 01302-761616 Open 10.00 to 17.00 (16.00 in winter) Wednesday to Sunday inclusive.



*A Whirlwind at KEP in the early 1960s.*

*Another Whirlwind landing on Bird Island in the 1970s.*



## The exotic mammals of South Georgia

Bob Headland

With all the discussion of the forthcoming rat eradication campaign, I have been interested in the exotic, or alien, mammals of South Georgia. Currently there are only three species extant (common rat, reindeer, and house mouse) but, over the decades, dogs, cats, sheep, pigs, cattle, horses, goats, foxes, rabbits and at least one monkey have been present, making a total of 14 species of mammal. None of the other peri-Antarctic islands has had more. Rats, mice and reindeer are well-known. This note describes the other mammals.

Working cats travelled aboard many sealers' vessels and they were often kept by whalers. They lived in most whaling stations and at King Edward Point where the last died in the 1980 winter. Few cats are known to have bred outside human habitation although several ranged as far as 5 km from houses in summer and in winter (I have seen cat tracks in the snow as far as Maiviken). Most resorted to the human habitations for winter. I suspect there was a great danger of feral populations becoming established and that the disasters experienced on other islands were very narrowly missed on South Georgia. Cats became pestilential on Marion Island and Macquarie Island where expensive eradication campaigns have ultimately been successful.

Domestic and sledge dogs have regularly been ashore from the days of the early sealers. The earliest record I have



found is in 1800 when one came ashore from the Nantucket vessel, *Ranger*.

James Weddell visited in 1823 and reported about albatrosses "They have great power in

their beaks, and, when on the nest, I have observed them defend themselves for half an hour against an active dog." Robert Cushman Murphy mentions the presence of a bitch aboard *Daisy* in 1911-12 and several photographs show dogs during the whaling period from 1904 to 1965. Wilhelm Filchner's expedition aboard *Deutschland* left sledge dogs ashore but it was reported they became so wild that they were destroyed. Sir Ernest Shackleton's *Endurance* expedition used the time at South Georgia to fatten sledge dogs on whale meat in 1914 (and was disappointed not to find any left by Filchner). There are accounts of a variety of breeding curs from the whaling fleet accumulating at stations; these occasionally required organization of a 'dog-shoot'. The last resident dog died at King Edward Point in 1974.

An unsuccessful attempt to breed fur fox (Arctic fox) was made at Grytviken in 1939. The foxes were fed on the abundant whale meat. Their accommodation was unfavourable for breeding they failed to thrive. The industry was abandoned by 1945 and few exports of fox pelts are recorded. In 1977 a few fox cages remained at the site of the 'fox farm' near the whalers' cemetery.



Pigs were introduced by sealers and whalers. Most whaling stations had several dozen in heated piggeries (the remains of these buildings are found in all the stations). They flourished on a diet of whale products but few survived to form winter breeding stock for the next summer. Imports, mainly from South America, were an annual event for over half a century. (It was said that large sausages of bacon, pork fat, whale meat, and herbs were regarded as delicious by some - although this was an acquired taste.)

Horses and ponies have been introduced on at least three occasions. In 1905 Ernest Swinhoe aboard *Consort* brought three mares and a stallion. Wilhelm Filchner in 1911 landed Manchurian ponies. They produced several foals which grazed on Hestesletten (= horse plain). Lauritz Larsen kept a horse at Ocean Harbour whaling station and another is known to have been kept at Husvik.



*The horse that pulled coal trucks at Ocean Harbour.*

Cattle, sheep, and, to a lesser extent, goats were similarly kept at the whaling stations. The earliest introductions were in 1882 when the German contingent of the first International Polar Year Expedition introduced three cattle, 17 sheep, and nine goats when they established a station at Royal Bay. At whaling stations sheep, in particular, were left to graze wild. Near Grytviken 17 ewes with lambs were present in 1905, from *Consort*. Captain Larsen was thanked by Wilhelm Filchner in 1912 when he gave him 'two steers, two pigs and two sheep'. Barbed-wire fences confined them



to the vicinity of the whaling stations, such as that on the hillside south of the football pitch at Grytviken. A sheep became famous by surviving several winters in the wild near Prince Olav Harbour in the 1930s. The whalers' name for King Edward Point was Sauodden (= sheep point) and early photographs show them grazing there.

Introductions of rabbits were made on several occasions. None, fortunately, became established, although some rabbits bred outside for several few years; it was a very near miss. The earliest example is said to be when rabbits were brought by a sealer from Tristan da Cunha in 1872. Whalers made later introductions near Grytviken (Hope Point), Husvik (Kanin Bay, kanin is rabbit in Norwegian) and Stromness (Grass Island) during the early decades of the last century. Rabbits have become pestilential on Iles Kerguelen and Macquarie Island, and were recently exterminated from the Auckland Islands.

At least one monkey lived briefly on the island. A photograph, taken by the magistrate Edward Binnie in 1914, shows it up a flag pole. Owned by the medical officer at Husvik, it appears to be a vervet monkey, an African species probably sold as a pet in Cape Town (identified by the primatologist Professor Colin Groves). It is possible other monkeys were introduced, especially as a more recent monkey jaw was found in Grytviken in 1980. Cages found in Grytviken and elsewhere appear to be for parrots, but at least one held a monkey which was photographed inside it (although it is insufficiently clear for identification).



There is a mystery animal (above) in a photograph taken about 1925. It is a fox with a collar and chain, photographed in a whalers' cabin at Grytviken. Identification is not yet confirmed but it appears to be a European red fox rather than one of the American species.

At various times introductions of mink, musquash and bighorn sheep and even muskox have been suggested. Luckily wiser counsel prevailed.

## Express delivery

Mail takes several weeks to travel the 12,000 km to South Georgia but postmistress Sarah Lurcock is now equipped to carry it the last few hundred metres at an accelerated rate.



## A lousy job for a teenager

Robert Kennedy

When I reached my 17th birthday, my father, a former Royal Navy man, encouraged me to 'See the World' and join the Merchant Navy. After three months training at Sharpness in the training ship *Vindicatrix*, I made my maiden voyage on the *Captain Cook* that carried around 1,500 emigrants, known as '£10 Poms' by the Australians and New Zealanders. The voyage took 3 months and a day.

My second voyage was on SS *Southern Garden*, a ship Salvesen's used to transport men, stores and oil. It was berthed at Stobcross Quay in Glasgow and such was my naivety that I thought that we were heading for the USA until the Pool Officer told me where South Georgia was. It was certainly an unusually steep learning curve for a young man! My first memory of the whaling business was walking down the gangway to be met by a sailor who had an extraordinary black bushy beard down to his chest. This was uncommon around Glasgow but as I learned weeks later it was very common at South Georgia.

We sailed from the Clyde in late 1958 with a full load of whalers destined for South Georgia to commence the Summer Season. We had catcher crews, flensers, cooks, production workers and launch men. Indeed, the *Garden*, with *Southern Opal*, was Salvesen's main supply vessel, carrying staff to and from the island and returning with products of the whaling season.

On leaving the Clyde we traversed to Caripito Venezuela where our tanks were filled with fuel oil. The ship's bosun informed me this was oil for the whalers and shore generators.

Still only 17 years old, I got the fright of my life entering the Roaring Forties where I was convinced the ship would keel over with mountainous seas engulfing her. She was rolling over at least 45 degrees and shooting into the air like a rocket. That stretch of ocean is well named, as all voyagers to the South Atlantic can attest.

Finally we arrived at Leith Harbour and anchored for the



*Southern Satellite and Southern Garden at Leith Harbour.*

night. Through the porthole shore lights were winking away just like a small town. In the morning anchor was raised and Captain James Ross (I still have his signature) slowly took the *Garden* into Leith Harbour and steered the ship alongside *Southern Opal* which was already there. Gangways were placed between *Opal* and *Garden* and we stayed there until April 1958.

My first impression of the whaling station was the pungent smell of whale. We got used to it, of course, but it never left. The buildings were blackened by the smoke emanating from chimneys.

Scattered around the bay were dead whales with identification flags in their backs. Catchers with their prominent gun platform were tied up, some at anchor. The station was a hive of activity. Launches were towing whales by their enormous tails to the plan, where steel cables dragged them up the slipway. I was fascinated to see the flensers cutting out footholds on the whales to climb on their backs and commencing dissection of the unfortunate mammals. The factory ships *Southern Harvester* and *Southern Venturer* would also anchor in the bay so there were three slipways in action all the time. Little wonder the 'Save The Whale' campaign came into being.



*The view from the ship.*

As deck crew of the *Southern Garden* we had a terrible task no-one had mentioned. After the Venezuelan oil had been discharged into shore tanks, the Butterworth system of cleaning ships' tanks took place. Thick pipes with three revolving nozzles blew high-pressure steam to clean away as much oil as possible. Then the deck crew had to descend into the tanks, erect scaffolding and commence hand-cleaning every inch of the surface. We had noticed hundreds of bales of soft cloths coming onboard at Glasgow but

thought nothing of it until we found ourselves using the cloths to wipe down the steel plates. A Health and Safety officer ensured we did a good job. It was an awful task but it was essential to prevent contamination of the whale oil that would fill the tanks.

Years later on telling my father, he said: 'That was super: learning discipline and attention to detail'. But spending weeks down tanks, cleaning decks, bulkheads and deck-heads, was Purgatory at the time. But now with seven grandchildren I can tell them the same thing. It is easy to give up in adversity: perseverance will bring its own reward. Thanks to experiences such as this time at South Georgia I went on to become Superintendent Head of Operations West Scotland for Group 4 Security.

I recall wandering around Leith Harbour and Stromness when on off-duty. The gigantic overhead rocky outcrop was always subject of speculation. When will it tumble down? But it had been there for a million years and is probably still there. I took great interest in the wildlife and would sit for hours watching the penguin rookeries and the seal colonies where the bull elephant seals battled to defend their harems. I etched my name on the naval gun facing out to sea on Hansen Point near the whaling station.

My ancient Seaman's Discharge Book R690831 shows that I had joined on 26 September 1958 at Glasgow and signed off on 4 April 1959 at Tilbury. The latter date is memorable because I had to say goodbye to countless dozens of various breeds of penguins which had accompanied us from the Island. Salvesen's were exploiting every source of revenue as well as whale products!

I went on to sail on a total of 24 different types of ships to nearly every major country. But South Georgia always has a special place in my heart. Such was the magic of the South Atlantic Island.

### **Sleep-over at Leith Harbour**

Ron Lewis-Smith

Leith Harbour was by far the largest of South Georgia's whaling stations. I was there in 1964 for a day just before the Japanese enterprise ceased. It was then a hive of activity with steam and smoke shrouding the buildings and Japanese flensers busy dissecting a couple of whales on the plan.

A few years later Leith Harbour was abandoned – silent and forlorn. The shelves in Salvesen's office still were stacked with all the record books going back to the start of the station's activities, ships' logs, details of personnel – everything in place, just as they had been left. A few years



*Leith Harbour in 1964.*



after that the buildings had been ransacked by marauding crews of Russian fishery ships (aided by a few BAS ship visits). In 1981 Pete Witty, David Wynn-Williams, Tim Heilbron and I were taken from KEP to Leith on a French yacht and we stayed in the Villa above the offices, still very comfortable despite the unhygienic activities of previous visitors. I can never understand why wreckers of havoc want to advertise themselves by name! Then, the chart room above one of the huge store buildings still housed shelves of hydrographic charts of the Southern Ocean, early plans of the station and rows of nautical books, including Antarctic and South African Pilots (all had disappeared 10 years later), and stacks of beautiful leather chart cases.

In 1992 I was working from the Villa at Husvik, the temporary base for the terrestrial biology programme on the island (after eviction from KEP by the military following General Galtieri's little sortie to South Georgia). I took a few days' R&R and, as everyone else was deeply ensconced in their own work, I made a solo trip to Stromness and Leith to continue my long-running survey of alien plants.

The night in the Stromness Manager's Villa was uneventful and I continued the following day to Leith, via Tønsberg Point and the huge sea cave there. By now Leith was a sad sight, totally dereliction, made worse by the activities of Davidov's earlier retrieval of heavy plant and all manner of scrap metal which was still piled high on the plan. It was a veritable ghost town, with creaking sheets of corrugated iron on high rooftops, swinging steel hawsers clanging against high poles and doors squeaking on rusted hinges.



*Ruins of a once-thriving industry.*

Most buildings were still largely intact, the most notable being the vast guano shed at the south end of the station – big enough to house two football pitches and a good audience. Considering there had been a major clean-up, especially of hazardous materials, several years earlier, I was amazed at the quantity of lethal substances remaining in the chemistry laboratory and fully stocked hospital dispensary. In several of the barracks I was intrigued by the number of whalers' names, addresses and dates on the island written inside lockers and cupboards, as well as in the gun hut. I noted all I could find, as well as those at Stromness, most belonging to men from Lewis and other northern islands, between the late 1940s and 1961. As for the aliens, there were plenty of these too, both plant and animal. It is the animal that made the greatest impression.

My enduring memory of the visit was my night in one of the sheds that the military presence had designated for accommodation. There was an ex-whaler's metal-framed, wire-sprung bed on which I was to spend the night. I just managed to find my way about in this hovel before darkness



*Davidoff's scrapheap.*

set in and I had to fumble about in the light of a candle. A meal was quickly cooked over the primus and devoured even faster. After a stiff nightcap I turned in early, probably the earliest since I was a pre-teenager. Dropping off to sleep was difficult with all the eerie sounds from outside, not helped by the shadows cast by my flickering candle, which eventually snuffed it. The hours that followed were the weirdest I have ever encountered. In a semi-conscious state I was having surrealistic dreams which incorporated strange sounds. I soon realised that these were, in fact, real – the scratching and scurrings of rats in the room above my abode. Later they seemed nearer, as in below the room above. The noises were everywhere, even in or on the walls. Then there was a rustling of paper and I quickly realised the rodents were inside my rucksack devouring my breakfast. After some stern words to my uninvited guests I dropped off into an uneasy sleep.

Some time later, I was aware of a movement on my sleeping bag, but that was incorporated into some dream. As the fantasy wore on I unwittingly put my hand out and grasped a huge (or so it seemed) furry object that squirmed itself free and disappeared uttering loud squeaking noises. That caused a minor panic amongst the gathering throng, followed by a chaotic scrambling of tiny feet in all directions. Suddenly, all was silent, although I was sure that could see lots of beady eyes staring at me as the first glimmer of day penetrated the small window.

Daybreak and breakfast, or what was left of it, could not come quick enough.

### **The last match at Leith Harbour Reindeer vs Gentoos**



## The loo with a view

Ewan Edwards

According to Sir David Attenborough, the Bird Island jetty toilet is '...the finest on-location lavatory in the world'. It has benefitted from some renovation work this season. Base personnel rolled up their sleeves (metaphorically – see illustration) to apply a fresh coat of black tar paint to protect the wooden exterior and return it to its former glory.



Adam's modesty is preserved through the strategic placement of a gentoo penguin chick!



The 'Cistern Chapel' was christened (so to speak) with a drinks reception on the jetty.

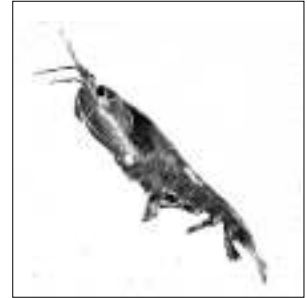
Despite the plush comforts of the new Prince House at Bird Island Research Station, with all mod cons including three flush toilets and two showers in a very cosy building, the 'jetty bog' (as it is known locally) has not lost its appeal and is still regularly visited by Bird Islanders. Its use is encouraged as it saves water (a precious commodity during rare dry spells). It is the only lavatory with windows (and what a view...) and the short, brisk walk to the end of the jetty regularly yields its own surprises.



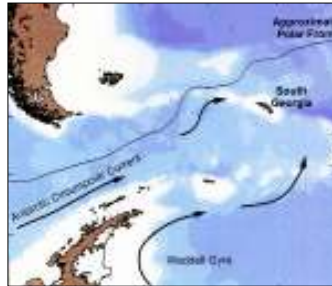
Always carry your camera on trips down to the jetty. You never know what you might see.

## The return of the krill

BAS scientists at South Georgia monitor krill by assessing its abundance in the faeces of seals and from stomach samples of penguins (convenient but not aesthetically pleasing techniques). Last summer (2008-09) they recorded an extreme scarcity of krill. Indeed, between May and October, Bird Island did not yield a single krill shell in 120 samples.



The dearth of krill was not caused by overfishing but is a natural phenomenon that occurs every few years. It is associated with a weakening of the current that sweeps krill up from their breeding grounds off the Antarctic Peninsula.



The scarcity led to a high mortality of gentoo chicks and fur seal pups last year. There was speculation that 2009-10 would see another poor

breeding season for animals that feed on krill. In terms of numbers attempting to breed, this is what happened.

During the late winter, aborted fur seal foetuses were found around the beaches of Bird Island. These abortions were from female seals that were in no condition to carry a pregnancy through to the pupping season. The fur seals that did turn up in spring arrived in poor condition. Cruise ships reported that it was easier than usual to get ashore on the breeding beaches and that there were fewer pups.

Routine observations at penguin colonies revealed half the number of gentoo nests were occupied. Throughout the 2009 winter, dead and dying gentoos were washed up on the beaches of Bird Island. When macaroni penguins came back in October they were present in good numbers but they appeared to be in poor condition.

The good news is that a return of the current brought krill back to South Georgia last summer. Fur seal droppings and the familiar mess in penguin colonies were once again stained pink from the pigment in krill.

Fur seals and gentoos bred successfully. Although there was a downturn in the number of pups born, their survival was very good, as females gorged on krill at sea and returned regularly from short feeding trips to nurse their pups. Gentoo and macaroni penguin chick survival on Bird Island was fairly typical. In very good years, many gentoo pairs raise two chicks to fledging. However this year most settled with raising one healthy chick. (Thanks to Ewan Edwards for information.)



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