



# HISTORY MYSTERIES

## What happened to the crew of the Franklin Expedition?

Stone Age	Bronze Age	Iron Age	Romans	Anglo-Saxons	Medieval	Tudors	Stuarts	English Commonwealth	Stuarts (again)	Georgians	<b>Victorians</b>	Edwardians	World War I	Inter-War Period	World War II	Cold War	Modern
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Sir John Franklin (1786–1847) was a British naval officer and Arctic explorer. He was chosen to lead an **expedition** to travel through the **Northwest Passage** in 1845, which, at the time, was one of the last unexplored regions of the world.

The Franklin Expedition left England in May 1845 in two boats: HMS Erebus and HMS Terror. Both ships became **icebound** off King William Island (Canada) in September 1846. The ships were **abandoned** in April 1848. Many of the crew had already died from a variety of causes: hypothermia, starvation, lead poisoning, zinc deficiency, scurvy and exposure to the cold with inadequate clothing and equipment. Historians know this from examining remains of the bodies that have been found.

The remaining survivors set off on foot and their bodies have not been found. The wrecks of the Erebus and Terror were found in 2014 and 2016, with no bodies inside. So – what *did* happen to the remaining crew?



*The Northwest Passage, a sea route from the Atlantic to the Pacific around the top of Canada.*

## Source A



- 1. Cornwallis Island:** After entering Lancaster Sound from Baffin Bay in July 1845, the *Erebus* and *Terror* circumnavigated this island by initially sailing along the...
  - 2. Wellington Channel:** This was where many of the rescue expeditions looked for Franklin and his crews.
  - 3. Beechey Island:** The *Erebus* and *Terror* spent the first winter of 1845–46 here. 3 crew members died and were buried here.
  - 4. Peel Channel:** The *Erebus* and *Terror* sailed down here in the summer of 1846.
  - 5.** The approximate wintering point for the second winter of 1846–47.
  - 6. Victory Point on Prince William Island:** This was where a large amount of equipment was found in 1859, as well as the Victory Point Note (see below).
  - 7. Mouth of the Back Fish River:** Thought to be the place the crews tried to reach in order to walk out of the Arctic following the loss of their ships.
- E:** The wreck of the *Erebus* was found here in September 2014.  
**T:** The wreck of the *Terror* was found here in September 2016.  
**B:** The wreck of the Breadlebane, supply ship lost in 1853, was found here in 1980.

*John Franklin and the Arctic Northwest Passage Lost Expedition Map -*  
[https://www.coolantarctica.com/Antarctica%20fact%20file/History/antarctic\\_ships/Franklin-north-west-passage-map.php](https://www.coolantarctica.com/Antarctica%20fact%20file/History/antarctic_ships/Franklin-north-west-passage-map.php)

## Source B

Franklin's ship was trapped in the ice in a remote and desolate area, which **Inuit** rarely visited, calling it *Tununiq*, 'the back of beyond'. They couldn't rely on local people for meat, clothing and oil, as other expeditions had. But they had enough supplies for about three years, and British expeditions were experienced at overwintering in the Arctic...

*Claire Warrior, Senior Exhibitions Curator, National Maritime Museum (Royal Museums Greenwich)*

### Source C

In March 1854, at Pelly Bay, explorer John Rae and his men met an Inuk who told them of a group of 35-40 Europeans who had starved to death some distance away. Rae thought this information was too vague to act upon and instructed the Inuk to tell anyone with more information to report to him at Repulse Bay. Rae...returned to Repulse Bay. Here he met more Inuit from whom he bought articles which had clearly belonged to members of the Franklin expedition. None of the Inuit Rae questioned had first-hand information about the site of these discoveries.

*The Arctic Expeditions by Fiona Gould, John Rae Society Archivist - <https://www.johnraesociety.com/john-raes-arctic-journeys/>*



### Source D

The Victory Point Note, which states that Sir John Franklin died on 11 June 1847. It also records that on 22 April 1848, the crew abandoned the ships and set off on foot across the ice.

*Victory Point Note. © National Maritime Museum, Royal Museums Greenwich, London.*

### Source E

Frostbite can blister fingers, making the skin incredibly tender, and toe damage is common. The skin becomes very cold and painful, before turning red, then numb and pale as the tissue freezes. If the blood supply is lost, gangrene may set in – the tissue is dead. Amputation may be needed if this happens. Sores can form when, for example, ice forms below the chin after a runny nose. Taking a balaclava off can rip the skin and beard from the chin in extreme cold. **Hypothermia** is always something to be aware of in these kinds of temperatures. It's particularly important not to get wet. People shiver uncontrollably, become 'sleepy' and slur their speech, get amnesia and become confused, and their heart slows. They may then pass out.

*From the Royal Museums Greenwich website: What happened to HMS Erebus and HMS Terror - <https://www.rmg.co.uk/stories/topics/erebus-terror-what-happened-crew>*

### Source F

In 1981, over 100 years after the last search expedition returned home, **forensic anthropologist** Dr Owen Beattie returned to the fate of the crew as part of the 1845-48 Franklin Expedition Forensic Anthropology Project (FEFAP). Relics and human remains...were collected from sites on King William Island. The human remains were analysed using modern forensic techniques in an attempt to ascertain what might have caused the death of the crew. Through Beattie's research it was found that the amount of lead in the bones of some of the men was exponentially high, leading to the theory that lead poisoning may have been one of the factors contributing to the expedition's demise.

*From the Royal Museums Greenwich website: What happened to HMS Erebus and HMS Terror - <https://www.rmg.co.uk/stories/topics/erebus-terror-what-happened-crew>*

Source G

## Franklin expedition: DNA test identifies member of 1845 Arctic voyage

A member of a doomed 1845 Arctic voyage has been identified by researchers who matched his DNA with that of a living descendant from South Africa.

Tests confirmed skeletal remains recovered from an island in northern Canada were those of John Gregory. Gregory was an officer on British explorer Sir John Franklin's ill-fated expedition to chart the Northwest Passage in the Canadian Arctic.

From BBC News, 6 May 2021 - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-57013327>



# What do YOU think?

### Glossary

*expedition* – a group of people who go on a journey to explore or discover something

*icebound* – when a ship becomes surrounded by ice and can no longer move

*Inuit* – the original (indigenous) people living in northern Canada

*hypothermia* – when the body gets so cold that it cannot warm itself up again; hypothermia can cause death if not treated as organs will stop working if they get too cold

*forensic anthropologist* – a person who uses scientific techniques to study human remains in order to solve historical crimes

### Further Reading:

*There are no books specifically about the Franklin Expedition written for children but both these websites contain fascinating images and videos all about the expedition:*

Royal Museums Greenwich – *What Happened to HMS Erebus and HMS Terror?*

<https://www.rmg.co.uk/stories/topics/erebus-terror-what-happened-crew>

Parks Canada – *The Wrecks of the Erebus and Terror*

<https://parks.canada.ca/lhn-nhs/nu/epaveswrecks>