

Arctic Mystery B1

In 1845, two British ships, the HMS Erebus and the HMS Terror, went on an Arctic expedition and disappeared. More than 170 years later, modern science has solved this maritime mystery.



"They forged the last link with their lives" by William Thomas
National Maritime Museum



Sir John Franklin

The Franklin expedition was trying to find the “North-West Passage”, a direct passage from the North Atlantic to the North Pacific Ocean. Europeans wanted to find a faster, cheaper route to Asia. They were certain it was possible to find an Arctic route. But it was very dangerous because ships were often trapped in the ice.

The expedition leader, John Franklin left England in May 1845 with 128 men. In July, they were at Baffin Bay in Canada. And then.... nothing. Between 1847 and 1880, over thirty search expeditions tried to find traces of Franklin and his men. In 1859, they found a note explaining that the two ships were trapped in ice in September 1846. Franklin died on 11 June, 1847, and the 105 surviving men abandoned the ships on 22 April, 1848. But what happened to them?



Help

HMS = His/Her Majesty's Ship; the name of all British vessels start with those initials.

trapped (adj) to be in a situation from which it is difficult to escape

A Very Cold Case

In 1981, scientists from the University of Alberta, Canada, decided to use modern forensic techniques to examine a few objects and three bodies that were preserved in the permafrost. Like, detectives, they looked for clues. They concluded that the men were possibly poisoned by lead.

Their food was preserved in tin cans – a new technique in 1845. Lead in the cans contaminated the food.



THERRY BOYER/PARKS CANADA

A diver observes the HMS Erebus.

Inuit Stories

Investigators found more clues in stories the native Inuit people told about seeing white men, and finding an abandoned ship that then disappeared. In 2014, a Canadian scientific expedition used sonar to search where the Inuit said the ship was. And they found the *Erebus*! In 2016, they found the *Terror*, too. The cold water preserved the ships, but exploring them is very difficult. It is impossible for the explorers to go inside the ships, because they are very fragile, but they can use special underwater cameras to look inside.

Help

lead (n, pron. *led*) a chemical element. Its symbol is Pb.

Genetic Identification

Scientists found fragments of human skeletons near the ships. Using modern DNA analysis they think they can identify some of the people who died. They were surprised to find that four of the 24 individuals discovered appear to be women.

The North-West Passage At Last

Franklin never found the North-West Passage. Norwegian explorer Roald Amundson proved it existed in 1903-06, but he was in a small boat. It was impossible for large ships to use the Passage... until 2007. Because of climate change, the Arctic Ocean has less ice. It is now possible to do what historic explorers imagined.

Many objects from the Franklin Expedition are part of an exhibition developed with Canadian museums and Britain's Royal Maritime Museum near London.

■ **Death In the Ice** is on at the Canadian Museum of History till 30 September 2018.

<http://www.historymuseum.ca/event/the-franklin-expedition/>

■ There is still a lot of information about the museum on the Royal Maritime Museum site:

<https://www.rmg.co.uk/see-do/exhibitions-events/past/franklin-death-in-the-ice>