

Spitsbergen Retraced: An Expedition to the High Arctic

Background

In the summer of 1923 the SS Ternigen sailed from Tromsø bound for the island of Northeastland in the High Arctic. Under the student leadership of George Binney, the Merton College (Oxford) Arctic Expedition intended to circumnavigate the archipelago of islands now known as Svalbard and to cross the unexplored interior of Northeastland. As it happened a build-up of pack-ice in the Hinlopen Strait forced a last-minute revision of this second objective. Instead, on 29 July a sledging party landed on the East Spitsbergen ice cap with a view to making the first east–west crossing of this section of the island. Over the course of thirty days they overcame terrible conditions to achieve both their goal and a detailed topographical survey of the unexplored interior.

Ninety-three years later to the day, another Oxford expedition arrived on the eastern shores of Svalbard's 'cold coast'. The genesis 'Spitsbergen Retraced' project to repeat the 1923 journey lay in the original maps and photos from the expedition, discovered in the archives of the Oxford University Exploration Club. After nine months of planning, fundraising and training for the expedition, the team are pleased to report that it was a resounding success.

Achievements

Over the course of thirty two days, we crossed from Duym Point on the East Coast (79.5N, 18.70E) to the terminus of the Nordenskiöld Glacier in the west (78.6, 16.9). The core route was 180 miles (with considerable side-tracking) conducted entirely unsupported and predominantly on ski, with the exception of several days of blue ice at lower altitudes. Despite two major storms and unseasonably cold conditions, all team members remained in excellent health and hugely enjoyed the experience.

By following as closely as possible the route followed in 1923, we were able to repeat over twenty original landscape photographs taken by surveyor Robert Frazer. A particular highlight was the discovery of the remains of the 1923 'Carpet Camp' near the Bear Bay Glacier and a hand-written note cached by the sledging party on Mount Chernishev. Subsequently reporting the camp to the island's Governor in Longyearbyen we received confirmation that ours was apparently the second ever visit to this particular corner of the East Coast.

In 1923, mapping the predominantly uncharted landscape and conducting scientific research had been at the heart of Binney's mission. Building on this legacy, we continued a biological survey of vascular plants first begun by the expedition's chief scientist, Charles Elton. Secondly, we explored scope for drone-based 3D mapping around the Bear Bay Glacier (now Chydeniusbreen). Having successfully mapped three separate transects along the glacier, the team is now working with the University Centre in Svalbard on a glaciological paper.

Arguably of all the 1923 expedition members, the 21 year old Andrew Irvine's name acquired the greatest renown a year later following his tragic death on Everest with George Mallory. In Spitsbergen, Irvine had been introduced to mountaineering by the experience climber, Noel Odell. Keen mountaineers ourselves, we repeated all of the original ascents made by the 1923 team in the Chydenius and Atomfjella/Stubendorff Mountains. This included the first known repeat of the

South East Ridge of Irvinefjellet ('The 1923 Route'). We were lucky enough to put our own first ascent too, on the unclimbed West Ridge of Newtontoppen, Svalbard's highest mountain.

Legacy

The team will be submitting a full report of the expedition which will be publicly available. In addition, a number of lectures will take place in Oxford and through a number of mountaineering clubs. In the meantime, please contact jamesgc.lam@gmail.com or see our website svalbard2016.com and [facebook](#) page. James will also be overseeing the evaluation and hopeful publication of the team's scientific findings.

In addition to our historical, scientific and mountaineering objectives we also succeeded in capturing the journey on film. We are currently working with a London production company to prepare a documentary for national broadcast, for which a brief [trailer](#) has already been made. Failing or in addition to this, we will be submitting to festivals over the coming months. Please contact either jamiegardiner1994@gmail.com or liamgarrison@gmail.com for more information.

Thanks

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