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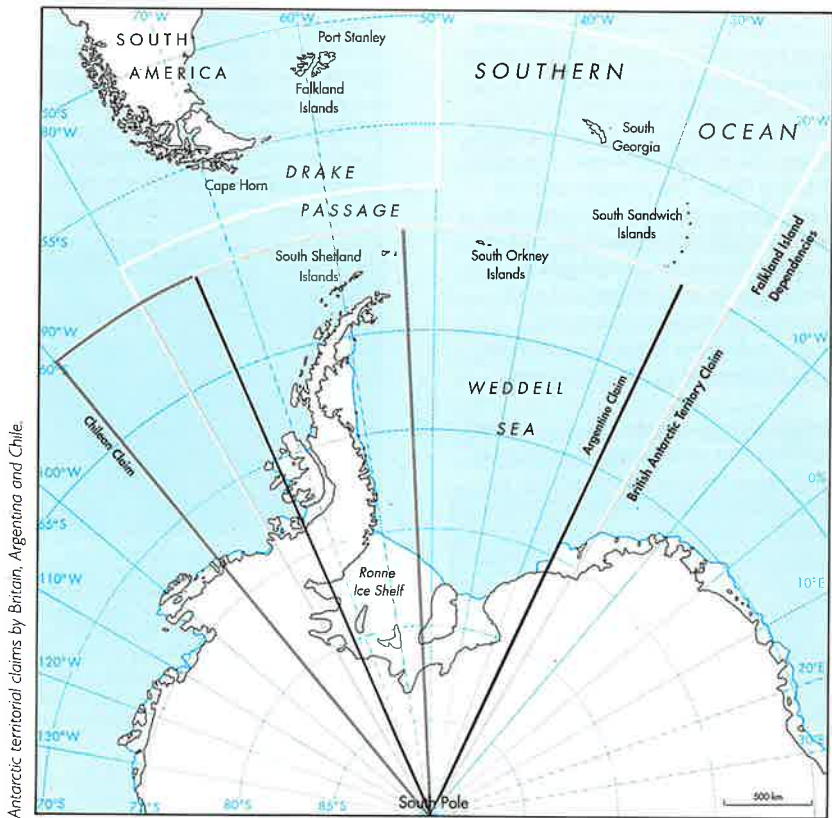
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Operation Tabarin

Sue Robertson

What was Operation Tabarin?
1993 commemorates the 50th anniversary of Operation Tabarin, a wartime British expedition to

aply named after a well known Paris night-club *Bal Tabarin*, given that the detachment would winter in the Antarctic darkness.



Antarctic territorial claims by Britain, Argentina and Chile.

Antarctica mounted by the Admiralty on behalf of the Colonial Office (1943–45). Operation Tabarin was

Why an expedition?
Operation Tabarin was set up mainly for two reasons; to discourage the use

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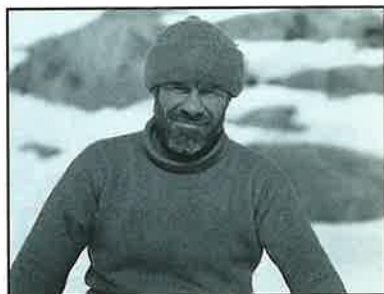
of Antarctic anchorages by enemy commerce raiders, and to strengthen British claims to sovereignty of the Falkland Islands Dependencies (now South Georgia, South Sandwich Islands and British Antarctic Territory). Although Britain was at war, the Falkland Islands Dependencies were not forgotten. Indeed their strategic importance had already been demonstrated during the First World War, when two major fleet actions had been fought for control of the shipping lanes around Cape Horn. By 1941 allied shipping losses in the southern hemisphere were becoming critical including the destruction or capture of almost the entire Norwegian Antarctic Whaling Fleet. The principal culprits were German raiders operating from the Subantarctic Islands where oil fuel installations and coal stocks left at whaling stations could be used with impunity. These were eventually destroyed by the Royal Navy to deny their further use to the axis powers.

Britain also viewed the need to reassert her claims to sovereignty over parts of the Falkland Islands Dependencies as urgent as a result of wartime counter claims from Argentina and Chile. In particular, the political developments within Argentina made it highly undesirable that that country should be in a position to control the southern side of the Drake Passage.

Organising the Operation

Organisation of Operation Tabarin began immediately by setting up an expedition committee, made up of representatives of the Colonial Office, Discovery Committee¹, Admiralty, Foreign Office, Treasury, Ministry of

War Transport, and Crown Agents. The original intention was to establish two bases; one to guard Deception Island anchorage from enemy commerce raiders and the other to occupy a position on the Antarctic Peninsula². Representatives of the Discovery Committee appreciated that bases established for political reasons could also provide a platform for useful scientific research and provide valuable meteorological data for naval operations. Hence many of the servicemen and civilians recruited were not only experienced polar travellers, but were suitably qualified to undertake a variety of science projects. James Marr, who had served on Shackleton's Quest expedition, and had worked as a biologist in the Arctic and Antarctic,

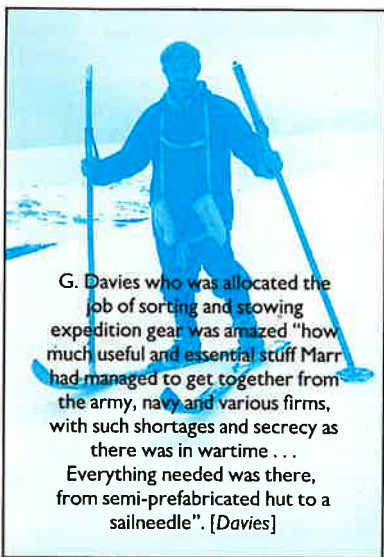


James Marr

¹Discovery Investigations – were set up in 1917 by the Colonial Office to study the biology of the Southern Ocean, with particular reference to whaling. By 1923 a Discovery Committee was formed and research was initiated in 1925 with the first Discovery Investigation Expedition, which also established a biological station at King Edward Point, South Georgia. These expeditions continued until the Second World War.

²The Antarctic Peninsula was originally known to the British as Graham Land. The Americans called it Palmer Land. In 1964 it was agreed to call the whole region the Antarctic Peninsula with the southern half named Palmer Land, and the northern half Graham Land.

was chosen as leader and promoted to Commander on taking charge.



Marr on skis.

G. Davies who was allocated the job of sorting and stowing expedition gear was amazed "how much useful and essential stuff Marr had managed to get together from the army, navy and various firms, with such shortages and secrecy as there was in wartime . . .

Everything needed was there, from semi-prefabricated hut to a sailneedle". [Davies]

Operation Tabarin Members 1943-44

Base A, Port Lockroy

(64°49'S; 63°31'W)

Ashton, L. (RN, Carpenter)
Back, E H (Surgeon-Lt RNVR,
Medical Officer and Meteorologist)
Berry, A T (Purser)
Blair, K C (Handyman, Feb-Mar
1943)
Blyth, J (Cook)
Davies, G (Handyman)
Farrington, J E B F (Wireless
Operator)
Mackenzie Lamb, I (Botanist)
Marr, J W S (Lt-Commander
RNVR, Zoologist/ Commander)
Taylor, A (Capt RCE, Surveyor)

Base B, Deception Island

(62°59'S; 60°34'W)

Flett, W R (Geologist/ Base
Leader)
Howkins, G A (sub-Lt RNVR,
Meteorologist)
Layther, N F (Wireless Operator)
Matheson, J (RN, Handyman)
Smith, C (Cook).

Within just a few months the immense task of acquiring necessary supplies, huts, food, fuel, clothing, radio equipment and sledge outfits was achieved.

Veslekari, a 250 ton Norwegian sealer, was chartered by the Admiralty. She was renamed *HMS Bransfield* in honour of Lt. Edward Bransfield, RN who, in 1820, was the first to chart a portion of the Antarctic mainland. *SS Fitzroy* was also chartered from the Falkland Islands Company to assist *Bransfield* with carrying cargo between Port Stanley and Deception Island.

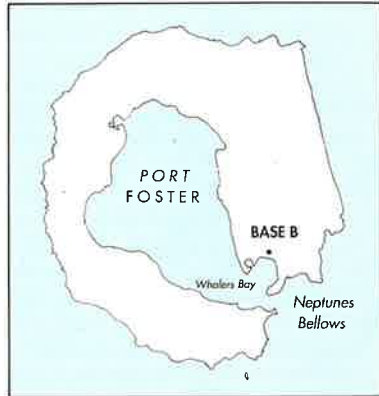


SS Fitzroy.

Bransfield set sail in November 1943 from Tilbury. However, with the heavy cargo she was carrying she lay deeper in the water than she had for many years. A weakness was revealed when she sprang a leak, and she limped into

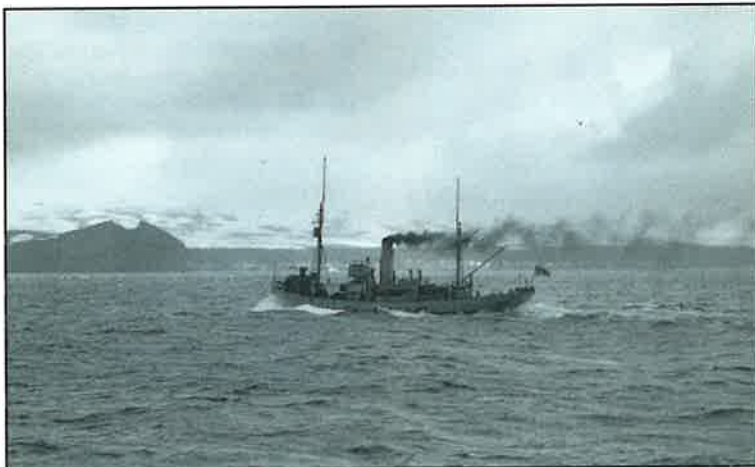
Portsmouth on the 29th November having sailed blithely over the minefields of the port. Alternative transport to carry cargo and personnel had to be found immediately because of the short Antarctic summer. With no suitable ship available in the UK, HMS *William Scoresby*, which had been undertaking minesweeping duties in the South Atlantic, was offered to the expedition by the Governor and Commander-in-Chief of the Falkland Islands and Dependencies, Sir Alan Cardinall. In Britain most of the stores and all of the men joined the troop ship, HMS *Highland Monarch*, which was due to sail from Avonmouth for the Falkland Islands on 14 December 1943 to relieve the garrison there. By 26 January she reached Stanley, where all cargo was transferred to *Fitzroy* and *William Scoresby*. These two ships pressed on into the boisterous seas of the Drake Passage. On 3 February

11 km across. The ships sailed through Neptune's Bellows, the one breach in the coastline into the crater, expecting



Deception Island.

to find enemy raiders in possession, but discovered only an Argentine flag painted on the side of fuel tank of the abandoned whaling station.



HMS *William Scoresby*.

1944, maintaining radio silence, they reached Deception Island, a volcano whose sea-filled crater forms a harbour

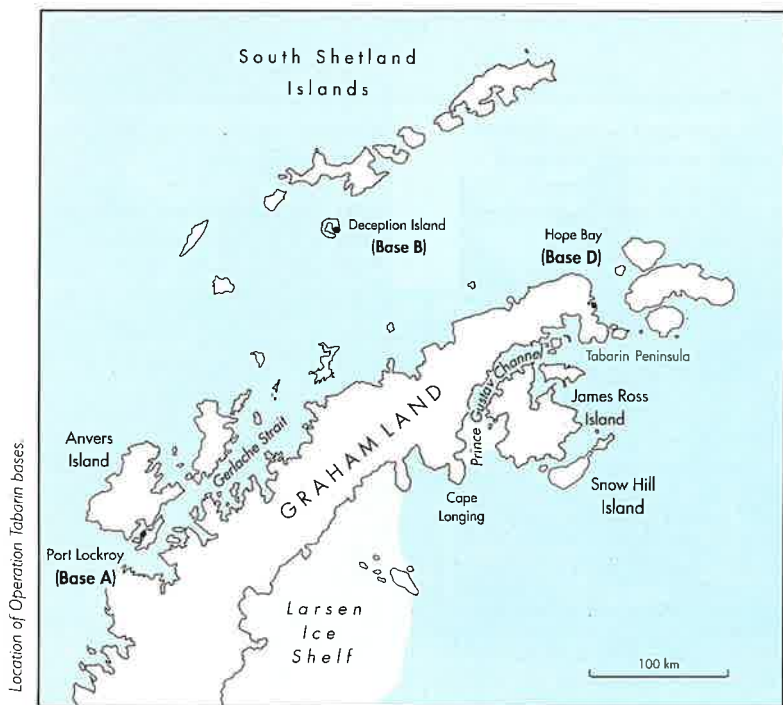
The First Year (1943-44)

The party landed and surveyed the area around Whaler's Bay and decided to

establish the base within some of the old whaling station buildings. Within days the ship had been unloaded and the shore party, under the command of W R Flett, was well established at what was to be called Base B. *William Scoresby* and *Fitzroy* then left for Hope Bay to establish the principal base on the mainland. *William Scoresby* entered Hope Bay alone, having penetrated a belt of pack-ice. Marr took a party ashore in a motor boat to choose a site for the new base. However *Fitzroy*, carrying hut and stores for the base, was unable to follow because of the risk of damage to the ship by the ice. To Marr's great disappointment the plan had to be abandoned and *William*

Scoresby rejoined *Fitzroy* to search for an alternative site.

Continuing south-westwards they searched without success for a suitable landing place. As *Fitzroy* was running short of coal they were forced to enter the sheltered harbour of Port Lockroy, on Wiencke Island, visited by previous expeditions and whaling ships. Here they decided to set up their main base (Base A), reluctantly accepting that its island location would restrict their scientific plans. The first shore party discovered the names of previous visitors etched onto the rocks and a metal Argentine flag, left by the ship *Primero de Mayo* in February 1943. In



the midst of continuous unloading and building acts of sovereignty were carried out, including the raising of a

By 15 February radio communication was established with Port Stanley and a day later with Base B. Two days later

Port Lockroy, Base A.

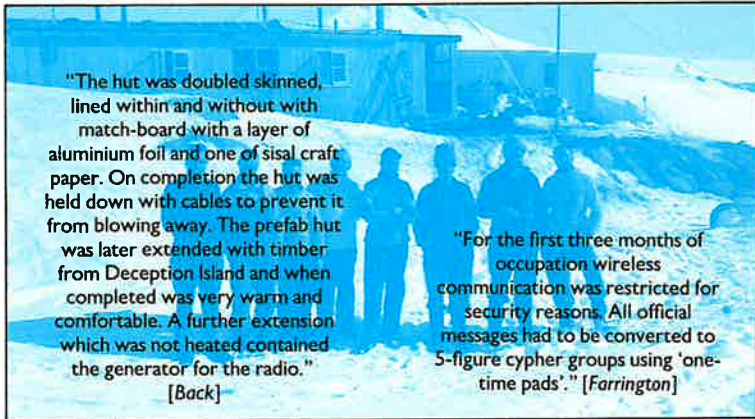


Union Jack. Soon after landing the Post Office was set up and new stamps of the Falkland Islands, over stamped Graham Land, were issued and franked 12 to 14 February.

both ships headed for Stanley having unloaded all cargo.

It was not until 24 April 1944 that the existence of Operation Tabarin was made public.

Group at Base A.



Once settled in, both parties transmitted twice-daily weather reports to the Naval Meteorological Station at Port Stanley. Base B was to provide information on the activities of both enemy and neutral vessels whilst the Graham Land party at Base A was given the task of extending the survey work beyond the point reached by Rymill's British Graham Land Expedition³. On Deception Island balloon ascents were carried out to determine upper air movements and, throughout the winter, daily observations of the sea ice were made in Bransfield Strait. A survey was made of the volcanic rocks as well as the glaciology of the area. At Port Lockroy

emphasis was placed on topographical surveys, but Marr made extensive collections of marine animals whilst



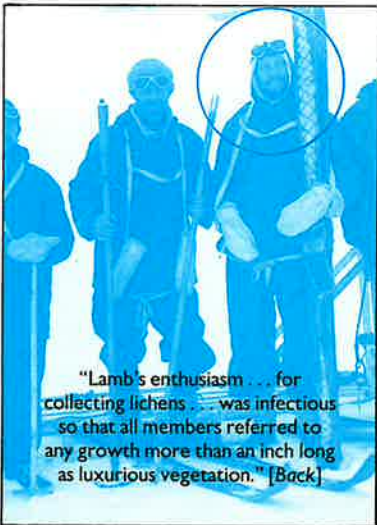
Marr collecting biological samples on Gaudier Island.

Mackenzie Lamb, the botanist, collected lichens.



Flett and Russell surveying at Hope Bay.

³ R Rymill was expedition leader of the British Graham Land Expedition (1934–37) a privately organised scientific group which surveyed and photographed over 1000 miles of the Graham Land coastline.

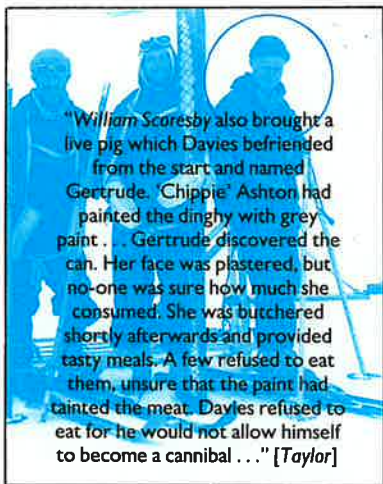


Blyth, Marr and Mackenzie Lamb (left to right).

"Lamb's enthusiasm ... for collecting lichens ... was infectious so that all members referred to any growth more than an inch long as luxurious vegetation." [Back]

On 19 March 1944 William Scoresby returned to Port Lockroy and shortly afterwards made a landing at Cape

Renard on the mainland of the Antarctic Peninsula in order to raise a Union Jack.



"William Scoresby also brought a live pig which Davies befriended from the start and named Gertrude. Chippie Ashton had painted the dinghy with grey paint . . . Gertrude discovered the can. Her face was plastered, but no-one was sure how much she consumed. She was butchered shortly afterwards and provided tasty meals. A few refused to eat them, unsure that the paint had tainted the meat. Davies refused to eat for he would not allow himself to become a cannibal . . ." [Taylor]

Mackenzie Lamb and Davies.

The ship made one last unexpected trip to Port Lockroy on 18 April to deliver the first mail since leaving England.



Surveying on Wiencke Island.

Throughout the austral winter of 1944 poor sea ice prevented any of the party at Port Lockroy from venturing far

from base. Nevertheless, a good deal of local mapping was achieved and during the spring (September) of 1944 Marr, Davies, Taylor and Mackenzie Lamb man-hauled two sledges across Wiencke Island to the east coast to survey and collect rock samples and lichens. As there was no dog transport until the second year, operations were considerably hampered.

The Second Year (1944-45)

Operation Tabarin Members 1944-45

Deception Island (Base B)

(62°59'S; 60°34'W)

Sub-Lt Reece, A W (RNVR Medical Officer, Meteorologist)
Bonner, S (Handyman)
Farrington, J E B F (Wireless Operator/ Mechanic)
Smith, C (Cook)

Hope Bay (Base D)

(63°24'S; 56°59'W)

Ashton, L (RN, Carpenter)
Back, E H (Surgeon - Lt RNVR, Medical Officer and Meteorological)
Berry, A T (Stores)
Blyth, J (Cook)
Davies, G (Handyman)
Donnachie, T (Radio Operator)
Flett, W R (Geologist)
Lt James, D P (RNVR, Surveyor)
Mackenzie Lamb, I (Botanist)
Capt Marshall, N B (REME, Zoologist)
Matheson, J (Handyman)
Capt Russell, V I (RE Surveyor)
Capt Taylor, A
(RCE, Surveyor/ Commander)

Port Lockroy (Base A)

(64°49'S; 63°31'W)

Sub-Lt Lockley, G J (RNVR Base
Leader, Meteorologist, Zoologist)
Biggs, J K (Handyman)
Layther, N F (Wireless Operator/
Mechanic)
White, F (Cook)

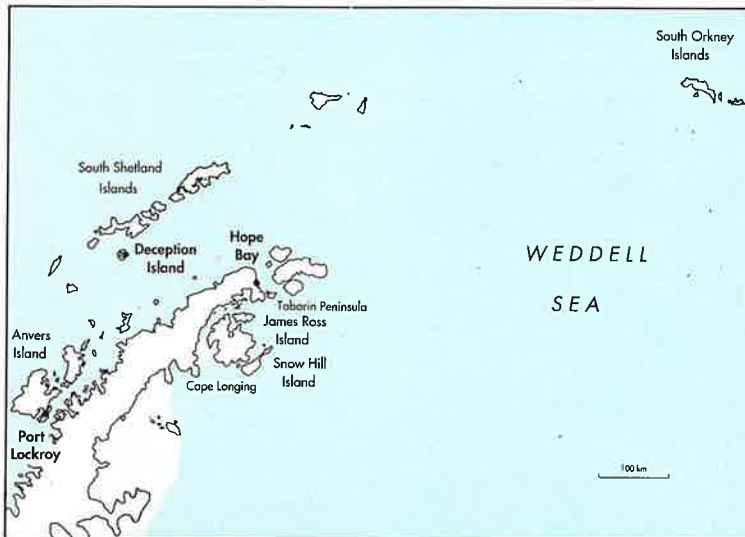
The primary objectives for the second season were to relieve personnel at Port Lockroy and Deception Island and replace them with new recruits to continue the meteorological observations at both bases; to erect a hut on Coronation Island (South

Port Lockroy to Hope Bay. Husky dogs were also to be brought from Labrador, Canada to Hope Bay. On



Mackenzie Lamb and Daimy at Hope Bay.

previous expeditions it had been proved that the use of dog teams alleviated much of the discomfort of



Orkney Islands) for occupation the following year; and to establish a third base transferring some of the men from

polar travel. Dog transport meant more fuel could be carried, greater distances could be covered and

consequently greater emphasis placed on the tasks of surveying and scientific observations.

ice. Her main role was therefore to establish the new base at Hope Bay (Base D).

Crew of SS Eagle.



Fitzroy and *William Scoresby* were to be reinforced by *SS Eagle*, a 550 ton vessel chartered in Newfoundland. Under the

Sailing from Port Stanley on 23 January 1945 *Fitzroy* and *William Scoresby* reached Deception Island four days

Tabarin personnel onboard SS Eagle



command of Capt. R C Sheppard, she was the only one of the three capable of carrying cargo as well as dealing with

later, unloaded supplies and moored an oil barge, to provide fuel for *William Scoresby*. Port Lockroy was relieved on

3 February 1945 by *Fitzroy*. A day later both ships were back at Deception where they found *Eagle* waiting. *William Scoresby* sailed for Stanley on 8 February while *Fitzroy* went directly to Coronation Island, 400 miles to the east. She left materials for a hut to be erected by the *Scoresby*'s crew on her return from Stanley. Marr returned to England in February 1945 due to ill health and suggested that the leadership of the expedition should be handed over to Capt. A Taylor.

With all other objectives fulfilled, *Eagle* now sailed from Deception Island to establish a base at Hope Bay with Taylor in charge. The new base at Hope Bay was built on level ground, conveniently situated near the beach for landing stores and near a stream for

Ashton had already built a prefabricated hut at Port Lockroy which they used as a temporary galley, 'Uncle Tom's Cabin'. Hut building began on 13 February and for the rest of that week the weather held, although later blizzards seriously hampered the work. On 15 February the flag was raised at Hope Bay. All stopped work while pictures were taken. Matheson also made four large signs painted 'British Crown Lands'. These were to be erected at different strategic points along the coast.

Eagle returned to Deception Island to take on coal and to transport the remainder of the cargo. She returned to Hope Bay where more stores were landed, but four days of bad weather prevented any cargo being put ashore

Constructing Hope Bay hut, 1945.



fresh water. The south-east side of the bay was ideal with ice- and snow-free hills behind.

apart from timber. On the morning of 17 March 1945 Base D personnel awoke to find a blizzard swirling

outside. They tuned in for the daily wireless schedule with the ship. To their dismay they heard the Captain

Sheppard, the *Eagle* succeeding in getting back. However two-thirds of the stores aboard had not been landed



SS Eagle at Deception Island

announce that an anchor had been lost in the night and in the poor visibility had collided with an iceberg. The extent of damage to the bow of the ship was unknown. However they were taking in water. A further signal was received that her other cable had parted and they were sinking.

Shortly afterwards they heard that the Captain was considering beaching her. Base members felt it was a desperate act to try and beach an old wooden ship on the rock strewn shore in a howling gale and immediately mounted a rescue party. Unexpectedly the ship's pumps regained control and a message was sent to the base that the ship would attempt a passage to the Falkland Islands. Due to the skill of Capt.

and this left the party at Hope Bay short of supplies for the winter. All food and drink was rationed to two hot meals a day whilst heavy work was going on and then one hot meal a day as winter set in. In the haste to unload in the bad weather, most of the stores had been landed some distance away and it was not until May, when the sea-ice formed sufficiently, that the rest could be moved. It was moving these 30 tons of stores that gave the party their first real experience of dog handling. This would be valuable experience as sledging was to become the main activity at Hope Bay.

On 8 May 1945 the end of the war was announced over the radio by the Governor of the Falkland Islands. All

bases celebrated this historic day.

When the days lengthened the first

discovered and mapped islands formerly
thought to be part of the mainland.

They reached as far south as Cape

Davies with dog team at Hope Bay.



dog-sledging parties ventured out to
examine the Graham Land side of

Longing in the Weddell Sea. The rocks
change from volcanic arc terrain to
sedimentary at this point and fossils
were found for the first time since
leaving Hope Bay. In all, the party had
covered a distance of 721 miles in 32
days.



Prince Gustav Channel and to
circumnavigate James Ross Island. Good
weather prevailed and the party

During the next two months the
weather deteriorated to the extent
that only routine observations could be
made. In October most of the sea ice
blew out of the bay and the birds,
absent since April, reappeared. A
census made of the penguin rookery
recorded 54,000 Adélie and 250
gentoo nests.

A second sledging party comprising
Taylor, Lamb, Russell and Davies, with
two dog teams and some pups, left on

8 November 1945. They extended the topographical survey started in the previous trip, covering 500 miles.

Environment Research Council.

Throughout its 50 years of existence

Sledging Party at Duse Bay.



Geological collections included fossil plants of the Tertiary Period.

Post-war Science

Operation Tabarin was finally relieved in January 1946 by *William Scoresby*, *Fitzroy* and *MV Trepassey*. Surgeon Commander Bingham relieved Taylor as commander of the expedition and most of the Operation Tabarin personnel, who had spent two years in the Antarctic, returned to England. With the war in Europe at an end there was no need to work in secret. In July 1945 the Falkland Islands Dependencies Survey (F.I.D.S.) was born and transferred as a civilian operation to the Colonial Office. During 1962 F.I.D.S. changed its name to the British Antarctic Survey and in 1967 became one of the institutes of the Natural

the Survey has successfully established 20 stations from which a wide variety of science has been undertaken. The early exploratory journeys from Hope Bay in particular provided much of the groundwork for future work in the northern part of the Antarctic Peninsula by F.I.D.S.

Today the Survey operates four scientific research stations:

Signy ($60^{\circ}43'S$; $45^{\circ}36'W$) in the South Orkney Islands;

Signy Research Station.



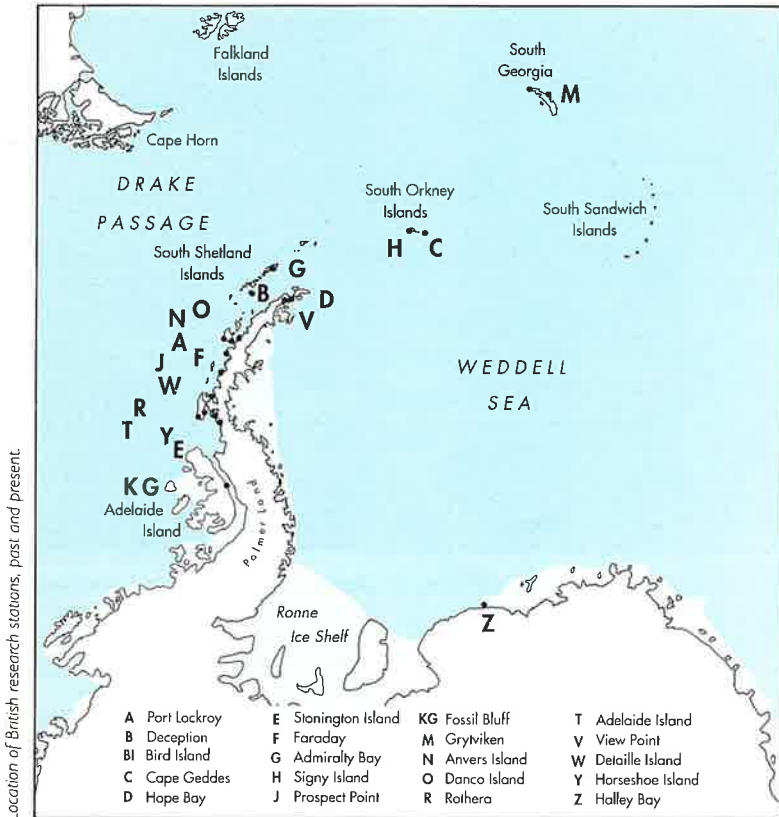
Faraday ($65^{\circ}15'S$; $64^{\circ}16'W$) in the Argentine Islands (close to the site of Rymill's B.G.L.E. base);

Rothera ($67^{\circ}34'S$; $68^{\circ}07'W$) on southern Adelaide Island;

Faraday Research Station.



Rothera Research Station.



Halley (75°35'S; 26°15'W) on the Brunt Ice Shelf, in the north-eastern Weddell Sea.

In addition a small biological field station is maintained at Bird Island (54°00'S; 38°03'W) off the western end of South Georgia.

Halley Research Station.



Bird Island Field Station.



British Antarctic Survey Headquarters, Cambridge.



From these stations a comprehensive research programme is carried out in the Life, Earth and Atmospheric Sciences. Problems of global relevance are addressed – stratospheric ozone destruction, climate change, ice sheet dynamics and mass balance related to sea level changes, adaptation and colonisation of plants and animals to the Antarctic terrestrial environment,

geological and geophysical structure of Antarctica, geospace research and marine biology. The work is supported by two, 100m, ice-strengthened ships, (RRS *James Clark Ross* and RRS *Bransfield*) and a fleet of aircraft (four ski-wheel de Havilland Twin Otters and one de Havilland Dash-7) operating from a 900 m crushed-gravel runway at Rothera Research Station.

The British Antarctic Survey

The British Antarctic Survey (BAS) is responsible for nearly all the British Government's scientific research in the Antarctic, South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands. Financial support comes through NERC from the newly formed Office of Science and Technology. All aspects of the research programmes are organised from the BAS headquarters in Cambridge.

Suggested reading:

- Fuchs, V E (1982). *Of Ice and Men*. Anthony Nelson, 383pp.
Hunter Christie, E W (1951). *The Antarctic Problem*. Allen and Unwin, 336pp.
James, D P (1949). *That Frozen Land*. Falcon Press, 204pp.
Wordie, J M (1946). The Falkland Islands Dependencies Survey, 1943-46. *Polar Record*, 4(32), p372-384.

Further information and details of other leaflets, books and educational materials currently available may be obtained from:

The British Antarctic Survey,
Natural Environment Research Council,
High Cross, Madingley Road,
Cambridge CB3 0ET, UK.
Telephone: Cambridge (0223) 61188

