

FRANK WORSLEY AND CLAYGATE

By Pat Bamford

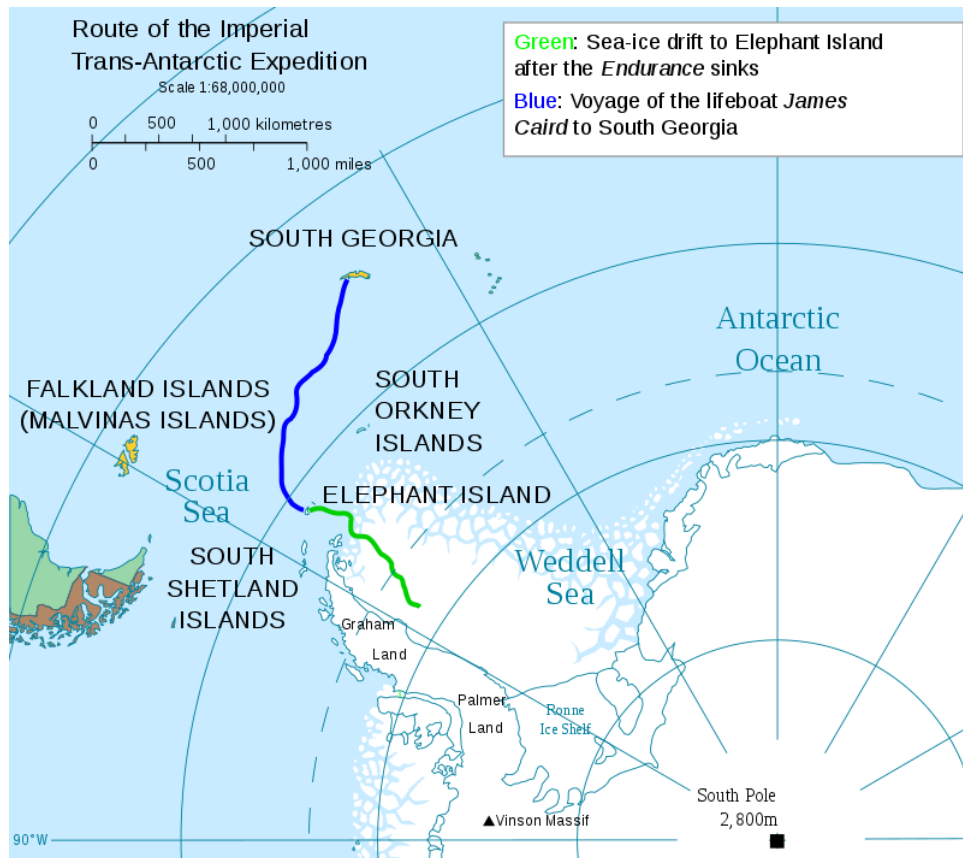


On 1st February 1943 Commander Frank Arthur Worsley DSO and Bar, OBE died at Linksfield, Red Lane, Claygate just a few weeks short of his 71st Birthday. 33 years later in 1976 his wife Jean Worsley died in the same room at Linksfield as her husband all those years before. How did this come about? What was the connection that caused me, Pat Bamford, to travel to New Zealand to seek out his birthplace high on the hillside above the tiny village of Akaroa in the Banks Peninsular?

My first recollection of Frank Worsley, perhaps one of the greatest navigators in the world of the old school, was as Uncle Wuz and Aunt Jean who came to stay at my home during the depression years of the 30's. He would announce his impending arrival with stentorian shouts of "Yoiks Tally Ho" starting at the Green in Claygate and continuing until he passed Crease's Farm at the bottom of Red Lane, shortly to arrive at our gate with an uproarious welcome. He used to call Linksfield his country mansion, but I later found out that they mostly visited when they were penniless or between jobs. They were, of course, neither Uncle nor Aunt: the visits were as a result of a lifelong friendship formed first in the early 1900's with my Mother when Worsley lodged at the West London boarding house run by my Grandmother. I still retain a picture of Commander Worsley waving farewell to my Mother and Father on their wedding day as they left for their honeymoon on my Father's Matchless motor cycle and sidecar in 1921.

Frank was born in Akoroa New Zealand in 1872 to Henrietta and Henry Worsley who had emigrated from Derbyshire in 1850. At age 16 he enlisted as a junior midshipman on a New Zealand Clipper ship the "Wairoa" bound for London with a cargo of wool. After sailing in the Pacific for the New Zealand Government he got his master's certificate in 1900, and in 1906 back in England he trained in the Royal Naval Reserve rising to the rank of Lieutenant Commander. In 1914 he joined Ernest Shackleton as captain of the ship "Endurance" for the British Trans-Antarctic expedition. The story of the "Endurance" is now part of epic history: how the ship was beset by the Antarctic ice and was

eventually crushed - how the party lived for four months on the ice floes before taking to three tiny boats when the ice broke up - how they made their way to the tiny rock of Elephant Island. How Shackleton, Worsley and four others sailed the "James Caird" the 800 miles to South Georgia through some of the worst seas in the world navigating with only a sextant and four short sightings of the sun - how they landed on the wrong side of South Georgia and three of them crossed unmapped mountains to reach the Whaling station at Grytviken.



All this is told in Commander Worsley's book 'Shackleton's Boat Journey', which is once again on sale in its fourth reprint.



Lieutenant-Commander Frank Worsley 1917

After rescuing the Elephant Island party, Worsley returned to Britain, where as a Royal Naval Reserve officer he was given command of a "Q" Ship in which he rammed and sank a German U-boat as it attacked a British Tanker in the Irish sea. For this he was awarded the DSO. Later he joined the British expedition to Archangel in Russia, where he fought on the side of the White Russians against the revolutionary Reds.

In 1925 he led an Arctic expedition described in his book "Under Sail in the Frozen North". Between the wars he scratched a living in any way he could. He ferried boats around the world, delivering them to their owners, and often he took his wife Jean with him. Out of a job he would visit his old friends amongst whom were the Bamfords in Claygate. This friendship continued to grow and lasted for the rest of his life. When the Second World War came, and their home in London was bombed, his wife Jean lived in Linksfield when she was not with her mother in Aberdeen. Worsley had to be in the fray, and he soon signed up with a shipping company (lying about his age - he was 68) engaged in salvage and blowing up wrecks off Sheerness in the Thames Estuary. He would take his leaves in Linksfield, joining his beloved Jean. Eventually his age was discovered, and he then went to Greenwich to teach Naval Cadets. It was there that he contracted cancer, and when the hospital discharged him as inoperable he came back to the Bamford family at Linksfield to die.

My father and his wife Jean attended the memorial service at Greenwich and saw his ashes scattered in the Thames Estuary where he first saw land as a sixteen year old Midshipman. When my father died in 1957, my mother no longer wanted to live in Linksfield so I purchased "Waverley Cottage" in St. Leonards Road for her to live in, and my wife Beryl and I occupied Linksfield. Jean Worsley went to live with her at Waverley Cottage as a companion until my mother died in 1976. My wife and I then invited her to live with us, rather than go into a home. So it came about that on her death in 1978 I was appointed her Executor. After fulfilling those duties and passing her estate on to rather distant relatives, for she had no close family of her own, I was left with Jean's personal letters and photographs, and it is these items that are now proving to have such historic significance that they need to be preserved in an appropriate Museum. A good part have already been gifted to the Scott Polar Institute in Cambridge in accordance with Jean's wishes - but many of the other letters and pictures seem more appropriately to be left to his country of origin New Zealand. It is a New Zealander John Thomson who has written the first Biography of Frank Worsley called "Shackleton's Captain", so it was that last February I went to stay with John Thomson in New Zealand where we jointly visited Museums in Wellington, Christchurch and Akaroa where Worsley was born. All are greatly pleased to receive and preserve the historic record of this great navigator.

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The history of this welcome Monograph makes interesting reading:

In April 1999 the County Archivist received a request from Washington USA for information about Frank Worsley's grave, which the inquirer thought was in Claygate. The young lady had chosen a book by Frank Worsley as part of her Grade 10 English course and wished to know more about him.

All the archive databases were searched at the Surrey History Centre at Woking, with no result and the request was passed to our Chairman, Colin Dall who also was initially unable to find any information. However, Jo Buckley one of our Committee members knew just the person to ask - Pat Bamford.