



EXPLORING THE FROZEN WORLD

IN LATE NOVEMBER 2010, A SEVEN-MAN BRITISH EXPEDITION BOARDED THE YACHT SPIRIT OF SYDNEY IN THE TIERRA DEL FUEGO CAPITAL USHUAIA, AND SET SAIL ACROSS THE DRAKE PASSAGE FOR THE ANTARCTIC PENINSULA. ON THEIR RETURN LESS THAN ONE MONTH LATER, THE TALLY OF SIGNIFICANT FIRST ASCENTS WOULD MAKE THIS EXPEDITION ONE OF THE MOST PRODUCTIVE CIVILIAN BRITISH MOUNTAINEERING VENTURES TO ANTARCTICA IN RECENT HISTORY.

Supported by a grant from The Alpine Club Climbing Fund, set up by Chris Watts of First Ascent, the trip had been thrown open to any members of the Alpine Club with suitable experience, and - given the usual high costs of yacht charter in the Southern Ocean - a sufficient bank balance. The chief organizer was Phil Wickens, who has spent more time than most at high latitudes.

From 1997-2000 Wickens was a British Antarctic Survey (BAS) field assistant, and in recent years has visited the Peninsula on a number of occasions, for climbing and guiding/lecturing work on cruise ships. Great familiarity with these mountains led Wickens to suspect that several major unclimbed summits were significantly higher than marked on official maps. He decided to concentrate efforts on the more accessible northern sector of the Peninsula, Graham Land, in particular peaks east of the famous Lemaire Channel and, a little to the south, Paradise Harbour. With him was a fit and experienced team comprising Derek Buckle, Mike Fletcher, Stu Gallagher, Richmond MacIntyre (a South African 'Seven Summiteer'), Olly Metherell and Dave Wynne-Jones.

After a preliminary warm-up on the popular **Jabet Peak** (552m) above Port Lockroy on Anvers Island, the climbers were dropped further south at Deloncle Bay, immediately north of the 'narrows' in Lemaire Channel. From here they climbed inland up the Hotine Glacier and made camp at 850m, below the rumbling South West Face of Mt Matin.

Looking up the Hotine Glacier from Deloncle Bay, the most prominent peak is **Mt Nygren**, named after Rear Admiral Harley Nygren, a former BAS observer and director of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Corps. Nygren is a fine isolated pyramid in the middle of the glacier and all team members except Metherell climbed it on the 3rd December via the *East Ridge* at AD-. Two GPS and one altimeter reading were averaged to give a height of 1,454m on this previously virgin summit.

Next day the team brought to light one of the more significant errors on the 1:250,000 BAS map *Brabant Island to Argentine Islands*, published in 2008. On this map the relatively well-known and popular Mt Shackleton is unnamed and instead part of a massif two kilometres to the north east is

THIS PAGE: *Spirit of Sydney* in Deloncle Bay. Behind are unclimbed summits of Humphries Heights, which run north to Cape Renard. **PHIL WICKENS FACING PAGE TOP:** Seen from Lemaire Channel, the two spires on the left are known as Cape Renard, or more prosaically Una's Tits after the wife of a former governor of the Falkland Islands. The three summits to the right are referred to as False Cape Renard. The main Cape Renard tower, the 747m spire on the far left, defeated several British and Canadian attempts before finally climbed in 1999 by a strong German team including Kurt Albert and Stefan Glowacz. The left and highest tower of False Cape Renard was climbed by the Pou brothers in 2007 and named Zerua Peak. **DAVE WYNNE-JONES FACING PAGE LOWER:** Dave Wynne-Jones (in yellow) and Mike Fletcher reaching the lower North Summit of Mt Inverleith. Across the waters of the Gerlache Strait lies Mt Francois (2,822m) on Anvers Island, one of the highest on the Peninsula. It was named after Charcot's ship and first climbed by a FIDS team in 1955. **PHIL WICKENS**

erroneously labelled 'Mt Shackleton 1,300m'. The true Shackleton, visible from the coast, was named after the legendary Irishman in 1908 by Jean-Baptiste Charcot, France's most famous polar explorer (see below). Recent visitors have started to call the labelled peak **False Mt Shackleton**. Wickens hoped to make its first ascent, unaware at the time that it had been climbed on the 22nd January 2010 by Ludovic Challeat's French party, which had already summited the true Shackleton earlier the same day. Buckle, Fletcher, McIntyre and Wickens climbed the *North Face to East Ridge* to make the probable second ascent, but by a new route. The face was objectively safe but had several large crevasses and steepened to 60°, before reaching the giant whale-back of the broad East Ridge (AD+). The altitude was measured as 1,476m, considerably higher than the true Shackleton.

Early Peninsula exploration was made by sealers and whalers, but arguably the first primarily geographic explorations south down the coastline were made by the Frenchman Charcot in 1904-07, and again in 1908-10. His initial expedition employed a professional mountain guide, P Dayné, to make the first serious mountaineering ascents in the region.

Little climbing was achieved before World War II, but in 1943 the British government launched Operation Tabarin to reinforce the traditional British claim. Next year it established two small bases; on Deception Island and at Port Lockroy. In 1945 the operation became the Falkland Islands Dependency Survey (FIDS), renamed in 1962 as the British Antarctic Survey. Since then the vast majority of first ascents made on the Peninsula have come from FIDS and BAS personnel (the highest mountain in the entire Peninsula, Mt Jackson at 3,184m well to the south in remote Palmer Land, fell to the notorious Scot, John Cunningham, in 1964). However, the British government has always frowned upon extra-curricular climbing activity by employees, and whilst in reality there was little time for most field assistants to tick off virgin summits, climbing history is incomplete, many routes remaining unrecorded to avoid serious repercussions from officialdom. As Antarctic guru Damien Gildea notes when talking of the Peninsula, 'if you need to claim to be the first on some piece of Antarctica, you should go elsewhere'.

After the war FIDS quickly erected several more bases, including Faraday in 1947 on the Argentine Islands, a little south of the Lemaire Channel. Faraday remained under BAS occupancy until it was sold to the Ukraine in 1997 and renamed Vernadsky. It is perhaps most famous for being the location from where, in the early 1980s, British scientists first established the existence of the Ozone Hole. It is the longest continuously running scientific station in Antarctica, and a popular stop-off for cruise ships and yachts. To honour this former British base, Wickens has proposed to the UK Antarctic Place Names Committee that False Shackleton now be called Mt Faraday.

Next on the list was **Mt Matin**, marked as 1,360m on the map. It was named by Charcot after the Swiss newspaper, *Le Matin*, which partially sponsored his first trip. An initial foray up the *South West Ridge* to an altitude a little more than 1,360m confirmed Wickens's suspicions; the summit was still a long way above. On the 5th, in great weather and with Buckle, Fletcher, McIntyre and Wynne-Jones, he continued above the high point, mainly on ski, to the rounded snow-dome summit (PD). The altitude was 2,415m, more than 1,000m higher than the map. The temperature was bitter but the view extensive and breathtaking, with all but the highest peaks of Brabant and Anvers Islands below them. All five then made a superb descent from summit to camp entirely on ski.

Next day they moved camp to below **Mt Cloos**, the west side of which falls precipitously into the Lemaire Channel, from where it presents an impressive spectacle of rock and ice. It impressed Charcot, who named it after the Honorary Belgian consul in Denmark during his second expedition. The peak has two summits. On the 8th all seven climbers followed straightforward east-facing snow slopes (F) to the 935m South Summit, from where Buckle, Fletcher, Metherell and ▶



Wickens made a long, quasi-horizontal traverse north to below the main top, which from this direction is guarded by large crevasses and an active serac barrier. Moving further right they climbed a steep narrow icy chimney around the gently overhanging barrier to reach summit slopes (D+). Their arrival on the 1,200m Main Top in afternoon sunlight was clearly visible to the yacht crew, anchored in the waters opposite.

With all the major previously virgin summits around the Hotine Glacier now climbed, the team began its return journey north, stopping to make a quick ski ascent and descent (the fourth overall) of **Mt Banck** (710m: *North Face*, PD) above Paradise Harbour, before turning east into Andvord Bay. Their last significant first ascent was **Inverleith**, one of the highest Peninsula peaks north of the Antarctic Circle. Marked as 2,038m on maps, it was first named by Scottish geologist David Ferguson during the 1913-14 summer season.

After weaving through a broken icefall of the Almirante Ice Fringe, Buckle, Fletcher, McIntyre, Wynne-Jones and Wickens skied south to 600m, where they tucked themselves behind a sharp spur to avoid fierce katabatic blasts and set up camp for the night of the 13th. Next day, with winds abating, they passed below Dallmeyer Peak and reached a col, from where they climbed interesting slopes through crevasses and seracs on Inverleith's *North Face*, to reach a shoulder high on the broad North Ridge. Seemingly endless breakable crust took forever but they finally summited (AD+) to enjoy magnificent views across a sea of mountains stretching all the way north to Deception Island. Beyond lay the Drake Passage, across which they would return in a few days' time, having made six first ascents to five previously unclimbed summits.

This team went no further south than the peaks east of Vernadksy, but neither do the vast majority of visiting mountaineers. There are several reasons for this. Peaks on the northern Peninsula are spectacular, more well-known, and can be accessed more easily from acknowledged safe anchorages. Most climbers cannot resist 'stopping off' to climb one or two. Also, most yacht charters are 30 days from Argentina, which in effect leaves less than two weeks to climb in Graham Land. Given the vagaries of the Antarctic maritime weather, it is too much of a gamble to push a little further south to the less explored areas of Adelaide Island or the Arrowsmith Peninsula, which remain just out of reach for today's yacht-based climbers.

In his seminal 1979 *World Guide to Mountains and Mountaineering*, John Cleare remarked that 'while the mountaineering potential of the [Antarctic] continent is tremendous, for most its glittering prizes will remain only dreams'. Despite increases in disposable income and far greater availability of Southern Ocean yacht charter, it seems, for the Peninsula new-router at least, this statement is almost as true today as it was 30 years ago.





FACING PAGE TOP: False Shackleton/Mt Faraday (1,476m) from the north west, showing the new route up the North Face and East Ridge **FACING PAGE MIDDLE:** Mt Inverleith (2,038m) from the north east, showing the line of first ascent via the North Face, North Summit and North Ridge. **FACING PAGE LOWER:** Mt Matin (2,415m) from Flandres Bay to the north. The British first ascensionists came from the far side to reach the right-hand ridge. **THIS PAGE:** Mike Fletcher and Olly Metherell preparing to pass the serac on the steep, upper East Face of Cloos Main Summit. ALL PHIL WICKENS

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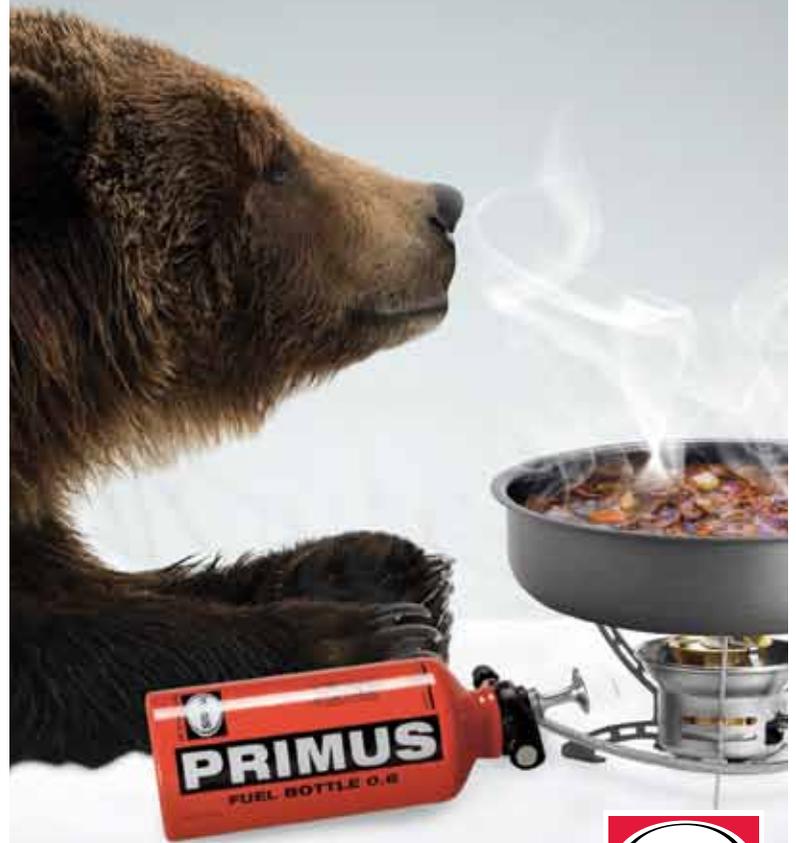
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