

Cruel fate that awaited famous polar ship

In the centenary month of Scott's epic march to the South Pole, **Steve Snelling** tells the story of a veteran Antarctic ship that braved the icepacks – only to come to grief on a sandbar off the Norfolk coast.

She took a while to die. Long enough for her hapless crew to harbour hopes of salvation. And long enough for them to realise, as the sea swept over them, that there was no hope and there could be no escape.

Stuck fast on the sands that would be her grave, she creaked and groaned beneath the pummelling of a gale-lashed sea. Her decks were quickly awash. Water flooded the engine rooms. And even as the crew scrambled into one of the small boats she began to break up, her splintered hull tilting drunkenly in the face of oblivion.

In the midst of it all, with the waves crashing and crushing about them, one of the stranded seamen found breath to call out to the captain: "It is all up with us. There's not a man will put foot on shore again..."

Such was the tragic and ignominious end of the Nimrod.

Once upon a time, she had been one of the most famous ships afloat, her name synonymous with an extraordinary expedition into the icy depths of Antarctica that seemed to rival the greatest journeys from the golden age of exploration.

She had survived some of the wildest seas in the southern oceans. She had ventured into uncharted waters and evaded the clutches of miles of potentially lethal pack ice only to come to grief on a sandbar within two miles of the Norfolk coast.

The irony was as inescapable then as it is nine decades on and is certainly not lost on Rorke Bryan. The author of a new book that charts the vital part ships have played in the exploration of Antarctica, he has spent years on the trail of the Nimrod and the myriad vessels that braved the frozen waters of the far south.

"When you consider what she'd been through, just what she'd endured," he says, "it was, unquestionably, a sad conclusion for a ship that had earned such an important place in the history of Antarctic exploration."

Ordeal by Ice is a monumental achievement in its own right that represents the culmination of an historical odyssey spanning half a century. Bryan calls it a "labour of love with a very long gestation".

His long journey of exploration began way back in the early 1960s when the Dublin-born son of a master mariner was a member of a British Antarctic Survey team. "Partly, I think the interest grew out of wanting to know more about the ships that had ventured south," he says. "Some, like the Nimrod, the Terra Nova and the Discovery, were famous, but others I scarcely knew and as I got further and further into the subject more and more ships appeared and more and more tales."

The result is a series of gripping sea yarns, adorned by a plethora of paintings, drawing and photographs, that begin in the 15th century and which focus on the attempts to chart and explore Antarctica over the course of the past 250 years.

Bryan takes us aboard the Resolution during Captain James Cook's historic voyage of circumnavigation and the myriad lesser-known 'sealers' and 'whalers' that sought to exploit the 'new' continent before joining the trailblazing voyagers who journeyed south for geographical and scientific discovery.

Here, during what Bryan calls the "exploration rush" and others have labelled the "heroic age" of Antarctic questing we encounter the likes of Robert Falcon Scott, Roald Amundsen, Jean-Baptiste Charcot, William Speirs Bruce and Ernest Shackleton. Only in Bryan's trailblazing study the focus is not so much on the men

as the ships that carried them south and made all their remarkable journeys possible – the Discovery and the Terra Nova, the Belgica and the Fram, the Francais and the Pourquoi-Pas?, the Scotia, the Endurance and Aurora and, of course, the Nimrod.

Not that the Nimrod was ever intended for such a place in maritime history. Her origins were as humble as they come. So humble in fact that Bryan was able to find no record of any ship-builder's drawings or plans. "I expect there never were any," he says. "I don't know it for certain, but I suspect she was basically built on the eye of the shipwright."

If so, he did a remarkable job. Nimrod was the first of four ships from Dundee's Alexander Stephen yard to find her way into the Antarctic. But that she did so at all was more by the accident of chance

“A triumph of survival turned the Nimrod into a celebrity ship...”

than design. She was found and bought by Shackleton in Newfoundland in May 1907, but it is clear that Nimrod was, in Bryan's words, "by no means his first choice".

In fact, Shackleton, whose ambition was to follow up Scott's 1904 exploration, from which he had been sent home after falling ill, by leading the first team to reach the South Pole, would have preferred to have taken the 598-ton sealer Bjorn which would have been perfect for the mission. But, at £11,000, the asking price was simply too much for a privately-funded expedition where, as Bryan put it, everything was "organised absolutely on a shoestring".

So, instead of the fine, large new vessel that had been purposely selected for his voyage south, he had to make do with a tiny, 50-year-old schooner that was "a scarred veteran of many years of sealing in the pack ice along the Labrador coast" and which cost just £5,000.

Launched in 1866, having been built under the personal supervision of Captain Edward White, of Tickle Cove, Bonavista, Newfoundland, Nimrod was among the very first steam auxiliary ships to enter the Labrador seal trade. But by 1907, half a century of toil had taken its toll. "She was filthy and dilapidated, with rotten masts," notes Bryan, though "her hull, built on oak frames, planked with American elm and sheathed in ironbark, was sound".

Shackleton had her completely stripped and cleaned. Her masts were replaced and the interior refitted to provide crew accommodation in the fo'c'stle and officers' quarters in deck houses on the poop. Meanwhile, a "very cramped" hold devoid of portholes or effective ventilation was converted below the after deckhouse to take 15 members of the shore party.

Raymond Priestley, one of the occupants

of what became known as 'Oyster Alley', later described it as "more like my idea of Hell than anything I have ever imagined..."

Her size was indeed a serious shortcoming. Measuring only 136ft and with a beam of just 30½ft, Nimrod was woefully small to carry all the necessary supplies required for a prolonged stay in the Antarctic.

In fact, space was so short that five of the 15 ponies earmarked for the expedition had to be left behind while her coal capacity was sufficiently inadequate to necessitate a tow to the edge of the ice.

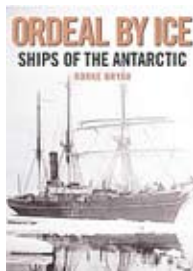
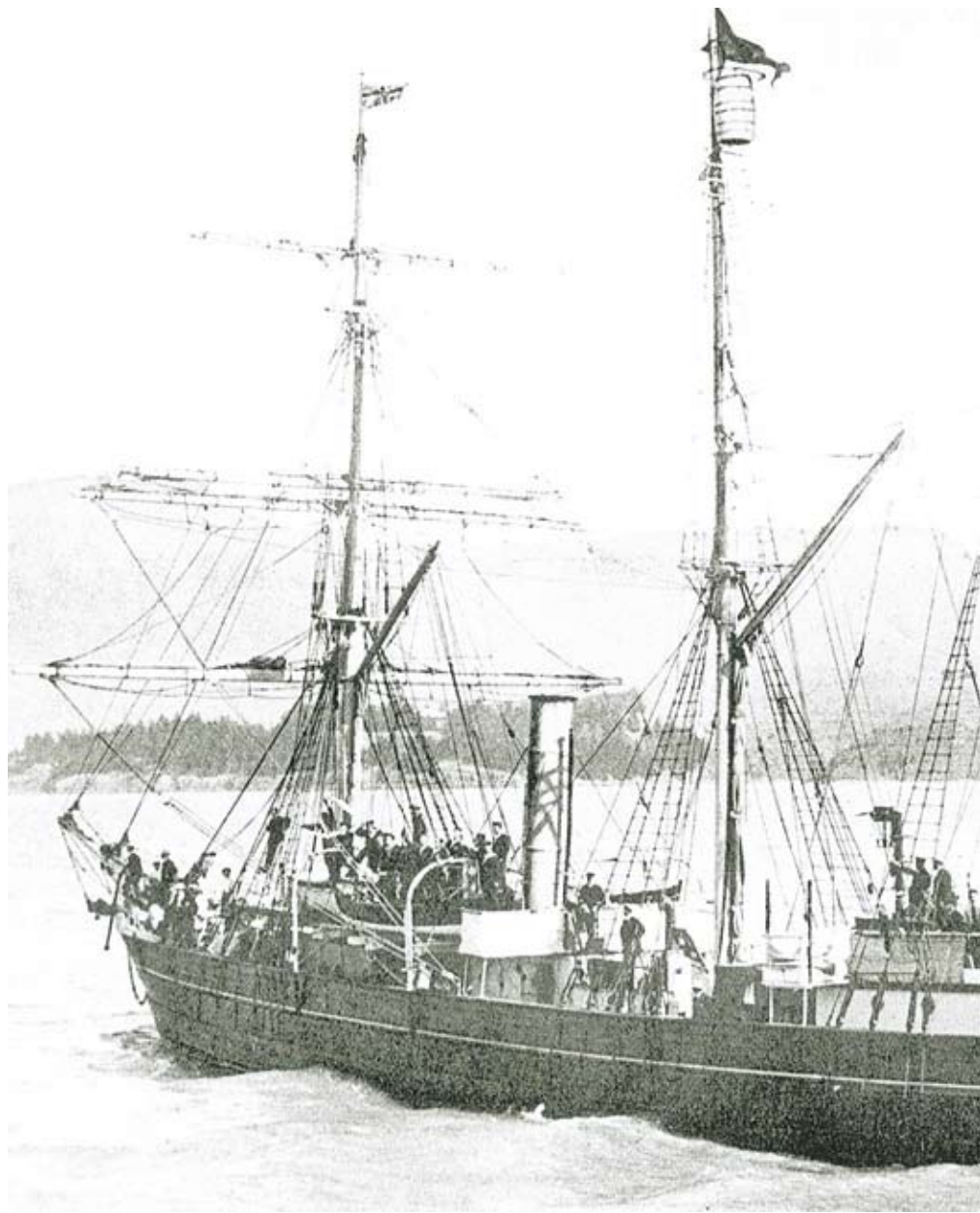
But size and age apart, Nimrod was more than ready for the challenge. Indeed, ill-fitted though she may have seemed for such a perilous voyage she proved herself superior to some ships that were specially designed for Antarctic conditions.

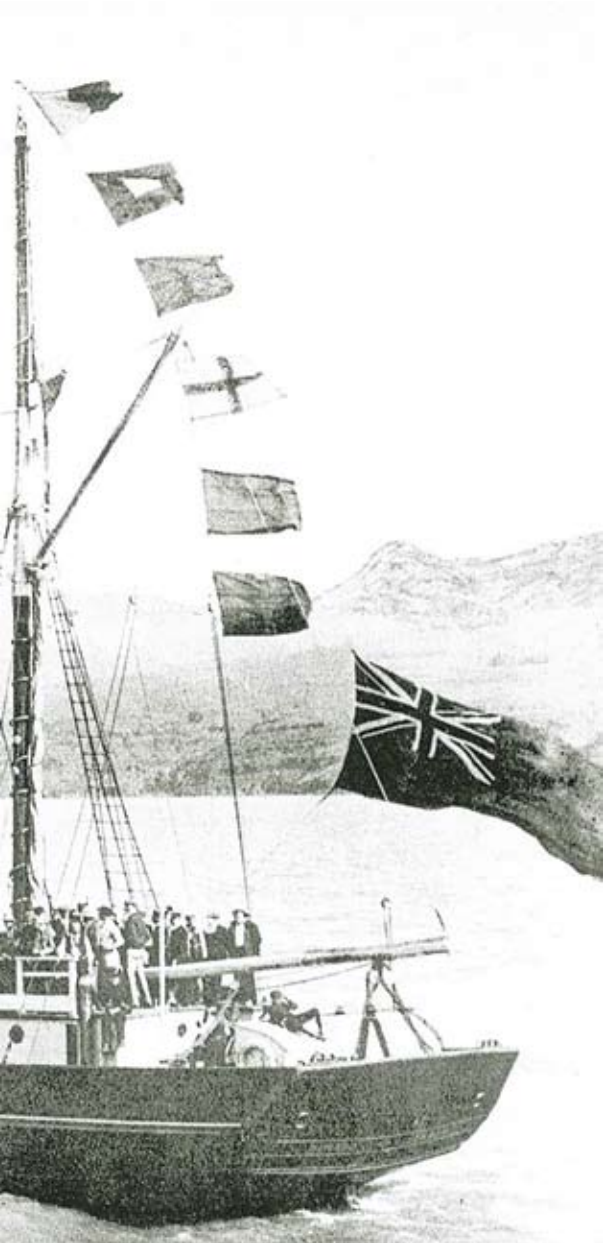
Trailing behind the steel steamship Koonya for the journey south from New Zealand, the elderly, reconditioned schooner "performed magnificently" in Bryan's estimation.

One of her officers, Aeneas Mackintosh, described Nimrod "riding the mountainous sea like a duck" while her tow, battered by the howling gale, seemed virtually to disappear beneath waves towering to a height of almost 100ft.

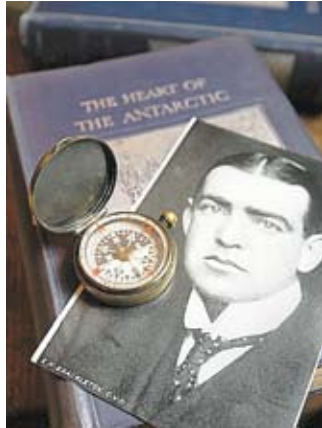
"Quite simply," says Bryan, "Nimrod did everything expected of her. And while it must have been extraordinarily uncomfortable in 'Oyster Alley', she behaved splendidly both in the journey to the Antarctic and along the Barrier as well as during her return voyage to recover the South Magnetic Pole party later on."

Nimrod may even be said to have outperformed her illustrious commander. For despite his best efforts, Shackleton's





Main picture: Flags ahoy: the Nimrod in all her glory, leaving Lyttelton Harbour, New Zealand, for Antarctica on New Year's Day, 1908; **right,** polar explorer Ernest Shackleton.



the previous fortnight. All of those ships had been successful in pulling clear and, for a few moments, Doran thought he could do the same. He ordered engines stopped and tried to bring her astern, but Nimrod was held fast.

In no time, she began to settle in about four fathoms of water that smashed against her stranded hull even as the wind beat at the canvas sails. Ten vital minutes when Nimrod's beleaguered crew might have been able to get off in their two lifeboats were lost as Doran hoped against hope to save his ship from disaster. By the time he realised Nimrod's fate was sealed it was too late.

The gale had pushed the ship almost on its side and water was gushing into the engine room. In desperation, Doran ordered SOS rockets fired as he clung to the tilting doorway of the deckhouse.

Even as the crew scrambled along the slippery and steeply angled deck to find shelter beneath the bridge, the sea swept the starboard lifeboat from its mountings. It was the beginning of the end. Soon, the Nimrod began to break up.

Derrick booms thrashed madly as loosened planks swirled back and forth. Moments later the deckhouse roof was ripped off and the chief engineer disappeared in a boiling lather of sea and spume.

With the Nimrod crumbling beneath them, the 11 survivors struggled into the portside lifeboat on the bridge deck. Their plan was to wait for a 'big sea' and chop away the 'tackles' so that they might be carried away from the wreck. But before they could do so, the bridge was swept away and the boat tipped over into an icy sea.

The first mate, James Truelsen, managed to grab hold of the boat's stern post and hauled himself on to the keel just as the boatswain, Russell Gregory, drifted past. "For God's sake save me," he called out and Truelsen managed to pull him out of the water. Another man, strained to hold on to the side of the boat, but eventually lost his grip and was swept away.

For three-quarters of an hour, the boat remained locked to the wreck while the sea broke over it until breaking loose and drifting north with the two men clinging for dear life.

The last they saw of the Nimrod was "its funnel rocking as though it would fall... and the masts reeling. Nothing else remained above water".

Hours later, the small boat drifted ashore with Nimrod's only survivors. They were alive, but only just. Stiff with shock and exposure, they crawled up the North Beach where a local man found them, took them home and plied them with steaming mugs of tea. In the words of one newspaper report, their survival in was "little short of a miracle". They had displayed a "wonderful fortitude" of a kind that Shackleton himself would have been proud.

But of the brave little Nimrod there was nothing beyond the wreckage that washed ashore, together with the bodies of the rest of the crew.

Those pieces of splintered decking and part of a shattered spar were all that remained of a workaday ship that had come to play a proud role in the golden age of exploration only to find a watery grave as one of the most notable wreck ships lying off the Norfolk coast.

Ordeal by Ice: Ships of the Antarctic, by Rorke Bryan, is published by Seaforth Publishing, priced £35.

assault on the Pole ended 97 nautical miles short of his goal. From the furthest point south reached by man, there then followed a desperate race against time and starvation to make the rendezvous with Nimrod.

A triumph of survival which would prove merely a precursor to a still greater epic of Antarctic endurance was sufficient to turn the newly knighted Shackleton into a national hero and the Nimrod into a celebrity ship.

Following a further 5,000-mile voyage into Antarctic waters in search of four islands that did not exist, the Nimrod returned to Britain where she was put on display on the Thames. A tour of British ports followed before the gallant little ship was sold.

It marked the beginning of a sad decline that would reach its tragic nadir off the Norfolk coast in January 1919. Reduced to the role of collier, the Nimrod spent four inglorious years sailing in the colours of Decker and Co of London before being sold on to a Belgian ship owner and managed out of Hull.

She sailed for the last time out of Blyth on the morning of January 28, bound for Calais with a cargo of 330 tons of coal and a crew of 12, most of them Humberside men, under the command of Captain William Doran. There should have been 13, but one man, fortuitously as events turned out, failed to join her.

By the following night, she had reached the Norfolk coast. All was well. The night was clear, though a biting wind blowing in from the east was whipping up a heavy sea. Even so, it should have posed no difficulty for a ship that had survived one of the wildest oceans on earth.

Passing the Cockle lightship at around 10.20pm, Doran set course to pass through Yarmouth Roads. But he never reached them. Shortly afterwards, while still near the lightship, Nimrod bumped onto the northernmost tip of the Barber Sands not far from where seven vessels had 'touched' during

make your kitchen smile again



Breathe new life into your home

- From replacement doors to complete kitchens
- Free estimation & planning
- Local family run business



DREAM DOORS®
NEW LIFE FOR OLD KITCHENS

13 Chalfont Walk, Eaton, Norwich, Norfolk NR4 7NH

Call for a FREE Estimate: 01603 505595

www.dreamdoors.co.uk

View our credentials at



I ♥
Slimming
World *because...*

Join a warm and friendly group near you today...



MONDAY

NEW GROUP OPENS 9TH JANUARY

NORTH WALSHAM
Community Centre, New Road
at 10.00am
Call Karen on 01603 405536

NEW CONSULTANT NEW TIME FROM 9TH JANUARY

WROXHAM AND HOVETON
Broadland High School, Tunstead Road
at 7.30pm
Tel Jen 01692 671704

TUESDAY

EAST HARLING
Harling Youth Centre, Church Road
at 7.30pm
Call Lydia on 01842 760354

WEDNESDAY

NEW TIME FROM 2ND JANUARY

NORTH WALSHAM
Community Centre, New Road
at 6.00 & 8.00pm
Call Karen on 01603 405536

AYLSHAM
St Michaels Nursery & Infant School, School House Lane,
at 5.30 & 7.30pm
Call Kirstie on 01263 587877

CROMER
Methodist Church Hall, Hall Road
at 6.30pm
Call Barbara 07504 039 530

DEREHAM

The Assembly Rooms, Market Place
at 10.00am & 12.00pm
Call Judy on 01362 691904

FAKENHAM

Salvation Army Hall, Oak Street
at 5.30 & 7.30pm
Call Annette on 01328 863776

THURSDAY

NEW TIME FROM 5TH JANUARY

ACLE
Bure Room, Acle Recreation Centre
Bridewell Lane,
at 9.30am & 11.30am
Tel: Ruth on 01603 211468

NEW TIME FROM 5TH JANUARY

DEREHAM
The Assembly Rooms, Market Place
at 5.30 & 7.30pm
Call Louise on 01362 692740

HOLT

Loades Hall, Holt Methodist Church,
Norwich Road
at 6.30pm
Call Annette on 01328 863776

FRIDAY

THORPE END
Thorpe End Village Hall, Plumstead Road
at 10.00am
Call Ruth on 01603 211468

FREE
membership
worth **£10**
plus 2 weeks
FREE*

FREE
Secrets of
success
guide

*when you buy a 12-week
Countdown 1-28 January 2012

0844 897 8000
www.slimmingworld.com



Slimming
-WORLD-
because you're amazing