

### **Sir John Franklin's snowshoes**

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The recent announcement of the discovery of one of the ships used by Sir John Franklin in his fated final expedition of 1845 made waves around the world and put the Lincolnshire town of Spilsby in the spotlight. Future research at the site will hopefully identify whether the ship is HMS Erebus or HMS Terror, and ultimately shed light onto the fate of one of Lincolnshire's greatest sons and his crew.

Lincolnshire's museums and archives collections contain a number of objects and documents relating to Franklin's career, expeditions and even the search for him in the years following his disappearance, but few items are so unusual or as poignant as a pair of snowshoes worn by Franklin himself. The shoes were donated to the museum by Franklin's great niece in 1922 and are an evocative survival of early 19<sup>th</sup> Century exploration, complete with their pointed wooden frames and criss-crossed animal hide. A contemporary note attached to one of the shoes attests that they were worn by Franklin in 1820, dating them to one of Franklin's earliest and most controversial Arctic ventures - the Coppermine expedition of 1819-1822.

Franklin's naval career was long and distinguished. After persuading his father to allow him to join the Royal Navy aged 14, he witnessed some of the most significant events of his age. He sailed with his uncle, Matthew Flinders, on his landmark circumnavigation of Australia and saw military action at the battles of Copenhagen and Trafalgar. His first experience of the Arctic Circle came in 1818 when he was second in command of an expedition to find the fabled North West passage - a safe shipping route through the ice of northern Canada to link the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. Although the expedition was ultimately unsuccessful, it seems to have peaked Franklin's interest in the quest that would make his name, and ultimately cost him his life.

The Coppermine expedition aimed to map the Canadian coastline via the river that gave the expedition its name. Tragically, the expedition was a failure. An overland trek of hundreds of miles through vicious winter weather turned into a desperate fight for survival, which these snowshoes may well have witnessed. The unprepared crew were forced to eat lichen and even the leather from their boots to stave off starvation, and some were clearly driven to madness by the experience, with some sources suggesting that cannibalism and murder both occurred. Eleven of the twenty strong party perished and Franklin was personally criticised by local fur traders for his lack of preparation and unwillingness to listen to local advice, though this criticism may not be entirely justified. In Britain, however, the story was lauded as one of courage in the face of adversity and Franklin became something of a celebrity.

Franklin would return to the Arctic for a more successful voyage in 1825 before turning to a different lifestyle as Lieutenant-Governor of Van Diemen's Land (modern Tasmania) between 1837 and 1843. In 1845 he was invited to lead another expedition, despite being 59 years of age and not having been to the Arctic for nearly twenty years. Sadly, this would be the expedition that he would never return from, and it is known that he perished on 11<sup>th</sup> June 1847, along with the other 129 members of the crew. Future research may well soon shed light on his final days and weeks, but in the meantime the museum's snowshoes serve as a poignant reminder of the exploits of one of Lincolnshire's most famous sons.

