

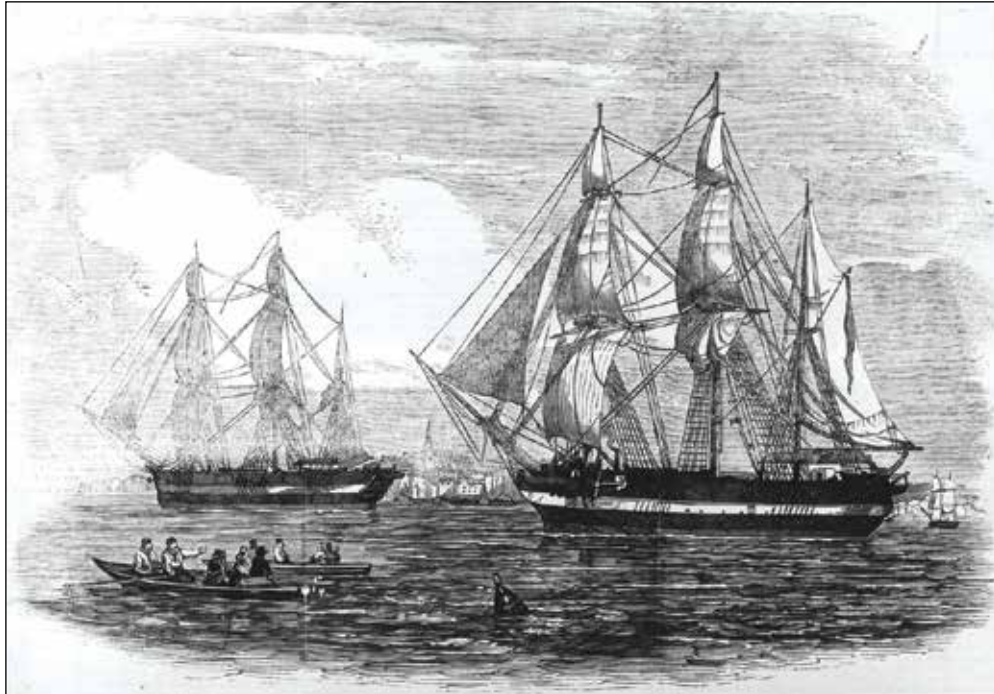
## Did Sir John Franklin Eat From These Plates?

# Transferware and Other Ceramics Recovered from the Wreck of H.M.S. Erebus

By David F. Hoexter

### Introduction

The expedition led by Captain Sir John Franklin (1786-1847) departed from Greenwich, on the River Thames, England in May 1845, in search of a Northwest Passage around Canada and a faster, safer, and cheaper, route to China. Under Franklin's command were 134 officers and men (including Franklin) in two ships, HMS Erebus and HMS Terror (Figure 1). Franklin was in overall command of the expedition and commander of the Erebus, while Captain Francis Rawdon Moira Crozier commanded Terror. This was Franklin's third expedition to the Arctic, and his last, as the ships became trapped in ice and subsequently disappeared, and the entire remaining complement of 129 was lost (five were deemed unfit for the expedition and disembarked at Greenland). Most or perhaps all of the crew did not go down with the ships; they deserted both ships in 1848 and attempted, but failed, to make their way to safety by land (it is unclear, a few of the crew may have remained with or re-manned the ships prior to their ultimate sinking). According to the



**Figure 1. Departure of the Erebus and Terror on the Arctic Expedition (public domain, from the Illustrated London News, 24 May, 1845, Getty/Wikipedia).**

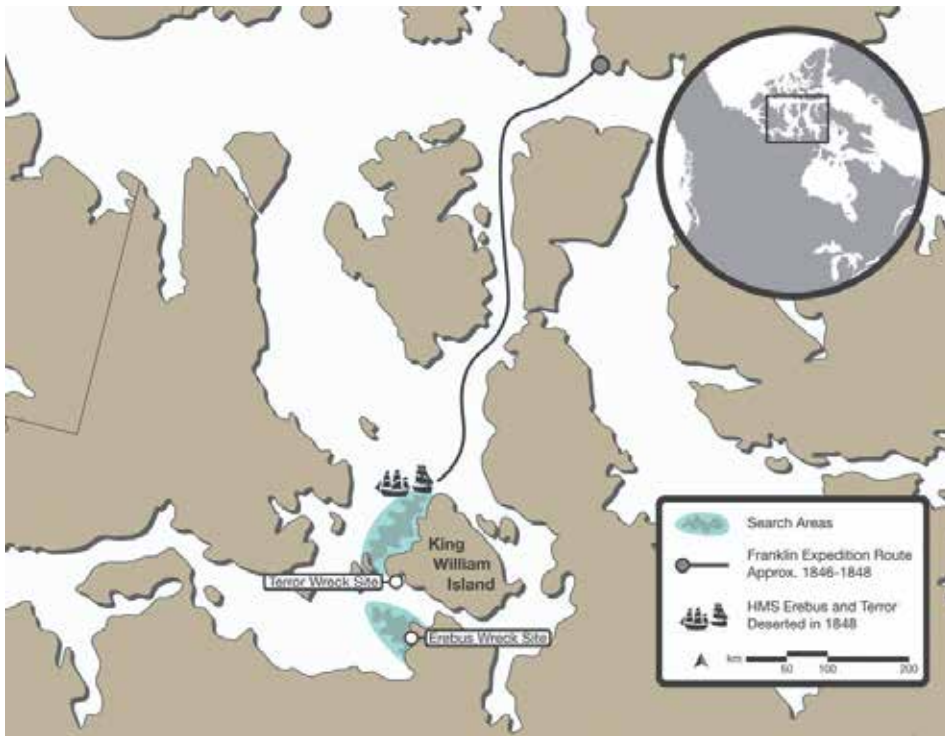
website "The Franklin Mystery: Life & Death in the Arctic", 32 expeditions from Britain and the United States searched for Franklin between 1847 and 1859! According to Charles Dagneau (personal communication), a principal underwater archaeologist with the Parks Canada Underwater Archaeology Team and participant on recent recovery expeditions, 37 Royal Navy and private search, supply and relief expeditions took place during this period, and failed to find any surviving members of Franklin's lost expedition, or either of its missing ships. We'll leave it to the reader to further explore the expeditions and Franklin's fate. There are a great many resources, both published and on the Internet.

But what does a failed expedition in the Canadian Arctic have to do with transferware? Well, thanks to underwater archaeology, quite a bit.

In 2010, Parks Canada and a number of partners initiated a new search for the lost ships, and in 2014 located the wreck of HMS Erebus in 36 feet of water near the coast of Arctic Canada (Figure 2). In 2016, the wreck of the HMS Terror was located, approximately 75 kilometers (47

miles) to the north along King William Island, at a depth of 79 feet (Figure 2). Each of the ships may have drifted, re-manned or without crews, some distance before they settled through the shallow water, remaining essentially intact and vertical (Figures 3 and 4, sonar images of HMS Erebus and HMS Terror, respectively).

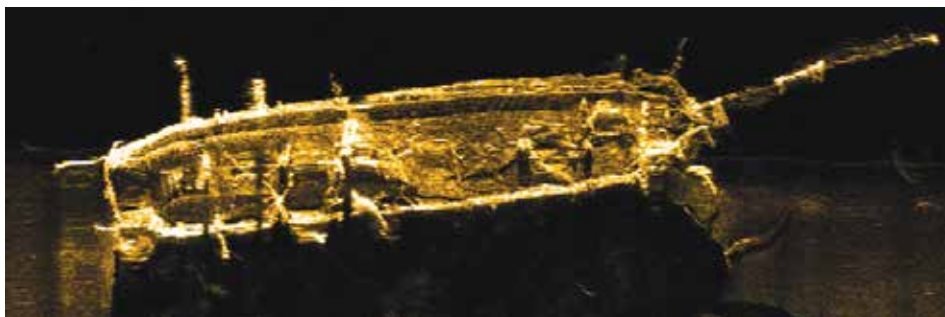
Following the ships' discoveries, Parks Canada underwater archaeologists explored the two wrecks, producing photographs, video, and several hundred artifacts (from Erebus only, to date), which were brought to the surface. The Parks Canada website and an online article from Smithsonian Magazine, as well as other sources, provide images of the wrecks and much more information, as well as images of recovered artifacts and short informational videos. Be sure not to miss the video link from the



**Figure 2. Map showing locations of the Erebus and Terror wreckage (courtesy of Parks Canada website).**



**Figure 3. Sonar image of HMS Erebus (courtesy of Parks Canada website).**



**Figure 4. Sonar image of HMS Terror (courtesy of Parks Canada website).**

Smithsonian Magazine article (see References and Additional Resources). Additional information, including identification of various expedition participants and their relationship to various artifacts from the two vessels, is included in an article by Charles Dagneau (see References).

### Discoveries

All manner of items were recovered from Erebus. Just a sampling includes surveying, navigation, meteorological, and musical instruments, such as an accordion; personal hygiene items, including tooth and hair brushes; the ship's bell, cannons, bilge pump, and other ship parts; a book cover; boots; cooking and eating implements; and even coffee beans! Examples are shown on the Parks Canada website in a section titled "Artifacts", which include both underwater images of the artifacts in-situ, as well as some of the artifacts in both recovery and following cleaning and restoration. Of course, of greatest interest to the pottery enthusiast and TCC member would be the various British ceramics, including transferware! Particularly useful in matching artifacts to users is the extensive research conducted by Parks Canada to identify the cabins of specific crew members, the officers' and enlisted men's messes, and other features, all of which facilitated linking the various artifacts to specific individuals and functions. Dagneau's article presents some of these findings, and in particular links five artifact clusters to particular individuals or groups.

The currently available information on the observed and recovered English pottery is limited. It is likely that additional patterns and forms remain to this day within the wrecks. In addition, based on personal communication with Mr. Dagneau, numerous items from the wrecks, including additional ceramics, have been recovered but not to date been evaluated. Following is my evaluation of some of the observed and recovered Erebus pottery; additional findings are likely to occur pending further evaluation of recovered artifacts and additional likely recoveries in the future.

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**Figure 5. HMS Erebus “Whampoa” pattern plate stack (courtesy of Parks Canada website).**



**Figure 6. HMS Erebus “Whampoa” pattern plates and additional patterns/shapes (courtesy of Parks Canada website).**



**Figure 7. “Whampoa” pattern plate recovered from HMS Erebus (courtesy of Parks Canada website).**

Found stacked together on the lower deck of the Erebus, within the presumed Captain’s Steward’s Pantry, was an assemblage of flow blue plates, identified as the “*Whampoa*” pattern, stored together in a fitted compartment (Figure 5). The stack contained 10 plates. Additional *Whampoa* plates and other transferware patterns and forms are scattered nearby (Figure 6). “*Whampoa*” is included in the TCC Database of Patterns and Sources (TCC DB) as records 1960 and 18096. Record 1960 includes both conventionally printed versions of the pattern and an example similar to the Erebus flow blue discoveries. Parks Canada’s website states that the *Whampoa* plates may have been owned by Sir John Franklin and used for day-to-day meals. An example of a recovered *Whampoa* plate, with the center pattern covering a larger part of the plate, suggests a smaller size plate (Figure 7). A platter drainer, apparently the underside, lies nearby, as does a possible platter. A photo of a recovered drainer indicates that it is also *Whampoa*, thus supporting a conclusion that a complete dinner service was utilized. In fact, thus far, at least 48 *Whampoa* pattern pieces have been identified from the pantry of the Erebus’ Captain’s Steward, including 23 dinner plates of two slightly differing shapes and sizes), 8 soup plates, 4 serving bowls, 3 lids, 6 platters, and 4 “strainers” (probably platter drainers) (Dagneau, 2020, slightly modified per personal communication). The Parks Canada website states that “Most of the pieces show a floral “*Whampoa*” crest on their undersides, as well as a Royal arms, with the inscription: ‘Opaque Granite China’ and ‘W R & Co’”. This mark was used by William Ridgway & Co, (Shelton, Hanley) Staffordshire Potteries (1834-1854 [1830-1854 per the TCC DB]). Dagneau states that although W. Ridgway predominates as maker, other potters’ marks occur, and individual pieces in the set vary in quality. Thus, as was common at the time, a “made up” dinnerware set of varying manufacturers and sources could be created. It is interesting to note that TCC DB record 1960 includes a mark similar to the



mark identified in the Parks Canada research, but with an additional, impressed, mark “South Wales Pottery”, active 1839-1858 at Llanelly, Wales. Finally, two additional resources provide images and information on *Whampoa*. Jeffrey B. Snyder (1995) includes a 10.25 inch plate, which he dates c. 1845 and credits to Mellor Venables & Company, Burslem, Staffordshire (1834-1851); and Halliday and Zeller (2018) include an image of an ornate handled comport and two candlesticks c. 1831-1850, credited to Dillwyn & Co, Swansea, Wales (probably Lewis Llewelyn Dillwyn, Swansea). One must wonder whether additional *Whampoa* forms lie within the wreck of HMS Erebus.

Recovered on the Erebus’ lower deck near the forecandle galley stove were additional plates. The Parks Canada website shows three from the rear, each marked (Figure 8), and indicates one pattern as “Willow” (Figure 9). One can surmise (but without definitive evidence) that the *Willow* plates were used by the crew. Several of the plates were inscribed with various post-production marks, perhaps to identify the individual owner or user, a practice in use on other ships and at military bases of the same period (Dagneau, 2020). Marked plates from this area of the ship include the makers William and Samuel Edge, Lane Delph, Staffordshire, active 1841-1848, and the aforementioned William Ridgway, Staffordshire (Dagneau, 2020).

A “medium-sized” bowl was found in the lower deck forecandle, with a pale blue transfer print of a blossoming flowering tree (Figure 10a). The base is marked with a fern pattern and the printed word “Forest” (Figure 10b). The Parks Canada website states that this sort of bowl was used by the ship’s crew during meals. As with some of the plates described above, the bowl is inscribed with the number “4” engraved onto the base, and with two notches into the foot-ring. The website states that identical bowls inscribed “JOHN ALLASON – SEAHAM POTTERY” have been identified. J Allason “ran a pottery located in Seaham Harbour (North Sunder-



**Figure 8. Reverse of three plates found in HMS Erebus forecandle lower deck (courtesy of Parks Canada website).**



**Figure 9. “Willow” pattern plate found in HMS Erebus forecandle lower deck (courtesy of Parks Canada website).**

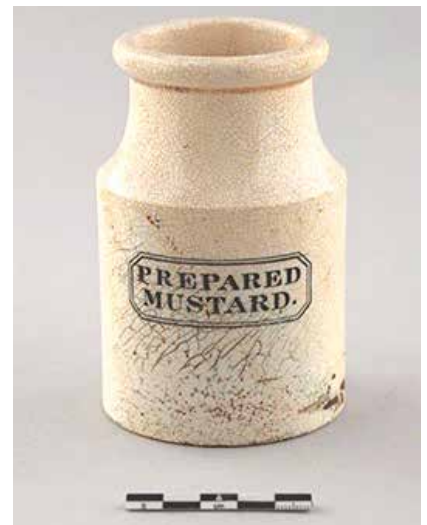


**Figure 10a. “Forrest” pattern bowl found in HMS Erebus (courtesy of Parks Canada website).**



**Figure 10b. “Forrest” pattern bowl (base) found in HMS Erebus (courtesy of Parks Canada website).**

land) between 1839 and 1841”. The TCC DB includes two examples identified as “Forest”. One is a jug blue-printed with a very similar pattern, number 12510, with an impressed mark attributed to Lewis Llewelyn Dillwyn, Cambrian Pottery, Swansea,



**Figure 11. “Prepared Mustard” jar (courtesy of Parks Canada website).**

1831-1850. The second example, pattern number 12531, is a brown saucer with a William Hackwood, Hanley,

Staffordshire, 1827-1843 mark; the TCC DB entry states that at least three additional makers produced this pattern: Dillwyn & Co, Samuel Alcock & Co, and John & George Alcock.

An earthenware jar (pot) transfer-printed "PREPARED MUSTARD" was recovered from the lower deck of the Erebus, within the presumed Captain's Steward's Pantry (Figure 11). The maker and the product producer are both unknown. The Parks Canada website states that "According to Royal Navy archival records, both Erebus and Terror were stocked with 500 lbs. of mustard at the start of the exhibition". It is unclear whether the 500 pounds applies to each boat, or the two together, but assuming that the noted weight was of the jars' contents only (and not of the contents and the jars, combined), 500 pounds would have amounted to a very large number of jars! It is interesting that such small jars were used (although of course it is possible that some of the mustard was stored in larger containers); the small size (this jar appears to be approximately 6 centimeters in diameter at the base, and I possess a similarly shaped jar which is also 6 centimeters in base diameter and is 10 centimeters high), suggests and the Parks Canada website surmises that the jar may have been part of the captain's or another officer's personal or mess supplies.

Another recovered utilitarian earthenware item was an approximately 3 centimeter high pot lid base (Figure 12). The lid has not been found. The pot could have contained any of numerous products, including ointments, creams, tooth paste or powder, pomade, shaving powder, etc, or possibly a food product such as fish or meat pastes. It would most likely have been personal property of one of the officers or crew. The British potteries produced huge numbers of these items for domestic use and export, perhaps in the millions, from the 1830s onwards.

An interesting, albeit not transfer-printed, item is an approximately 23 centimeter tall ink bottle found on the Erebus' lower deck near the presumed Captain's Steward's Pan-



**Figure 12. Ointment pot lid base (courtesy of Parks Canada website).**

try (Figure 13). The Parks Canada website indicates that this item "is made of Derbyshire brown salt glaze coarse stoneware". The bottle was corked when found, and contained a thick black liquid which "is currently under analysis". The bottle is impressed/stamped "VITREOUS STONE BOTTLED", "WARRANTED NOT TO ABSORB", "J. BOURNE", "PATENTED", "DERBY-CODNOR PARK" (Derby-Codnor Park Potteries). According to the Derbyshire Record Office website, Joseph Bourne took over the pottery in 1833, and it closed in 1861.

#### **Related Pottery**

As discussed in the introduction to this article, numerous search expeditions were launched during the years after the Franklin expedition failed to return. Among them at least one was apparently financed by Franklin's wife, Lady Jane Franklin. At least 37 attempts were made to find any surviving members of the lost expedition, or either of its missing ships. One of the earlier search expeditions (although apparently not financed by Jane Franklin) was launched in 1848 (possibly 1850) and led by John Ross, a noted Arctic explorer (ironically, both the Erebus and the Terror had been utilized for an earlier Antarctic exploration in 1839-1843, led by James Clark Ross, John Ross' nephew).

We conclude our discussion of Franklin Expedition artifacts with a pottery piece post-dating the Franklin expedition and thus NOT discovered in either of the two ship wrecks, a



**Figure 13. Ink bottle (courtesy of Parks Canada website).**

polychrome ("Pratt") (monochrome versions were also made) 3 to 4 inch diameter pot lid known as "Arctic Expedition in Search of Sir John Franklin", which depicts an incident during one of the Ross search expeditions when polar bears attacked the searchers (Figure 14a). This pattern is described in TCC DB entry 20421, and is based on a print by George Baxter (1804-1867), published in 1850 (Figure 14b). Mortimer (2003) shows an example and describes this lid. The polychrome example shown herein was unearthed during excavations of Old Sacramento, California, and was photographed by the author at the archaeology warehouse of the California Department of Parks and Recreation. One other example of a lid using the same Baxter print source



is a monochrome print advertising “Lewis Genuine Clarified Bears Grease”. Such was the import of the Franklin Expedition and its loss and numerous attempts to locate the victims that it was memorialized on published prints and further, on product containers and advertising, at least one of which ended up in California!



**Figure 14a. “Arctic Expedition in Search of Sir John Franklin” polychrome pot lid (courtesy of TCC DB).**



**Figure 14b. “Arctic Expedition in Search of Sir John Franklin” polychrome pot lid (courtesy of TCC DB).**

## Conclusions

What can we conclude about the English pottery recovered from the wrecks of the *Erebus* and the *Terror*? Of most importance is that the entire recovered pottery assemblage has not been fully documented to date (personal communication, Charles Dagneau). Thus, much is yet to be learned, and any conclusions would be premature. Nevertheless, we can state that an array of different pottery types from varied sources apparently spread through much of Britain was used aboard the two ships of the Franklin Expedition. Most of the thus-far documented items are from the *HMS Erebus*, which transported Franklin and presumably approximately half of the 129 officers and crew. The pottery items documented thus far are entirely utilitarian, including evidence of two dinner services (*Whampoa* and *Willow*). We conclude by again asking: did Sir John Franklin eat off of this plate? Although the answer is not definitive, based on the location of the recovered *Whampoa* pattern plates within the Captain’s Steward’s Pantry, the answer is “probably”.

I certainly look forward to further analysis of additional items thus far recovered, and to future additional discoveries. And thank you to Parks Canada for investigating, locating, and exploring the wrecks of the *HMS Erebus* and *HMS Terror*, and in particular to Charles Dagneau for his response to my enquiry, and his most useful comments on drafts of this article.

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- Wikipedia (Sir John Franklin): [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John\\_Franklin](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Franklin)
- Wikipedia (Lady Mary Franklin): [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jane\\_Franklin](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jane_Franklin)

## Additional Resources

- There are a number of additional websites and online videos which I recommend.
- Canada’s History video of *Erebus* [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FI7W\\_QniP-w](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FI7W_QniP-w)
- History Channel documentary “Arctic Tomb” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-j94t4tN1w0>
- Parks Canada Agency website featuring *HMS Erebus* artifacts: <https://parks.canada.ca/lhn-nhs/nu/epaveswrecks/culture/archeologie-archeology/artefacts-artifacts>
- Parks Canada Agency website featuring 2017 expeditions and video: <https://parks.canada.ca/lhn-nhs/nu/epaveswrecks/culture/archeologie-archeology/artefacts-artifacts>
- Parks Canada Agency website featuring 2019 expeditions and video: <https://parks.canada.ca/lhn-nhs/nu/epaveswrecks/culture/archeologie-archeology/explore/2019>
- Parks Canada Agency website featuring underwater archaeology at the Franklin wrecks: <https://parks.canada.ca/lhn-nhs/nu/epaveswrecks/culture/archeologie-archeology/explore/subaquatique-underwater>
- Parks Canada Agency guided tour video inside *HMS Terror* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OxyTZ3F7mkA>
- Smithsonian Institution online article and video: [https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/archaeologists-recover-275-artifacts-from-franklin-shipwreck-in-the-canadian-arctic-180981391/?utm\\_source=smithsonian-daily&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=editorial&spMailin\\_gID=47837035&spUserID=MTI1MzcyNjlxODMzNQ S2&spJobID=2380576345&spReportId=MjM4MDU 3NjM0NQ S2](https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/archaeologists-recover-275-artifacts-from-franklin-shipwreck-in-the-canadian-arctic-180981391/?utm_source=smithsonian-daily&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=editorial&spMailin_gID=47837035&spUserID=MTI1MzcyNjlxODMzNQ S2&spJobID=2380576345&spReportId=MjM4MDU 3NjM0NQ S2)