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Dear David

South Georgia History Database

I am sorry to have been slow in reporting on progress. As this is an open-ended project, I wanted to make significant progress before giving an account. However, I was slow to start because it took some time to find suitable computer software on which to set up my database. I also took on some cruise ship lecturing last summer to fill a sudden vacancy and was out of the country for several weeks.

I have now set up *Catalist* (an accession programme for small museums) and have started to enter records. While much easier than filling-in index cards, this is still a slow process. The programme was designed for real museums and I have arranged for my copy to be partly rewritten for my "virtual museum". My big challenge will be to log several thousand colour transparencies taken by Bill Vaughan, Nigel's Bonner's successor as Seal Inspector. (This will be worthwhile as Bill had labelled most of the slides with date, place and people. So the collection will be a good archive of South Georgia in the era of Japanese whaling.) Investigating the subjects of photographs and the provenance of artefacts to complete their records is also proving to be very time-consuming, but has been most interesting.

I have spent time visiting people who own relevant material. I went to Norway in June and made Shackleton the main object of my visit, so that I would not antagonise the "Friends of South Georgia" and other organisations who are recording South Georgia's whaling history. However, we have agreed to liaise on this subject. I made contact with several ex-whalers and descendants of whalers, searched the archives of the Sandefjord museum and local papers and also arranged for articles about my visit to be printed in two papers. However, the results were rather unexciting. There was no response to the articles and I found little new in the archives. The big disappointment was that I was hoping to visit Thoralf Sorlle's last surviving daughter, Lillian. She had spent four summers at Stromness in the Shackleton era. Unfortunately, within the last year, she has lost her long-term memory and can no longer recall her time on South Georgia.

I have already found some use for the database in helping Norwegian colleagues identify the subjects of their photographs and in advising the makers of films on Shackleton.

I will continue accessioning existing material and seeking new material when I return from Antarctica at the end of February. I hope that I can link with the Antarctic Virtual Museum being set up at SPRI. I am also planning to publish some of the results of researches, for instance in the James Caird Society Newsletter, Falkland Islands Journal and Polar Record, as appropriate.

With best wishes

Bob

The South Georgia History Database

While I was Director of the South Georgia Whaling Museum, I was approached by a number of people who owned items relating to the history of South Georgia. These ranged from diaries and letters to collections of photographs and various objects kept in the family as keepsakes. It occurred to me that their existence should be put on record.

One reason is that, as ownership of these items passes down the generations, their significance may be forgotten and they will be thrown away. I have heard of the destruction of objects connected with Shackleton that would grace a museum (or fetch a good price at auction!). Cataloguing such items will demonstrate that they are valued, and even valuable, and so worth saving. Another reason is that there is an increasing interest in South Georgia, so recording the existence and location of these items will make them available for research. Most of the items I have found to date have concerned the whaling industry, which is not surprising considering its importance at South Georgia for nearly 60 years. I have also been collecting material relating to Shackleton's last two expeditions, on *Endurance* and *Quest*, for, in the words of Duncan Carse, 'South Georgia will be remembered as journey's end for a great British polar explorer, Sir Ernest Shackleton; and that alone is enough to ensure it of a place in history.' With 'Shackletonmania' in full swing, this is an ideal time to seek out hitherto unrecorded material.

This is a project which I hope will be an absorbing hobby for years to come. With the aid of a Shackleton Scholarship, I have set up a "virtual museum". It is "virtual" because the

"exhibits" are not on display in museums but are kept in people's homes around the world. However, I am cataloguing them in much the same way as in a "real museum". I have acquired a computer programme called *Catalist*, which is an electronic version of the index cards which are traditionally used for recording museum acquisitions.

Recording large numbers of similar items, as in a photograph collection, is still a tedious business but computerisation makes it much easier because recording repetitive data common to many items, such as names and dates or even long descriptions in a series of photos, is done with simple keystrokes. I can also store photographs and extra information such as accompanying letters or other documents in my computer. However, the great value of *Catalist* is that I can easily sort and retrieve my records. I can, for instance, "pull out" and display everything I possess relating to R.R.S. *Discovery II* or all the photographs taken at Grytviken whaling station in the 1950s.

The majority of items in my database are photographs, dating back to the earliest years of the 20th century and the beginning of whaling at South Georgia. They have usually been kept in the family photograph album or perhaps in an envelope stuffed in a drawer. They are often unlabelled, which means that they are at best tantalising and at worst useless. However, it is fascinating how a little detective work can reveal some of the details such as names of people or ships, as well as the time and place that a photograph was taken. For instance, if a ship at a whaling station can be identified, consulting the list of ships owned by the whaling company will give an indication of the date.

There is a quite well-known photograph of Arnold Hodson, governor of the Falkland Islands, unveiling the headstone on Shackleton's grave in 1928. I had for some time wondered about the identities of the people in the photograph. This was revealed when I acquired the photo albums of Dr Francis Fraser, one of the *Discovery* Investigations' scientists who was a friend of my father. His copy of this photograph has names written in pencil around the border. They reveal that on one side of the grave stand the crew and scientists (including Dr Fraser) of the RRS *William Scoresby* and on the other the Norwegian whaling station managers. There is also Mrs Arlberg, the only woman on the island at that time, and a man simply identified as Amadroz. He was a puzzle until I was given a copy of the diary for 1927 of Captain George Mercer of the *William Scoresby*. From it I learned that Commander Amadroz was the Harbour Master at Port Stanley. There were also some interesting insights into Falkland Islands' social life!

(attached)

This is a tiny detail of a single event but I hope that, as my database expands, I will be able to fill more significant gaps in South Georgia history. I have already helped to identify photographs in a major collection of photographs taken by Edward Binnie, for many years magistrate at South Georgia, and to assist the makers of a new film on Shackleton.

I have been finding out the whereabouts of my "virtual collection" in a variety of ways. Often it is through "friends of friends" or the "South Georgia grapevine". The former led me to contact the man who inherited a gold watch presented to his grandfather by Shackleton for buying sledge dogs in Canada and transporting them to England for the

Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition. This has led me to some articles in Canadian publications that describe the details of a little-known aspect of the expedition. The latter has taken me to the whaling district of Norway where I have met retired whalers and the descendants of whalers. Another way of finding things of interest is to write articles such as this one in the hope that they will spur readers to contact me about anything in their own possession that may shed a little more light on the history of a fascinating island.

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Governor Hodson unveiling the Shackleton grave-stone: 1928.