A high-altitude mountain landscape with snow-covered peaks and a person in a yellow jacket in the foreground. The person is standing on a rocky, snow-dusted ridge, looking towards the camera. The background shows a vast, snow-covered mountain range under a clear blue sky.

Eagle Ski Club 2013
Liverpool Land
Expedition
Greenland
8/4/13-3/5/13
Mount Everest Foundation
Report

Dave Wynne-Jones

Aims of the Expedition.

To explore on ski the Himmerland peninsular and surrounding coastal mountains with a view to making first ascents of Dobbeltoppen 1040m and Kirchen 1209m amongst others.

To traverse the Istorvet Icecap from Storefjord to Kalkdal.

Acknowledgements

We acknowledge the generous financial support of the Mount Everest Foundation.

The compilers of this report and the members of the expedition agree that all or part of it may be copied for the purposes of private research.

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www.eagleskiclub.org.uk

Introduction.

Eric Shipton said, “Save Greenland for your old age,” whilst Bill Tilman seems to have followed that advice, making several sea and land exploratory visits to the area around Scoresbysund and losing a boat in the process. The Eagle Ski Club has a tradition of mounting an expedition every year to a remote area where challenging ski-mountaineering is likely. In 2012 it was decided that the ESC expedition for 2013 would go to Greenland. It took quite a bit of research not only into different areas but also into the cost of accessing those areas, before the team finally decided upon Liverpool Land.

The Area

Eastern Greenland is an extensive area of mountains bordered by the Inland Ice to the west and the sea to the east. Active glaciation has produced a classic fjord coastline with mountains rising directly out of the sea in places whilst inland, despite glacial recession, the landscape can be distinctly Alpine as the names Schweizerland and Staunings Alps testify.

The two main areas of settlement are Angmagssalik, served by Kulusuk airport and Ittoqqortoormiit served by Constable Pynt airport. Angmagssalik is the larger with around 3500 inhabitants compared to 450 in Ittoqqortoormiit where the population remains basically a subsistence hunting community diversifying into some tourism. Ittoqqortoormiit appears to be threatened by an unsympathetic government that has closed the local high school, shipping out the children to Nuuk for whole terms at a time, and has awarded the air transport subsidy to Air Greenland despite that company's inability to match the flight access previously available via Air Iceland. There is little that can be done politically since the constituency boundaries have been drawn to incorporate Ittoqqortoormiit into Nuuk so that the locals are massively outvoted by people hundreds of miles away with no common interest. We decided they could do with some support.

The mountains to the west such as the Staunings Alps are within the National Park so various permits are necessary and access is more expensive but Liverpool Land has neither of those disadvantages. The mountains do not exceed 1500m but are glaciated and the coast is icebound until June. Some ski-mountaineering has been pursued in the south and north but the area around the Himmerland peninsular appeared to be largely unexplored except by hunters and dogsledders whose activities have been mainly confined to the coast. A recent commercial “Ski Traverse of Liverpool Land” confined itself to hauling pulks through the main valleys of the area.

A British-based agency that occupies containers just beyond the airport perimeter at Constable Pynt offers expensive logistical support packages but we found that Nanu travel, a Greenlandic agency based in Ittoqqortoormiit, did a great job with the added bonus that the money was going into the local community.

The Team

Dave Wynne-Jones, 61, British, Retired.

Experience: 33 years Alpine climbing including ascents of all of the 4000m mountains & routes such as the Frendo Spur; expeditions to Alaska, Ecuador, Kyrgyzstan, Peru, Pakistan, Nepal, India, China, Chile, Antarctica; 1st ascents of Nevado Padrecaca, S. Face of Pokharkan, Dhanesh Parbat, AC 150, N. Ridge of Dangchezhengla; ascents of Denali, Illiniza, Cotopaxi, Cayambe, Pik Lenin, Ticlla (3rd), Pisco, Huascaran Norte. Ski expeditions to Mt. Logan, Caucasus (Elbrus & Kazbek); Damavand, Mustagh Ata (7546m. solo ascent), Ak-Shirak 2003, 2006 (7 first ascents), 2007 (4 first ascents), 2008 (5 first ascents , 2 first British), India (Manali), Mongolia (Khuiten & other 4000m ascents). REC course 2011.

James Stuart Gallagher; Age 68; British; Retired teacher

Experience – Have climbed since the age of 15 in Britain, the Alps, Tien Shan, Cordillera Central Peru, Yosemite, & Atlas Mts.

Ski Mountaineering since 1980 the Alps, Tien Shan, Urals, Rockies, Selkirks, & Coast Range of Canada, Mt Logan Yukon, Kamchatka, the Atlas, & the Antarctic Peninsular.

On many of these trips there were first or first British ascents. Member of Alpine Club.

John Russell; 59 ; British ; Retired Solicitor

Experience:

2004 Traverse of Canadian coastal range glaciers via Mount Waddington (with Rob Collister);

2005 Aludag Turkey, exploratory expedition (with Rob Collister); 2007 South Eastern Greenland;

2010 ESC Chile and Argentina expedition.

Philippa Cockman; 52; British; Full time GP and GP trainer in Bow, London

Experience: Walking & scrambling in UK, Ireland, Pyrenees, Alps, Zaire, Morocco, Patagonia & Nepal (ascent of Pokalde 5806m.)

Ski-mountaineering since 1998 in Scotland, Alps, Norway & Canada. ESC Chile & Argentina expedition.

Member of Alpine Ski Club. REC training course completed.

Declan Phelan; 52; Irish; Full time GP and GP trainer in Hackney, London

Experience: Walking & scrambling in UK, Ireland, Pyrenees, Alps, Zaire, Morocco, Patagonia & Nepal (ascent of Pokalde 5806m.) Alpine seasons in Arolla, Bernese Oberland, & Zermatt.

Ski-mountaineering since 1998 in Scotland, Alps, Norway & Canada. ESC Chile & Argentina expedition.

Expedition to Ala Dag mountains, Turkey.

UIAA diploma in Mountain medicine 2007 ; refresher courses 2010 La Grave, 2012 Snowdonia.

Member of Alpine Club & Alpine Ski Club.

Howard Pollitt; 55; British; Design Consultant (semi-retired)

Experience: 14 years' ice climbing & mixed routes in the Alps & Canada.

35 weeks ski touring in the Alps 1997 - 2012

Mongolia Expedition 2011

Canadian Bugaboos- Rogers Pass traverse 2012(incomplete)

Advanced Avalanche Training Programme 2009

Member of Alpine Club. REC Course 2011.

Adele Long; 56; British; Medical Research Manager (NHS)

Experience: 16 years mountaineering in Alps, Pyrenees, Bolivia, Morocco, Tanzania & Kenya.

Ski-mountaineering for 7 years in Scotland, Alps, Georgian Caucasus, Canada (Wapta Icefields traverse); expeditions to Chile (ESC) and Kyrgyzstan (Ak-Shirak range, 4 first ascents).

Member of Alpine Club. REC course 2011

Logistics

Travel

1. Flights:

Flights from London or Edinburgh to Reykjavik were followed by an Air Iceland/ Norlandair charter flight from Reykjavik to Constable Pynt via Akureyri

2. Snowmobiles were hired in advance to transport the team into Narratfjord and out from Mariager Fjord to Ittoqqortoormiit & onward to Constable Pynt through Nanu travel.

Permits.

No permits were necessary.

Communications.

Mobile phones were expensive to use in Greenland and reception patchy. We took a satellite phone that just about did the job although there seem to be problems with break-up. 2 way radios would have been a good idea since the group did split up on a few occasions.

Food.

It is difficult to obtain lightweight dehydrated food in Greenland so we brought our own supplied by www.expeditionfoods.com amongst others.

Medical arrangements.

Declan Phelan compiled and supervised a base camp pack of medical supplies and a field pack taken out on day trips. Some of us brought mini-kits of what we'd found useful on previous expeditions. It was essentially a sophisticated first aid package. Little was used other than basic antibiotics and painkillers.

Insurance

Medical and rescue insurance was provided by the Austrian Alpine Club Weltweit scheme by special arrangement, Dogtag, and HCC Medical Insurance Services (USA).

Maps

Maps of the area are available from The Map shop Upton on Severn: Saga Maps Scoresbysund.

Agency:

Nanu Travel

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mobile: +299-599118

fax: +299-991070

www.nanu-travel.dk

Expedition Log.

08/04/13

The team was united in Reykjavik after various flights, transferring from Keflavik International Airport. We spent the evening catching up and enjoying a good meal.

09/04

We flew by Fokker 50 from Reykjavik domestic airport to Constable Pynt, changing planes to a Twin Otter at Akureyri. The rest of the day was spent organising our loads and pulks for transport on the snowmobiles next day.

10/04

10am the snowmobiles arrived from Ittoqqortoormiit. We loaded up and set off north up Hurry fjord. There was a marked lack of snow in Klitdal that meant the route-finding proved rather more difficult than expected. It was tough on the snowmobiles and passengers. Leg-stretch stops were essential but one machine did overheat. However, the loads and personnel were all delivered safely to a new shelter used by dogsled teams at the head of Narratfjord adjacent to some hot springs. We had been unaware of its existence but the snowmobile team leader pointed out that we would be more comfortable there than in tents, so why not?

11/04

A very cold night led to a later start than anticipated as we climbed up snow-covered moraine into the glacier bay to the East. Most of the Cirque was comprised of steep walls of snow and rock that were unlikely ski-mountaineering objectives but an icy couloir to the south-east promised views of the coast beyond from the col on the ridge above.

We climbed this with some difficulty involving one pair in belaying from ice screws to cross a section of hard ice whilst others stashed skis to boot up the final section through unconsolidated snow and loose rock. The view from the col presented jagged rock peaks riven by glaciers rising from a frozen sea.

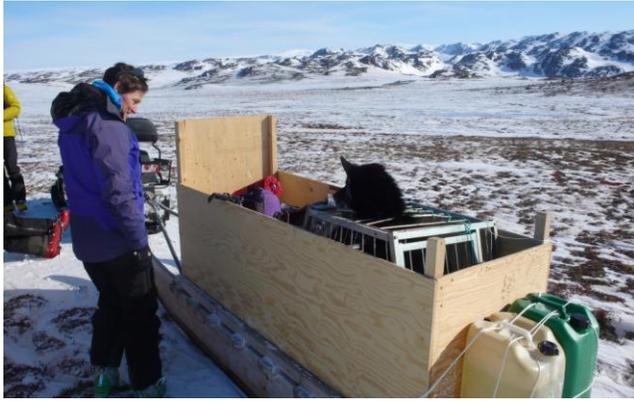
Variable snow conditions contributed to a challenging ski descent. Back at the shelter, the dog, rented as a polar bear alert and (to some extent) deterrent, had gnawed through his leash but at least he hadn't run off.

12/04

Temperatures continued in the -20°C range so again we left about 10am this time with the dog. He rapidly demonstrated that he must be the only dog not interested in going for a walk by escaping from John and heading back to the shelter. We continued north, breaking east into another glacier bay that we reckoned would lead up to Kirken. Climbing up to a broad saddle we gained views of a large frozen lake beyond whilst to the east the rocky peaks of the Kirken massif stood out against the sky. We descended to the glacier and continued east for a more thorough reconnaissance. A wide steep couloir descended from the north-east flank of the main ridge but seemed to end in a rocky headwall. All the other potential routes on these mountains appeared to be much more technical with mixed rock and ice rather than skiable slopes and with temperatures continuing so low there was no chance of making ascents that would involve anything but the most limited scrambling: bare hands rapidly became useless.

We arrived back at 6pm, taking advantage of the very long daylight hours.

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13/04

The mountains to the west now attracted our attention & we crossed the river created by the hot springs using stepping stones in order to climb up in full sun. It was the warmest we'd been so far! Lunch on a shoulder provided fine views south down the fjord to Frydendal and east into the glacier systems we had explored so far. A steep snow slope led to a broad ridge of successive rounded fore-summits before we gained the highest point, our first first-ascent N71°08'18"W22°02'19".

Some scratchy skiing around the rocks of the summit ridge led to a fine descent stitching other snowslopes together all the way back to the river.

14/04

Despite high altitude cloud the previous evening, the day turned out fine again & still bitterly cold. We had determined to explore the furthest glacier system to the north-east particularly since a likely looking col at the head of the northernmost branch glacier had been spotted from our previous day's summit. 3 hours after setting out we were lunching at the foot of that branch glacier just above the snout of the main glacier. At the head of the main glacier were a couple peaks which looked to be mostly snow or at best a short scramble to the summits, so we abandoned our plans for the col to the north and headed east.

The glacier ascent was taken at a cracking pace until the teams split into two with Howard and Philippa tackling the more northerly peak whilst Declan, John & Dave had designs on the spikier one to the south. Dave arrived on the small table-top of the spikier summit after a short but steep and very exposed scramble on perched blocks and was soon joined by Declan to see Howard & Philippa gaining the more northerly summit: two more first ascents within view of each other at N71°10'42" W21°59'22" 825m. The views were terrific with more dramatic rock spires of the Kirken range to our right, jagged ridges running down to the sea on our left and icebergs islanded in the sea ice that stretched away to leads of clear blue water in the distance.

Back at the skis the glacier provided a good ski descent followed by a climb back up and over the watershed of the main valley before skating back to the shelter.

15/05

By now we were all beginning to suffer from cold injuries and Adele had infected blisters so the day was spent soaking feet in the hot springs and treating ailments. Two of the team climbed up into a hanging valley to the west late in the day but went up no further than 600m before turning back. The dog was looking more alert & responding well to the company. We speculated that he might have been sedated for the snowmobile journey in his cage and it hadn't agreed with him. We also decided to call him Blackie as we thought there had been some mistake in the given name of "Lassie."

16/04

To our surprise Blackie decided to accompany us as we set out up-valley for an attractive-looking peak to the northwest. We reached the watershed of the valley & began climbing until Adele decided her feet were too painful to continue. She returned to the hut accompanied by the dog.

The rest of us skinned on up a series of snow ramps to a shoulder where we had lunch before continuing on to the summit ridge. This narrowed to a rocky edge so we left skis and climbed on foot to the summit: N71°10'40"W21°59'17", a fourth first ascent. We reversed the line in descent, finding that the sun had softened the snow to good "corn" so that the ski down was quite pleasant.

That evening we decided to stay another day before heading for Frydendal in order to give Adele's blisters more time to heal.

17/04

Howard, Declan & John explored the nearest glacial valley to the west of the shelter, reaching a high point on the plateau above at N71° 08' 38" W22° 09' 59" and obtaining good views inland.

18/04

We packed up and left the hut, towing pulks and haul bags 10km to the Frydendal shore of Storefjord. The dog proved his worth by helping haul each of the pulks in turn, setting a cracking pace for the owner of the pulk who had to balance out the team on the other side or Blackie would charge off at right angles to the desired direction (he was clearly used to being one of the "left-hand dogs" in a paired sled team). We took a break to do some "ice bouldering" en route on a berg locked in the sea ice of the fjord.

The weather continued fine but much colder than expected so the campsite was located to obtain maximum sunshine. It was -15°C in the tent overnight.

19/04

We finished sorting out the campsite, discussed the itinerary for the remainder of the expedition, then skinned up to the glacier system to the south-east that was planned to be our access to the Himmerland mountains. The approach looked good but to camp at the snout of that glacier would have left us trapped in the cold shadows of the surrounding mountains for too long to be comfortable. Blackie seemed happy to be out with us.

20/04

Heavy snowfall and strong winds kept us tent-bound all day.

21/04

A fine morning encouraged us to explore the valley due west of us that appeared to give access to a glacier above. There were several peaks on the ridge bounding Frydendal to the south so if snow conditions were acceptable we might be able to climb one of them. Fortunately the snow had not developed much of a windslab hazard, many slopes being swept clear of new snow by the force of the wind. We climbed carefully along the flanks of the glacier then up a steep slope to gain a broad ridge and a distinct summit. Unfortunately there was already a small cairn on it, but the views were fantastic, as far inland as the peaks of the Staunings.

Warmer weather had rendered the snow rather heavy so the descent was nothing like as exciting as it could have been. Blackie didn't think much of it and refused to follow some of the ski lines but we waited for him to catch up.

22/04

We skinned back up to the main glacier snout and on up the glacier towards Doppeltoppen. Unfortunately the glacier proved to be a lot longer than expected. In fact it was domed, more like a remnant ice cap than a glacier, but undoubtedly in recession. The bounding rock walls were far too steep to allow access to the peaks above on ski and wading through deep snow would have been a waste of time. As a route into the mountains of Himmerland it was simply not going to work for us. After hours of skinning we turned back and slid gently back to camp. At the subsequent planning meeting we decided to move on to Mariager Fjord and explore the possibilities from there.

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23/04

Another day of heavy snow meant we stayed put in camp.

24/04

We packed up and skinned up Frydendal to a pass at about 300m before making an awkward descent with short but steep drop-offs to camp at the head of Mariager Fjord. Deep snow and large sastrugi made for hard work particularly for Blackie who nonetheless put in a sterling effort with one pulk after another. Windy and cold.

25/04

The team had decided to push on over the sea ice to ascend what looked to be an easier glacier to the south rather than climbing up the nearest valley to access the Istorvet Icecap as originally planned. Unfortunately when we neared the snout of that glacier we found a 10m wall of 80-90° ice blocking further progress. There were possible fracture lines that could have been climbed but there was no chance we could get the dog up them. Realistically there was no alternative but to go back to the head of Mariager Fjord and attempt the original valley route. The spectacular icebergs locked into the sea ice offered some compensation for our wasted journey.

Unfortunately on the return journey Dave suffered from acute back pain and could no longer tow his pulk or even carry a rucksack for a while. With assistance, all returned to an area near the previous camp.

26/04

That morning a team meeting explored our options:

1. Evacuate Dave by helicopter and go on over the Istorvet Icecap with the rest of the team.

2. Arrange a pickup by snowmobile meanwhile explore more of the Mariager Fjord area.

3. Head back towards Ittoqqortoormiit along the coast to meet with incoming snowmobiles.

After much discussion and several satellite phone calls, it was established with Nanu that the weather was deteriorating but a pick-up could be arranged for 29/04, so it was agreed that we would explore the mountains around Mariager Fjord until then.

That afternoon John, Declan and Howard decided to make a fast lightweight push to establish whether the nearest valley route up onto the ice cap was in fact feasible. It was.

27/04

A grey morning with occasional snow flurries did not deter the team from attempting to climb the 1100m peak to the west of the campsite. Attaining a minor top in deteriorating weather, John, Adele & Dave decided to return to camp whilst Howard, Declan & Philippa went "to have a look around the corner." They returned very much later having summited on the original target peak.

Meanwhile Dave had to attend to the dog, which had managed to drag his snow-stake and chain out of the snow. At some point he had trodden on the steel karabiner at the free end of his chain and impaled a rear paw. It was impossible to free the karabiner because the opening of the gate was inside the paw. Adele put the dog in a headlock then Dave had to push the karabiner through the paw, open the gate then push it back through the paw to remove it. Stressful stuff for dog and couple!

28/04

John, Declan, Philippa & Dave headed out along the northern shore of Mariager Fjord to recce the approach to a glacial valley from which it looked as though a peak might be possible. Unfortunately the peak proved to be another steep and spiky rock ridge that would undoubtedly make a worthy alpine objective in warmer temperatures, but not on ski and in the current conditions. Howard's feet needed rewarming.

29/04

We packed up camp and waited a short time until the snowmobiles arrived, then loaded up and made the uncomfortable journey south down the coast on the sea-ice to Ittoqqortoormiit. The coastal scenery was spectacular but lack of snow made it a very bouncy ride and at one point the drivers had to unload the snowmobiles in order to cross a neck of land near a derelict hunters' hut or Fangsthus. Apparently, to have gone further out to sea would only have compounded the problem with more pressure ridges creating barriers across the sea-ice.

At another Fangsthus we encountered a dogsledding team that turned out to be where our dog originated. Blackie settled back into the traces quite comfortably after his owner had made a real fuss of him.

Arriving at the guesthouse in Ittoqqortoormiit quite late, we found Jennifer from Nanu there to meet us. She arranged for food and drink before we showered and slept.

30/04

We were privileged to spend the day amongst the people of Ittoqqortoormiit who were very friendly and all had interesting stories to tell.

01/05

We packed up and travelled to Constable Pynt via Kap Hope. At CNP we found we were able to avoid freighting anything out as our baggage allowances for the flight back were just sufficient.

02/05

We flew back to Reykjavik via Akureyri and stayed overnight. Before flying back to the UK

Picture captions:

1. Snowmobile access with dog!
2. Fangsthus Narratfjord.
3. Approaching steep couloir of first excursion.
4. Lunchbreak on main glacier in Kirken massif.
5. Looking down Narratfjord to Frydendal.
6. Hot spring foot treatment.
7. Summit at the head of northernmost glacier system. Kirken range in background.
8. Ski depot below summit ridge of northernmost Peak 840m
9. Iceberg locked in the sea-ice of Storefjord.
10. Climbing up to glacier west of Frydendal.
11. Team on summit of peak west of Frydendal.
12. Descending to Mariager Fjord.
13. Iceberg in Mariager Fjord.
14. Ice wall barrier.
15. Climbing up from Mariager Fjord towards 1100m peak.
16. Sunset Ittoqqortoormiit.



Conclusion

The area we explored was dominated by spectacular jagged rocky peaks that provided tremendously impressive views particularly when seen against the expanse of sea ice. Unfortunately the winter had seen unusually sparse snow-cover and for most of the time we spent in Liverpool Land temperatures were unusually low, typically below -20°C at night and out of the sun during the day. Air temperatures plummeted with the slightest breeze and the whole team suffered from cold feet despite having taken what we thought were appropriate boot systems for the expected conditions. There were several cases of incipient frostbite and on one occasion Howard's feet had to be rewarmed under medical supervision. Discussions highlighted a concern that new ski boots were now less well insulated since manufacturers had reduced insulation to emphasise lightness in view of warmer conditions experienced in the Alps in Spring which is where their volume sales are targeted.

Slopes which would have held snow in other years were instead extensively rock-studded and where snow had accumulated it was often unconsolidated. Ski ascents and descents often consisted of linking snow-slopes together between bands of rocks, although the glaciers were better. All the main peaks appeared to involve technical mixed climbing that we were simply not prepared to attempt in the conditions. Despite this we succeeded in making 4 first ascents and one further ascent of respectable peaks, although Kirken and Doppelltoppen remained beyond our reach. We also succeeded in exploring the glacier systems that flow east from the coastal mountains and established that they should provide easy access to the main peaks for any future expeditions that might wish to tackle the technical climbing later in the season, particularly in the Kirken range.

The dog was recommended to us by our agent who told us that locals do not trust the trip-wire systems employed by some commercial outfitters as a polar bear warning system. In the event we encountered no polar bears probably because they were out on the sea ice hunting seals. However they do come inland to hunt musk ox so it was a reasonable precaution. Of course later in the season there would be a lot more likelihood of encountering polar bears close to shore as the sea ice melts. Inuit dog mushers that we met insisted that the presence of the dog would also deter any bear from approaching. The dog was fine with the team but ripped one of our haul bags to pieces when he gnawed through his tether one day and went looking for food. To avoid that recurring we had to use one of our haul poles to tether him. An alternative would have been to attach his chain to the cable of a deadman or deadboy buried in the snow.

We were privileged to spend a day in Ittoqqortoormiit or Scoresbysund where 25% of the population is under 18. In view of the lack of support from the Greenland Govt in regard to flights, education and political organisation mentioned earlier, we were very glad that we had taken the decision to engage a local agent and employ local snowmobile drivers to support the local community. The service they provided was superb.

Appendix 1
Finance summary

Costs ex Reykjavik (7 persons):

Return Flights to Constable Punt: £5820

Freight: £634

Snowmobile & equipment hire: £5485.89

Accommodation & snowmobile hire, Ittoqqortoormiit: £1374

Accommodation, Constable Punt: £1030

Satellite phone hire: £87.96

Incidental expenses: £100

Total: £14531.85

Income:

MEF Grant: £1000

ESC Grant: £2600

Balance made up by members of the team: £10,931

NB

Costs of getting to & from Reykjavik varied but averaged £300 pp for flights & accommodation.