



Henry 'Birdie' Bowers
1883 - 1912



Birdie Bowers

29 July 1883, Greenock -
March 1912, Antarctica

Henry 'Birdie' Bowers is best known for his role in Captain Robert Scott's Terra Nova expedition to Antarctica (1910-3), during which he became the youngest man and first Scot to reach the South Pole but died on the return journey. Captain Scott described 'Birdie' (a nickname alluding to his beak-like nose) as a 'marvel', a short, stocky bundle of energy who was a stalwart of the expedition and rarely failed to lift his companions' spirits.

Henry Bowers' father, Captain Alexander Bowers, was born and brought up in Rue-End Street, Greenock. He sailed to India, Burma and beyond on ships owned by Thomas Hamlin of Greenock and was a captain by the age of twenty. He won a China-London tea-clipper race and explored the upper reaches of the Yangtse Kiang. A staunch Christian, he offered free passage to missionaries and his ship saw government service during the 1857 Indian mutiny. In the early 1860s the Captain joined Glasgow-based British India Steam Navigation Company (B.I.) as captain of the S.S. Madras. Now reasonably prosperous, he purchased a fine new home for his family, 'West Bank' on Greenock's Esplanade.

Captain Bowers eventually parted company with B.I. and worked in Rangoon, Burma. In 1868 he joined an expedition to explore old trade routes between upper Burma and China. Following the expedition he returned to Scotland and addressed Glasgow's Chamber of Commerce and Greenock's Philosophical Society and was elected a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society. His next venture was a shipping service

Front cover and above: Bowers with a laden sledge.

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along the Malay Peninsula, established in partnership with Patrick Henderson & Company of Glasgow. In 1877 the hitherto confirmed bachelor married Emily Webb, a young English missionary teacher; within a few years they had two daughters, Mary (called May) and Edith (Edie). By now, however, the Captain's business was suffering from depressed world trade and increased competition; in 1883 he returned with his family to Scotland, where Henderson's sold their joint-owned ships at a loss.



*Above: Captain Alexander Bowers.
Courtesy of and image © the owners.*



Above: Portrait of the Bowers family. From left, Edie, May (standing), Emily, Henry sitting with kilt on.
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On 29 July 1883, Henry Robertson Bowers was born in 'West Bank' in Greenock. The Bowers stayed at 'West Bank' for a few years, but while Henry was still a toddler, Captain Bowers returned to Burma with a new ship. After struggles against storms and increased competition affected his health he sent for Emily to join him but before she and Henry reached Burma the Captain died of heart failure. In Greenock tributes were paid to 'a worthy man and a good sailor' and Captain Bowers' name was added to the family memorial in the town's cemetery.

Emily Bowers and her children moved to London, where she supported her young family by acting as 'house-mother' to the children of friends from Burma, who were also attending London schools. Henry and his sisters received a sound religious and scholastic education. Henry, a boisterous redhead, showed an early interest in geography and travel and, at the age of seven, wrote of his hopes of visiting the distant, barely-charted continent of Antarctica.

Henry joined HMS Worcester, a training ship on the Thames, from which he graduated in 1899 with first-class honours. He joined the Loch Torridon, a Clyde-built sailing ship, as an apprentice; as he circled the globe he wrote long letters home, describing the places, people and wildlife he encountered. In London, on a return visit to HMS Worcester, he met Albert Armitage, a Scottish 'Old Worcester' about to join Captain Robert Scott's Discovery expedition to Antarctica.

By 1905 Henry was a junior officer in the Royal Indian Marine and Emily had returned to the Firth of Clyde. When Henry visited Emily's new home in Bute he swam in all weathers and explored the beaches and hills. Passing through London on his way to India, he re-visited HMS Worcester, where he met members of Scott's recently-returned Discovery expedition and heard himself described as a potential leader of a polar expedition.

In the east, Henry transported troops and the 'great and good' around India, Burma and the Middle East. He found the heat and spiders trying but enjoyed visiting his Father's old haunts in Rangoon. In 1907 he transferred to a ship based on the Irrawaddy where, between duties, he explored jungle and tribal lands and caught unrecorded species of butterflies. In sweltering heat he longed for Bute's sea breezes and envied his family's visits to snowy Switzerland. By now he was eagerly following reports of Ernest Shackleton's Nimrod expedition to Antarctica.

In 1908 Henry returned to Scotland for eight months' home leave; he swam, walked the hills and beaches, climbed Ben Nevis three times in one week and enjoyed his first family Christmas for years. On his return east he helped keep peace in Persia (now Iran) and chased gun-runners in the Persian Gulf. He was working towards promotion but when, thanks to his HMS Worcester contacts, he had the opportunity to join Captain Scott's second expedition to Antarctica, he did not hesitate.

Henry returned from India in June 1910, met up with his family in London and joined Scott's Terra Nova expedition. Now nicknamed 'Birdie', he soon made his mark with Captain Scott and was promoted from ship's officer to member of the landing party. In November 1910 the expedition left Lyttelton harbour, New Zealand (which reminded Birdie of the Firth of Clyde) for Antarctica.

In January 1911, following storms in the Southern Ocean and weeks trapped in pack-ice, Scott's men landed at Cape Evans, Ross Island in January 1911 and built their hut.



Above: Scott's Cape Evans hut, Antarctic, 2011, (c) Anne Strathie.

Birdie was expedition quartermaster, but he also took meteorological readings, trained and cared for ponies and laid food depots for the journey to the Pole. During the dark Antarctic winter he prepared rations, wrote journals and long letters home and, as ever, contributed to the social life of the expedition. Along with Edward Wilson and Cherry Apsley-Garrard he also undertook a perilous expedition to Cape Crozier's Emperor penguin colony.



*Left: Tins of Lyle's (a long standing Greenock family) Golden Syrup, Scott's hut, 2011.
© Anne Strathie.*



*Above: The 'Tenements' at the Cape Evans hut. Bowers stands at his improvised 'desk'. Cherry-Garrard is in the lower bunk, Oates in middle bunk, Meares (above), Atkinson (below) in the right-hand bunk.
Photograph: Herbert Ponting. Image © Kerry Stokes Collection, Perth, Australia.*

On 1 November 1911 Birdie and his companions set off across the massive Ross Ice Shelf; their next task was to haul laden sledges up the huge, crevasse-ridden Beardmore Glacier. Birdie, who had expected to return to Cape Evans with the last surplus sledge, was delighted when Scott chose him to join Wilson, Lawrence 'Titus' Oates and Edgar Evans on the final leg of polar journey.

On 17 January 1912, as the five-man team dragged their sledge towards the South Pole, Birdie's sharp eyes spotted a cairn and flag, which told them that Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen had reached their shared goal first. The next day Birdie double-checked their position and took photos of all five men at the South Pole.



Above: At the South Pole, 18 January 1912.

Left to right: Oates, Bowers (pulling the string to the camera with his bare-fingered right hand), Scott, Wilson, Evans.

Photograph: Henry R. Bowers.

Image © Kerry Stokes Collection, Perth, Australia.

On the long journey back, as the weather worsened, Evans and Oates began suffering badly from frostbite. By 20 March both had died and Scott, suffering from a frost-bitten foot, could hardly walk. As blizzards enveloped the tent, navigation became virtually impossible and travelling perilous. By late March, with supplies of food and fuel (needed to melt snow and ice into water) exhausted, Birdie, Edward Wilson and Robert Scott died in their tent. They were only 11 miles from their next food depot. In his last letter to his mother, Birdie assured Emily that his death would be painless and 'only sleep in the cold'.

The Terra Nova returned to Cape Evans from New Zealand in January 1913. By that time the bodies of Birdie, Scott and Wilson had already been found and buried, where they had died, beneath a cairn. When the news of their deaths reached Britain in February 1913, they were widely mourned. Emily Bowers was presented with her son's Polar medals and HMS Worcester and the RIM erected memorials to Birdie in London and Bombay and on Bute. In Greenock the name of Henry Robertson Bowers was added to the family memorial.

During 2012, the centenary of Scott's party reaching the South Pole, the expedition's exploratory and scientific achievements were widely commemorated and celebrated. Birdie was also remembered near his homes in Streatham, London, and in Greenock, where members of the Royal West of Scotland Amateur Boat Club saluted him at 'West Bank' from their 'Birdie Bowers' skiff.

Henry 'Birdie' Bowers, mariner, world traveller and first Scot to the South Pole should not and will not be forgotten.

Anne Strathie

Author, Birdie Bowers: Captain Scott's Marvel



Above: Watercolour by Edward Wilson showing Bowers on the ramp in winter 1911.

Scott's Last Expedition, Vol. I, facing p306. © private



*Left: Royal Indian Marine memorial to Bowers, originally at St Ninian's church, Port Bannatyne, Bute, now at Bute Museum, Rothesay. An identical copy of the monument is in Bombay Cathedral.
Image © and courtesy Bute Museum.*

*Above: Bowers' medals (reverse sides). Left to right: Royal Geographical Society Memorial Medal (Captain R. F. Scott's Expedition 1910-13); Polar Medal (George V, clasp Antarctic 1910-13); Italian Royal Geographical Society (Scott expedition 1913).
Image © private.*

