



MANCHESTER CRUISING ASSOCIATION

Living and Working in Antarctica

12 January 2006 Ron Smith

Ron spent two years in the Antarctic for the British Antarctic Survey in the early 1970s and gave a fascinating talk well-illustrated with a fine selection of slides. In those days – before the Health and Safety Executive became involved – it was a real and dangerous adventure. The chance of not coming back after a winter seemed to be about 1 in 100 – although, as Ron said, the losses tended to be of small groups out sledging or flying. And, to get the gruesome part over, there seemed to be a lot of blood about anyway. Seals (old males) were shot and butchered on the ice. After the choice bits had been reserved for the explorers, the rest went to the dogs (in a manner of speaking). Ron enjoyed Weddell seal and tinned veg. casserole but on balance was fonder of penguin curry.



There was one deeply unpleasant revelation. Water for cooking was collected as snow and put in a large vat by the kitchen sink. The dogs – and particularly the puppies – were inclined to (how to be delicate about this?) poop randomly, so there was always the chance that within the snow something organic lurked undetected. The counter-measure was a small child's fishing net kept by the vat. I warned you!

But (beyond the murderous and the frankly revolting) Ron's account of the comradeship, the challenges (including some prodigious drinking) and the dangers illustrated just why live talks are sometimes so much better than expensively-produced films and TV shows. How else, other than live, could we appreciate the experience of tumbling 140 feet down a narrowing crevasse, wedging our arms and legs to stop, seeing two dogs sliding past and knowing how to get out? The account of heroic bowel surgery on another dog, carried out by the cook while Ron relayed information over the radio to a doctor 1000 miles away, was marred only by its death.

Of course it was enhanced enormously by Ron's selection of slides from the 2000 he has. Some of them were of the hairy scarecrows in arctic clothing of the period that the adventurers became (in an emergency Ron could have ignited his beard and kept warm for a couple of days). But many were truly superb photos of that magnificent wilderness.

And then there were the photographs of the cute husky puppies in the bath (which didn't get used for much else by the way)...it's the only time I've heard the whole MCA audience go Aaaaaaaaaaaaah. Sappy lot! I doubt they'd survive down there for long.