

Heard Island: a history of exploration

Despite considerable sealing activity at the Iles Kerguelen from the 1770s, Heard Island – approximately 300 km to the south-east – remained undiscovered until 1853. On 25 November of that year, Captain John Heard, aboard the merchant vessel *Oriental*, sighted land. His wife provides the first recorded description of the island:

'At 10 o'clock the Captain was walking on deck and saw what he supposed to be an immense iceberg. ... the atmosphere was hazy, and then a heavy snow squall came up which shut it out entirely from our view. Not long after the sun shone again, and I went up again and with the glass, tried to get an outline of it to sketch its form. The sun seemed so dazzling on the water, and the tops of the apparent icebergs covered with snow; the outline was very indistinct. We were all the time nearing the object and on looking again the Captain pronounced it to be land. The Island is not laid down on the chart, neither is it in the Epitome, so we are perhaps the discoverers, ... I think it must be a twin to Desolation Island, it is certainly a frigid looking place.'

In the five years following Heard Island's discovery and reporting in newspapers around the world, more than 50 visits were made to kill elephant seals and render their oil. Oil production peaked in 1857–58 and continued until 1877, despite the near-destruction of seals on the island by 1859. The poor weather conditions at Heard Island and the lack of sheltered harbours along its coast meant that many vessels ran aground, occasionally sinking in view of the sealing gangs that awaited their return.

Early scientific visits to Heard Island

The Australian National Antarctic Research Expeditions (ANARE) station at Atlas Cove was established in December 1947. Before then, five known scientific visits to Heard Island occurred between 1874 and 1929. The first was by the *Challenger* in 1874, when a landing was made at Atlas Cove and a few scientific samples were collected. Poor weather limited the visit to three hours. Later that year, the *Arcona* brought a German expedition to Heard Island looking for suitable sites for observing a transit of Venus. It is likely that poor weather discouraged their interest in the island. Three visits were made in the early 20th century. The first was in February 1902 by the German Antarctic Expedition, when a small team landed at Atlas Cove to make observations and collect samples. The second was an eight-day visit to the Atlas Cove region in January 1928 by two French geologists and the third was in November 1929 by the British Australian New Zealand Antarctic Research Expedition, led by Douglas Mawson. As with previous visits, poor weather limited the scientific investigations by the field party.

Australian research expeditions

In December 1947, Australia established a research station at Atlas Cove. The station was occupied by the ANARE for seven years until March 1955 by between nine and 15 men. The station was originally planned for Spit Bay in the east,

but poor weather prevented landing operations there.

The station was abandoned in March 1955 at the time of the establishment of Mawson station on the Antarctic continent. The next visit was for six weeks in 1963, when scientists and a small climbing party were landed on the island. Poor weather prevented the climbers from reaching the summit of Big Ben.

In 1979–80 a National Mapping expedition visited Heard Island for two weeks. During this visit, the second landing was made on the nearby McDonald Islands (discovered by Captain William McDonald on 4 January 1854) by amphibious vehicle, and a small team spent five days conducting the first scientific surveys of the islands. Between 1985 and 1988, three extended visits were made to Heard Island over three summers. A month-long mid-winter visit was made in 1990 by a team of four at Spit Bay and five expeditioners wintered on Heard Island between January 1992 and March 1993. Further expeditions occurred in 2000–01 (42 expeditioners) and 2003–04 (28 expeditioners).

Foreign national and private expeditions

Between March 1969 and April 1970, the ANARE station at Atlas Cove was occupied by American scientists involved in the US Coast & Geodetic Survey. The scientists' objective was to photograph a satellite in orbit, for use in triangulation calculations to determine the shape and size of the Earth and the relative locations of the photographic stations. Unfortunately, poor weather limited the number of photographic opportunities. Early in 1971 a joint French–Australian expedition visited Heard Island for six weeks. During this expedition the first landing was made on the McDonald Islands – a helicopter landed two scientists for 45 minutes.

There have been five private expeditions to Heard Island between 1965 and 2000. The first, the Southern Indian Ocean Expedition, visited in 1964–65 with the aim of climbing Big Ben. The climbers landed at Capsize Beach – so named as the surf overturned their boats on landing – and successfully reached the summit on 25 January 1965. A second mountaineering expedition visited Heard Island in early 1983 and successfully ascended Big Ben, reaching the summit on two occasions. Another expedition, present on Heard Island at the same time, was primarily a ham-radio visit, but a small mountaineer team was also landed in another (unsuccessful) attempt to climb Big Ben. A ham-radio expedition spent less than three weeks at Atlas Cove in January 1997. They established their own camp and made more than 80,000 contacts with other ham-radio operators around the world. The third ascent of Big Ben was made in 1999–00 by four climbers from the Australian Army. Several small yachts have visited Heard Island since the early 1970s.

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