

ARCTIC ADVENTURES

Written by Sara Stirling, photos by Will Stirling



The 'Old Putney' during her successful Row to The Pole expedition

For the last five years Devon based boatbuilder and sailor, Will Stirling, has spent his summers sailing in Arctic waters.

It all began with the build of his first vessel at Morwellham Quay during 2006-2007. After completing an MA in Maritime History at Exeter University he embarked on the design and construction of a replica 1835 Westcountry Smuggling Lugger. 'Alert', a 37' wooden, two-masted dipping lugger was the kind of craft that Will's very great grandfather, Admiral Sir Robert Barlow, would have chased in his Revenue Cutters from Plymouth in the early Nineteenth century. 'Alert' was launched down the slipway into the Tamar river in May 2007. A two month voyage to Spitsbergen was planned and a motley crew, including the local blacksmith who had never set foot on a boat before, boarded the vessel under Saltash bridge. They set sail, leaving Will's pregnant wife waving goodbye on the pontoon.

After a speedy and non-stop passage round the Isles of Scilly and up the Irish Sea they reached Cape Wrath,

the northern tip of Scotland, where the weather turned nasty. One member of the crew decided lugger sailing was not for him and jumped ship. The blacksmith found the appeal of being an old salty seadog was a great success with Scottish ladies and went ashore leaving instructions to be recalled when the weather cleared. The remaining crew member, a fellow shipwright, stayed aboard and assisted with running repairs whilst waiting for Will's dad to arrive to make up for the lost crew member.

Storms delayed them so much that they soon realised they no longer had time to reach Spitsbergen (a thousand miles to the North)



A young polar bear who was interested in the boat



Will swam (or floundered!) at every degree as they sailed north

and get home again to Devon in time for the birth of Will's son. A new plan was devised with a shorter passage to Iceland. The sea off the east coast of Iceland is well known for being unpredictable and often ferocious but Alert met with a good sailing breeze and calm seas and the crew spent five days sailing up the North East coast of Iceland to Sedisfjordur. Some time was spent exploring the Faroese fjords before heading back south in time for Alfie's birth on the last day of August.



North East Land

The following summer Will made another attempt at sailing to Spitsbergen, this time on Dolphin, a friend's 100 year old wooden gaff cutter that was already in Norway. Instead of weather delaying the passage, this time it was work time constraints that curtailed the trip

Third time lucky and 2009 saw Will back on Dolphin and finally on his way across the Barent's Sea via Bear Island to Spitsbergen, a passage of six days. On making landfall they attempted to enter a mountain bound fiord for some rest but the katabatic wind (cold air falling off the glaciers and rushing down the fiord) forced them back out into the open sea and freezing mist. Weary and cold they sailed further up the coast to the next large fiord and the main Norwegian settlement of Longyearbyn. Having taken on supplies they sailed north with the mountainous coast to starboard, the Arctic Ocean to port and pack ice ahead. The initial aim

and they sailed around the Lofoten Islands and back to Norway, planning the big push to Spitsbergen the following summer.

of circumnavigating Spitsbergen depended on the extent of the ice on the north coast, which they wouldn't know until they were there.

Spitsbergen reaches north to within 550 miles of the North Pole. It is a remote wilderness full of danger from ice and polar bears. Charts for the area are very limited in the detail of depth soundings and rocks and there are no tidal atlases. Anyone venturing there is legally required to carry a shotgun. Despite precautions it is not uncommon for people to lose their lives in this land each summer. Will says, 'Up there you are really alone. If anything goes wrong there is no-one to call to come and help, you have to deal with it yourself.'



The Row to the Pole team - Will Stirling on the left



Capps and Will man-hauling the dinghy across the fast ice

Having reached Ny Alesund on the north west corner of Spitsbergen the crew split, Will and Tig walking across the mountains and the two remaining crew sailing round the headland to meet them on the other side. With the glare of the snow making it almost impossible to judge distance and contours, and Will's lack of gaiters causing constant stops to wring freezing water out of his socks, they got themselves across the mountains, met up with the boat and sailed on along the north coast. The sea was full of ice and the freezing fog made progress painfully slow. A man had to stand in the rigging to guide the helmsman through the leads in the pack ice with constant vigilance required to avoid them getting trapped and crushed by the moving floes.

“It soon became apparent that a circumnavigation of Spitsbergen was impossible this year as the ice was down hard on the coast from the Seven Isles to North East Land.”



Walrus - up close and very smelly



Climbing Nelsonoya



Will's wife, Sara, 4 day old Alfie and Bowsprit the dog on Alert on the Tamar river

After a night (although there is no darkness as the sun remains permanently above the horizon during the summer) spent fighting the pack ice, which was closing them into the bay where they were anchored, they decided to turn back and head west once again. Before leaving they made a pilgrimage to Nelsonoya, one of the smaller rocky islands that make up the Seven Isles, named after Admiral Horatio Nelson some years after he sailed to Spitsbergen in 1773 when he was just fourteen years old. It was also here that he is fabled to have had an encounter with a polar bear. Will had a particular interest in landing on Nelsonoya as his very great grandfather Admiral Sir Robert Barlow's daughter, Hilaire, married Nelson's brother William Nelson. Proud of the connection, the Barlow family formed a tradition of using Nelson in the name of the first born son of each generation. Thus George Nelson Barlow; Nelson William Barlow who was captured during the First World War; Hilario Nelson Barlow who was killed in

action at Arnhem in 1944; there were no boys in Will's mother's generation Emma Barlow; William Nelson Charles Stirling and to date his four year old son, Alfred Nelson Barlow Stirling.

Back home in warm and relatively dry Devon, Will was still hankering to achieve the goal of a circumnavigation of Spitsbergen. Plans were made for a final attempt for the summer of 2010. Another baby was on the way, but this time it had been planned so as not to interfere with any Arctic adventures ... and was due in November. For the third year in a row Will flew to Norway to join Dolphin and sail the exposed passage across the Barent's Sea. Up to Spitsbergen again, taking on supplies in Longyearbyn, on up to Ny Alesund and along the north coast which this year was free of ice. They were able to sail the complete length of the top of Spitsbergen, further on to North East Land and beyond. Ice-free seas made for good passage making but had the worrying effect of trapping the polar bears on the land, making encounters with them an almost daily occurrence. With everyone, including polar bears,

safe, Dolphin sailed south through the Hinlopen Straights with its majestic mountainous and glaciated scenery. The boat was accompanied by three large whales. The first storm hit as they entered the 'Devil's Dancefloor', a stretch of open sea between Spitsbergen and the north coasts of Norway and Russia. After travelling at walking pace for six days of huge seas, howling wind and filthy visibility they arrived (much further east than planned) at Hammerfest on the northern shores of Norway. The colours of the Norwegian houses, the verdant hill sides and bushes, were a visual sensation after weeks of ice rock and sea.

This summer Will's arctic adventuring took him to a very different part of the Arctic for a very different kind of adventure. Will's combination of qualifications and experience of sailing in Arctic waters led him to be selected to be skipper of the BBC camera boat for the Row to the Pole expedition led by Arctic explorer Jock Wishart. The aim of the expedition was to highlight the extent of polar ice melt. The team of six rowers

and four support crew flew to Resolute Bay in the Canadian High Arctic where the rowers embarked on their epic journey. Will and his team followed them for the first part of the trip to ensure that their specially designed rowing boat and all of their systems were working before saying farewell and returning to Resolute. They had hoped to pay their respects at the site where Franklin and his men were found dead after their failed attempt to discover a North West Passage in 1847 but weather and diminishing fuel stores forced them to abandon this in favour of getting back across the Wellington Channel in safety. The rowers successfully reached the magnetic North Pole at the end of August 2011 and Will had made some new friends who share his adventurous nature. They are now in the throes of planning their next adventure, not the Arctic this time but nearer the Antarctic - to build a wooden boat and sail her through the Magellan Straights at the southern tip of South America.

For more information on Will Stirling's boatbuilding and sailing adventures see; www.stirlingandson.co.uk