

The Race to the North Pole

The desire to explore uncharted regions has long inspired people to set out on daring expeditions. Svalbard's favourable ice conditions and location have made the archipelago an attractive point of departure for expeditions deeper into the unfamiliar icy wilderness. In the struggle to get furthest north, Virgohamna became a key point of departure in the race for the greatest trophy of all - the pole itself.



Two characteristics of the 1800s were a focus on wild, untouched nature and a belief in progress. Nature, which earlier had primarily been viewed as a resource and a threat in the struggle for survival, now had aesthetic value, becoming a source of dramatic experiences. But nature had to be subdued. Technology was the tool by which humans would win control over nature. What place was more suited to show the potential of technology than the inaccessible, magnificent and dramatic Arctic regions?

Faith in the advantages of technology resulted in a drive to get to the North Pole by ship, sleds using humans and reindeer as draught power, and flying machines. But it was with the oldest and most traditional vehicle of transport, the dog sled, that both poles were finally reached. Thus, many of the expeditions become an expression of the period's exaggerated optimism concerning progress and man's constant lack of respect for knowledge accumulated through many generations' co-existence with the



Thousands were gathered when Andrée leaves Gothenburg in Svensksund in 1896. This was Andrée's first attempt to reach the pole.

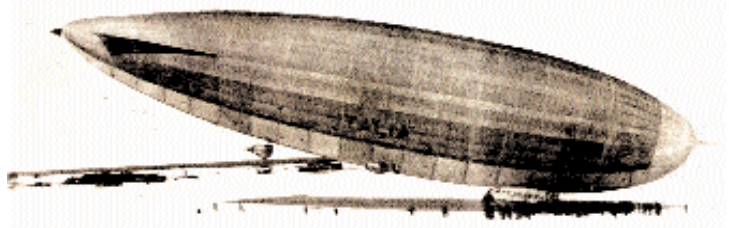


Photo: From Arnesen 1928

Although their attempts from Virgohamna failed, Andrée and Wellmann prepared the way for later air expeditions. The establishment of mining operations in Ny-Ålesund opened the way for explorers. Ny-Ålesund became more accessible for expeditions and the media, and had more appeal than the wind-blown, harsh site in North-West Spitsbergen. The landing mast in Ny-Ålesund (right) was used both for the expeditions by Ellsworth, Nobile, Riiser Larsen and Amundsen in 1926 and for Nobile's failed attempt two years later. The photo above shows Italia in Ny-Ålesund in 1928. In 1926, the American Richard Byrd attempted a flight to the North Pole with pilot Floyd Bennett. They took off under Amundsen's nose and returned 15 1/2 hours later, enough time for a trip to the North Pole and back. Amundsen tried being a good loser and congratulated Byrd with "a real kiss on both cheeks", as he wrote in his memoirs.

environment.

National prestige

The polar explorers and scientists returned home with travel descriptions, samples of unknown organisms and observations of remarkable phenomena - data gathered under the severest of conditions, often at great risk.

Their deeds made them important national heroes to emulate. During a period marked by international rivalries, scientific and physically demanding expeditions were a good means of increasing national prestige.

The conquest of nature revealed the strength and technological level of a nation

and the claim that its people had a special ability to endure arctic environments. The expeditions were instrumental in creating a common national awareness of native strength and superiority - that "our" characteristics are better than "theirs".



Photo: Andree Museum

National heroes

Man against nature, expeditions and explorations, were themes just as popular around 1900 as they are today. Thousands gathered when Andrée's polar expedition left Gothenburg. Crowds equally as large gathered in Norway when Fridtjof Nansen and *Fram* returned from their expedition in 1896, and when Roald Amundsen returned in triumph from the South Pole. The position of the polar



Photo: Norwegian Polar Institute

There was widespread interest in Wellman's expeditions. Tourists who wanted to see Jules Verne's fantastic tales come true streamed to Virgohamna in 1909.

heroes in Norway is perhaps best understood from Nansen's death in 1930. The funeral was held on Norway's national holiday, with mourners replacing the happy flag-waving children along Oslo's main thoroughfare.

Polar heroes were not only the objects of attention in Norway and Sweden. There was great interest in them abroad. The same was true for the British expeditions of Ernest Shackleton and Robert F. Scott, the Americans Robert Peary, Fredrick A. Cook, Richard Byrd and Walter Wellman, and the Italian Umberto Nobile.

The expeditions were great media events. Lack of communication with the outside world during the journey led to speculations in the press that helped fan interest. Back home, books about their deeds had many readers and gave the heroes large incomes, which helped finance further expeditions.

Svalbard played a central role in the attempts to reach the North Pole. Tourist ships and journalists flocked to the islands to follow preparations for the many expeditions. This put the islands on the world map for readers around the globe.

By air to the North Pole

During 1896-1928, Svalbard was the point of departure for nine attempts to fly to the North Pole. Five of these were from Virgohamna.

These journeys by air represented the ultimate in technological development. Andrée was a pioneer in the use of the gas balloon. Walter Wellman was one of the first to use motorised dirigibles. Both used their time in Virgohamna to make continual improvements on their

equipment.

The expeditions went into unexplored areas, without knowing what lay ahead. Even though the expeditions of neither Andrée nor Wellman were primarily scientific, the motives and results must be



Photo: F. Aitid

evaluated from the perspective of their own time. In the vast Arctic wilderness any observations helped increase general knowledge. The journeys by air thus yielded not only new knowledge, but also honour and fame to members of the expeditions, their sponsors and their



Photo: H.B. Bjørck

nations.

Regions were occupied, heroic deeds were spread by newspapers and books, and the heroes received ovations when they returned home. The remains of their exploits lie scattered in Svalbard: mementos of successful expeditions, but also of the losers - those not given a

“...a desolate, dismal place ... an isolated, disagreeable bay”

This is Fridtjof Nansen’s description of Virgohamna in En ferd til Spitsbergen [A Journey to Spitsbergen] (1920). However, neither comfort nor pleasure is what those responsible for the many expeditions based in Virgohamna were after. What is it that has attracted the interest of whalers in the 1600s, the first wintering tourist - and the North Pole expeditions of Andrée and Wellman? What circumstances can explain such diverse activity in the same location?



Virgohamna has remains from several important periods of Svalbard’s history. Blubber ovens and graves from the 1600s, ground beams from a tourist cabin from the 1800s that was also used as a catching station, and many traces from attempts to reach the North Pole by balloon and air ship in this and the previous century. The photos show Virgohamna today (top), Andrée’s base (left) and Wellman’s base (right). Maps on p. 9 and 32 help us identify historic sites in Virgohamna.

Photo (top): T. Koil Gamst (l): Andrée Museum (r): Norwegian Polar Institute

The meeting of giants

The mighty Gulf Stream has its northernmost destination near northwest Spitsbergen. Through a deep-water channel along the western coast of Spitsbergen the

stream of warm sea water is thrust into the icy Arctic waters - until at last it meets the frigid ocean current over the polar basin.

The meeting of these global ocean currents is

emblematic of the meeting of two famous polar expeditions in 1896. Virgohamna was the first stop for Nansen’s *Fram* after it escaped from the ice-covered ocean current over the polar basin.

Simultaneously, and in the same location, the Swedish balloonist Andrée had established his base and waited for the “favourable winds” that would carry him directly over the Pole. Andrée had followed the ice-free, warm Gulf Stream in order to reach this northernmost accessible point on the way to the North Pole. Even this far north, the Gulf Stream is warm enough to leave an open passage that permits vessels to approach the western coasts of Spitsbergen during most months of the year. The ocean current thus forms a navigable corridor deep within the frozen polar region in closer proximity to the North Pole than any other place in the Arctic.

Good feeding grounds

The ocean currents were just as important for whalers in the 1600s. The whalers also followed this channel of open water furthest north. Even more important, the meeting of the warm and the cold ocean currents created a nutritionally rich environment for several whale species. When the first whalers came to North-West Spitsbergen, there were great numbers of whales not far from land.

A safe harbour

To the extent that safe harbours exist in this harsh environment, Virgohamna is one of them. The place-name stems from Andrée’s polar expedition, which utilised the reinforced steamship *Virgo* for transport. The harbour is a calm inlet in the Danskegatt, protected by small reefs and islets. From the west there is a short and deep approach to the harbour. There is also easy access to the fjords.

Nature’s own conditions have made Virgohamna ap-

pealing in various contexts. The combination of varying environmental factors provided the foundation for a unique cultural history. This history has today left its mark on the landscape, through cultural heritage landmarks - and not least in the realm of place-names.

The story from above

Page A4 of the map series Svalbard 1:100 000 shows place-names around Virgohamna. Names such as *Danskøya*, *Amsterdamøya*, *Hollenderberget*, indicate the presence of several nationalities. *Smeerenburg*, or “Blubbertown”, states the importance of whaling in the area. The *Place-names of Svalbard* helps make sense of names such as *Salatberget* and *Slaadbukta*. “Zalad” is a Dutch term that means “scurvy grass”, a vital necessity for whalers and trappers in Svalbard. *Likholmen* and *Likneset* (lik=corpse) underscores the fact that this grass was not always sufficient, and the name *Djevløya* (Devil’s Island) provides a glimpse of the harsh conditions endured by hunters and whalers.

Polar history revealed in the landscape

North-West Spitsbergen is one of the few places in the world where names like *Ballongkollen* and *Luftskipsodden* are quite natural. Many other names indicate the significance of the region for the prestigious race to the North Pole. *Wellmankollen* needs no explanation. But perhaps *Örnenøya* does: it was named after Andrée’s balloon - and *Lachambrebreenn* after the French balloon manufacturer. *Kapp Zachau* takes its name from Hugo Zachau, captain of the *Virgo*. The names *Gjøavannet* and *Frambukta* are reminders of



famous polar vessels. *Archernabbane*, three mountainous ridges in the northernmost part of Frambreenn, take their name from Colin Archer, who constructed the ship *Fram*. Other polar explorers whose names live on in the landscape are perhaps lesser known:

Blessingberget: Henrik GrevBlessing, member of the *Fram* expedition.

Astrupneset: Eivind Astrup, Norwegian polar explorer who participated in Peary’s expeditions from 1891 - 93.



Photo: H.B. Bjørck

Ekholmppynten: Nils Gustaf Ekholm, member of Andrée’s expedition 1896.

Strindbergfjellet: Nils Strindberg, member of Andrée’s expedition 1896/97.

What about S. A. Andrée? For the most famous polar explorers a map page at a scale of M 1:100 000 is too small - Andrée Land between Wijdefjorden and Woodfjorden covers all of 6



map pages. And for the most important explorers, even Svalbard is too small:

Amundsen and Nansen have had to go way out to the Arctic Ocean to find space, further north and in deeper waters. We need a globe to find the enormous *Nansenbassenget* in its entirety north of Svalbard, Franz Josefs Land and Novaya Zemlya. And still further north is *Amundsenbassenget*, under the North Pole itself.

Cultural heritage landmarks – history on ground level

It is on ground level and not on a map that we find traces of the people. There are outlines of buildings, remnants of blubber ovens, graves, remains of various installations and collections of deserted equipment and refuse. Maps and historical accounts provide a general outline. Cultural monuments tell us about people and how they lived – and died.

Harlinger kokerij

Historical sources say that Harlinger kokerij in what was once known as Houker Bay was founded in 1636, due to lack of space in Smeerenburg. A few years later, the good times were over. The whales had virtually disappeared from nearby coastal areas and had to be



Scattered along Svalbard's coastline are the graves of whalers who died from sickness or misfortune. Permafrost, and the dry, cold climate, have provided archeologists with unique finds. The dead have often been preserved along with their clothing and personal effects, giving us a rare glimpse into the lives of these persons. Above: From Likneset. Below: Whaler's grave from Jensenvatnet.

pursued far out to sea. The blubber ovens (tryworks) there therefore declined in importance from about 1640.

Already by 1671, when Friedrich Martens visited the area, the Harlinger kokerij was a cultural landmark. He describes two warehouses and three dwellings each with a living room, bedroom and attic. There were thick layers of ice in the buildings. Ice had caused barrels and kegs to burst, revealing their contents, which, frozen, retained the shape of the containers. Anvils, blacksmith tools and other equipment protruded out of the ice. A big boiling kettle could still be seen in one of the blubber ovens, with

wooden cooling vessels nearby.

The buildings described by Martens are still visible (*see map p. 9*). There are also several



Photo: Tromsø Museum

graves here. Archaeological investigations of similar graves in the vicinity provide a unique close-up view of the whalers. The graves are well preserved, and clothing has been discovered that is not found even in museums in the whalers' homelands. Many skeletons reveal traces of the dreaded scurvy, and most sets of teeth show strong traces of wear from clay pipes.

Blubber ovens and oil extraction

On the stony shore of Virgohamna we find the foundations of three double blubber ovens. Scattered about are yellow bricks that lined the ovens. Inside the furnaces there are rings of blubber cement, i.e., charred blubber combined with sand and gravel. This blubber cement reveals the outline of 2-3 m wide copper cooking vessels, now gone. Ramps were built on the sides to ease loading to and from the cooking vessels.

How were the blubber ovens operated? After the whale was towed ashore it was flensed and the blubber cut into

smaller bits. The drawing shows how the blubber was carried to the chopping boards where the blubber was cut. As it was cooked, the oil separated from the blubber, and the fritters (boiled blubber pieces) were skimmed off. The fritters were used as fuel in the furnace. From the cooking vessel the oil was scooped over into cooling vessels, where it was filtered before being put into barrels.

Early whaling concentrated on the ca. 20 m long Greenland whale. It was sluggish and easy to catch, and could weigh about 100 tonnes. A single whale could yield about 100 barrels of oil. The approximately 100 baleens in the whale's jawbone were also very valuable, and were often used in the production of stiffeners in dresses, corsets and umbrellas.

Whaling in the early 1600s was extensive. The Dutch concentrated primarily on North-West Spitsbergen. For many decades there were about 100-250 whaling boats that annually caught 750-1250 whales. This slaughter

exterminated the Greenland whale from the area.

Pike's Bay – Pike's house

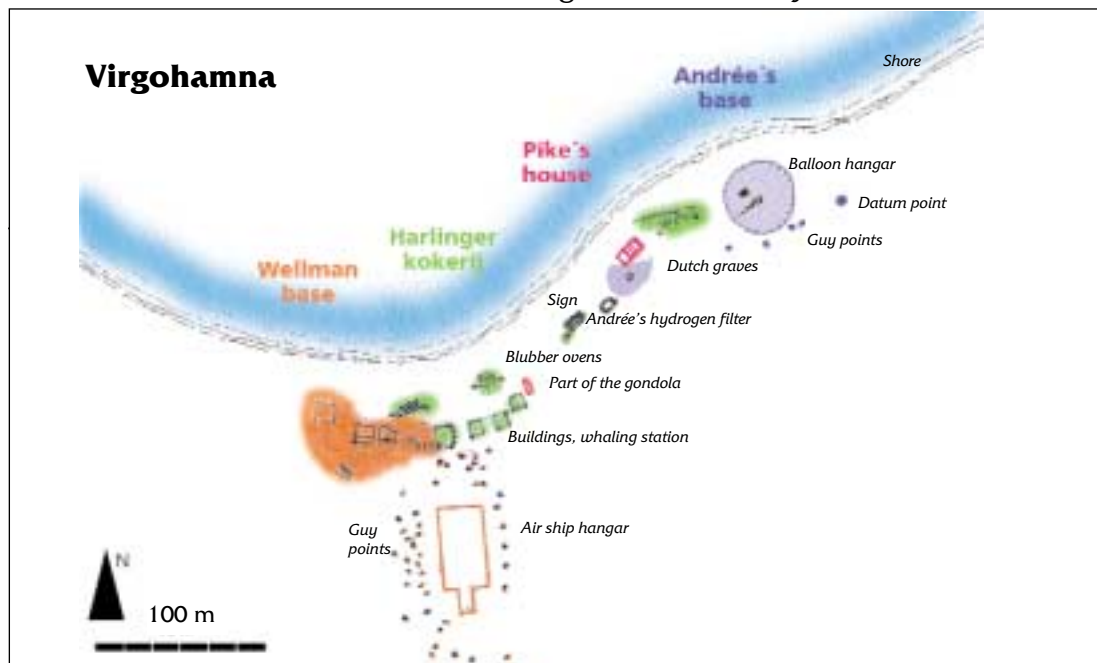
In 1888, the Englishman Arnold Pike had a house prefabricated



Along the beach there are traces from Harlinger kokerij - one of the Dutch blubber ovens that was established in 1635. The drawing above shows the operations at the site. From Hacquebord 1988

in Norway in which he would spend the winter in Svalbard. The aim was to see the dramatic changes during the year in this exotic desolate area. The house was erected on the former site of the old Harlinger kokerij. The old name was forgotten, as was the station, and in only a few years the place was known as Pike's Bay.

Photo: T. Camst



Drawing by H.B. Bjørck



The balloon hangar was exposed to severe weather conditions in North-West Spitsbergen. Strong guy points were required. Some are still visible in Virgohamna.



Pike's house

The crew on the sloop *Siggen* assisted in setting up the house. Six of them stayed with Pike during the winter of 1888-89.

Later, the house was utilised by Andrée and Wellman. Pike was present the summers of 1896 and 1897. Pike's house was moved to Barentsburg in 1925. What finally became of it is not known.

Virgohamna – base for North Pole expeditions

Andrée established his base in 1896, and built a gigantic shelter for his balloon, *Örnen* (the *Eagle*). The hydrogen filter was erected just behind Pike's house.

Traces of Andrée's base are still clearly visible – the foundation and guy points for the balloon hangar and the depression in the centre of the floor into which the gondola was lowered. Scattered about are bits of boards, nails, bolts, lengths of wire, and remnants of the felt that lined the interior of the hangar to protect the balloon. The trench where the gas pipe was brought into the hangar is still visible. Remains of the gas equipment may be seen. There are scattered piles of rusted iron filings used in the production of gas.

Andrée's balloon hangar was partially torn down during



Walter Wellman made several unsuccessful attempts to reach the North Pole. After his final attempt failed in 1909, the dirigible, the gondola loosened and crashed to the ground. The rest of the vessel soared into the air until growing pressure caused it to spread over a wide area in the western part of Virgohamna. Wellman opened a bottle of champagne and played solitaire.

the balloon ascension in 1897. The remains were reused in a rather comical way in yet another North Pole expedition: The German lieutenant-commander in the reserves, D.O. Bauendahl, built in 1901 an eight meter long raft with two masts from the wooden constructions at Virgohamna. The raft sunk while being towed off the coast of Prins Karls Forland – along with two year's provisions.

Wellman established a base for his expedition furthest west in the bay in 1906. He constructed a gigantic hangar to house *America*, a dwelling for himself, a hydrogen plant, and stacked pipes, crates and barrels of iron filings and scrap iron, sulphuric acid, oil and gasoline, tools, equipment and material.

Wellman also used the base in 1907 and 1909, and attempted several unsuccessful flights. He no doubt had plans to return, but with the news that Cook had conquered the North Pole, he gave up the plan for good.

This is an important reason why so much was left behind. The framework for the hangar lies flattened in an orderly fashion on the ground. The house is gone, but its foundation is visible. Also visible are remains of the dirigible, fuel tanks, the frame of the gondola, and fragments of canvas and framework material from the air ship.

Virgohamna becomes a cultural monument

Nansen visited Virgohamna in 1912 and describes an installation in serious disrepair just 3 years after Wellman had deserted the base. The reason for his visit was engine damage. The ship's engineer had recommended going to Wellman's base for a replacement:

The debris left by this great humbug was scattered everywhere. A pathetic sight. The balloon hangar had collapsed after predatory hunters had helped themselves to steel stays and anything of use. All kinds of objects lay spread between the stones. A number of steel petrol



Photo: Norwegiang Polar Institute

ble was towed back to the base. While dismantling the used the balloon to explode. The remains of his dirigible were

drums, crates, tools, tin cans, steel cables twisted in all possible directions, acid carboys, barrels of iron filings, rigging screws, etc. The equipment for producing hydrogen gas was still in place. (...) The living quarters were large and spacious, but not very pleasant. A corridor with various rooms formed the outer part of the house all the way around, and enclosed on all sides a large middle room that was probably a sitting room for the residents, but it had no windows (...) the light came from a little roof structure. There was a bathroom with a tub, a kitchen, a darkroom for photography, and much more. The house was in good condition, that is to say the walls, ceilings and floors, but the locks and door handles and anything metal had been removed, so the doors stayed open, exposing the interior to the elements. This is, unfortunately, what hunters do, and it is an indication of European greediness that gives cause for reflection. (...) What should one say to the fact that no windows and doors in Spitsbergen can keep their hinges, hasps, or locks? They stand open, and snow and ice get in and destroy the cabin. (...)

But why point a finger at hunters? We have also come here to help ourselves. We found some rigging screws that were also useful for

stretching forestays, so we took a couple of them.

Nansen shows us how a cultural landmark comes about, how it is “developed”. Nansen describes the first phase, when the remains still had utilitarian value and were plucked apart for that reason. In the second phase Virgohamna becomes a

refuse is the residue of famous events in world history. The desire to take some of this excitement home in the shape of a piece of board or a loose bolt is understandable - but impossible. The excitement does not lie in the objects themselves, but the context in which they exist. Many fail to



Fuel tanks from the wrecked air ship America.

Photo: B. Elnan

tourist attraction where visitors want some memorabilia. His description illustrates how this pilfering speeds up the process of natural decay.

Is it possible to own a cultural landmark?

As often before, we can learn something from Nansen’s comments - how to conduct ourselves when visiting historical sites. Everyone who visits Virgohamna is affected by the excitement of the amount of “talking” refuse, in absurd contrast to the overwhelming and almost untouched Arctic wasteland surrounding it. This

realise this until they get home and unpack a piece of board that is no longer a part of Andrée’s balloon hangar. We see too late that the theft was just meaningless. Some try to undo their mistakes, like the Swedish Andrée enthusiast who in 1997 attempted to return a number of souvenirs he had collected 10 years earlier. Bits of paper reveal that the objects include a *Piece of wood from the balloon hangar, Nail, Wire, Rope, Filings from the hydrogen plant*. The context is lost - even though the objects have been returned. Throughout its 100 years as a historical site, Virgohamna has been



Virgohamna 1906 with wood from Andrée’s balloon hangar, Pike’s house and the framewor from Wellman’s hangar. The North Pole base was a tourist attraction.

Photo: Norwegiang Polar Institute

Andrée's balloon expedition from Virgohamna toward the North Pole

Virgohamna, 1:46 p.m., 11 July 1897: Everything is set for an expedition in the spirit of Jules Verne, equipped with high-technology and daring in the struggle against the extreme forces of nature. The balloon, Örnen (the Eagle), a technical marvel, creaks powerfully against its tightened towlines, heavily loaded with the best of special equipment and instruments. Salomon August Andrée, Nils Strindberg and Knut Frænkel are in place in the gondola, which has been lowered into the pit in the middle of the balloon hangar. Around the men are their closest co-workers. Outside, a whole world is following the drama hour by hour. "Attendez un moment, calme!" shouts the French balloon expert, and in the hush that follows Andrée's voice resounds: "Kapa allt!" Light flashes on three knives - three men are being sent to their deaths.

Let us capture this image in the millisecond before the moorings are cut - what was the background and the drive behind this daring expedition? What were the expressed goals, what were the underlying motives? Behind Andrée's resolute expression there is a chaos of dreams, ambitions, experiences, memories, skills, that all come together in this moment. Not even Andrée could have explained it, let alone us. Even so, let us attempt to sort out some of the things that may shed light on the fatal balloon expedition. We begin by going back a scant year, to Andrée's first attempt to reach the North Pole.



The departure of the Andrée expedition, at 1:46 p.m., 11 July 1897.



Andrée's base was built under difficult conditions.

Photo: Andrée Museum

the dreaded Arctic winter lurks behind the northern horizon. But for the polar sojourners, scientists, technicians, boat crews, officers, carpenters, tourists and journalists in Virgohamna, the days only grow longer. Everything had been ready for more than two weeks. Only two days remained until the absolute final deadline for departure.

Andrée wanders idly

among the people and installations, in the midst of the realisation of the plans he had borne deep inside himself for many years. Örnen, the partially steerable balloon, grinds impatiently against the felt-covered walls in the 20 m high balloon hangar. The specially constructed pockets fastened inside the gondola and the carrier hoop were packed with tools, tacks, nails, rifles, ammunition, fishing

VIRGOHAMNA, 14 August 1896

The sun is ever lower on the horizon, summer is fading -

equipment, sewing kit, medicines, building sets for a boat and sleds, sleeping bags, tents, maps, reference works, navigational equipment, film and cameras.

They had used a month and a half to set up the base. The base included a balloon hangar and gas plant where 5,000 m³ of hydrogen was produced from 2-3 t of iron filings, 41 t of sulphuric acid and 76 t of salt water - in addition to 450,000 l of rinsing water. Hundreds of metres of rope and lines were cooked in petroleum jelly and



Photo: Andree Museum

Photo: Andree Museum

tallow. Friction against towlines was tested in water and on land, instruments, clothing and weapons were checked. They had tested the specially constructed primus that was to hang from the gondola at a safe distance from the explosive balloon, and had trial-released carrier pigeons that were to take back news from the northward bound expedition.

Andrée's vigilant eye looks for a sign of a favourable breeze: a flutter of the flags atop the hangar, a ripple on the sea, cloud formations on the horizon. He casts an impatient glance at the weather instruments. All that was lacking was the wind that would bring the expedition to the North Pole. Would it be for nothing? An uneasy, mute atmosphere had settled over the base that earlier had been the scene of hectic activity. The crew had begun making preparations for a trip home



a band of stray ruffians. But it was Nansen's *Fram* that slowly entered the harbour. This was the first time in 2 years and 11 months its crew had seen land. They had only seen pack ice in the Arctic Ocean. They returned now without Nansen and without having reached the Pole, but as victors none-



The expedition crew built a gas plant that produced 5000 m³ hydrogen from 2-3 tonnes of iron filings, 41 tonnes of sulphuric acid and 76 tonnes of salt water - in addition to 450,000 litres of rinsing water. Above we still see remnants of the felt that protected the Eagle inside the balloon hangar.

in defeat. The *Virgo's* captain, Hugo Zachau, felt boundless irritation over the scientists' lack of discipline. Nils Ekholm kept on about gas leakage and safety. The journalists bristled with false energy. Nothing is worse for people with great objectives than to have to wait.

Fram arrives

But precisely this day, 14 August 1896, would be noteworthy in polar history, unexpectedly, with Andrée as an outlooker. An unfamiliar and weather-beaten vessel appeared on the horizon. The crew, unshaven and untrimmed, could have been

theless. Nansen's plan had been successful. There were handshakes, cheers, speeches and champagne - and concern for Nansen and Johansen who had left *Fram* on that very day 17 months earlier.

Two days later Andrée gave orders to return home. During the packing he may have remembered that he had recently spoken ironically about Nansen's plan to drift passively with the ice. As Andrée, downcast, was on his way toward Tromsø, Nansen turned up in Hammerfest, quite alive after spending the winter at Franz Josefs Land. He had even managed to gain



Just before take-off, July 11, 1897, the large wooden planks were thrown on the ground to free the balloon. The photo shows the felt from the inside of the balloon house (see p. 13).

Photo: Andrée Museum

ca. 20 pounds, and seemed in better shape than before the polar expedition, brighter and more blustery than ever. Nansen and Andrée met in Tromsø on 24 August 1896. Nansen could affirm with self-satisfaction that he held the record for getting farthest north. Andrée hastened off to Sweden. He had no desire to follow in the wake of Nansen's confetti-strewn trail along the coast of Norway.

The winter of 1896–1897

Nansen and Norway had won the first round of the polar championship - Andrée and Sweden had left the race. This was perfect for Norway, caught up in the struggle for national independence from Sweden. Andrée was probably aware of Alexander Kielland's words that make reference to Nansen's victory and Andrée's defeat:

"It was a blessing for the entire country, laden with trials, that he came home, and home in such a manner - yes, even the Swedes had to contribute to the splendour with their 3 wind bags who returned home with the balloon between their legs".

Andrée exchanged correspondence with the polar hero. He must have envisioned Nansen, snug with victory and snug before his fireplace, as he read Nansen's reply with this stabbing postscript: *"I believe Macbeth's golden words could be placed on your banner: 'I dare do all that may become a man; Who dares do more is none'. It is in drawing this boundary that true spiritual strength reveals itself."*

Andrée replied, *"Since I have proven that I am capable of returning, I am greatly tempted to do just the opposite."*

There must have been ample time for words like these to ring in Andrée's ears during the course of his

"involuntary" wintering in Sweden. There was no lack of agitating formulations in the press - from loyal supporters, polar competitors, a myriad of know-alls, and not least himself: *If we succeed, and when our feet stand again on firm ground so we can say 'mission accomplished', you must know that our thoughts will be*



Photo: Andrée museum

The members of the expedition in 1896: Nils Ekholm, Salomon A. Andrée and Nils Strindberg. Knut Frænkel (right) joined them in 1897 after Ekholm had withdrawn from the expedition.

here with you where the expedition received vital help and support. And should things not go so well - then in the final moment our thoughts will fly back to Gothenburg, and my last thought shall be, 'Oh, I will not be able to thank them one more time'. (Andrée's departing words in Gothenburg in 1896.)

We sense here something that may explain some of Andrée's motivation. But there is more - something that lies deeper in the past. We must go back to 1882, when Andrée spent the winter at the Swedish research station at Kapp Thorsen in Svalbard.

In darkness at Kapp Thorsen

The winter of 1882 was not a happy time for Andrée. His stay at the station disclosed gaps in Andrée's academic background. It was said that many of his ideas were scoffed at. He also had to tolerate criticism, e.g. for miscalculating the amount of kerosene needed, that resulted in strict rationing of light during the endless polar night.

Andrée undoubtedly had ample time to think at Kapp Thorsen. The partially self-inflicted darkness must have added a ring to the ironical comments of academicians. He gained valuable experience and insight, but worked to make up for what he lacked and had a burning

desire to prove that he was somebody.

Science - and technology

It was Andrée's interest and insight into the world of technology that would become his opportunity. The distinction between science and technology, and the emphasis on the significance of technology, is expressed in many quotations from Andrée:

"The time is coming when science will lag far behind technology. Think of electricity! Technology is everywhere and must solve problems scientists have never thought about".

Photo: A. Kjensheim

At Kapp Thorsen during the winter of 1882, Andrée volunteered for an experiment. He would remain in total darkness for a month to study the effect of the absence of light on skin color. Svenskhuset (the Swedish house) where the experiment was carried out, is still standing (above). The house is perhaps best known as the place where 17 sealers sought refuge a decade earlier. All 17 died during the winter due to scurvy and illness. Only 15 of the bodies were recovered.



This caricature shows that the race between Andrée and Nansen took on national dimensions. The conquest of the North Pole was important in a period of growing national awareness in Norway and deep national rivalry. Caricature from Lundström 1990.

Aviation was just one of the areas that technology had to penetrate. And Andrée was the technician before the scientist.

Balloon aviation

Andrée first realised his long-time dream of balloon aviation on 15 July 1893. He was a pioneer in international aviation technology. He developed the towlines which made it possible to control the balloon's cruising altitude: the higher the balloon rose, the more the weight of the towline had to be lifted by the balloon, causing it to descend. As more and more towline remained on the ground, the balloon was made

lighter, once again able to gain altitude. Control of the cruising altitude had great significance. If the balloon rose too high, gas pressure would be too great, with a loss of gas, and, worst of all, an explosion as the result. At best, the carrying capacity would quickly be reduced. Constant, low altitude meant, in other words, greater range.

Andrée had noted that ground friction of the towline gave the balloon directional stability. This gave him the idea of being partially able to steer the balloon, which he was the first in the world to develop. Directional stability made it possible to mount diagonal sails, so that the balloon could cruise according to



Photo: Andrée Musearrn



The Eagle leaves Virgohamna bound for the North Pole. The balloon winds higher and higher, eagerly toward the north. The towlines form a snakelike trail that quickly disappears. In the distance, mountains are visible.

wind direction. Towline friction also reduced speed in relation to the wind and increased the ability to steer. He completed a number of successful flights across Sweden, and achieved an average of 28° deviation in relation to wind direction.

His balloon flights brought him considerable attention, and Andrée quickly became a national celebrity.

The plan takes shape

The idea for the polar expedition must have been conceived in the air - in the loneliness under the balloon.

As he heard the sound of the towline beneath - like a newly cut umbilical cord to Mother Earth - in the continuous tail wind, the setting gave rise to creative thoughts. What better way to show the potential of the balloon than a flight across the inaccessible polar wilderness? A flight like this could also result in a lifelong position for Andrée, from which he could look down on the world just as he did from the balloon, at a height from which even academicians appear small. Such an accomplishment would also be a boost for the entire

nation, so that all Swedes could look a bit condescendingly on others, at least Norwegians.

The bold plan was first mentioned in confidence to a chosen few. After receiving positive signals he formulated his, "Proposal for a Polar Expedition by Balloon", that he delivered at the Royal Swedish Academy of Science on 13 February 1895. The expressed goal was that "*the expedition would accomplish the geographical exploration of as much of the northern polar region as possible*". But there were also favourable side effects that

and southern Europeans should explore Africa, they also expect us to explore the White region of the world?"

The plan aroused much attention, and within a short time had the support of influential persons such as Alfred Nobel and King Oscar.

At the mercy of the logic of events

Against this background, Andrée's hazardous expedition becomes more understandable. There were not few critics who said it had to go wrong, stating their misgivings on the basis of technology and safety. Meteorological observations revealed that the strong southerly winds Andrée needed to move northward almost always created fog that would result in the problem of ice forming on the balloon. Andrée must have known about such things - including the objections of Nils Ekholm, who withdrew from the expedition in 1896 because important safety precautions were neglected.

In the end, however, the matters of technology, safety and weather conditions were of secondary importance. In the final stage, the departure was a matter of rescuing Andrée and Sweden. Andrée had achieved a top social position through his plan. But this position was on lease, and could become truly his only by completing the plan. He had made the expedition a matter of national prestige, having created a gladiatorial mood by focusing on courage, danger and defiance of death.

Andrée eventually tended two balloons: The one was *Örnen* with its weaknesses. The other was invisible, yet all the more tangible. It was the balloon of expectations - it

continuing could he reach the high goal he had set for himself - whether he lived or died was of less importance. The order to "Cut all!" at 1:46 p.m., 11 July 1897 was the easiest way out.

Few have formulated what lay at the heart of the drama better than Swedish author Frans G. Bengtson:

"A psychological drama now ensues, which lasts from the time the idea is conceived until the moment it is put into operation. The journey and their doom form the epilogue. It is a drama that may briefly be summarised as follows: At the beginning there is a whole world that doubts and one person - himself - who believes; at its close there is a whole world that believes and one person - himself - who doubts. Caught up in a mighty cyclone, which he has brought about, he finds himself, when the truth becomes obvious, in a situation in which struggle is useless. At last he is



Photo: Andrée Museum

less than an hour the Eagle is a black dot that vanishes behind the

would increase the chances of added financial support.

Andrée closes with an appeal to the weakness for national prestige:

"Who is better suited to undertake this endeavour than we Swedes? We are a highly civilised people who through the ages have been distinguished by our fearless courage, living close to the Arctic regions, familiar with its climatic peculiarities and trained by nature itself to overcome them. We can hardly free ourselves from a feeling of duty in the matter referred to. (...) Are we not, more than any others, called and qualified to accomplish this task? Am I wrong in assuming that, as we hope and expect that central



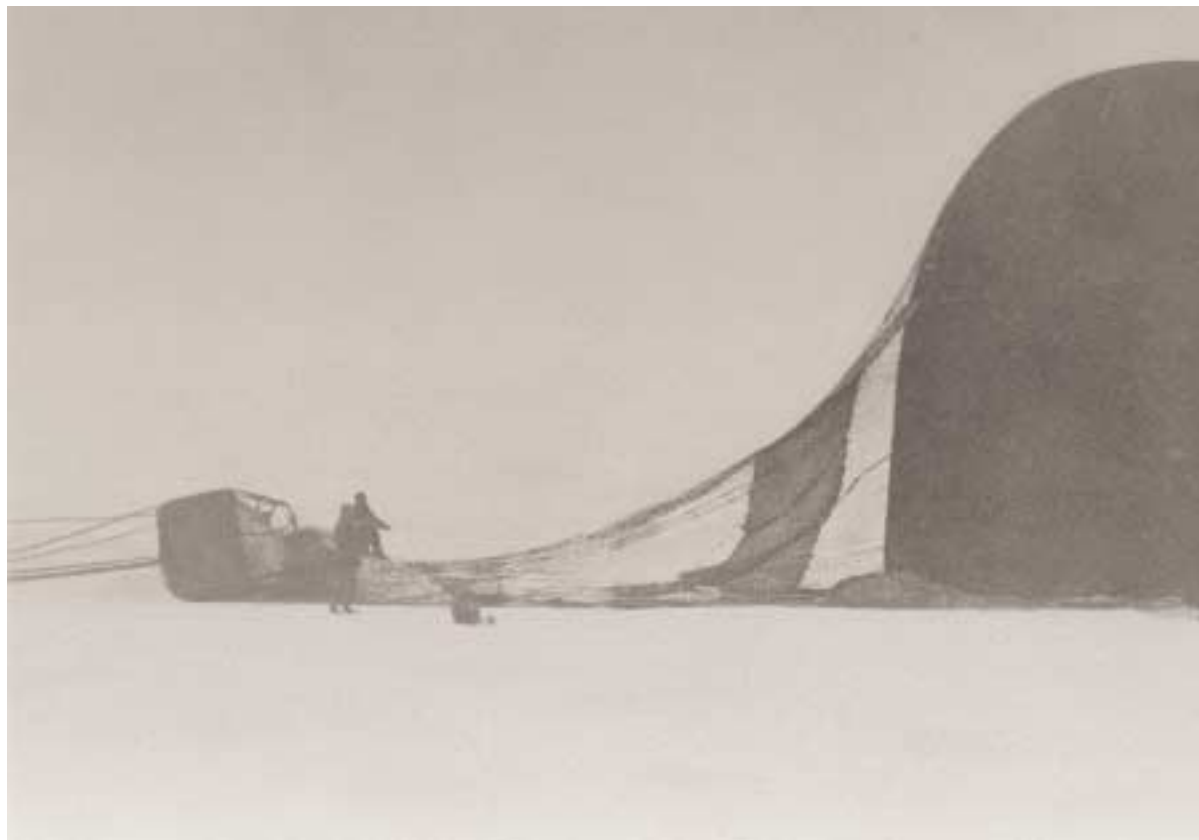
Photo: H. B. Björck

The gondola was lowered into the pit in the centre of the balloon hangar.



Photo: H. B. Björck

blown toward the Pole in a desperate mood, at the mercy of the logic of events.



Starting out with favourable winds, the wind dropped on the eve of 12 July. There was fog which resulted in ice build-up on the balloon. The next morning the wind blew again to the power. It was finally forced down to the ice below. The photo shows the final grounding of the Eagle at 07:30 p.m. 14 July 1897.

“Cut all!”

We return to Virgohamna. The date is 11 July 1897: Three knives cut through *Örnen's* towlines and the expedition is underway. The balloon ascends, accompanied by cheers that are answered with “Greet old Sweden” from the gondola, and the three men are lifted out of the hangar. A katabatic wind nearly puts an end to the journey then and there. The balloon is pushed down and the gondola hits the water, but ascends once more. The long towlines lie spread out on the shore, and

are gradually lifted up. But the lines begin gyrating, and several work themselves loose from the bolted fasteners in the gondola. More than 700 kilograms of valuable ballast is lost during the first minute of the journey, but it is no catastrophe - yet. *Örnen* winds higher and higher, eagerly toward the north. The towlines form a snakelike trail that quickly disappears. In less than an hour *Örnen* is a black dot that vanishes behind the mountains to the north. If all goes well, they will leave

3,700 kilometres behind them over the North Pole and reach the Bering Strait in 6 days and nights.

Sign of life

Four days later a white bird lands on the catching vessel *Alken* located in waters north of Svalbard. The bird is shot and lands in the water. Since it is not a grouse, the bird is left behind. Several hours later *Alken* meets another catching vessel and learns that Andrée had started his balloon expedition. Could the bird have been a carrier pigeon



...northwest, but the balloon did not have enough carrying

Photo: Andréé-Museum

from the expedition? They turn back and, incredibly, relocate the bird. There is a little cartridge attached to one of the tail feathers containing this rolled-up message:

"From Andréé's Polar Expedition to Aftonbladet, Stockholm. 13th July 12.30 midday. Lat 82° Long 55° 5' E. Good speed to E. 10° south. All well on board. This is the third pigeon-post. Andréé."

Years were to pass before there was further news of the expedition. A buoy was found in Iceland in 1899 and one in Finnmark the following year. Both messages stated that all was well on board, even

though it was clear to everyone that the expedition had had a dramatic end.

Several search parties were sent out in 1898. A search had even been made on Kvitøya, just a few metres from the place where the three bodies would later be discovered. There was no lack of speculations. For years, newspapers printed reports from the entire region, but they were nothing more than erroneous observations, misunderstandings and out and out falsifications. It was gradually assumed that the fate of the expedition would never be known. That was, however, not to be the case.

The discovery on Kvitøya

The summer of 1930, the crew from the catching vessel *Brattvåg* stumbled across a canvas boat on Kvitøya farthest east in Svalbard. It was soon apparent that this was the remains of Andréé's expedition. Their recovery was made with great interest by the media and accompanied by war headlines in the world press. Besides the bodies of Andréé, Strindberg and Fränkel, and much equipment, the neatly written diaries were found describing the journey from Virgohamna to the death camp. Exposed film was developed. The

pictures make it possible for us to follow the journey, literally through the eyes of the doomed. With wonder and sorrow we can study the objects that testify to indomitable hope: The three men had brought the formal attire that was to be worn at the moment of victory all the way to Kvitøya - cummerbunds, silk ties, white shirts and white moose-hide gloves. The only bit of uncertainty is whether the clothing was to be worn when meeting a king, tsar or president. This is indicated by the travel funds that were equally divided between dollars, roubles and Swedish kronor. All three possibilities were left open right to the last.

The balloon journey to 82°56'

The diaries from Kvitøya reveal the expedition's progression. During the first day, the *Örnen* advanced 400 kilometres in a north-easterly direction. On the eve of 12 July, the wind dropped and shifted to the west. Fog resulted in ice build-up on the balloon, forcing it toward the ice below. They landed and anchored the balloon during the evening, after having drifted 200 kilometres to the west. On the morning of 13 July the wind again blew toward the north-west. But the balloon did not have



A silk cushion with the Swedish-Norwegian union flag and gala attire found on Kvitøya in 1930.

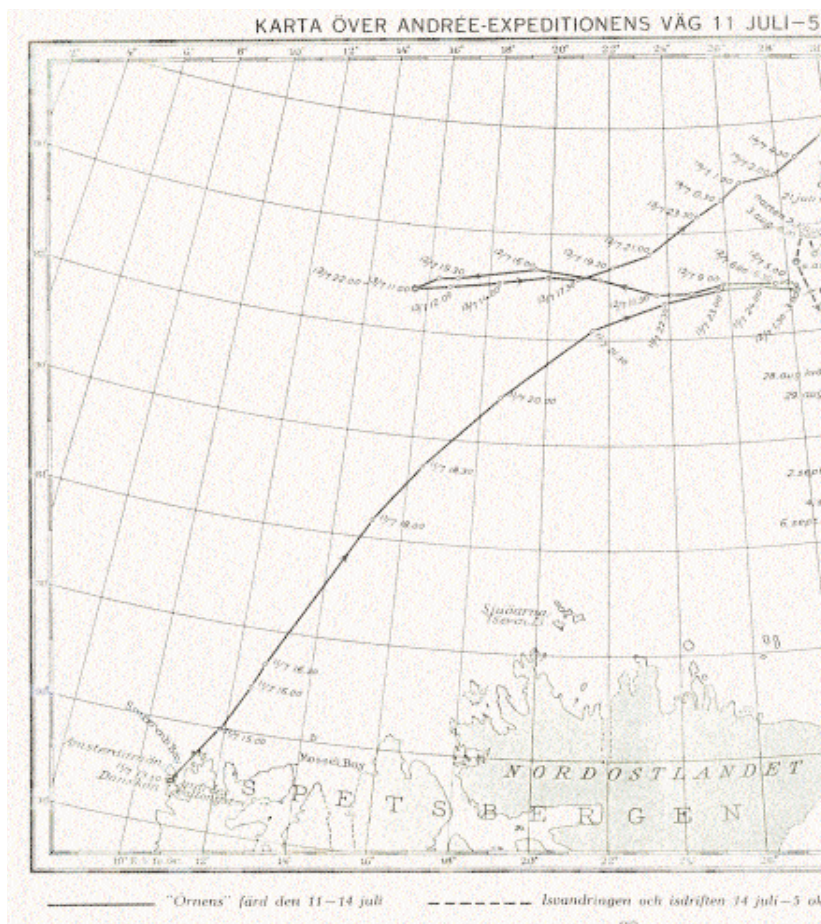
Photo: Andréé-Museum

enough carrying power, it banged into the ice, skipped a short distance, and struck the ice again. This continued for hours. The collisions were more frequent and the distance between them shorter. At last they used the balloon as a sail to pull the gondola. It was now 7:30 a.m. on 14 July. They had flown 480 kilometres from Virgohamna, but are miles south of the spot where Nansen and Johansen had to turn some years earlier. The total flying distance was, however, almost 1,000 kilometres. If the wind had been straight north during the whole flight, they would have been less than 200 kilometres from the North Pole.

Crossing the ice

They had good time to make such calculations during the week they used for making preparations to cross the ice, but possible disappointment was quickly turned to relief. In relation to the crossing that lay before them, the position was more than far enough toward the north. They packed provisions, a tent, sleeping bags, equipment and tools. The building sets for a boat and sleds were assembled with numb fingers. They abandoned the remains of *Ørnen* and 700 kilograms of cargo and headed in the direction of Kapp Flora on Franz Josefs Land.

Brief notations and descriptive pictures reveal the drudgery that was to follow and their frustration over the moving ice beneath them. The ice drifted in all directions. Sometimes they awakened farther north than where they had started the morning



Map showing route of Andrée's expedition 11 July to 5 October 1897.

Gala Banquet 18 Sept. '97

*on an ice floe just east of
(Kvitøya)*

*Roasted Seal and Ivory Gull fried
in butter and seal blubber,
Seal liver, -brains and kidneys.
Butter and Schumacher bread.*

Wine

*Chocolate with Mellin's Food flour
with Albert cakes and butter
Gâteau aux raisin
Raspberry juice
Port wine 1834 Antonio de Ferrara,
a gift from the King.*

*A Toast by Aée for the King with
royal Hurrahs!
The Royal Anthem sung in unison
Biscuits butter cheese
One glass of wine*

Festive atmosphere

*The Union Flag waved over the
camp throughout the day.*

(From Strindberg's observation book no. 2.)

before, after 10 - 12 hours of hard walking. Time and again they had to lighten the load and reselect equipment. They were plagued by pack ice, deep pools, open ravines, blisters, head colds, frost, thirst, diarrhoea, exhaustion and growing despondency. At last they chose a new course, toward Svalbard, but the ice worked against them no matter which way they turned. Even so, they recorded some pleasant moments. After nearly 2 months of sweat and toil, they still had strength enough to celebrate King Oscar's 25th jubilee. (See menu)

The men made scientific observations right up to the end. They take photographs and write about animal life, collect earth samples and plant remains in the ice and



pack and label them. Scientific observations were perhaps the closest they could come to a normal existence, something to hold on to during days with waning hope and a growing fear of death on the horizon.

The death camp on Kvitøya

Up until the final days of September they struggled against the drifting ice, before they settled down on an ice floe and built "Hemmet", a snow hut with a living room and sleeping area. They drifted around Kvitøya with little exertion, but on 5 October the ice floe split by the hut. They broke camp and headed for land on the little ice-free point on the western side of Kvitøya. The situation was hopeless. The gravel shoreline provided no stones

to build a shelter. They wrote little. It seems that the three had more or less given up hope after landing on Kvitøya. Their chances of being rescued were doubtful, and of survival through the winter, minimal. On 17 October, Andrée wrote "at home 7:05 a.m.", the last cryptic sign of life.

The remains of the camp indicate that they attempted to make a hut out of the tent, some driftwood and a bone

Svensksund, the same vessel that had carried the Andrée expedition to Virgohamna in 1897. The trip along the coast of Norway, with the coffins draped in Swedish flags, included stops at Ålesund and Stavanger. In Gothenburg they were met on that dark evening with tolling bells and a torchlight parade with 75,000 persons. *Svensksund* was escorted through Øresund by Danish naval vessels and nine aeroplanes, and given a

Photo: Andrée Museum



Andrée, Frænkel and Strindberg used a week in their camp on the ice to plan their trip back to solid ground. They pack provisions, tents, sleeping bags, equipment and tools. Prefabricated building sets for boats and sleds are assembled with numbed fingers. They leave the remains of Örnen behind and head toward Kapp Flora.

from a whale. Along one wall there was an empty sleeping bag, next to it matches, a sewing box with roubles and dollars, a rifle, Frænkel's wallet and Frænkel's corpse. Andrée's corpse was found outside next to a primus and cooking vessels. Nearby were the sleds, the boat filled with equipment, snowshoes, some polar bear furs and bones from seals. Strindberg's body was buried in a stone crevice and covered with stones.

The homecoming

The bodies of the Polar heroes were brought to Tromsø, along with effects from the camp on Kvitøya. A memorial service was held before the transfer to the gunboat

cannon salute from Kronborg Castle. As the ship approached Stockholm, there was a plane escort and reception by King Gustav V. That was Sunday 5 October, 30 years to the day after the expedition landed on Kvitøya, in one way a symbolic date of death. The bodies were brought through the city on their way to Storkyrkan. Thousands of people were present, and the ceremony in Storkyrkan was broadcasted live on radio. The bodies were cremated on 9 October and placed in a common grave in Norra Kyrkogården.

The remains from Kvitøya were displayed in Stockholm that autumn, with a record number of visitors. A museum was established in Gränna,

The eternally betrothed

There is an other side to Andrée's story than the more obvious connections to national prestige and international politics, a human side, as illustrated by the case of Nils Strindberg's fiancée, Anna Charlier.



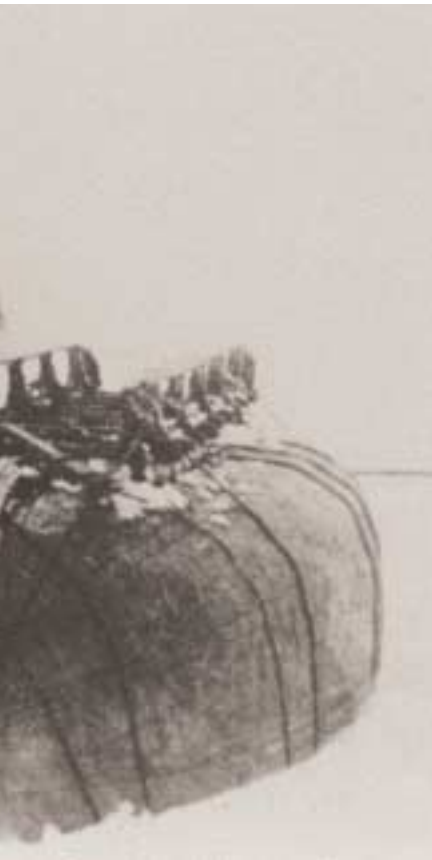
Nils Strindberg was engaged to Anna Charlier. He wrote letters to her from Kvitøya that helped keep alive the hope he would return to Sweden. He was buried with his most prized possessions: her hair, and the tickets from their visit to the Art and Industrial Exhibition in Stockholm the very last evening before Nils left for Svalbard.

She waited 13 years for her beloved Nils before marrying and moving to England. A description of her home in England reveals that portraits of her eternally betrothed had a central place in several of the rooms. It was while waiting on the pier in Gothenburg to return to her family in England from a visit to Sweden during the late summer of 1930 that she heard that the remains of Andrée's expedition had been found on Kvitøya.

We have no reason to doubt that she, like us, familiarised herself with the finds from Kvitøya gradually: her Nils was the first to die. He was buried by Andrée and Fränkel, who looked after his most precious belongings. There was a heart-shaped locket with a photograph of Anna and a lock of her hair, and the tickets from their joint visit to the Art and Industrial Exhibition in Stockholm - the very last evening before Nils left for Svalbard with Andrée.



Photo: Andrée Museum



sions: a heart-shaped locket with a photo of Anna and a lock of

There were the remains of the signed portrait that Anna had given Andrée behind Strindberg's back, so that Andrée could give it to Nils on his birthday on 4 September. She could read the entry in Andrée's diary that Nils had been awakened on his birthday with her letter, and that it had given him pleasure to see how happy he was. Could she really bear to read "Strindberg's stenogrammes to his fiancée" that were

24 July. 12.5 GMT. We have just stopped for the day after pulling and tugging on the sleds for ten hours. I am really very tired, but we must have a little chat. First of all I must congratulate you, as this is your birthday. Oh how I wish that I could tell you that I am well, and that you do not need to fear for us. We will gradually make it home.

Yes, all this fills my thoughts a great deal these days. There is so much time to think, and then it is so good to have such fine memories and such happy prospects for the future to think about!

(Later) We have just pitched camp for the night and had our coffee with bread and cheese, biscuits and juice. We are just putting up the tent and Frænkel is making his weather observations. Just now we are enjoying a caramel, a real treat. You mustn't think anyone here is grumpy. Yesterday evening I served some soup (I tend to the housekeeping) and it was really not good. That Rosseauska bouillon powder tastes pretty awful and one tires of it rather quickly. But we did eat it . . .

We have stopped here for the night in an open area. Around us there is ice, ice everywhere. You saw from those Nansen photographs what this kind of ice looks like. Pack ice, mounds and channels exchanged with melted ice, endlessly

Photo: Andrée Museum



Photo: Andrée Museum

monotonous. It is snowing a little just now, but at least there is no wind and it is not especially cold (-0,8° C). No doubt you have pleasant summer weather at home.

It is very strange now to think that it may not be possible for us to be home even on your next birthday. Perhaps we must spend the winter yet another year. We are making such slow progress that we may not make it to Kapp Flora this winter. Like Nansen we may have to spend the winter in a cave. Poor little Anna, you will be in such despair if we do not make it home next autumn. I want you to know that I suffer at the thought of it, not for my sake because it doesn't matter now what I may have to endure, just so I get home

found on Kvitøya in 1930? (See above.)

Anna Charlier died in 1947. Her grieving husband Gilbert Hawtery was to read in her last will that she wished to be buried in England. Nevertheless, her final wish is for her heart to be cremated separately, and the ashes gathered in a little silver box and placed in the grave with Strindberg, Frænkel and Andrée in Norra Kyrkogården in Stockholm.

Perhaps Anna's husband is

the greatest hero in this story. Faithfully and unselfishly he carried out the wishes of his spouse's broken heart - the final act of the drama of Andrée's failed balloon expedition to the North Pole.

Walter Wellman – Pioneer or humbug?

Nansen's description of Walter Wellman as a "big humbug" has tainted the world's view of the American. A man who during the period 1894-1911 made five attempts to conquer the North Pole. A man who was in the forefront in the use of motorised dirigibles on exploratory expeditions. Today there is reason to re-evaluate Nansen's statement.



Walter Wellman (centre) on board Frithjof in Tromsø before the winter stay on Franz Josephs Land 1898-99.

Obsessed with the North Pole

The latter half of the 19th century was a time of many exploratory expeditions that received world-wide newspaper coverage. Perhaps influenced by the possibility of not just conveying the news but also shaping it, and thereby gaining world attention, the journalist Walter Wellman (1858- 1934) was seized by the thought of conquering the North Pole. Wellman's attempt to fulfil his obsession of conquering the pole by ship, dogsleds and airships must be understood in the context of the period's firm belief in man's ability to

subdue the earth's many snow-covered regions.

In 1894, Wellman spent three days in Pike's house in Virgohamna before heading farther north with the Tromsø-registered vessel *Ragnvald Jarl*. Virgohamna, known then as Pike's Bay, had thereby started its career as a stop on the way to the North Pole.

Using aluminium boats and dogsleds, Wellman wanted to cross the ice to reach the North Pole, but the attempt failed. The equipment was too heavy and the expedition was not physically prepared for what lay ahead, least of all

Wellman himself who more often frequented smoking compartments than rough terrain. After their ship was jammed in the ice and sank, a catching vessel returned them to Virgohamna. From there Wellman went back to Chicago, his dream of reaching the pole still intact.

Four years later he was back in Svalbard, on Franz Josephs Land. A year had passed since the Andrée expedition had left on its journey with the balloon, *Örnen*. The news monger Wellman was on a new pursuit of the Pole and glory. Trophyless, but with

funds was set in motion. In 1905, Wellman received \$75,000 from Victor F. Lawson, owner of The Chicago Record Herald and Wellman's employer, to construct a dirigible that would carry him to the North Pole. He managed to raise a total sum of \$250,000.

The dirigible - the next-to-largest the world had seen - was built in Paris and christened *America* in the spring of 1906. That summer, Wellman was back in Virgohamna and started work on the hangar, machine shop, dwelling and hydrogen plant.

Why Wellman chose Virgohamna in particular, is not known. The choice may have been due to its position - a bay facing north free of ice early at about 80° N is a good point of departure. But the symbolism of accomplishing what *Andrée* had begun, from the same place, was undoubtedly also not lost on a man who knew the marketing value this could have for the project.

Wellman brought three shiploads of lumber, iron and other equipment. The hangar,

58 metres long and 26 metres high, towered above the landscape. The floor was made in part from the remains of *Andrée's* balloon hangar. Camp Wellman also contained a machine shop, cooking house, steam engine, and a plant for the production of hydrogen. There was also teeming life out on the sea, with many boats full of expectant tourists who looked forward to the fulfilment of one of Jules Verne's fantastic stories.

Almost everything went wrong in 1906. Even though 40 Norwegian carpenters worked continuously in 14-hour shifts, the hangar was not completed until August. The dirigible leaked and the motors did not function. There would be no attempt to leave that year. When Wellman left Virgohamna during the autumn, the gondola that was intended to bring Wellman the North Pole, fame and glory remained behind as a reminder of that year's attempt. Today we can see the remains of the gondola's floor with two



Photo: Tromsø Museum

continuing optimism, Wellman once again returned home to devise new plans.

A steerable airship

Late in September 1898, Alberto Santos-Dumont from Brazil mounted a two-cylinder motor on a balloon, thereby inaugurating the age of the airships. The balloon, which earlier had to drift with the wind, was transformed into a steerable airship. Wellman immediately saw how this new means of transportation might be used in the quest for the North Pole.

An intensive effort to raise



Camp Wellman in Virgohamna during construction, 1906. From the ship *Frithjof*, Wellman established contact with the outside world via wireless telegraph - a sensation several years before the first telegraph station was set up in Svalbard.

Photo: A. Wilse



parallel beams held together by three pipes.

A further attempt

When Wellman returned the following summer, the hangar was still intact. But soon after, strong winds flattened the building. Summer went on while the hangar was repaired and the expedition awaited calmer winds.

With his sharp pen and public notoriety, Wellman had added to the pressure on himself. Many journalist colleagues awaited the chance to report ironically yet another failure for the adventurer in the icy wilderness.

In September, when all reason dictated that the participants should have returned home, Wellman issued orders to take *America* out of the hangar. The dirigible was towed out into the fjord beyond Smeerenburg before the towline was cut. On board, in addition to Wellman, was the designer of the gondola, the Frenchman Melvin Vaniman, as well as the American Felix Reisenberg. Vaniman started the motor and the crew took its first flight in the dirigible in arctic regions. Beneath the dirigible hung Wellman's version of Andrée's towlines. Wellman had tested various alternatives to solve the problem of ballast, before coming up in 1907 with the same towline solution as Andrée. In 1906 he had plans to tow a steel boat containing provisions. It may be this that inspired Nansen's description of the



On its way to the North Pole in 1909, the dirigible America lost the towlines suspended below. Losing 500 kilograms of ballast pressure difference could lead to expansion of the gas and bursting of the balloon, Wellman's brother-in-law panicked and a Norwegian naval vessel Farm came to the rescue and the expedition to the North Pole ended. The boat Wellman had brought was the North Norway Maritime Museum in Gratangen.

provision-filled steel sausage that was to hang under the dirigible, which would leave a trail on the return trip and deposit provisions along the way.

Nansen's descriptions, which have influenced the later image of Wellman, do not entirely agree with the facts. They may

have been the fabrication of the arctic explorer in an attempt to maintain his own greatness at the expense of others.

Over the open sea, *America* struck a north-westerly wind that brought her back to land. The dirigible barely missed colliding with Strindbergfjellet. Vaniman forced the motors,



ast the vessel quickly gained altitude. With the risk that the
opened one of the vents allowing the gas to stream out. The
t along is visible on the bow of the gondola. The boat is now at

but their power was not enough to control the world's next-to-largest dirigible. The wind picked up and it began to snow. Just like Andrée ten years earlier, Wellman was at the mercy of wind gusts and their mysterious ways. With a dirigible out of control and a crew unprepared to cross the

ice, the North Pole was quickly forgotten. Vaniman stopped the motor and the dirigible had a rather brutal encounter with Fuglepyntbreen (15 km NE of Virgoamna). The dirigible continued across the glacier before the three-hour journey was over. Three days later the damaged dirigible was back in the hangar.

After their return, Wellman stated that the attempt had shown the dirigible's power and steerability - the attempt had been a success in every way. The main benefactor and employer was of a different opinion and cut off financial support. In spite of the dirigible's obvious limitations, Wellman was ever the optimist, always ready to face new challenges.

Final journey

In 1909 Wellman made yet another attempt. Vaniman had developed a new gondola with a stronger motor and adjustable propeller. Technologically, the expedition was advanced, but the crew had made few other preparations. While the expeditions of Peary, Amundsen and Nansen were the results of thorough preparations, Wellman was probably more concerned about the dramatic and heroic deed, the adventure, than the goal.

The second week in July 1909, the *Artica* arrived in Virgoamna. The hangar had not survived two winters and bade the vessel a prostrate welcome. Work on the hangar took time. Precious time. Virgoamna showed its best side this July 1909. Twelve days of mild, calm weather in succession were unusual in this place. This would have been enough time to get to the North Pole and back, but the dirigible was not ready before the middle of August.



At 10 o'clock a.m. on 15 August, *America* left the hangar. A light southerly wind provided the best conditions for a successful journey. Wellman, Vaniman, Nicholaus Popov (Russian aeronaut) and Vaniman's brother-in-law A. L. Loud, took their places with the dogs, provisions, boat and sleds. The dirigible was equipped with towlines that functioned as ballast and stabiliser. Wellman first attempted to reach the ocean through the north-west passage, then the western passage. After several rounds in Smeerenburgsundet, Wellman crossed directly above Smeerenburg and out to sea. The vessel was doing close to 25 knots and the prospects looked good. With this speed they would reach the North Pole within 30 hours.

Suddenly, however, the towlines plunged into the ocean. Weighing 500 kg less, *America* rose from the cruising level of 80 m to 1,800 m. Beneath them, the Norwegian naval vessel *Farm* was on a scientific voyage. Captain Gunnar Isachsen watched anxiously as the dirigible gradually descended toward the water's surface, and headed for the rescue.

With the loss of the ballast, Wellman had no other choice than to give up. Perhaps this distinguished him from other polar explorers? While Peary, Scott, Nansen and Amundsen might have risked going ahead north with the possibility of ensuing tragedy, Wellman made the safe decision. Wellman no doubt realised that



he was not prepared for what awaited them should they have to land and return across the ice. Even though they had dogs, sleds, provisions and equipment, none of them were physically or psychologically equipped to make it through the winter or a return trip.

Farm towed the dirigible back to Virgohamna. On board *Farm*, with *America* and 200 tonnes of highly inflammable hydrogen above them, Wellman sat down and lit a cigar. Neither he nor others on the ship seemed concerned about this.

By midnight the dirigible was back in Virgohamna, but the drama was not over. The Englishman A. J. Corbitt, who was not on the flight, helped get the dirigible on the ground. When this was done, Corbitt went on board and began to dismount the motors. Simultaneously, Vaniman made a hole in the tanks draining the fuel into the sea. This lightened the dirigible so that it took off with Corbitt on board. About 8 m off the ground, the gondola loosened and Corbitt fell to the shore below, barely missed by the gondola. Corbitt was not injured by the fall. The rest of the dirigible kept rising until the pressure was so great that the balloon exploded. Wellman opened a bottle of champagne and played solitaire. A bit later, he gave orders to lengthen the hangar. He had not given up.

But Wellman was never to return to Svalbard. In Bodø he was informed that Dr. Frederick A. Cook claimed to have conquered the North Pole. The jewel had been taken and Well-



The extended hangar, 64 m long, 26 m high and 26 m wide, towered above the landscape. Though today it is a pile of wood, we can still make out the construction. The floor of the hangar was made partly from the remains of Andrée's balloon hangar.

man went off in search of other possible exploits. Virgohamna remained behind as an arctic warehouse for hunters staying the winter and for scientific expeditions - and as a paradise for tourists looking for souvenirs.

For Wellman, the North Pole was replaced by the first trans-Atlantic flight. In October 1910, his new dirigible *America* departed from Atlantic City, New Jersey. He experienced problems at Barbados and was picked up by steamship. The dirigible disappeared out across the Atlantic Ocean. Wellman had failed once again, but the distance of 1,600 km was the longest covered by any air vessel until then. Wellman soon faded out of the limelight.

Journalist and explorer

Wellman's reputation has been shaped by Nansen's statement following his visit to Virgohamna in 1912:

This was the scene of Wellman's activities over a several years, where he blew air into his expedition and his airship. (...) A peculiar man who illustrates how one, in utilising the art of advertising, is able to hold the attention of the world's newspapers year after year without having a thing of value to report. It is just a matter of knowing what kind of stuff the newspapers are after in order to nourish the world's spiritual need - and in that respect the man was truly great. (...) The debris left by this great humbug was scattered everywhere. A pathetic sight.

Nansen's stern judgement of his competitor may have been influenced by the fact that one of his own crew members aboard *Fram* lost his life during Wellman's winter stay on Franz Josefs Land in 1898-99.

Wellman may deserve criticism for not making sufficiently thorough preparations for his expeditions, and for probably being more concerned about

attention than his objectives. Nor did Wellman show courage in crucial situations. As leader of expeditions, he was a failure, but Wellman has been given an unjustly bad reputation.

Sponsors and marketing procedures were a factor Wellman had in common with Nansen and other polar explorers. The discovery of new lands and heroic feats were good news items, then as now, and were followed by the

President Roosevelt via his own station in Hammerfest, to Tromsø, forwarded to the president's summer residence outside New York City. He also delivered reports to his newspaper that were published the day after they were sent from Svalbard. While Peary, Cook, Nansen and Amundsen took months to report their feats, Wellman had direct contact with the outside world. Wellman also intended to send reports from the dirigible, but



Photo: B. Einar

Above: Wood from Wellman's hangar. Below: Remains of the canvas that covered the dirigible *America*. Above left: Barrels with iron filings used in the hydrogen production.



Photo: H.B. Bjerk

press. Newspapers and sponsors paid large sums to "their" expedition leader. To the same degree as Amundsen and Nansen, Wellman took advantage of this attention.

Wellman and his crew were also pioneers in dirigible technology. Vaniman devised solutions that were ahead of their time, including the capability to change the angle of the propellers while airborne. Even though Wellman's flights were not successful, he demonstrated that flight was possible in the Arctic region.

Wellman was the first to establish direct contact between the Arctic and civilisation. From Virgohamna he sent a telegram to

did not accomplish this.

Unjust criticism from his American press colleagues has contributed to the myths concerning Wellman. New knowledge brought to light by the American researcher *P. J. Capelotti*, have made it possible for us to dispel some of these myths.

A memorial to the polar explorations

Today little remains in Virgohamna of what once was Camp Wellman. Whalers and trappers, scientific expeditions, tourists and nature have removed many traces. But knowledge gives life to the remains and brings us close to historic events.

Assisted by old photographs and a bit of imagination, the wooden remains are again the hangar with 40 hard-working29

The North Pole – Some Were Losers

Salomon August Andrée and Walter Wellman are not among the winners in polar history. Both led expeditions that failed. Later accounts about them differ greatly, however. What has shaped their posthumous reputations?



Andrée, Strindberg and Frænkel were given a state funeral at the Storkyrkan in Stockholm. The King stood at the head of the receiving line. Along the route of the Sörensund, the ship attention. The thousands coming out bear witness to the impact the three had made on their lives.

The losers are forgotten

The polar explorers were the vanguards of modernism, conquering nature by their courage and use of new technology. Blank areas on the map could be filled in, and new species added to the catalogue of animal life. The expeditions played a role in creating our modern society.

The new reporters of history – newspapers and periodicals – brought events and discoveries into private homes, making them everyone's property. Accomplishments became a part of a nation's self-understanding, of the history of its national grandeur and level of civilisation. In these accounts

there was no room for losers.

That was to become Walter Wellman's fate. No one is so quickly forgotten as the person who does not succeed. Failing time after time, Wellman was made the butt of ridicule by his journalist colleagues. He played for high stakes, lost

value. The opposite was true for Andrée, Frænkel and Strindberg.

The value of myth

The story of the three Swedish balloonists has all the elements of romance, new discoveries, courage, technology, death, and, above all, mystery. Uncertainty about the fate of Andrée's expedition kept alive the fame of the three men. Some bits of information were always available. One of the carrier pigeons was found. Not long afterward buoys were picked up containing new messages. But none of the discoveries really solved the mystery. Rumours flourished. Corpses were discovered in Siberia.

The stories about Wellman and Andrée, have their parallel in the story of Roald Amundsen and Umberto Nobile. In 1926 they flew over the North Pole together in the air ship Norge. Even though Nobile was the one who made the preparations and accomplished the deed, it was Amundsen who took most of the credit. Two years later Nobile crashed on the ice north of Svalbard following a fresh attempt with the air ship Italia. Virgohamna was the base for rescue operations involving several ships and flying boats. In Norway

Amundsen looked for possibilities for saving his reputation after several failures following his conquest of the South Pole. He went out in search of his rival, but disappeared with his plane en route to Svalbard, a factor that saved him from suffering the same fate as the others. Nobile was rescued from an ice floe, but had to remain for several humiliating weeks while the rest of Italia's crew was still on the ice. Nobile was a defeated man. Portrayed as weak and cowardly, he was deprived of his military rank.



Photo: From Amesen 1928

Nobile and his dog were the first to be rescued from the ice. The plane later sank during attempts to rescue the crew. The photo shows the camp as the pilot and crew members wait for help to arrive.

Not even the eventual discovery of the three men on Kvitøya answered all the questions. And still today - after 100 years - discussion continues about how they died. Did they commit suicide? Were they killed by polar bears? Were they poisoned?

The mystery and their deaths perpetuate the story of the three



Photo: From Amesen 1928

that brought their remains back to Sweden, soldiers stood at

and vanished. Wellman could not write dramatic accounts of his journeys, nor was he the object of children's dreams of fame and adventure. No one had cause to refer to Wellmann in flowery speeches. The abrupt discontinuance of his expeditions had no symbolic

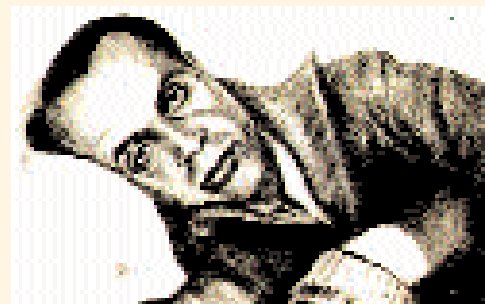


Photo: From Amesen 1928



Photo: From Amesen 1928

The last photograph of Amundsen, taken in Tromsø.

Regulations concerning visits to Virgohamna

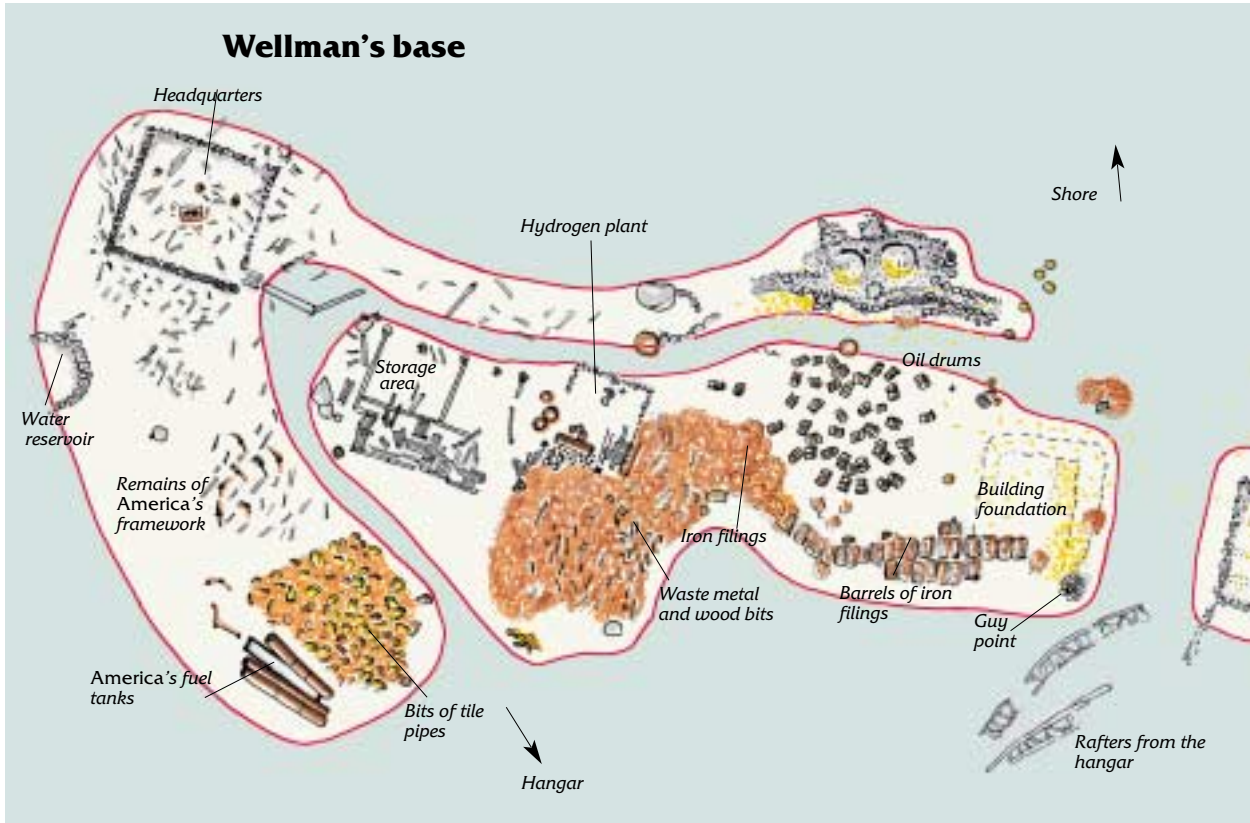


Foto: B. Elnan

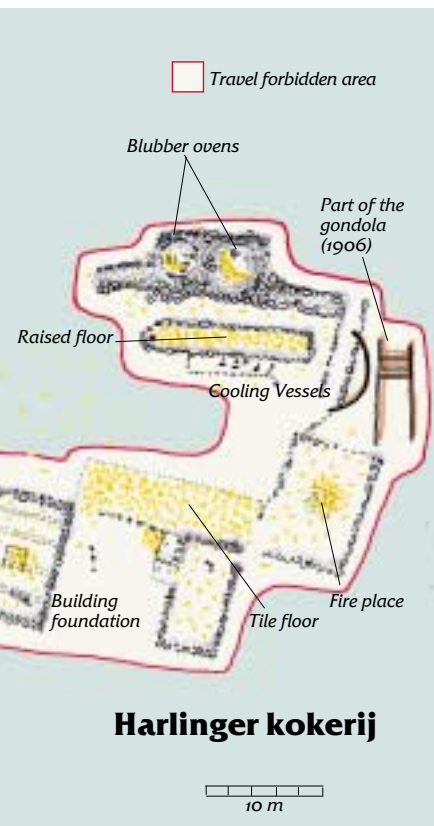
Travel ban

Virgohamna's environment is fragile and shows signs of deterioration due to heavy traffic. Stepping on blubber ovens results in wear and destruction. Many of the

effects and remains of buildings in the camps of Andrée and Wellman have been trampled to bits. Moveable objects are picked up as travel souvenirs. All this has a disastrous effect on the environment.

The cultural environment in all of Virgohamna is protected in accordance with *Regulations Concerning the Cultural Heritage in Svalbard*. Visits to the site (see map) without written permission is prohibited.

Dispensation for visiting Virgohamna may be granted by the Governor of Svalbard (see frame).



Surveying: H.B. Bjørck. Drawing: H.B. Bjørck and E. Andreassen

Dispensations

Permission to visit Virgohamna may be granted by the Governor of Svalbard. Written permission lists specific conditions for visits, which include the following:

- The applicant must be 18 years of age or older. The dispensation is personal and may not be transferred to others.
- The person to whom a dispensation has been granted may be accompanied by a limited number of individuals (specified in the dispensation) in the protected area, and must see to it that the other visitors are familiar with and adhere to other regulations that pertain to the natural environment and cultural monuments in Svalbard.
- During the visit in Virgohamna, no one may trample on any remains such as blubber ovens, graves, building sites, wood, iron objects, potsherds, glass, iron filling deposits, etc. Travel is absolutely forbidden in areas with fragile cultural remains (see map).
- Setting up camp is forbidden. No traces of a visit are allowed: picnic sites, refuse, moving of stones or driftwood, inscriptions, cairns, etc.
- The person or persons to whom dispensation has been granted must, without delay, report any occurrence or observation of environmental damage to the Governor.
- Non-compliance with these conditions or any other regulations may result in revocation of the dispensation, and the denial of future dispensations.
- Violation of the regulations or failure to comply with other rules may result in fines or imprisonment up to one year.

More information about the regulations may be obtained by contacting the Governor of Svalbard.



Drawing by H.B. Bjørck based on surveying by P. Capadott and H.B. Bjørck



Foto: B. Elman

See also map p. 9.

North-West Spitsbergen National Park



Preservation of Svalbard's wilderness is a primary objective for Norwegian environmental management, and the establishment of protected areas is an

important strategy. The establishment of North-West Spitsbergen National Park in 1973 must be seen in this context. The national park covers the north-west corner

3,560 square kilometres.

The park has a magnificent and rugged landscape with a rich variety of land and marine plants and animals. It has a large number of nesting grounds for sea birds, and mammals such as walrus, reindeer and arctic fox. Much of the cultural heritage from whaling in the 1600s is found in the park, as well as traces left by Russian and Norwegian hunters. The main purpose of the park is to preserve the regional wilderness with its natural plant and animal life, to maintain the close connection between the cultural heritage and the natural environment, and to make it possible to experience unique environmental values.

The *Regulations Concerning North-West Spitsbergen National Park* (1973) includes regulations concerning travel and activity in the park. Visitors should familiarise themselves with the document, so they are in compliance with the regulations. All visitors to Svalbard's protected areas must report to the authorities in accordance with *Regulations Relating to Tourism and Other Travel in Svalbard*. Regulations regarding the national park will undergo revision in the near future. Current regulations may be obtained from the Governor, who is responsible for administration of the park. Information is an important tool, as are the task of supervision and the surveillance of vulnerable aspects of the environment.

See *Experience Svalbard on nature's own terms* for more information about the national park and other regulations. Contact the Governor or Info-Svalbard for brochures.





"Smeerenburg" or "Blubber town", was located on this shore farthest east on Amsterdam Island. This was the main base for dutch whaling on Svalbard. Foundations of buildings and blubber ovens are still visible.

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