

# 'My wife was one of the last people to discover I was rowing a boat to the North Pole'

Arctic explorer Jock Wishart has already walked to the North Pole but he craved an even tougher challenge. So now he's going to row a boat through the 450 miles of freezing water and icebergs. Words: **Alex Donohue**

**A**s job offers go, intrepid explorer Ernest Shackleton's infamous 1907 advert in *The Times* takes some beating. "Men wanted for hazardous journey," it read. "Small wages, bitter cold, long hours of complete darkness. Safe return doubtful. Honor and recognition in case of success."

The Anglo-Irish adventurer earned a knighthood on that trip, by going further south than any man before. But a later expedition, in 1914, was marked by extraordinary difficulties: he had to battle incredible odds to save his men from disaster, leading them hundreds of miles across the southern seas in tiny lifeboats after their ship got trapped in the ice, missing their goal of reaching the pole.

A century later another fearless British explorer, Jock Wishart, is looking for his own team of men to embark on another hazardous journey – christened the Old Pulteney Row to the Pole – that will emulate Shackleton's voyage.

The 58-year-old London-based Scotsman aims to row a five-man boat 450 miles across open water and ice from Canada's Resolute Bay to the magnetic North Pole.

It is a challenge that has never been undertaken before. But, as Wishart acknowledges – comparing himself to Mickey Rourke's character in *The Wrestler*, the ageing warrior going into battle for one last hurrah – at his age it's a case of now or never.

"I don't deny as I get older there will come a point when I'll have to say 'no more'," he sighs.

"The mental will to do these expeditions will always be there, but it's the physical aspect that will eventually overrule the mind. There will come a day when I can't do this anymore. But I don't know when that will be. Will I do another expedition after this? I just don't know." If he does decide to

go to the pole again, it will be his highly supportive wife, Debbie, who will be first to hear about it.

"She was upset with me a while ago when she heard about this one," he explains.

"Not because I was going, you understand, but because I hadn't told her about it sooner. She only knew a week before I told the press."

Wishart may not be setting off on his polar expedition until July 2011, but his painstaking preparations already take up most of his time.

He's yet to finalise who his five-strong crew will be; himself and his cameraman are the only ones confirmed. He jokes about the advert Shackleton placed all those years ago, but he's under no illusions about how hard his task will be.

"I did have that *Times* ad in mind before I started looking for a crew," he laughs. "It makes you think about how much those men were prepared to put everything on the line."

"I get people putting themselves forward every day for the challenge and I keep everyone in mind but it takes a certain kind of character mentally and physically to do it, we need to get it right."

"Taking a rowing boat to the North Pole is just unprecedented. People need to understand that despite the technological advances we've seen over time, this just hasn't been done before."

"There's certainly not been an attempt to row to one of the poles since the days of Shackleton – and he didn't make it."

Considering this, it perhaps isn't that much of a surprise that the expedition started out as a throwaway joke.

"I'd just completed an expedition to the North Pole in August 2007 when someone said, 'What are you going to do next Jock; row to the North Pole?'"

"Everyone burst out laughing at the idea but I wondered if it was possible. It was only after doing research I realised that rowing to the magnetic North Pole could be done. For the majority of the



**JOCK'S AWAY**  
WISHART BELIEVES HIS NEW EXPEDITION WILL BE EVEN MORE CHALLENGING THAN WALKING TO THE NORTH POLE, WHICH HE ACHIEVED IN 1992 (MAIN PICTURE)



year the route is covered in thick ice, but there's a small window of opportunity in midsummer where it melts enough to find a way through."

Right now, Wishart's main focus is building a boat able to withstand the best and worst nature can throw at it.

The actual design has yet to be unveiled, but his team is working on a fibreglass and wood construction that will include sledge runners on the bottom – allowing the occupants to drag it across the ice when no waterway lies ahead.

Despite the meticulous preparations, he knows success hinges on factors beyond his control. "The weather will be one of our main obstacles," he says.

"Even after all this preparation, we know we're at the mercy of situations we can't control. It's all very daunting, I can't deny that."

**WISHART IS NO** stranger to epic expeditions. A potted history of his adventures to date include rowing from the Canary Islands to Barbados in 1997 and completing a 26,000 mile circumnavigation of the globe in 74 days to set a world record in 1998. He captained the 1999 team that broke the London to Paris rowing record, and he devised The Ultimate

## 'SHACKLETON WAS THE LAST TO TRY THIS AND HE DIDN'T MAKE IT'

Challenge in 1996 of finding 10 "Arctic novices" whom he trained to reach the magnetic North Pole. In addition, he led the first team to walk unsupported to the geomagnetic North Pole in 1992.

Born in Dumfries in 1952, Wishart – who can count the poet Robert Burns among his ancestors – developed a taste for adventure from his forebears: both his father and grandfather "went to war and explored the world".

He rails strongly against Britain's play it safe "work ethos" which demands students go to university and get a sensible job.

"People want an adventure," he points out. Wishart cites his own scariest Arctic experiences as waking up to find a polar bear trying to snaffle food from inside his tent, and coming to the rescue of the crew of a stricken Dutch yacht that had capsized.

"There is always the potential for things to go catastrophically wrong," he says candidly.

"But what I find inspirational is the idea of doing something that's not been done before. I was once asked if I'd consider climbing Mount Everest, but it doesn't excite me at all. Half a dozen people do that every year. My mindset is to make things happen. The trick I've learned in life is you always have to keep going." ●

Turn to page 43 for details on how to win a bottle of Old Pulteney whisky

