

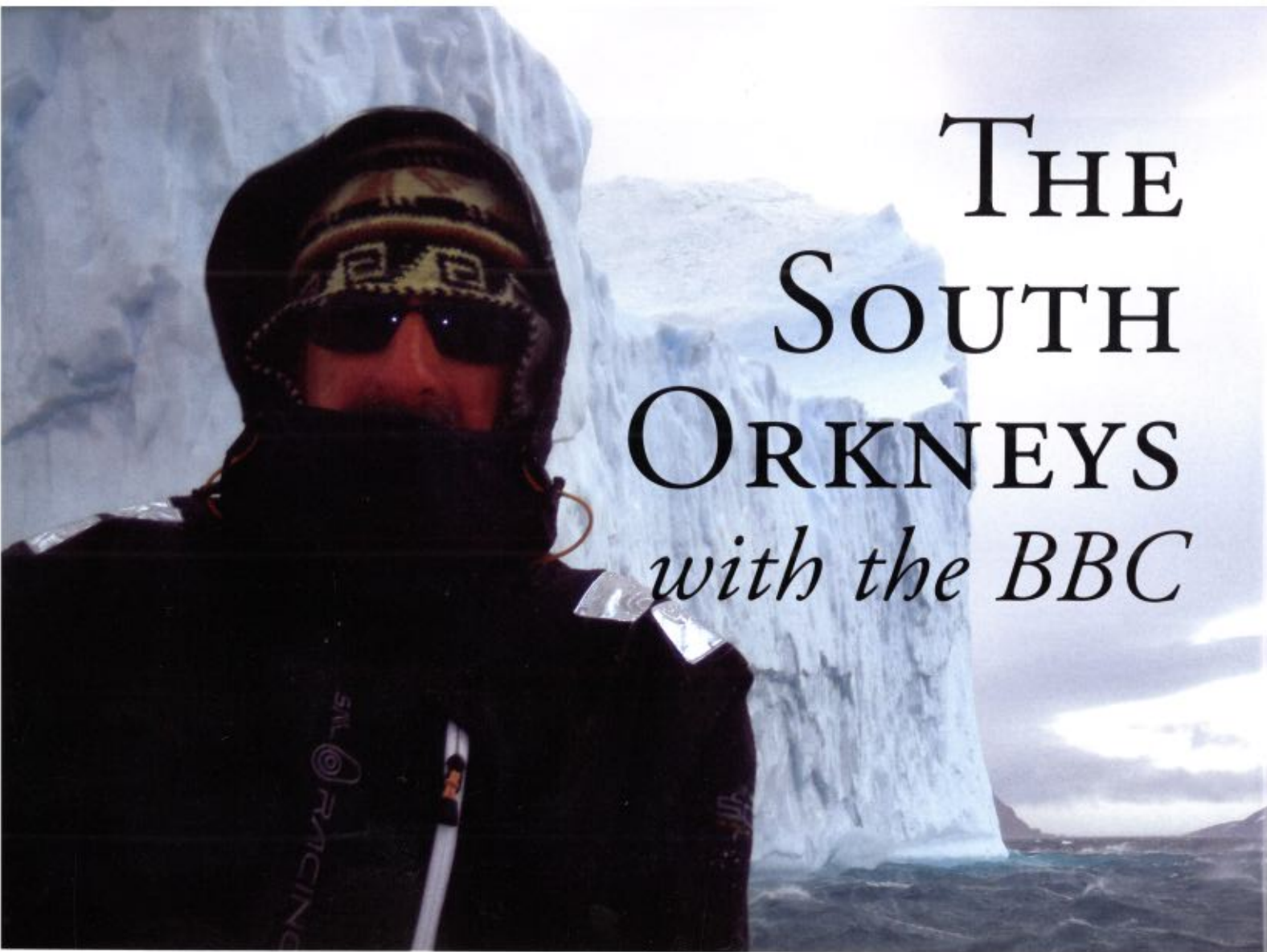


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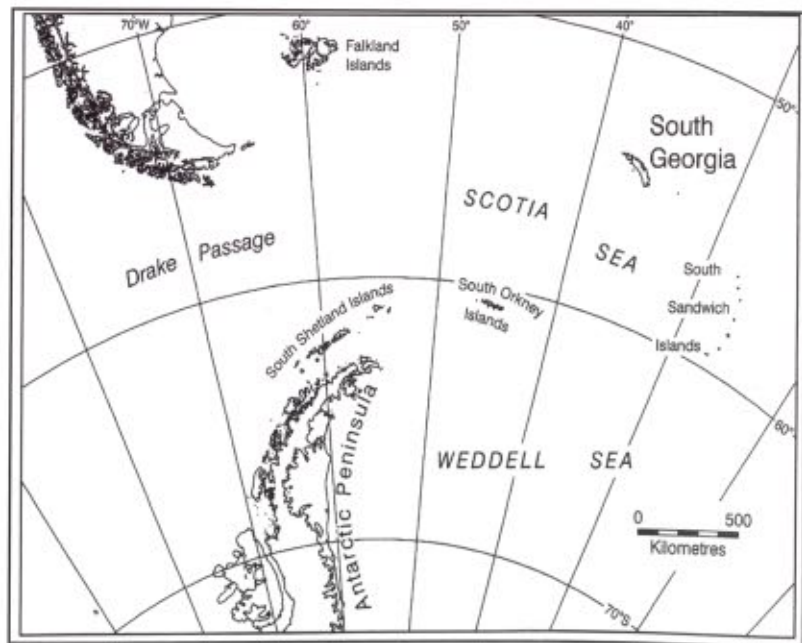


THE SOUTH ORKNEYS *with the BBC*

by Skip Novak, Great Lakes Station

The South Orkney Island's reputation for miserable weather, the risk of pack ice in summer, and what could be a tricky time groping around in the mist under sail is well known. At only 60° 30' South it is considered sub-Antarctic in climate (part of the so-called 'banana belt' by base personnel who work on the continent), but being just south of 60°, it does fall squarely in Antarctic Treaty Territory. It also lies well below the usual 'trade' routes, neither on the way to South Georgia from the Falklands nor en route to the Antarctic Peninsula proper. Consequently this small archipelago has seen little yacht traffic over the years. In other words, you need a damn good reason to go there.

Film companies are notorious for last minute logistic planning and the BBC regional production units are no exception. *Pelagic*, the original and smaller vessel of our expedition fleet of two, has over the years been an asset on standby for 11th hour demands for transport south. Their script is always the same: "We finally have our budget and we **MUST** go this season . . .!" Enter BBC Scotland making a historical documentary on their hero of polar exploration.

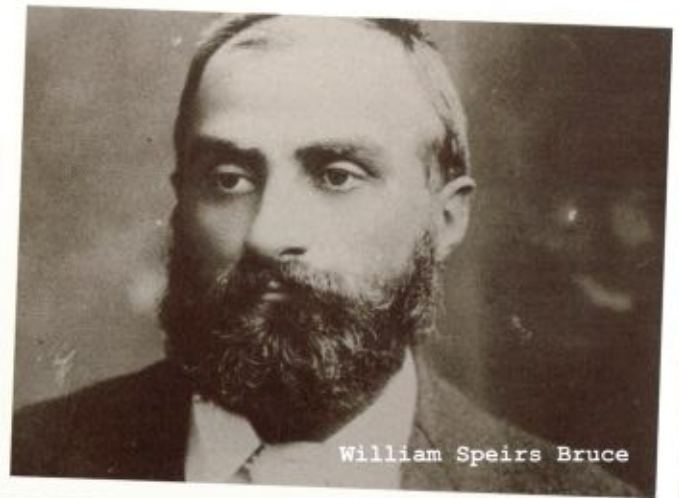


Never having been put off by rain, snow, mist and ice, I jumped at the chance to take *Pelagic* to this relatively untraveled corner of the Southern Ocean. After a protracted, and at times painful, extraction of 'health and safety' guarantees as to our seaworthiness, the Beeb's (BBC) lawyers finally gave their stamp of approval a week before our proposed departure. This was a three week mission, Stanley to Stanley, but it meant only eight days of onsite filming - a tall order to make a 50-minute documentary. On a Skype call the week before, my friend Chris Elliot, former captain of the British Antarctic Survey's state of the art research vessel, the *James Clark Ross*, warned me (from the comfort of his cottage in the Pyrenees) that if a southerly wind persists we would be lucky to land anywhere on the south coast due to pack ice. Doubts about the whole project started creeping in.

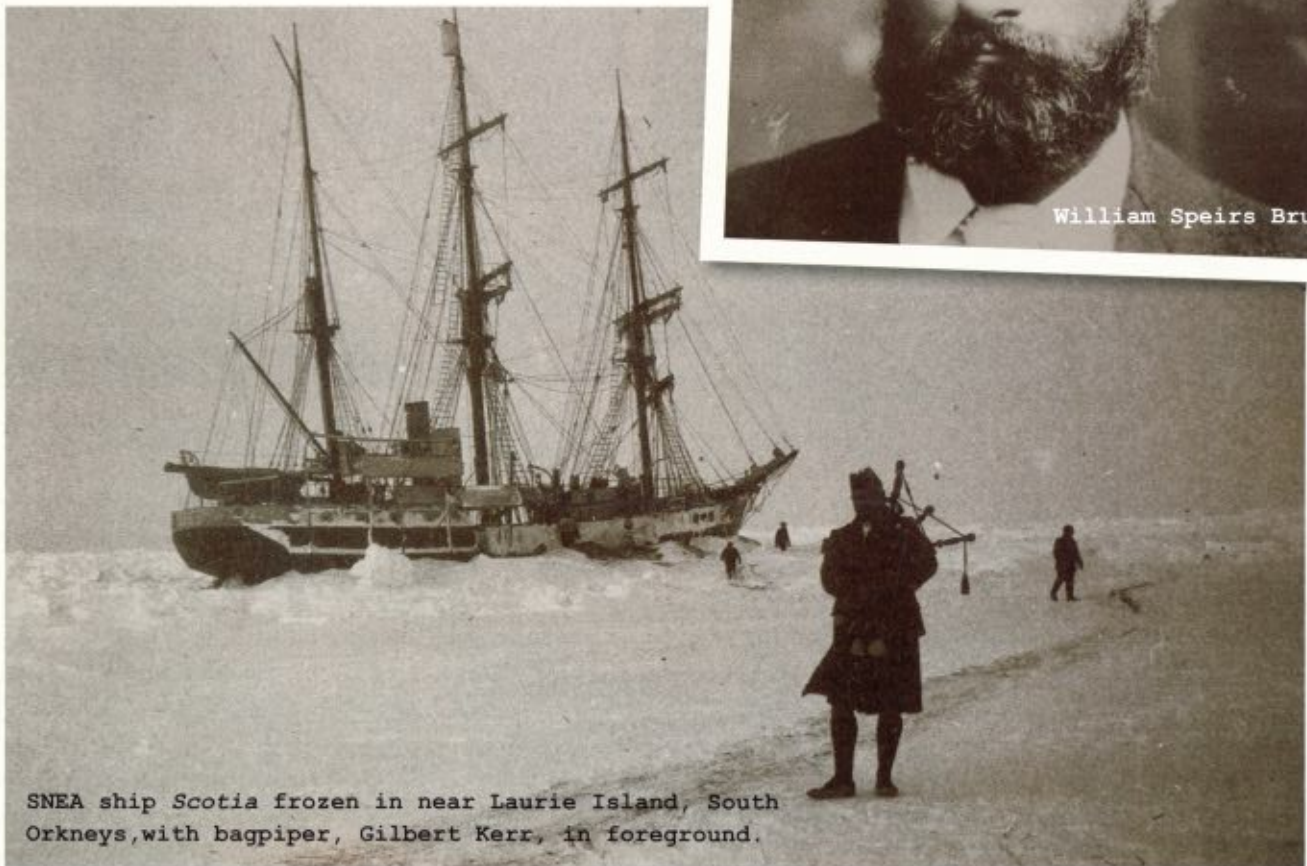
William Speirs Bruce led the Scottish National Expedition to the Antarctic from 1902 to 1904. It was the first truly scientific expedition to the Antarctic.

On January 22, 2011, I flew into Mount Pleasant Airport in the Falkland Islands via Santiago, the film crew of five having arrived from the UK earlier that morning on the aptly coined 'air bridge' direct from the UK via Ascension Island. We all met at the 'FIPAS' main jetty, a precarious floating military contraption left over after the 1982 war with Argentina. Colin Murray's mouth dropped open in shock and horror at the mere size of our ship - all of 54 feet. He was the director and responsible for this gig, and it was immediately clear to me that maybe he hadn't done his homework. After we successfully stowed the usual mountain of filming and personal equipment, he began to relax a bit, seeing the possibility of it all before becoming increasingly anxious about the prospect of imminent seasickness for himself and his team as the boat bobbed gently to the harbor swell. The next day we were due to depart and the forecast was for a bumpy ride in a fresh southwesterly. Only the cameraman had any sailing experience at all - a veteran of Lake Windermere in Great Britain's Lake District.

William Speirs Bruce led the Scottish National Expedition to the Antarctic from 1902 to 1904. It was the first truly scientific expedition to



William Speirs Bruce



SNEA ship *Scotia* frozen in near Laurie Island, South Orkneys, with bagpiper, Gilbert Kerr, in foreground.



Omond House on Laurie Island, built during Bruce's expedition. It was the oldest continuously inhabited site in Antarctica.



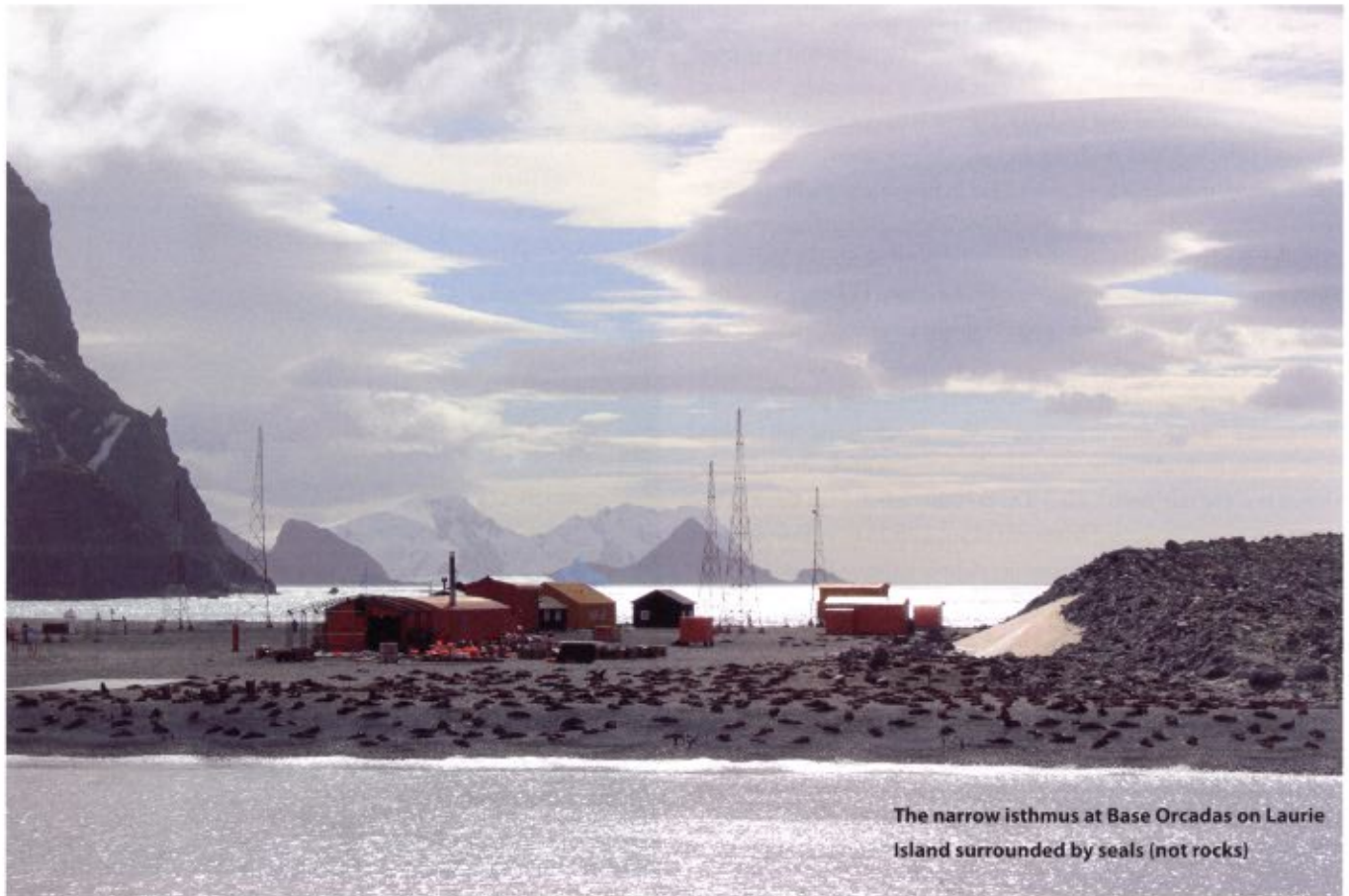
Bruce at Royal Scottish Oceanographical office



BBC crew filming at site of Omond House ruins

the Antarctic, without the exploration bravado that was a large part of previous expeditions south and of many that would follow. Articulating this story for the film was the British housewives' TV favorite Neil Oliver. When I 'googled' him, I read that his shoulder-length, black, bonny locks were insured for one million GBP (this focused my mind - possibly I could cut off a few inches while he was asleep deathly seasick, and auction them later on eBay?). Joined by cameraman Alastair McCormick, soundman Jamie Flynn, safety officer Jim McNeill, and *Pelagic* crew Chris Harris, we shoved off on January 23 and made our way to the open sea through a placid Berkeley Sound.

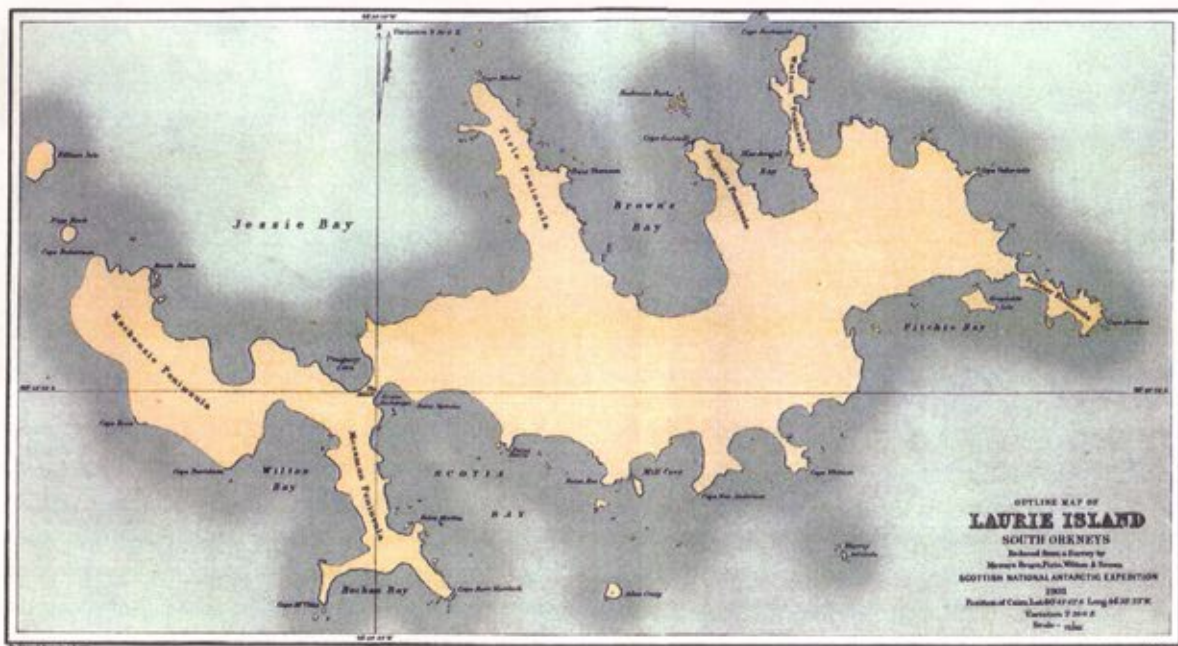
Within six hours, the yankee had been furled to just short of its clew patch and we were down to three reefs and our storm staysail (always rigged and ready) and we pretty much stayed that way for the next four days. Yes, bumpy in the southwesterly with the wind forward of the beam, but fast. We all survived the passage down with no dramas and made landfall on Coronation Island on January 27 weaving our way through an obstacle course of bergy bits and growlers, marveling at the light of a low sun illuminating bands of tabular bergs barricading the southern horizon. As always, first landfall in the Antarctic is spectacular, but let it be said, some people more than others were glad to lay off to the east under the south coast and into flatter water.



The narrow isthmus at Base Orcadas on Laurie Island surrounded by seals (not rocks)

There are two installations on the South Orkneys – The British Antarctic Survey’s ‘Base Signy’ on Signy Island, an outlier under the belly of the main Coronation Island, and the Argentine’s Base Orcadas further to east on Laurie Island. It was evident that the film would be focused around Base Orcadas where Bruce’s expedition had wintered and set up a shore station to better conduct

observations. In spite of ours being a ‘fiercely Scottish’ project, it was clear the proper protocol was to check in first with BAS at Base Signy. Base Commander Matt Jobson was expecting us, having been alerted through the BAS’s headquarters in Cambridge. Luckily a few bergs, no pack ice, and good visibility made things easy in finding our way into the anchorage near the base.



We spent a very pleasant three days at this compact and very professionally run research station. We were happily received by Matt and his team, consisting of bird biologist Derren Fox, entomologist Roger Worland (who had been studying the habits of one austral insect for the last 25 years), technician Joe Corner, (just in from a year on Bird Island, South Georgia) and general assistant Ed McGough, (just in from a winter at Halley Research Station on the Brunt Ice Shelf in the Weddell Sea). Three visiting Italian scientists, Michele, Luca and Roberto, were also in summer residence studying permafrost when not cooking the pasta.

Many people find it hard to understand why young people in their 20s would want to spend, in some cases, three summers and two winters straight time in the Antarctic. Outside the Antarctic genre, this is largely viewed as a 'cop out' from society. On the other hand, I can think of no better way to set the scene for the rest of your life than to have time to think and reflect and get your priorities right first time – by and large an improbability, at best a gamble, with all the distractions and frivolities young people are continually bombarded by today.

Besides the meals together (the Italians were seasick on *Pelagic* when it was our turn), endless cups of tea and general natter, the high point was the walk up over the island's spine and down a dry glacier to the Chinstrap penguin colony where Neil helped Derren net quite a few for the camera. One of Derren's jobs was to catch



Film crew heads
for landing at Base
Orcadas



Derren netting Chinstrap penguins for weighing in

over 200 Chinstrap chicks a week or two before they fledged so he could weigh them for their database.

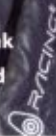
Throughout our visit the weather held fine and we had a good look at the mountainous landscape that is usually under a blanket of low cloud. We were not entirely alone on the island. Not far from Base Signy stood an extensive tented camp for an American ham radio operator's

expedition supported by the New Zealand motor vessel, *Braveheart*. For some unexplained reason, the BAS personnel did not fraternize with this expedition, so nor did we.

This stop reminded me of the 'good old days' when crews and shore personnel alike looked forward to the visits. Antarctic camaraderie was in force and the base personnel took the time to have a yarn and, when



Skip Novak
unmasked



sold mainly to cruise ship tourists) and a seasonal staff of four. They recorded licking stamps for 80,000 pieces of post last season!

Now it was on to Base Orcadas, only 40 miles away to the east on Laurie Island. This massive Argentine installation lies on a low-lying, dead-flat isthmus of shingle and beach stone only a few meters above sea level. Viewed from above on the dry glacier to the east, it is a singular feature, a precarious ribbon of land connecting the two halves of the island. Scotia Bay lies to the south, which is the preferred anchorage used by ships to supply the base and provides an easy dinghy landing on fine gravel. Uruguay Bay to the north would afford sea shelter in a howling southerly but looked foreboding. The steep beach, consisting of medium to large size boulders, would have been a tricky landing even on a fine day and was not inviting.

As expected, this station was quite a different venue; somewhat melancholic, tidy enough, but complete with crumbling infrastructure and peeling international orange paint on everything. It was staffed almost exclusively by Argentine military personnel. In any event, they were more than hospitable and obviously very chuffed with this being a Scottish and not a British project.

If you know the exploration history and are aware of the present tug of war in the South Atlantic over sovereignty, you would remember how the British establishment, in general, and Sir Clements Markham,



On the way from
Signy to Orcadas

they waved good-bye at the landing, it was with some regret and not relief – or at least we would like to think so. This is not the case today on the more accessible bases on the peninsula proper, where yacht visits are considered more of a nuisance due to the sheer volume of yacht and tour ship traffic. This past season, more than 50 yachts were recorded having visited Port Lockroy, which is the de facto visitors' center – complete with a British post office, paraphernalia for sale (several tons per season

president of the Royal Geographic Society, in particular, had fingers in every expedition pie. Due to an enmity that is well documented in the archive of letters between Bruce and Markham, the British refused to support and barely acknowledged Bruce's expedition, which was eventually funded entirely by Scottish donors. And by God, when Bruce was finished there in 1904, he ceded the 'station' to the Argentine government! In doing so, this set up the Argentine historical claim (in addition to their



Fur seal bachelors (non-breeders) at Base Orcadas

obvious geographical claim) to that part of what they now consider to be Argentine Antarctic Territory.

Our film team's priority was the stone remains of Bruce's Omond House, which then, more so now, is stretching the use of the word 'house.' Today it is a ruin, a pile of rocks and a retreat for fur seals seeking a bit of wind shelter, but it did admirably as a back drop for Bruce's story articulated by Neil for the camera. Omond House was the first meteorological installation in the Antarctic, which long ago evolved into a modern installation in the main part of the station. Thus, it has survived into the present and supports Argentina's claim that this is the oldest continually manned station in the Antarctic (true). The film work with Chris and me volunteering as unpaid 'grips' went on during the next four days to record everything that moved and didn't around the station, within and without.

The last day the weather broke into what we were told was the norm – what can only be described as the most miserable of cold rain showers in between squalls of freezing rain showers and sleet. For respite we watched Queensland's floods on BBC World via the stations satellite link in the overheated officers' mess (when the officers were not busy watching those evocative Argentine variety shows), drank mate and ate sweet biscuits.

Finally, the 'chips' were loaded with images (long gone: 'film in the can'), we bid our hosts "adios y suerte," up anchored and began the long six day haul back to Stanley – mission accomplished. ♡

Author's Note: All historical archive shots were taken in the museum at Base Orcadas.



Pelagic team hosting BAS team from Signy for dinner