In 1913, the adventurer Ernest Shackleton (1874-1922) proposed an expedition to cross the Antarctic continent, a feat that had not yet been attempted by any polar explorer. Shackleton had previously journeyed south as part of Scott’s team on the 1901-4 expedition aboard *Discovery*, but was forced to return home due to illness. He had led his own attempt to reach the South Pole in 1907-9, when he took the decision to turn back in order to save his men.

His new plan to cross the continent by foot was endorsed with funding from, among others, the Royal Geographical Society and from three wealthy sponsors, Janet Stancomb-Wills, Dudley Docker and Sir James Caird. He proposed an extensive programme of meteorological, magnetic, geological and geographical observations, not only on the journey across the continent but also at base camp. Five thousand applications to join the expedition flooded in. Shackleton selected his medical and scientific staff through a series of unusual interviews. The candidates were asked to sing and were appointed because they were amusing or could make suitable quips about losing a finger. Shackleton judged their professional capabilities from references, but wanted to ensure his crew was cheerful and optimistic.

On 16 July 1914, Queen Alexandra (widow of King Edward VII) and her sister, the Dowager Empress of Russia, visited Shackleton’s ship *Endurance* at Cowes. The Queen presented the adventurer with a Union flag, a replica of her own standard, and two inscribed copies of the Bible. War was brewing, and on 4 August, Shackleton offered his ship and crew to the Admiralty. In response he received a terse telegram from Churchill, then First Lord, saying simply ‘Proceed’. On 5 August, Shackleton was received by King George V and given a second Union flag to carry across the continent. *Endurance* finally departed on 8 August for Buenos Aires, from where she made her way south towards Antarctica.

Christmas was celebrated on board with a feast of jugged hare, Christmas pudding and mince pies, and on 30 December, *Endurance* crossed the Antarctic Circle. A pause by a large ice floe enabled the team to get off the ship, exercise the dogs and have a game of football. The crew sighted land on 10 January 1915 but two weeks later the ship was frozen in and at the mercy of the ice and the current. They were carried closer towards their intended landing point, but on 22 February came to a stop just 25 miles away from it. Shackleton decided to let the ship become a winter station.

The six-man team destined for the continental crossing began training their dog teams, and everyone was kept busy preparing equipment and discussing plans. In July the ice pack thickened, and by October the pressure from ice floes forced *Endurance* over at an angle. On 24 October the ship began to leak and finally sank a month later. The crew retrieved as much as possible from the ship and prepared to trek across to Paulet Island, where they would find shelter and stores. Personal gear was limited to 2lb per man, and Shackleton threw away the remaining Bible given to him by the Queen, keeping only the inscribed page and some verses from the Book of Job.

The men camped on solid ice floes until April, when Shackleton ordered them to take to the boats. Food supplies were dwindling, the cold, wet conditions were taking their toll, and the current had carried them
away from their goal. Shackleton decided to head for Elephant Island, where they arrived on 17 April and planned the next move. On 24 April, Shackleton and five others set off in a reinforced boat named James Caird (after one of the expedition sponsors) to make the 800-mile journey to South Georgia.

The 22 men left behind made themselves a shelter to survive the wait, upending the two remaining boats and covering them with tent material. The space measured only 10ft x 18ft (3m x 4.5m) and barely 5ft (1.5m) high, but it was home to them all for four months. Luxuries were doled out at suitable intervals, while the doctors performed amputations when frostbite took hold. A penny cook-book provided the source of much conversation, as recipes were read out and discussed in great deal.

Shackleton’s party took 17 days to reach South Georgia, an incredible feat of navigation and endurance. Three of the men – Shackleton, Captain Frank Worsley and Petty Officer Tom Crean – then set off across uncharted territory in South Georgia, crossing mountains and glaciers to reach whaling stations and help. They had no climbing gear with them, just a coil of rope and nails in the soles of their boots. On 20 May they arrived at Stromness Bay, where their bedraggled appearance caused young boys to run from them in fear.

After several failed attempts to reach Elephant Island, some involving ships lent by the Chilean and Uruguyan governments, Shackleton finally rescued his men on 30 August. Not one life was lost.