

Rowing the Northwest Passage Expedition Attempt 2023

THE DELIVERY EXPEDITION

Days 1-4

8th to 12th June

Eyemouth to Orkney

On the evening of the 8th June, expedition leader Leven Brown and I were waved off from Eyemouth pier by family and friends. We were setting off in our 44ft ocean rowing boat, "Hermione" to start the beginning of our Northwest Passage rowing attempt. The first step was to deliver our boat to the start line of Pond Inlet, where we would pick up most of our crew. Since commercial shipping to this area is both costly and logistically difficult, we instead decided to deliver our boat ourselves.



Hermione setting off into the North Sea from Eyemouth Harbour



Leven and I preparing to set off from Eyemouth

Although we would be attempting to row through the passage, we were not planning to row all the way to Arctic Canada and instead had a small electric outboard motor fitted to the back of the boat, which was powered by a little diesel generator. We also felt that having the motor on the boat provided us with an extra level of safety on the expedition, should we get into any trouble in the passage we would be able to move to safety using the engine.

The first stop on our journey was the Orkney Islands, where one of our crew members (Davie Flett) lives. Orkney has a close history associated with the Northwest Passage, being the birth place of John Rae. Rae was one of many explorers who went looking for the lost Franklin expedition and walked overland to find the last navigable link through the passage. The Orkney Islands were also the last stopping point for ships from the Hudson's Bay Company before they reached Canada, and in 1799, 400 of the 500 employees of the Hudson's Bay Company came from Orkney.

The journey between Eyemouth and Orkney wasn't pleasant. Although I had taken sea sickness medication prior to our departure I found that I suffered badly, especially during the first day, and this combined with having to quickly adapt to the four hours on, four hours off watch pattern meant that I was happy to see dry land as we arrived. It took us two days to reach Orkney and we were greeted by Davie and his wife Fiona on our arrival.



Outside Kirkjuvagr Distillery with a bottle of NWP Expedition Gin



Meeting members of the Orkney Coastal Rowing Club

members of the coastal rowing club who came to see us during their practice and we showed them Hermione. It was great to meet several more

rowing enthusiasts.



The Orkney Rowing Club visiting us during their practice



Onboard MV Ugly Betty, pouring over charts and discussing the NWP

Whilst in Orkney we met another boat planning to complete the Northwest Passage this year, a powerboat called “Ugly Betty”. Davie also introduced us to Captain Maiwenn Beadle, an ice pilot who has been through the passage twice and ended up becoming both a friend and also an invaluable source of information and support for the rest of the expedition.



Sunny skies leaving Orkney

Days 5-17 13th to 25th June

Orkney to Faroe Islands

After completing our first service on the diesel generator and refuelling we set off from Kirkwall harbour under clear skies and on silky calm seas, headed northwards towards the Faroe Islands. The beautiful weather didn't last, and we were treated to two days of thick fog. After a couple of close calls with some fishing boats in the fog we made it safely to Hvannasund, the home of our Faroese crew member, Livar Nysted. Arriving in Hvannasund I was told we were in a stunning fjord with huge cliffs towering over us, but I had to take Leven's word for it as I couldn't see a thing because of the fog. The

first sign we were close to land was the flashing of Livar's headlights on the dock, only a few metres away from us.

Whilst in the Faroe Islands we hauled Hermione out of the water and were able to fix a small leak that had been occurring in the back cabin (thankfully only due to a loose skin fitting and nothing serious) as well as having an interview for Faroese national television.

We waited in the Faroes for quite a while, watching closely the weather in Iceland which wasn't looking great. During our wait we were contacted by MV "Ugly Betty" who said they'd like to help us with our expedition by towing us across the Denmark Strait from Iceland to Greenland. Since this would involve towing Hermione over thousand miles (and since we were stuck in the Faroes waiting for a weather window to leave) we decided to get a new towing eye fitted to ensure we wouldn't have any issues. Livar's nephew, Dan, was able to weld us a new and more robust one, which we secured to our bow, ready for when we reached Iceland.

Whilst in the Faroes we were also offered a lift for Hermione on a cargo boat up to Iceland. Since the weather wasn't looking great in Iceland and we didn't want to miss our tow with Ugly Betty we gladly accepted and after building a cradle to support the boat we motored Hermione around the Faroe Islands from Hvannasund to the capital Torshavn. Once in Torshavn, we helped move Hermione out of the water and get her loaded on to a container pallet ready for shipping to Iceland.

Days 18-23

26th June- 1st July

Faroe Islands to Iceland



Hermione ready to be lowered back into the water in Reykjavik

Since we could not travel on the container ship as passengers, Leven and I needed to fly to Reykjavik to meet "Hermione". In Iceland we met up with the owners and crew of Ugly Betty (Bruce, Nora, Nicki and Jon) and also had our crew mate Davie fly in to join us for the rest of the delivery.

In Iceland we met two more boats planning to complete the Northwest Passage (Thindra and Seabelle) Both were sail boats and it was wonderful to chat with the crews of these boats and Ugly Betty and share plans and thoughts about the passage.

After a few days battling with Icelandic customs in order to get the boat released we were free to go and spent a day sorting out our towing set up before we headed off towards Greenland with the crew of Ugly Betty.

Days 24- 36

2nd July -14th July

Iceland to Nuuk, Greenland

On leaving Iceland Davie, Leven and I maintained a four-hour watch schedule that allowed us to keep a close eye on Hermione and ensure nothing appeared out of the ordinary and check that the towing line wasn't chafing.

Ourselves and the Ugly Betty crew quickly fitted in well together and it was as if we had all been friends for years. I took full advantage of their years of experience built from a life at sea and was able to pick their brains about their passage plans. Together we all spent hours perusing the Arctic waters cruising guides and pouring over the charts of the passage.

After three slightly rough days we finally reached the west coast of Greenland, and I had my first sighting of an iceberg. Rather than going right round the cape of Greenland we opted to go through the Prins Christian Sund and then work our way up to the west coast. Upon entering the Prins Christian Sund the water became flat calm and we were treated to a wonderful afternoon of motoring past magnificent icebergs and a few small glaciers. The tall mountains on either side of the fjord



The first of many chilly Greenlandic swims

once managing a full lap around both Ugly Betty and Hermione.



Leaving Reykjavik with Hermione in tow



Cruising through the Prins Christian Sund

were dramatic and imposing and it was like no place I had ever been before. Around every corner there seemed to be yet another more spectacular iceberg or glacier to look at in awe and I don't think I could ever get bored of the views we had.

Since Livar wasn't flying into Nuuk until the 15th July and the extra crew for Ugly Betty weren't arriving until after that, we were able to take our time moving up the west coast of Greenland. We stayed close to the coast, anchoring each night and exploring several of the fjords on the way north to Nuuk.

Because it had been a slightly colder summer than normal in Greenland the glaciers were calving less and so the water was clearer, without as much sediment running into it. I took full advantage of the beautifully crystal-clear water and went for several chilly swims, even

Some of the many highlights of our trip up the coast of Greenland including stopping to enjoy the hot springs at Uunartoq, exploring the town of Qaqortoq and getting off the boat in Tasermit fjord to explore the land a little bit.



View from the hot springs out to sea at Uunartoq, Greenland

One night we decided to “cook” for Ugly Betty by testing out all the rations we had on board Hermione for the

expedition. We cooked one of each type of meal and all tasted a bit of each and then rated them out of 10. It was a lot of fun as well as giving everyone a bit more of an insight to what life on Hermione would be like during the row.



Colourful houses in Qaqortoq, Greenland

We became very efficient at moving through ice with Hermione in tow and were able to snug her up close to Ugly Betty when we were in areas with lots of ice and then let her out behind on a longer tow whenever the swell picked up.



Pulling Hermione in close to Ugly Betty as we prepare to navigate an icy patch of water

We arrived in Nuuk on the 11th July and met up with some fishermen from Newfoundland who had met Ugly Betty last year. They kindly gave us lots of porcupine crab and halibut which was delicious. We spent a couple of days exploring Nuuk and repacking the boat whilst we waited for Livar to arrive.



Days 37- 42

15th to 20th July

Nuuk to Aasiaat

Once Livar arrived, we had a perfect weather window to leave and so we said our goodbyes to “The Uglies”, hoping to meet up with them again in Upernavik, and then set off on Hermione with Livar now installed on the boat.



Leaving Nuuk and heading North under our own steam

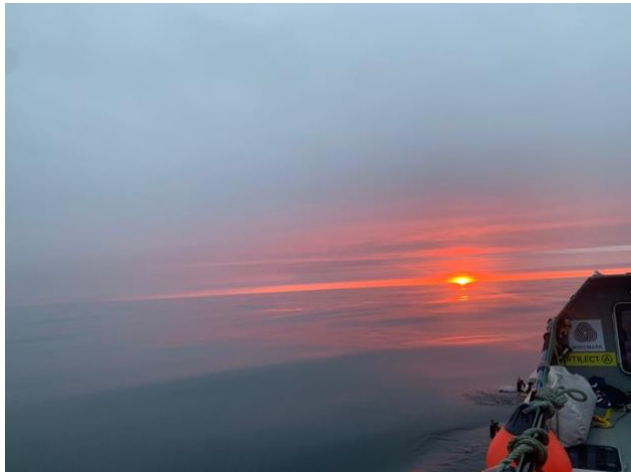
This was the first time we had both Davie and Livar on Hermione and it was lovely to have some company on deck for the watch shifts.

As we headed North we were treated to some spectacular views of several whales and more stunning icebergs. On the morning of the 17th July we hit 66°33' N and entered the Arctic circle which was a cause for celebration.

The seas were calm but it was damp and foggy and most of our clothing got completely soaked through from standing on deck for 12 hours a day.

We decided it would be best to make a stop at Aasiaat (which was approximately one day away) to allow us to dry things out before continuing.

On the morning of the 18th July we passed through our first two ice floes. We switched the autohelm off and I manually steered whilst Davie stood nearer to the bow and gave me directions. We passed through unscathed, and Leven and Livar had quite a shock when they woke up for their shift and saw what we had just navigated through.



Calm seas heading north up the west coast of Greenland

Later that day our generator decided to stop, we attempted to fix it but couldn't get it to work, so instead Davie and I took to the oars and rowed us the remaining 11 miles into Aasiaat.

Thankfully it was a beautiful sunny day and it was a very

pleasant afternoon to get the oars out and give Hermione (and the crew) her first taste of being rowed in the Arctic.



Davie and I rowing Hermione into Aasiaat after our generator broke down

Upon arrival in Aasiaat we asked someone for help and they turned out to also be from the Faroe Islands so Livar and our new friend chatted away and he was able to help us find a hostel for the night, as well as organise someone to fix our generator.



On board SY Sentijn with John, Kara and six year old Dean

We stayed in Aasiaat for three nights and were able to fix the generator, dry out all of our kit and also purchased some new oil skins for the remainder of the delivery journey to help keep us dry.

On our last night in Aasiaat we met another boat called Sentijn, that was also planning to do the Northwest Passage. On board was husband and wife John and Kara and their little boy Dean, who was extremely interested in our rowing boat and so he came aboard to have a little look around.



Bundled up in layers keeping warm whilst steering Hermione North through Disko Bay

Days 43- 48

21st to 26th July

Aasiaat to Upernavik

Feeling well rested and a lot drier we waved goodbye to the crew of Sentijn as they departed and then we also left Aasiaat. Our new waterproofs helped to keep us much drier in the relentless fog.

We opted to head through Disko Bay rather than going further out to sea. We passed lots of icebergs and so manually steered rather than using the autohelm. The 24 hour daylight and the four hour shift routine meant that all of us got a bit confused about whether it was morning or evening, however, it didn't matter much as by now we were all well adapted to the shift pattern and weren't feeling so tired.



One of several whale sightings



Magnificent icebergs in Disko Bay

We were coming up to a large area of ice that looked too thick to navigate through and so after looking at the charts we decided to head inland between a few small islands to try and navigate around it. As we were approaching the first of the islands our electric outboard started malfunctioning and showing us an error message. Livar and I got the oars out and rowed us a couple of miles into the shelter of a small island where we put the anchor down and tried to figure out what was wrong with the engine.

Unfortunately, it seemed that there may have been some water ingress causing a communication issue between our two controllers and the motor. We were unable to fix the engine at sea and so were going to row slowly towards Upernavik but had to wait for the headwinds on the other side of our sheltered island to die down. We also contacted Ugly Betty who had offered to tow us across Baffin Bay from Upernavik and they kindly volunteered to pick us up en-route to Upernavik once they left Nuuk.

We spent two days at anchor, mostly in the fog and mist with limited visibility. We had to move a little way a few times to avoid some drifting growlers but other than that it was a fairly safe and secure



MV Ugly Betty approaching to rescue us after our engine broke down

anchorage. One evening Davie and I saw two very inquisitive Arctic fox cubs running along the top of the small cliff along the shore. They didn't seem to take any notice of us, and it was lovely to see them frolicking around playfully.

On our third day at anchorage, we had a message from Ugly Betty to say they would be with us in the middle of the morning. We prepared Hermione to be ready for towing again and then lifted our anchor and slowly rowed into deeper waters to meet Ugly Betty. She appeared out of a fog bank glistening under the sun and we maneuvered Hermione alongside her, attached our tow line, and then hopped back on-board Ugly Betty. It

was great to see them all again, and to meet their three new crew; Clive (ice pilot), Steve (engineer) and Fergie (Nora's terrier).

We headed North and anchored that evening just outside of Upernavik down a fjord that ended in a beautifully sheltered bay with clear water and no icebergs.

That afternoon Clive gave us all a talk on polar bear safety, and we headed ashore so that all of us could practice some polar bear and firearm safety drills.



Our beautiful anchorage in the Upernavik archipelago

Jon and I also managed our first Arctic swim, and we were able to go ashore again and explore of the shoreline.

Days 49- 59

27th July to 6th August

Upernavik to Kullorsuaq and back to Upernavik

Since The Uglys had offered to tow us across to Canada, we would be staying with them until they were ready to cross Baffin Bay. Each morning Clive would give us a summary of the latest ice charts, which was incredibly useful and informative. Pond Inlet was still blocked by fast ice and there was still a fair bit of ice in Baffin Bay, so we decided to slowly move further north and explore the coast of Greenland a little more.

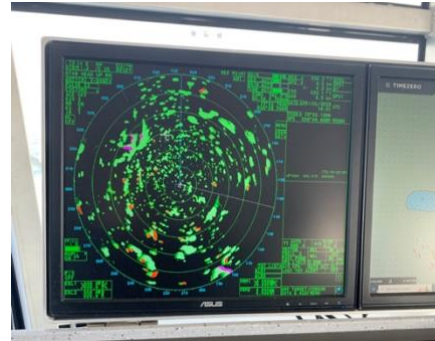
After refuelling and replenishing supplies in Upernavik, we had one more night at the same anchorage, where we met SY Sentijn again before heading north. We spent a bit of time tinkering with the towing configuration to make sure Hermione didn't snaggle in the water and potentially hit any small pieces of ice.

We cruised north slowly, stopping each night at a different anchorage and made our way as far up as Kullorsuaq. On our way up we caught several glimpses of the main Greenland ice cap and as we got near to Kullorsuaq we anchored and headed off in the dinghy to try and get in closer



"The Devil's Thumb" near Kullorsuaq

We opted not to go any further north than Kullorsuaq and instead decided to motor back to our lovely anchorage just outside of Upernavik, where a few other Northwest Passage boats were congregating.



The radar on MV Ugly Betty showing all the ice we were navigating through

to the main ice cap. There was too much ice to get right up to one of the glaciers but being down on the water line in the dinghy really brought the size and scale of some of the big icebergs into perspective. We were able to marvel at all the different patterns and colours that form, it was a truly magical experience to be right in amongst all the ice. We had anchored nearer a prominent landmark called "The Devil's Thumb", which sticks out of the rocks and was used by locals to navigate their way home. We too used it as a reference point to find our way back out of the maze of ice and back to Ugly Betty.



Towing Hermione back towards Upernavik

Once back at the anchorage there was a total of six boats that were planning to complete the passage anchored (5 sailing boats, Ugly Betty and us). We spent a wonderful couple of days with all of the other crews. One evening we had another evening of ration pack meals to let everyone taste what us rowers would be eating on the expedition and then we also took out small groups of the other crews onboard Hermione for some rowing practice, so everyone could get a little insight into life on an ocean rowing boat. Everyone seemed to have a great time, although I think they all agreed they'd much rather stay on their own boats rather than be on the rowing boat.



Several NWP boats all anchored together near Upernavik



Our little group of intrepid explorers all brought together by the Northwest Passage

Conditions were improving in Pond Inlet and the ice was beginning to melt which would mean we would be able to get in and pick up the rest of our crew.



Rowing practice with some of the other crews



The crew of MV Ugly Betty trying a spot of rowing

On the 6th August we said goodbye to all of our friends at the anchorage and ourselves and Ugly Betty headed to another anchorage just outside of Upernavik. We anchored there ready to head into Upernavik the next morning.

Days 60-62

7th to 9th August

Upernavik, Greenland to Bylot Island, Canada

Early the next morning headed into Upernavik so Ugly Betty could do their final refuel and resupply before we all headed across to Canada. When everything was ready, we waved goodbye to Greenland and set off across Baffin Bay.

It was sad to leave Greenland. Our extra time spent there with Ugly Betty had been an unplanned treat and I hope to be able to go back again and explore it further. Everyone we met was extremely beautiful and the landscapes were just stunning.



Anchoring in Tay Bay, Bylot Island

We dropped anchor at the mouth of Tay Bay on the west side of Bylot Island and then waved as Ugly Betty disappeared off into the sun. It felt like the end of a chapter saying goodbye to Ugly Betty. They had kindly towed us over 2000NM and had become like family to me. Their advice and help had been invaluable and they were without a shadow of a doubt an integral part of getting Hermione to the start line of the expedition.

It took us two days of continuous motoring to reach Canadian waters. Because the eastern entrance to Pond Inlet wasn't free of ice Ugly Betty dropped us at the northern approach near Bylot Island. They would have liked to take us all the way down Navy Board inlet into Pond Inlet but there was bad weather approaching and they wanted to head north to Devon Island to find shelter. After a lovely last meal on board and lots of goodbyes we stepped off Ugly Betty for the last time and back on to Hermione.

We dropped anchor at the mouth of Tay Bay



Leaving Greenland for the last time



Watching MV Ugly Betty leave to set off on the start of their own NWP adventure

Days 63- 69

10th – 16th August

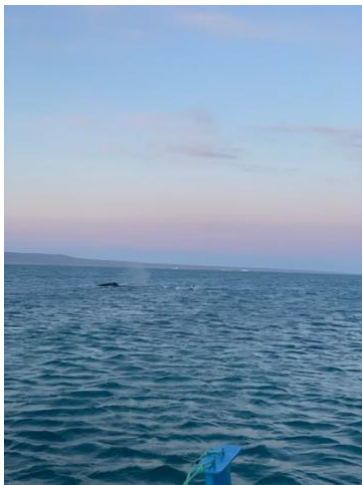
Tay Bay to Pond Inlet

We started slowly making our way south down Navy Board inlet to Pond Inlet, by rowing and attempting to use the engine where possible (although it still had communication errors and would switch itself off and need restarted). There were strong winds being funnelled down the inlet and so we moved carefully so as to avoid being blown on to ice.

We eventually anchored in a small bay whilst we waited for the ice conditions to change and the wind to die down. Whilst at this anchorage we were hailed on the VHF by SY Ocean View, who then came to anchor next to us. On board was Paul Souders, a renowned wildlife photographer and author, who comes up to the Arctic to take pictures. Paul anchored near by for a couple of nights and kindly baked us a loaf of fresh bread, a copy of his book and we exchanged stories over several cups of hot chocolate. Paul very kindly did some scouting for us around the ice and let us know what the conditions were like out of the shelter of our anchorage.



Two large icebergs grounded off shore near our anchorage in Navy Board Inlet



A bowhead whale passing by whilst we anchored in Navy Board Inlet

Meanwhile, the rest of our crew had been waiting patiently in Pond Inlet for our arrival and whilst there they had become friends with the crew of the Marie Tharp. A yacht that carries out ocean research, captained by Matt Rutherford (the first person in history to complete a non-stop single-handed voyage around North and South America).

Unfortunately for Marie Tharp they were unable to carry out some of the research due to equipment issues, and so instead of sitting in Pond Inlet at anchor they decided to do

something different and offered to head up and tow us back.

On the morning of the 13th August, after great weather intel from Paul on Ocean View, we lifted our anchor and headed South to meet Marie Tharp. We covered a fairly good distance over the morning and just as the wind and the waves were picking up, and making the engine cut out more, we saw Marie Tharp approaching from the south. After some quick communication over the radio we worked out a plan



Being towed behind SY Marie Tharp to Pond Inlet



A view of Hermione as SY Marie Tharp approached

and they threw us a line which we attached to our own towing line, and then Marie Tharp set up a bridle off of their stern. We didn't want to attempt to get onboard Marie Tharp in the choppy conditions and risk damaging Hermione, so instead we waved hello to all of the crew and to our remaining four rowers, who were also on board Marie Tharp, and we headed south. It took us about eight hours to get back into Pond Inlet and it was a relief to see the dock as we approached.

The dock at Pond Inlet had only been completed about six weeks earlier and there were now several boats anchored there, all rafted alongside. We rafted Hermione alongside our friends on SY Thindra and went to greet our remaining crew. It was lovely to have the whole crew together and we had a great evening meeting and thanking the crew of Marie Tharp.

We spent three days in Pond Inlet repacking and reorganising Hermione ready for the start of the expedition. Our replacement electric engine had also arrived and so we were able to remove the old one and fit the new one. We got to meet the crews of several other Northwest Passage vessels, including Estonian yacht SY Admiral Bellinghausen (named after Fabian Gottlieb van Bellinghausen who was credited with discovering the Antarctic ice shelf), who were creating a bit of a film about their crossing and so interviewed us and came aboard Hermione to find out more about the row. We also met research vessel Nuliajuk which carries out research for the Nunavut government.



The newly finished dock at Pond Inlet, already full of boats



Daniel and I sorting out the medical kit

I spent time with the scientists on board Marie Tharp to come up with ways in which we could help with their research. They were contributing to depth soundings to help map the ocean floor of Arctic Canada and together we were able to set up our chart plotter to track and record all of our depths. We had also planned to carry out water samples for microplastics research but it was suggested that instead of taking water samples we should take opportunistic sea ice samples as levels of microplastics are far more concentrated in ice than water and so this would provide us with samples without the need for filtering them to get a more concentrated sample.

Whilst in Pond Inlet we also met with Parks Canada to thank them for their help organising our permits for anchoring off of Bylot Island and we also spoke to members of the RCMP who were interested in our expedition. We met many locals who were all very kind and helpful and we donated our excess diesel to the local Hunters and Trappers Organisation. One of the locals we met was the grandson of Joe Panipakuttuk, a hunter from Pond Inlet, and his family, who was on board the RCMP ship the St. Roch on its east to west crossing of Pond Inlet to act as a guide for Captain Henry Larsen.

Once all preparations were complete all we had to do was say goodbye to many of our new friends and we were ready to set off.



Hermione prepared and ready to leave Pond Inlet



Some of the local children who came to visit us each day in Pond Inlet



Davie and I with some of the crew of RV Nuliajuk in Pond Inlet