

AUTHENTICATION

IN ART

AiA Art News-service

the guardian

Antarctic explorer's 118-year-old painting discovered among penguin poo

Watercolour of a small bird was painted by Dr Edward Wilson, who died in 1912 with Captain Robert Scott on their return trip to the south pole

Tuesday 13 June 2017 03.13 BST Last modified on Wednesday 14 June 2017 00.05 BST

A 118-year-old painting by a celebrated south pole explorer has been discovered in a historic Antarctic hut hidden by penguin poo.

Dr Edward Wilson, who died with Captain Robert Scott and three others in 1912 as they battled to return from their trip to the south pole, painted the watercolour of a small bird.

The watercolour was found among a portfolio of papers inside a bunk at the hut at Cape Adare, says the Antarctic Heritage Trust, which is restoring 1,500 artefacts from the hut.

The trust conservator, Josefin Bergmark-Jimenez, was shocked by the painting's beauty when she discovered it in September.

"I opened it and there was this gorgeous painting ... I got such a fright that I jumped and shut the portfolio again. I then took the painting out and couldn't stop looking at it – the colours, the vibrancy, it is such a beautiful piece of work. I couldn't believe it was there."

The discovery of the painting, labelled 1899 Tree Creeper, has been kept confidential until now to enable the team to focus on restoring all of the 1,500 artefacts from Cape Adare.

It was not immediately clear who painted the mystery picture or how it came to be among the papers.

The team from the trust knew it was likely to either be from Norwegian Carsten Borchgrevink's expedition in 1899, which built the two huts at Cape Adare, or the 1911 Scott expedition that also used them.

It was not until Bergmark-Jimenez attended a lecture on Wilson at Canterbury University in [New Zealand](#) and recognised his distinctive handwriting that she knew who had been the painter.



Dr Edward Wilson, photographed by Captain Robert, sketching on Beardmore Glacier in 1912. Photograph: Scott Polar Research Institute/PA

Wilson was integral to Scott's 1911 and 1912 expeditions to [Antarctica](#) as a scientist and medical doctor, and also a talented painter.

He was also known to have visited Lyttleton, near Christchurch, where he may have seen the tree creeper bird depicted in the watercolour.

The trust's program manager for artefact conservation, Lizzie Meek, said it was not entirely clear how the painting came to be in Antarctica.

"It's likely that Wilson painted it while he was recovering from tuberculosis in Europe," Meek said. "Clearly, he could have taken the painting to Antarctica on either of Scott's expeditions but we think it's more likely the artwork travelled with him in 1911, and somehow made its way from Cape Evans to Cape Adare."

Bergmark-Jimenez said the painting had survived in excellent condition because, while watercolours are susceptible to light, it had been tightly packed between other sheets of paper in dark and cold conditions.

"[It] is actually an ideal way to store it," she said.

The Antarctic Heritage Trust will return the 1,500 artefacts to their original places once the two Cape Adare huts containing them have also been restored.
