Rare polar sledge flag used in search for Franklin’s



Conservators from the National Museum of the Royal Navy with the polar Kellett sledge flag Credit: National Museum of the Royal Navy

The National Museum of the Royal Navy's campaign to save a rare polar expedition sledge flag has been successful, thanks to National Lottery funding.

Due to the flag's historic significance, Arts and Heritage Minister Lord Parkinson of Whitley Bay placed it under a temporary export bar in September 2022 so it could be saved for the UK.

The flag belonged to notable 19th-century Irish naval officer Vice-Admiral Sir Henry Kellett. It was flown from his sledge during the third of a series of search expeditions looking for survivors or evidence of Captain Sir John Franklin’s expedition to locate the Northwest Passage.

The maker is unknown but the motto *Auxilium Ab Alto* translates to 'Help From Above'. The flag was originally made from silk in a rich green colour, with an Irish harp embroidered in golden thread, all to reflect Captain Kellett’s Irish heritage.

> The flag represents a fascinating time in the UK's maritime history in which explorers sought to chart the Northwest Passage, to advance science, trade, and geographical exploration.
>
> *Stuart McLeod, Director, England, London & South, The National Lottery Heritage Fund*

Maritime mystery

The fate of the 129-strong crew of the Franklin expedition is still one of the greatest mysteries in UK maritime heritage. Franklin's two ships were only discovered within the last decade – HMS Erebus in 2014 and HMS Terror in 2016.

Although Franklin's expedition ultimately failed, it still became a key milestone in Arctic exploration. The findings of the expedition eventually led to the successful mapping of the Canadian archipelago and northern mainland coastline.

> A close up of Vice-Admiral Sir Henry Kellett's polar sledge flag. Credit: NMRN
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Celebrity supporters

The campaign to save the flag received support from TV documentary presenter and actor Michael Palin, and historian and broadcaster, Dan Snow. Their backing of the campaign unlocked a groundswell of public support too.

As a result of the fundraising campaign, and the grant from the Heritage Fund, the museum will take the flag on a national tour. It will visit the museum's regional sites in Hartlepool, Portsmouth and Belfast and will be displayed alongside artefacts recovered from HMS Erebus.

Stuart McLeod, Director, England, London & South at the Heritage Fund, said: "It's fantastic news that the Heritage Fund have been able to support the acquisition of Vice-Admiral Sir Henry Kellett's sledge flag and ensure that it is saved for the UK. The flag represents a fascinating time in the UK's maritime history in which explorers sought to chart the Northwest Passage, to advance science, trade, and geographical exploration."

Find out more

Discover the fascinating naval heritage the National Museum of the Royal Navy has to share across its UK sites or explore some of the other amazing projects we've funded across London & South.



The Fairmile RML497, pictured in 2013



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The Arctic Corsair, one of two historic vessels in Hull set to be conserved Hull City Council



Last surviving D-Day landing craft opens in Portsmouth