

A MYSTERY SOLVED
THE DEATH OF CHRISTOPHER D'AETH



As a member of the Churchyard Team, from time to time I inspect the gravestones in our care. I often wonder about the lives of those interred, especially if there is an unusual name or circumstance of their death. Both of these coincided when I studied the memorial of Christopher John D'Aeth.

Christopher is buried at the far side of the second section of graves on the left when walking away from church towards the Garden of Remembrance. The gravestone is a quite severe block, with art-deco hints and script of a style favoured in the 1920s-30s. It states that he died, aged 21 years on Akpatok Island, Baffin Strait on 15th September 1931. I wondered who was Christopher? What befell him in such a remote location at such an early age? How did he come to be buried at St Peter's, thousands of miles from where he perished?

Having an interest in the history of exploration in polar regions, I was stimulated a couple of years ago to find out more about Christopher, but I only found part of the story. Our recent presentation of Voices From The Churchyard led me to research further into his life and death.



Those who went on the churchyard walk will have heard some of the tale from the excellent Gabriel, but I thought I would give readers have a fuller picture.

Christopher John D'Aeth was the older son of Frederic George and Margaret D'Aeth, born in Liverpool on May 2nd 1910.

Christopher age 2

Frederic was a Londoner who had become a pioneer in social work, and had been appointed to the new Department of Social Work at Liverpool University – an interesting character in his own right, who was greatly affected by the grinding poverty of many of the residents of the city.

The family lived for some years at 65 Hope Street, an attractive red-brick Georgian villa overlooking what at that time was the building-site of the Anglican Cathedral.

A younger son, Andrew, was born in 1913, and at some stage the D'Aeths moved out to Formby, to live in the house named Linden Field, on College Avenue.

Linden Field, Formby



I am unsure about Christopher's early education, but we do know that he was a boarder at Rugby School, before going up to Oxford University in 1928. He was an undergraduate at the prestigious Balliol College, studying Chemistry.

He was evidently an active young man, rowing for his college, and becoming a member of the University of Oxford Exploration Club.

Having been an undergraduate for three years, he took the first part of his Finals in the summer of 1931 (The Chemistry degree at the time was a four-year course). He had also become Secretary of the Exploration Club, and had largely been responsible for proposing and organising the summer expedition, which that year was to survey the uninhabited island known as Akpotek.

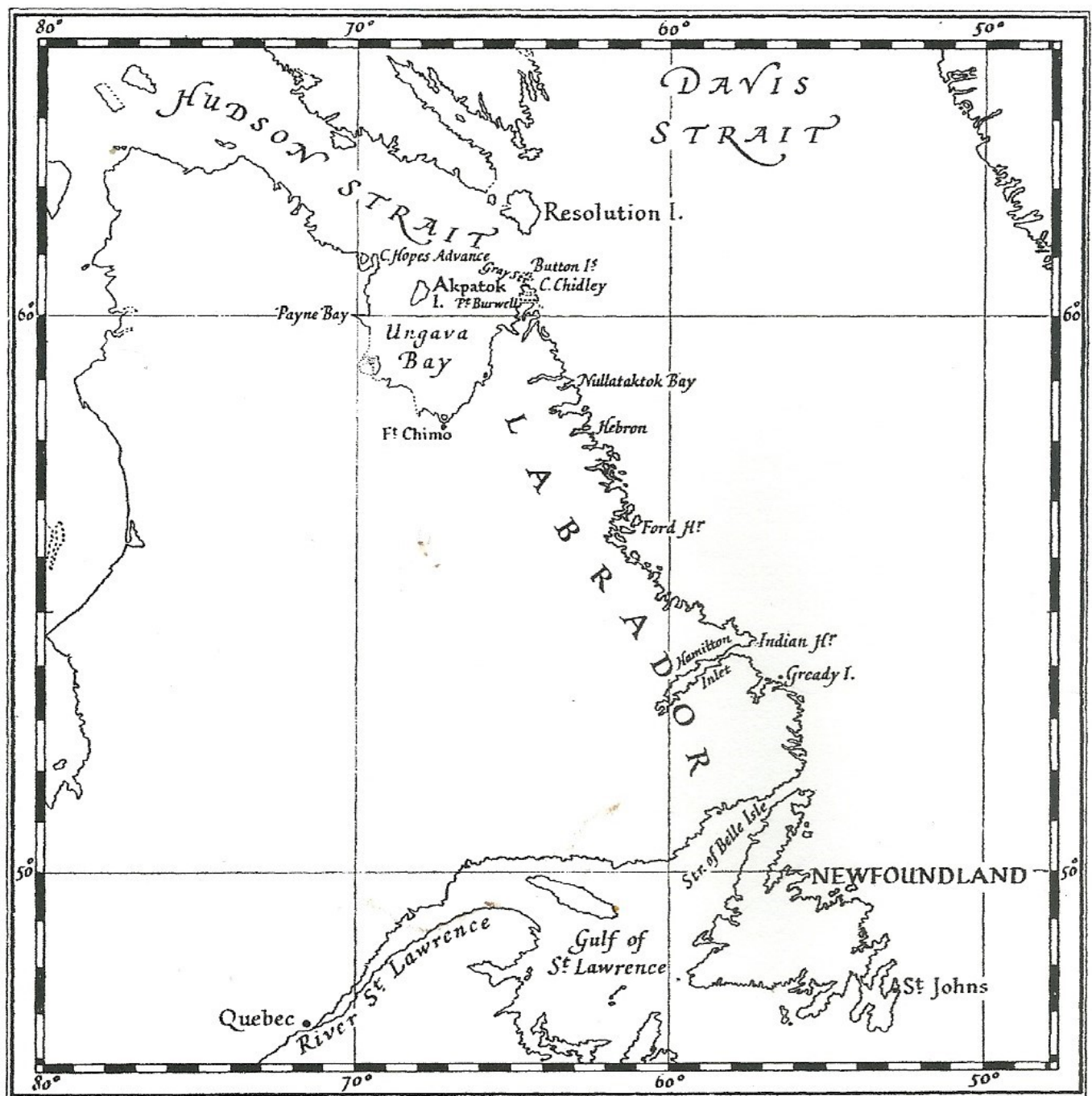
This is situated beyond Labrador in the Hudson Strait, at 60.25 degrees north.

Although this is well outside the Arctic Circle, the climate is distinctly sub-arctic, as is much of northern Canada. Its name is derived from Akpat, an Inuit name for the sea-bird we know as Guillemot, which inhabits the rocky cliff edges. At one time there had been an Inuit settlement which was abandoned years before, amidst tales of starvation and cannibalism.

The expedition consisted of 10 young men, mostly undergraduates, but with a Naval Lieutenant who was navigator and meteorologist, and a Surveyor from the Royal Engineers. The group was led by a recognised polar explorer, Hugh J. Clutterbuck. The purpose of the trip was to survey the extent of the island, its geology, and record animal and botanical wildlife, as well as climatic information. A weather window of about five weeks was envisaged before the early arctic winter set in.

The group set sail from Christopher's home city of Liverpool, presumably by regular steamer, on July 28th, bound for St John's, Newfoundland. Here they transferred to the expedition's boat – a part-sail, part-motor sealer of 100 tons known as The Young Harp, and left to sail northwards along the Labrador coast on 5th August. After various engine problems, the boat sailed into Ungava Bay on 16th. The mists parted and outline of Akpatok Island finally hove into view. What a bleak sight met their eyes! Sheer limestone cliffs rose up to 600 feet in height with little vegetation or sign of life, apart from the Guillemot colonies.





The group had first planned to circumnavigate the island to determine its size, and look for likely landing places. Somewhat to their surprise, the old Admiralty charts turned out to be quite inaccurate; Akpatok being only half the expected size at about 20 miles by 10 miles. The cliffs were broken in places by deep ravines, and eventually a landing spot was found at a cove on the south-west corner of the islands, where the cliffs dipped down.

The expedition named this location Harp Cove, and decided that this was the best location for a camp; evidence of previous Inuit hunting parties was found, with walrus and seal bones scattered around. Within a day they had unloaded the Young Harp using small fishing dories, and set up their camp of a larger mess-tent and four smaller sleeping tents.

The ship sailed away, with instructions to take off the party around 20th September. Each member of the expedition had his speciality – Christopher D'Aeth was the ornithologist of the group. All took it in turns to carry out cooking duties, and the group settled into a routine.

With just five weeks to survey the island, they set to work in pairs, hiking across the interior with theodolites and small bivvy tents, spending a couple of days at a time away from the main base. Fauna and flora of the island were noted, plankton was collected on short boat-trips, meteorological measurements were taken, and the project progressed well. The weather was kind, warm and calm for the first three weeks or so, but deteriorated once 10th September was reached.

On 14th September, Christopher D'Aeth and a man named Polunin established subsidiary camp six miles to the north of the base in order to complete the survey of the north coast, expecting to return in a couple of days. However, at 7.30 the next morning Polunin staggered into the main camp, exhausted, and with his boots in ribbons. In a snow-storm, he and D'Aeth had missed their tent after a surveying trek further north. They had decided to make for the main base, but Christopher had fallen into a ravine. He was not badly hurt, but the compass was lost in the dark. The pair staggered on, completely disorientated, but after some hours D'Aeth became too exhausted to continue. Polunin waited until dawn, and realised they were only a couple of miles from base, so made his way as quickly as he could to safety. He led back a search-party, but the time they found Christopher, he was still alive, but delirious. He soon lost consciousness, and died whilst being carried back to the base camp.

In the official report of the expedition from Clutterbuck to the Royal Geographical Society, apart from noting that D'Aeth was a very brave young man, who had been the organiser of the event, and had been the life and soul of the party, there is no further mention of the tragedy. Such was the way of such matters in those days. The Young Harp appeared on 19th September, and the party swiftly embarked for their homeward journey.

Only thirty-one days after he died on this far-flung island the mortal remains of Christopher John D'Aeth were interred in St Peter's churchyard on 16th October, presumably by our incumbent of the time, the Reverend H.P. Barsley, as recorded in the burials book.

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	Oct	15.	DIXON.	Fanny.	78	Inverallen, Gores Lane.	35.	273.	C	521-2.	2
	Oct.	16.	D'AETH.	Christopher John	21.	died at Akpotok Island.	35	274	C	511.	1
1932.						Ungava Bay, Newfoundland.					

The journey from death to grave seems incredibly swift in this day and age. The process of identification and inquiry as to the cause of death, with its attendant bureaucracy, must have been more scant than in modern times. This is not to mention the time which would be taken to repatriate the body via Newfoundland to Liverpool.


So ended the life of a brave and talented young man, who may have offered much to society in coming years. It turned out he had passed his Part 1 Finals with flying colours, and had been awarded a Herbertson Prize.

His brother, Andrew, went up to Balliol in 1931, where I expect he was always referred to as 'The brother of that fellow who died in the Arctic'.

So ends the sad and mysterious tale of how and why Christopher D'Aeth lies in our churchyard.

I acknowledge the help I have received from The Archive Department of Oxford University, and the Librarian of Balliol College in my research.

Nick Philpott



IN
MEMORY OF
CHRISTOPHER
JOHN DAETH
WHO LOST HIS
LIFE ON AKPATOK
ISLAND HUDSON
STRAIT ON THE
15TH OF SEPTEMBER
1931 AGED 21 YEARS