Standing on what is possibly the most remote beach on the stark and mountainous east coast of Baffin Island, I was surrounded by the 117-year-old wreckage of the Nova Zembla, the first historical British whaling shipwreck to be identified in the Canadian High Arctic. On reflection, even among the mass of splintered timbers and twisted iron, it was hard to believe this shoestring endeavour to locate the wreck had actually succeeded.

Eighteen months earlier I was dutifully engaged in my postdoctoral research, hunting for clues about the Arctic’s past climate in extant logbooks from Britain’s Arctic whaling trade. A subset of these documents had formed the key source for my doctoral work, and now convinced of their value I had set out to find all that survived. During the transcription of one such logbook, that of the Diana on its 1902 voyage from Dundee, Scotland, to Baffin Bay, I came across an entry that was unknowingly about to catapult me from the familiar lignin-scented silence of Northwest Greenland. The owner of the Diana, W.O. Taylor, purchased Nova Zembla almost on site, and the ship sailed from Dundee, Scotland, from 1875 onwards. John James Cooney had just assumed captaincy of the Nova Zembla during that fateful voyage of 1902, but he first appears in the records in 1893 as the bosun, his previous ship listed as the famous Terra Nova. He climbs the ranks to mate by 1896 and finally captain in 1902, losing the ship he knew so well just six months into his inaugural command.

Cooney’s bad luck was not to end there; the following year he took command of the Vega, Nova Zembla’s sister ship that had already achieved fame in the world of polar exploration, being the first vessel to successfully transit the Northeast Passage under a Swedish expedition lead by Baron Nordenskiöld in 1878–80. Cooney lost Vega the same year, crushed like so many before in the treacherous ice of Melville Bay. This portion of the voyage was considered such a danger that when ships sighted the Devil’s Thumb, a distinctive landmark on the west coast of Greenland that marks the start of this arduous passage, the crew were ordered to move their effects and supplies on deck as ships had been known to be crushed by ice without a moment’s notice.

Two for two is quite a remarkable, if unfortunate, claim to fame, and it is no wonder it was said bad luck sailed with...
him. Nevertheless, experienced Arctic seamen like Cooney were a dying breed and he was given command of yet another famed ship of polar exploration—the Windward. Windward found fame as a supply ship for the 1894–97 Jackson-Harmsworth expedition to Franz Josef Land, serendipitously encountering Nansen when he was nearing the end of his Fram expedition, during which he proved the trans-polar drift theory. Following this first encounter with Arctic fame, Windward went on to become the ship that would house Robert Peary during his first North Pole expedition before eventually returning to Scotland and it’s whaling roots in 1904. Cooney’s luck held under Windward during his initial voyage, but the notion bad luck sailed with Cooney again rang true in 1907. After successfully navigating the perils of Melville Bay, Windward ran a reef off the north west coast of Greenland, leaving Cooney and his crew to make the 450 km voyage to Pond Inlet (Mittimatalik) in their open-topped whaling boats.

It is a wonder anyone agreed to sail with the seemingly cursed captain, but to his credit no man was lost as a direct result of these wrecks, and he continued to be involved in the trade until his death in 1912. Cooney’s exploits, as with any news pertaining to Dundee’s Arctic whalers, were a hot topic at the time, and journalists were eager to publish accounts of the perils these hardy men faced at the icy edges of the known world. A quick search of the British Library’s online newspaper archive was all it took to uncover the news stories regarding Nova Zembla’s loss, with first-hand accounts from some of the 42 crew, all of whom survived and were brought home by fellow whalerships Diana and Eclipse.

Nova Zembla had been forced to run for shelter during an intense and blinding snowstorm. His years of experience evident, Cooney bore up for a well-known and secure harbour. At 10:20 pm on 18 September 1902, the crew were startled by the sudden lurch of the ship and the painful sound of splintering timbers. Nova Zembla was aground a mile south of the harbour entrance and 300 yards from shore. Immediately ordering the anchors dropped to reduce weight gave no saviour, the storm had firmly in its teeth. The masts were the first go, followed by engines being thrust up through the deck; all hope was lost, Nova Zembla was a total wreck. By the following morning, the crew had convinced the operator of a cruise ship, that intended to pass through Baffin Bay where our adopted whaleship hopefully lay in waiting. The pace at which this trip came together did not allow us to gloss over the known realities of working in the Arctic where weather and ice are king! We crashed back to reality with a 72-hour search window to find the ship, that could deliver us to our destination. We managed to convince the operator of a cruise ship, that intended to pass the area, to stop at our determined location, kindly agreeing to grant us a short seven-hour search window to find the proverbial needle in this remote and briny haystack.

A whirlwind five months from first reading that initial account in Diana’s logbook, we were on a plane heading north, poised to transit the Northwest Passage and down into Baffin Bay where our adopted whalship hopefully lay in waiting. The pace at which this trip came together did much to gloss over the known realities of working in the Arctic where weather and ice are king! We crashed back to reality with a 72-hour delay and a 600 km detour, finally boarding our commandeered cruise ship in the hamlet of Kugaaruk. As we made our way up the Gulf of Boothia most onboard thought of Franklin, but I was finally seeing for myself the seascape I had only imagined through the copperplate musings of forgotten sailors.

It was a joy to first arrive in a new and unfamiliar place and be greeted by friends. With only a few short hours in Pond Inlet, we headed to the most northerly of Canadian institutions—Tim Hortons to catch up and speculate on the
excitement ahead. As I mulled over the coffee to sugar ratio of the drink I’d been handed, I was co-opted into a game of duck-duck-goose by my friend’s youngest daughter. A welcome distraction from my growing anxiety that I was expected to find a shipwreck tomorrow, in a place I’d never visited, from a handful of clues that recently celebrated their 116-year anniversary.

The engines began to slow at 4 am, the swell was heavy and the wind strong, in contrast to the previous five days of uncharacteristically calm, clear weather. We surfed the swell towards the GPS fix identified in the high-resolution satellite imagery, half joking on how easy this would all be. Our hopes were soon dashed in that first hour of this improbable search; the anomaly we were so sure of manifested itself as a collection of boulders just below the surface. We had to be in the right place though, the historical evidence was so strong. Being there, the accounts of the crew all fit; we could see the boulder strewn reef, the beach a mile south of the natural harbour, and the rocky promontory that protected its entrance. This was the right place, Nova Zembla was here somewhere.

Almost six hours of running grids over the reef with our fishfinder-come-shipwreck discovering sonar in an exposed Zodiac had left me near hypothermic and dejected, nothing had jumped out as being remotely ship-shaped. Our time was nearly up when I noticed something that looked suspiciously like wood on the beach. Driftwood in this part of the Arctic is rare, and warned with anticipation, we quickly launched our small drone. Immediately it was clear we had been looking in the wrong place.

Spread across the surface of this fine, yellow-sanded beach were pieces of mast with iron fittings and planking with trunnels and paint flaking off. We saw a yard arm, a block and tackle, and immense rib timbers with iron rivets (some with evidence of burning). It was clearly wreckage from a sizeable, historical, sailing ship on the exact beach we had been looking in the wrong place. Our hopes were soon dashed in that first hour of searching.

Just as our seven hours was up and we were being called back to the cruise ship, we managed to grab a few fleeting photographs as evidence we were at least on the right track.

Pond Inlet with the goal of returning to that once coveted harbour Captain Cooney ran short of 117 years earlier. We boarded the Government of Nunavut’s fisheries research vessel Nuliajuk, a stout little 65 ft converted crab trawler with just enough space to house our expanded team of five. Captain Bob and his three crew, all Newfoundland crab fishermen, were the epitome of Canadian friendliness and hospitality as we made the 20-hour transit down to site.

I couldn’t feel the swell or hear the howling winds that the forecast had so eagerly promised. Then again, I was consumed with nausea, concealed inside my bunk in the forecastle—a lightless box of body odour, diesel fumes, and stagnant sea water—so my senses were not to be trusted. I extricated myself from my bunk and climbed up to the bridge, welcomed by clear skies and flat calm seas. The weather could not have been better, and we wasted no time in getting set up to go ashore.

The five of us, plus gear and Des, our helmsman, managed to make our way onboard the Zodiac and headed toward the shore. Initially we did a couple of passes up and down the length of the beach to survey for bears, a real risk in this part of the world, but thankfully none were immediately apparent on the sand. We started to head in to land but the reef was tricky to navigate even in the calm; it is no wonder once grounded here, Nova Zembla was doomed.

Even before we had brought all the gear up to a suitable basecamp, it was immediately evident that last year we had only sighted a small portion of what lay across these sands. We had landed at the western tip of the beach, 2 km from where we had conducted our brief drone flight, yet there were pieces of wreckage here, in fact there was wreckage everywhere we looked. We hadn’t even begun to inspect what lay before us but I was already speechless. Large rib timbers abounded, but it was the first sighting of small intricately detailed pieces that excited me further. A panel with ornate floral carvings sat on the surface of the sand, and while the paint was curling off it, the fine details remained despite being exposed to over a century of the worst the Arctic conditions could muster. I didn’t know it then, but I was staring at the once golden face of Nova Zembla, this being the section of bow where you might find the figurehead. This was later confirmed from a 1884 painting of the ship I tracked down on our return.

I zig-zagged my way between old and new tide lines up onto the fringes of the encroaching tundra trying to capture, in notes and photographs, as much as I could. I came across some thinner planking, this was clinker-built like the fishing cobles familiar to me from my formative years in the northeast of England. I realised this was the smaller wreck of the first whaling boat Nova Zembla had initially tried to launch when it had first hit the reef. It still had remnants of paint attached, but unlike the carving, the colours were clear; this whaling boat had a yellow and green stripe along it. I had read that the teams that crewed these boats often decorated them, but with few paintings and only sepia photographs, it was left to the imagination
as to how these whaling boats may have looked. Judging by those painted boards and a scrolling carved motif sticking out of the sand nearby, the teams took great pride in their whale boat’s appearance.

As I moved closer to the spot where I had taken the drone photos in 2018 the density of wreckage seemed to increase. Sections of mast appeared with the yard arms that sat perpendicular to them to hold the sails. It was interesting to note that both these had been cut, and judging by the weathering to the exposed timber, they had been cut a long time ago, likely at the time of the wreck. The historical accounts point to the masts falling off in the maelstrom, but with the rigging, lines, and sails still attached all around the hull, the waves would have quickly filled the sails, and if not cut free, could have ripped the hull apart. It would have been a mad dash to liberate them as soon as possible in case there was any hope of saving the hull, a potential lifeline if Diana and Eclipse had not been around the corner.

The entire 4 km beach was awash with wreckage, including a 60 ft section of hull poking out of the sand almost immediately inshore of where we found the anchor in 2018. We spent two days photographing as much as we could and completing an orthogrammatic survey of the whole beach, stunned at the level of preservation and sheer volume of material before us. We were never naïve enough to think we were the first to discover this site, a fact abruptly apparent by the graffiti from 2014 carved into one the larger timbers. But to attach it to the historical accounts and identify it as Nova Zembla felt like a step toward furthering the industrial history of the Canadian Arctic.

A short 48 hours later as we sail into the forecasted storm, not even the 15 ft swell can dull my feeling of elation and disbelief. It was a mere handful of newspapers, potentially having once adorned a Dundonian fish supper, that lead me to Nova Zembla’s final resting place.

Returning from 2019’s discoveries and in the midst of planning an ambitious archaeological investigation of the wreck for summer 2020, I go back to my logbook climate research. During the transcribing of an 1899 diary, when in the harbour that would allude Cooney and the Nova Zembla three years later, I read; “… examined the wreck of the Eagle, you can see her engines plainly under the water.”

Dr. Matt Ayre is a postdoctoral fellow at the Arctic Institute of North America, University of Calgary.

Matthew.ayre@ucalgary.ca