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Benjamin Leigh Smith, 1828–1913

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The centenary of the passing of Benjamin Leigh Smith (Fig. 1) was marked by a two day event, 27–28 September 2013, organised by his great-great-grand niece Charlotte Moore, guardian of the family archive at her home in Sussex. In five expeditions he plotted the north east limits of Svalbard and more than a hundred miles of the coast line of Zemlya Frantsa-Iosifa (Franz Josef Land), where he was marooned in 1881. In an epic voyage he and his companions sailed some 500 miles in four open boats, using table cloths for sails! They reached Matochkin Shar, the strait that divides Novaya Zemlya, in August 1882 meeting with a relief party almost immediately after making landfall.

Some 60 descendants and their spouses, and a handful of researchers and historians, enjoyed an exhibition at the Scott Polar Research Institute (SPRI) comprising photographic albums, letters and a bust of the explorer lent by the family. This was displayed along with material from the Institute's own collections, and relics of Smith's from Zemlya Frantsa-Iosifa retrieved by F.G. Jackson in 1897. They heard talks by P.J. Capelotti, author of the recent biography of Leigh Smith (Capelotti 2013) and Professor J. Dowdeswell, Director of SPRI, before a dinner at Jesus College, Cambridge, Smith's *alma mater*.

On the second day the group attended the churchyard at Brightling, near Battle, Sussex, where Smith is buried, for the dedication of a new grave marker, a traditional Sussex rail, to replace the original which had suffered decay and was no longer legible. The rail was carved by Bill Sutton, great-great-grandson of Smith's sister Bella and the ceremony was conducted by another family member the Rev. Meriel Oliver, great-great-granddaughter of Benjamin's brother Willy. Appropriate hymns were sung and a reading from a poem by George Crabbe, which included the words 'but nearer land you may the billows



Fig. 1. Portrait of Benjamin Leigh Smith by Reginald Eves RA (SPRI).

trace, as if contending in their watery chase'. Then followed another talk within the parish church, by P.J. Capelotti, and finally tea and cakes in the village hall with the opportunity to see another exhibition of photographs and artefacts, including a narwhal tusk brought back on one of the expeditions. Capelotti signed copies of his book, as did Charlotte Moore of her book 'Hancox' which recounts the history of the Smiths and their kinsmen (Moore 2010).

It was a delightful event and it is hoped that along with the book it will encourage a wider appreciation of the achievements of a modest and reticent man. He made significant advances to our knowledge of the Arctic, including important observations on the temperature layering in northern waters, entirely on his own initiative and at his own expense.

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