SIR JOHN FRANKLIN OF SPILSBY
ON THE TRAIL OF AN ARCTIC EXPLORER

JOHN FRANKLIN
1786 – 1798 EARLY YEARS

John was born on 16th April 1786 in Spilsby, Lincolnshire. His father, William, was a farmer and his mother, Hannah, was a housewife. John was the 9th of 12 children, although Henry, born the year before John, lived for less than a month. Three sisters were born after John. The daughter of the eldest of these later married Alfred, Lord Tennyson. Through his family, John had become involved in a speculative business venture that had become insolvent. Although John had been appointed 1st Lieutenant of HMS Forth in 1815, the ship’s company was disbanded in September and John found himself “on the active list.”

1834: THE FINAL EXPEDITION

Although Franklin was by now 59, he was invited to become the Lieutenant-Governor of Van Diemen’s Land, an area in Australia that had long been held that the North West Passage would be a shortcut from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean. Serving under Commodore Nathaniel Dance, taking part en route in the first Battle of Copenhagen, at which the Danes were defeated. Later part in the Battle of Trafalgar. According to his senior officer, John Franklin “performed his duties as first lieutenant to the best of his ability”. He was appointed temporary Captain of HMS Erebus on 22nd October 1839, when his two ships were equipped with new steam engines, screw propellers, and lightweight boats. Franklin succeeded in navigating “to the Shores of the Polar Sea”, and was in great demand as a speaker and at social gatherings. In August 1832 he married Eleanor Porden, daughter of a London architect, and their daughter, Isabella, was born in June 1834. During this period, Franklin had met and married his third wife, Jane Griffin, in 1828.

1845: THE FINAL EXPEDITION

In 1848 the first of many search expeditions set out from Greenhithe in May 1845. In late July they were sighted by whaling ships in Baffin Bay but what happened next is a matter of informed speculation. In 1854, relics, including Franklin’s Guelphic medal, were recovered from the wreck of HMS Erebus, and in 1855 from the wreck of HMS Terror. Franklin himself was removed from office and ordered to resign after his second expedition in 1845. In 1855, relics, including Franklin’s Guelphic medal, were recovered from the wreck of HMS Erebus, and in 1855 from the wreck of HMS Terror. Franklin succeeded in navigating “to the Shores of the Polar Sea”, and was in great demand as a speaker and at social gatherings.

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THE FRANKLIN TRAIL

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ollow this trail to find out what Spilsby may have been like when Sir John Franklin was born here in 1786, and the town’s current associations with the Arctic. The Franklin Trail is marked by the orange street signs and walking sticks. Please be mindful of the sites on the trail and remember the significance of this area.

1. Start at the Franklin Hall. Built in 1899 as a Drill Hall and rifle range, it now serves as the town’s main meeting place and houses the Town Council Chamber. If the Hall is open, go inside to discover an important part of Sir John Franklin’s life which was created by Spilsby WY. There are also toilets and information leaflets Opposite the Hall is the entrance to Bull Yard, a Georgian townhouse which was also home to Frank’s father before the current associations of this house.

2. Walk along Halton Road, past Alma Place, encased on the site of the Alma Engineering Works, and turn right down Tannam Road, named after Abel Tannam, the Dutch seafarer and explorer who in 1642 was the first European to reach the island off Australia. He named it Van Diemen’s Land after the Governor-General of the Dutch East India Company, with its name changing to Tasmania in 1855. Sir John Franklin was Lieutenant-Governor of Tasmania from 1836 until 1841, accompanied by his second wife, Jane. Together they made considerable improvements to the cultural and educational lives of both these settlers and convicts, although his actions were not always appreciated.

3. As Tannam Road bears to the right, look left to see Eresby Close, named for HMS Erebus, the ship that Franklin commanded on his final voyage to find the North-West Passage. The ship and crew were last heard of in 1847, but in September 2014 Erebus was discovered in Canadian Arctic waters, 11 metres deep. Some artefacts, including the ship’s bell, have now been recovered from the wreck. Further along Tannam Road you will pass Resolute Close, named after one of the ships in the Admiralty expedition mounted in 1852 to search for Franklin’s whalership. It is probably preferable that the name of this ship was chosen for the street rather than that of Franklin’s other expedition ship, HMS Terror.

4. On your right is Franklin Gardens, a modern eco-development with its eye-catching jagged rooftops, built in 2004. Continue through the barrier and bear right. You will pass Eresby Close which is named after Captain James Fitzjames, second in command of HMS Erebus. Close which is named after Captain James Fitzjames, second in command of HMS Erebus. Take the alleyway next to number 11 Shambles, leading uphill, and turn left at the top to explore some of the town.

5. The house to the left of the Red Lion public house was built around 1700 as one of the first brick-built houses in the town. ‘Little Jack’ lived in a small and narrow corner, typical of the poorer houses in the eighteenth century, and further along Market Street there are impressive houses on The Terrace. At The George public house, carefully cross Boston Road to reach St James Church.

6. Enter the church, the original part of which was built in the 14th century, with the tower added in 1529. This is how it would have looked when Franklin was baptised here in 1786. It was restored and enlarged in 1879 with the addition of the south aisle and the west end. On the wall at the west end there is a monumental tablet to Sir John Franklin, erected by his second wife, Lady Jane Franklin, after whom a modern estate in the town is named. There is also a monument to Eleanore, his first wife, and two of her brothers, Willingham and James. The flag on the wall was presented to this church on the bicentenary of Franklin’s birth in 1878, on the site of the White Horse Inn where Franklin would originally have stopped here 3 or more times a week, putting down the items taken on the final voyage. Magellan Drive was added in 2004. Continue through the alleyway named after one of the ships in the Admiralty expedition mounted in 1852 to search for Franklin’s whalership. It is probably preferable that the name of this ship was chosen for the street rather than that of Franklin’s other expedition ship, HMS Terror.

7. Leave the church and cross over to the former Grammar School founded in 1590 by King Edward VI. Franklin himself went to the Grammar School at Louth, but the former secondary modern school in Spilsby, which opened in 1953, bears his name. Go left to admire the impressive Spilsby Theatre, designed by H B Kendall in the Greek style. It opened in 1926, and originally housed the Court House for the Lindsey Quarter Sessions, with a prison behind, since demolished.

8. Go back past the school and cross Ashby Road to arrive at the west end of the market place. The architectural building ahead served Franklin in his time as a Corn Exchange. The statue of Sir John Franklin, which was unveiled in 1861 and paid for by public subscription. The statue is made of bronze, bone tea and pints of ale to the townfolk. Franklin died in Arctic Canada on 11th June 1847, although his body has never been found.

9. Now go left to the White Hart Hotel, on the front of which you will find one of the earliest post houses in the country. In Franklin’s time, mail coach drivers would have stopped here 3 or more times a week, passing Spilsby in touch with the outside world, and probably taking the young Franklin to London to join the Royal Navy, where he served with Admiral Nelson at the Battles of Trafalgar and Copenhagen.

10. Further along High Street is Franklin Passage, once known as Joining’s Inn. This passerby runs alongside the house (now a bakery) once owned by John Franklin’s father, Willingham Franklin. In which John Franklin was born on 16th April 1786. As one of at least 11 children it must have been quite a squab.

11. Cross to the far side of the central market place, turn right and read the information board detailing the life and exploits of Sir John Franklin and his Arctic expeditions. HMS Terror was finally located in September 2014, to incidentally in Terry Bay, standing in 48 metres of Arctic waters, with 3 square standing and all hatches closed. What happened to the crew, and that of HMS Erebus, has long been a mystery.

12. In the further market square you will find the modern Butter Cross, beside which stood the town stocks. The little white horse beyond it is made of metal and steel, although it would originally have been decorated with red. Queen Victoria was originally called Leather Lane, indicative of the local trade. Spilsby at the time of Franklin’s birth had a population of around 900, but was a market town of some importance with a weekly market and three annual fairs.

13. Close to the Methodist Church, built in 1878, on the site of the White Horse Inn where carrier’s wages would stop for refreshment. Carefully cross Halton Road at the zebra crossing to arrive back at the Franklin Hall. There are plenty of outlets in town for your own refreshment!