Captain William Scoresby, Sailor and Arctic Whaler

William Scoresby was born in 1760 on his father's small farm at Nutholm, near Cropton, far from the sea. He left school aged nine to help on the family farm. However, at the age of twenty he went to find work at Whitby Harbour and the sea, where he was apprenticed on a sailing ship and began his long and distinguished career as a sailor and whaler.
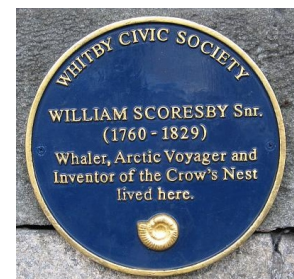
In 1785 he joined the whaling ship *Henrietta*, and sailed to seas near Greenland to hunt for whales. In those days, whales were a very valuable catch. From them came whale meat and blubber (fat) which was rendered down to produce oil for lamps. The captain recognised William's outstanding abilities and he was promoted to chief harpooner. William was quick to learn navigation and seamanship skills. Six years later when the captain of the *Henrietta* retired he recommended that William should replace him as captain of the whaling ship.

However, his first whaling trip as master of his own ship was a failure and he returned to Whitby without a single whale. He was given another chance to prove himself by the ship's owners. For his next voyage Scoresby carefully selected his own crew and set sail again. This time, he returned to port with 18 whales, the largest ever single catch by a Whitby ship up to that time.

Captain Scoresby continued his whaling expeditions, making record catches and becoming famous for his seafaring and whaling skills. He caught whales, narwhals, walruses, seals, and even polar bears. In 1806 he navigated his ship *Resolution* through vast uncharted seas to the furthest point north that any ship had sailed - and brought back another record catch. He retired from the sea a very rich man in 1823. He died six years later at the age of 69.

William Scoresby had a lifelong concern for the welfare of his fellow men. He made many innovations during his career, including the 'crow's nest', a wooden barrel-like enclosure placed atop the ship's main mast that protected the sailors on lookout duty from the icy-cold weather conditions and kept them safe.

William, the humble farm boy from the North Yorkshire moors, had risen to become one of the greatest navigators and whaling ship captains the world had ever seen.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

1. Where was William Scoresby born?
Nutholm near Cropton

2. How long after leaving school did it take Scoresby to find work at sea?
11 years

3. What career did he do?
He was a sailor and whaler

4. Which place did he sail near to catch whales?
Greenland

5. Which compass direction from Whitby would he travel to get there?
North-west

6. Why did people use whale oil for lighting?
Electricity had not been invented so people had to use candles or lamps

7. How did Scoresby become captain of the *'Henrietta*?
He had good seamanship skills and the retiring captain of the *Henrietta* recommended him.

8. When Scoresby was given a second chance to prove himself, how did he make things better?
He carefully selected his own crew and returned with 18 whales.

9. Other than whales, what animals did Scoresby catch?
Narwhals, walruses, seals, and even polar bears

10. Do you think you would be able to catch all of those things today? Explain your answer.
No, most of these (including whales) are protected species and it is illegal to catch them. Narwhals are a threatened species and Polar bears are a vulnerable species, which means their numbers are decreasing.

11. Give two reasons why Scoresby was a rich man when he retired.
He was an expert whaler and he navigated uncharted waters.

12. Give an example of how we know that Scoresby had concern for the welfare of his fellow men.

He invented the 'Crow's Nest', which helped protect sailors on lookout duty and keep them safe.

Find out more:
- Whitby Museum, Pannett Park, Whitby YO21 3AG, https://whitbymuseum.org.uk/ (Archive material may be viewed by appointment)
- 'My Father' by The Rev. William Scoresby, (1851, reprinted by Caedmon Press 1978)