



William Scoresby Senior, Arctic Whaler

Fiona Barnard

Born in 1760, William Scoresby grew up on his father's modest farm at Nutholm, near Cropton, on the southern edge of the North Yorkshire Moors. He left school aged nine to help on the farm but in 1780 sailed as an apprentice on the *Jane*, initially from Whitby to the Baltic. Scoresby left the *Jane* in London in 1781 to join the *Speedwell*, which was carrying stores to besieged Gibraltar during the 'Great Siege' by France and Spain (it lasted almost four years). The *Speedwell* was captured by the Spanish and the crew imprisoned, but Scoresby and a companion escaped to Cádiz, where they stowed away on an English ship. Scoresby returned to the farm and in 1783 married Lady Mary Smith, daughter of a Cropton farmer (the name 'Lady' was commonly given to girls born on 'Lady Day' – 25 March). They had eleven children, five of whom survived infancy. Following his wife's death in 1819 he married Hannah Seaton of Hull.

In 1785 Scoresby joined the *Henrietta*, sailing to the Greenland whale fishery. The captain recognised his talents and he rose rapidly through the ranks to become chief harpooner by 1790. When the captain retired in 1791 he recommended that Scoresby should replace him. Although on his first voyage as master no whales were caught, Scoresby was given another chance and picked his own crew for 1792: he returned to port with the produce

of 18 whales, the largest catch by a Whitby ship up to that point. In the following years *Henrietta* continued making record catches and Scoresby became famous for his skill. In 1798 he accepted a lucrative contract to command the *Dundee* of London.

In 1800, when Scoresby called in at Whitby to see his family on his way north, his 10-year-old son William hid on the ship when it was time to leave. His father sailed with him on board rather than miss the tide, putting him ashore to be looked after in the Shetlands; but the boy quickly escaped and returned to the ship, where he stayed for the whole voyage.

After four successful years with the *Dundee*, Scoresby returned to Whitby to take command and an eighth share of the new ship *Resolution*, with his son William now an apprentice. In May 1806, with 16-year-old William already first mate, the *Resolution* was in ice off Svalbard when Scoresby detected a shadow on the horizon which he deduced was open water. He forced the ship through and after five days reached an immense open sea which he explored northward to the latitude of 81° 30', the furthest north any ship had sailed. That voyage yielded 24 whales, 1 narwhal, 2 seals, 2 walruses and 2 polar bears. Later in 1806 William Junior began studying at Edinburgh University, re-joining the *Resolution* each spring.

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In 1807 Scoresby introduced the crow's nest, a barrel-like structure atop the main mast, protecting the watching officer from the weather as he navigated.

Scoresby passed command of Resolution to William Junior when he turned 21 in 1810. He himself moved to Scotland to take a share in the Greenock Whale-Fishing Company and command their ship John. After the 1814 season he resigned his command to his daughter Arabella's husband, Thomas Jackson. In 1816 he took command of Mars of Whitby and a year later bought Fame, hoping - in vain - that the Admiralty would accept his proposals for an expedition to Greenland. He continued whaling with diminishing success until 1823, when Fame was destroyed by fire in the Orkneys on her outward voyage.

Scoresby was by then 63 and whales were becoming scarce, so he retired to enjoy his considerable fortune. In

retirement he published proposals for improvements to Whitby's roads and harbour and for employment of the poor. He died in 1829. Captain William Scoresby was a large, energetic man with great strength and stamina. His acute observations added to his exceptional abilities as navigator and seaman. He made many practical improvements in the whaling industry, including changes to the rigging and ballasting of his ships which made them safer and more manoeuvrable, but his major innovation was the widely adopted crow's nest, which gave navigators some shelter and security. His record for sailing the furthest north of any ship stood for several decades.

He insisted that his children were educated. He was a deeply religious man, a conviction which he passed to his son William (1789-1857), who became a distinguished whaler, scientist, explorer and clergyman, and wrote the definitive book on Greenland whaling.



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)



Scrimshaw: engraved whale's teeth



Captain William Scoresby, Senior



Scrimshaw engraving of a whaling ship



Replica of Scoresby's Crow's Nest