

Polar panels

A fund-raising event at a polar research centre is a far from chilly affair, finds Philip Howard, reaching for his pockets rather than an ice-pick

A COUPLE of months ago I was invited to a dinner party at the Scott Polar Research Institute in Cambridge. Mind you, to call it a dinner party was to sell it short, it was a happening. I had been summoned by my friend, Humphry, who is himself a bit of a happening. Wikipedia describes Humphry, amongst other things, as an English baronet, an expert on antiques and architecture, a soldier, an explorer and the president of the Tibetan Spaniel Association. That sells him short. He is a *bon viveur*, a wicked raconteur with a razor-sharp mind. Allegedly, he arrived at Everest base camp to rendezvous with a fully equipped American assault team wearing a pair of tweeds over his grandfather's silks, together with one ancient Sherpa. Knowing Humphry, it was probably Tenzing Norgay.

His letter of instruction left me with no illusion about my role. It was a fundraising

large roman capitals declaiming QVAESIVIT ARCANA POLI VIDET DEI and a bronze head of Captain Scott loomed over me. It was closed. I checked the back door. There was a replica of the James Caird, the boat Shackleton used to travel the 900 miles from Elephant Island to South Georgia through Arctic winter seas to save his men. The back door was open but, it turned out, only for the six of us.

Thank God I was not late as Humphry had pulled the stops out. We were given a fascinating three-hour personal tour by the charming and passionate director of the institute, Julian Dowdeswell. He, of course, was also a polar explorer. It covered everything from the heroic explorers to the scientific research and experiments that are currently being undertaken to understand more about climate change and

went today. I was standing by Lyffs sledge at 4.50. Saw the funnel dip behind a hummock suddenly. Ran up the lookout. At 5pm she went down by the head. The stern, the cause of all the trouble, was the last to go under the water. I cannot write about it." The second one, dated 4 January 1922, reads: "A wonderful evening. In the darkening twilight I saw a lone star hover, gemlike above the bay." I turned the page to find 5 January blank. He died that night. Those were his last words.

As something of a couch potato I have always revered the endeavours of explorers with awe. So undoubtedly the best bit was saved until last. I sat next to a truly remarkable lady called Vanessa O'Brien. Mountain climber, explorer and advocate it says on her card. Well, O'Brien was the first American woman to reach the summit of K2. She has climbed the highest peak on every continent, skied to the North and South Poles, drove at 200mph with Mario Andretti and was shot at point-blank range with a .38 revolver to test bulletproof clothing. That this cerebral explorer goddess with long blonde hair and a radiant smile was clad in shimmering silk quite passed me by.

The Scott Polar Research Institute is a remarkable institution. Not just for what it celebrates from the past but for what it offers for the future. It is desperate to raise funds and bursaries to continue both research and fieldwork in both polar regions. I am definitely going to try to help and, unashamedly, if you have the urge, I would ask you to think about doing the same. ■

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dinner and at each of his three annual dinners he assembles the following four types: a kind soul or two who will give funds; an explorer straight off the ice (ideally a pretty one); a journalist who can advise on PR and publicity (ideally another pretty one); and a friend who can chat someone up. I was the latter.

I arrived at the institute on the dot at 4pm. A red-brick building with arched windows,

glaciology. White gloved, we were shown all the beautiful watercolours produced by Edward Wilson and his photographs of Scott's last expedition, as well as Scott's and Shackleton's own diaries. I recall two poignant entries in Shackleton's, one dated 21 November 1915 and describing the moment when the Endeavour, trapped in ice, sank, effectively condemning them to death: "She

