

The First Voyage of Lumina – post 9

Sailing to Svalbard

Not mining but quarrying!

In the early years of the 20th century there was much prospecting done in Svalbard and one of the main players was the Northern Exploration Company. This was led by Ernest Mansfield and he has left his mark in almost every fjord on the western side of Svalbard. For about 20 years he led expeditions to Svalbard nearly every year staking claims, building huts, doing trial mining and quarrying to back up his claims. He had previously been involved in New Zealand, Australia, and Canada in search of gold. He was not the classic gold prospector who went to those places and most likely lost his shirt, but more of a businessman dealing in gold mining shares rather than the gold itself. However, in none of those places did it seem that he made his fortune either, always exiting a company before it actually hit it big. Then he became interested in Svalbard and convinced a number of investors to set up the Northern Exploration Company, NEC. Before the Svalbard Treaty of 1920, Svalbard it seemed had escaped the empire building efforts of most European countries and was a “no mans” or rather “every mans” land. It seems anyone could stake a claim to an area just by building a hut and erecting signs around.



Camp Mansfield, one of two huts remaining at Ny-London



The Northernmost inhabitable Cabin, with Mr. Mansfield reading "Vanity Fair."
(Taken in the light of the Midnight Sun.)

A publicity shot of Mansfield reading a copy of Vanity Fair at Camp Zoe, named after his daughter



And Mr Riley reading the book about Mansfield 110 or so years later

Maybe due to his previous adventures, Mansfield was preoccupied with anything other than the coal measures which eventually proved to be the only viable mining operation. He returned home after his first expedition bearing claims of great mineral wealth which started the cycle of a summer expedition to Svalbard prospecting and probably a winter of raising money for the next. In 1910 the NEC was incorporated and shares issued. The main push at that time seemed to be the marble deposits in Ny-London (new London), Kongsfjorden which ultimately became the biggest non coal mining activity on Svalbard.

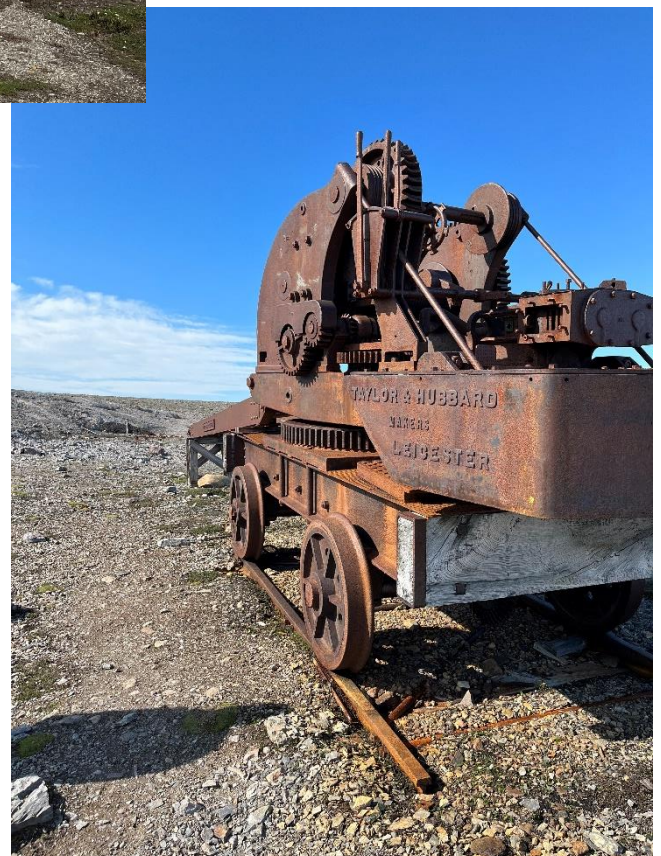


Every year, apart from the years of WW1 the NEC continued to raise more capital, send expeditions, claim more territory, and come home with ever more inflated claims of mineral riches. During the war the Marble operation at Ny London was plundered for machinery and equipment by

the Norwegian Kings Bay company across the fjord who were coal mining so on the return of the NEC in the summer of 1919 little was done there. The Kings Bay company did eventually pay for what they had taken, continued to mine coal up till 1962 and still own the settlement of Ny-Alesund today.

The NEC however never commercially mined anything and eventually they were virtually bankrupt and their total land holding was sold to the Norwegian government after the Treaty of Spitzbergen ceded sovereignty to them.

It seems that Ny London – New London did not take off quite as well as New York and today there are just a couple of the original huts left, together with the heavy machinery including the remains of the steam loco, steam crane and a couple of marble cutting machines also with steam boilers. The railway track, larger dwellings and anything usable was removed probably to Ny-Alesund and the coal mining operation there. The two



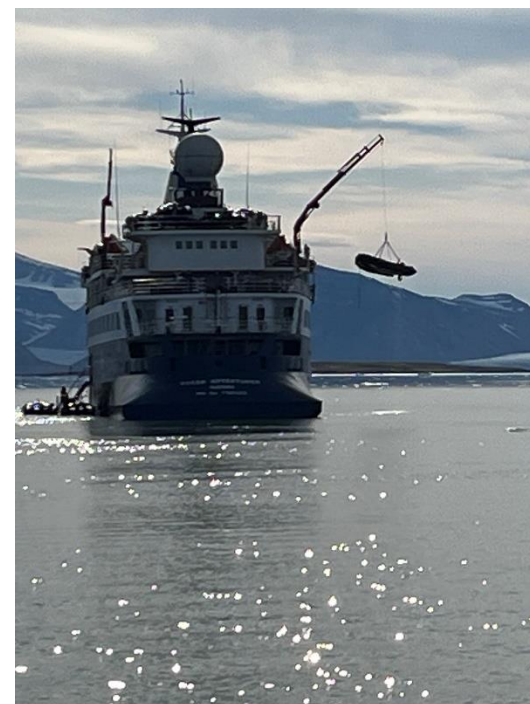
huts are used by the Sysselmann field rangers. When we went ashore we saw what looked like fresh bear damage to one of the huts but thought little of it, but were later told by the rangers at another station that a bear had got into one of the huts and ransacked it soon after the new rangers for this season arrived. I guess they were more careful after that. We had been ashore earlier in the week at a seal trappers place to see if there was anyone there and he had serious bear deterrents including long nails sticking out of the doors on the outside, and sheets of ply with nails beneath the windows and doors.

The bear issue is real, as we were leaving Ny-Alesund the harbour master said if we followed the coast a little, we would see the bear that had been spotted earlier in the morning. It was eating a seal it had somehow caught and was just a stones throw from the airship mast we had walked by a couple of days earlier. At Magdelenefjord, there is a ranger station and the most visited field site in the whole of Svalbard seeing 17,000 visitors a year, a bear and cub had been seen outside the rangers cabin the morning we arrived. When cruise ships arrive, they first dispatch a field team of three or four with rifles to scout the area and keep watch as maybe a hundred or so passengers are disembarked into zodiacs to get to the shore and whatever historical relic they have come to see. Many of the huts in remote parts are maintained by the Sysselmann and are stocked with gas and firewood. They are maintained each year and often must repair bear damage. That said, apart from one sighting we have yet see more....



Larger cruise ship with glacier behind – The front of the glacier must be at least 200ft high!

So, the pattern of our voyage continues with a new anchorage hopefully with some historical or other feature to be explored. The history goes back a long way but without any indigenous people, only in human terms as far as the whalers of the 16th century. However even that seems a long time ago when you can see their blubber ovens in many places, often quite well preserved for being 600 years old. The huts we see were mostly built early in the 20th century so are over a hundred years old and whilst you cannot see what is original or not many are in good condition as the wood does not rot here. On many of the beaches there is a lot of driftwood, but this may have accumulated over a hundred years also and maybe is not accumulating now. One reads terrible stories about beaches full of plastic waste in the Arctic that is supposedly causing much damage to sea life, and yet we have seen hardly anything. What you do see is many footprints around historic sites and the Governor has a code imploring people not to remove anything and be careful where you walk, yet the massive increase in cruise ship passengers over the last couple of years post covid may be causing more damage to the vegetation around these sites than is immediately obvious. The tundra is very slow to recover and after a couple of years of little or no traffic there has been a massive expansion in the “expedition cruise” market which may not be sustainable in its present form.



Zodiacs being unloaded from “expedition” cruise ship

Photoshoot from the dinghy



Inside the Camp
Zoe Hut