



Cold Heart

The Story of Chippy McNish
Port Glasgow's Polar Explorer

by St Stephen's High School
& Robin Henley



The Distant Noises project was developed and managed by Magic Torch Comics CIC with the support of National Lottery Heritage Fund.

The comic adaptation was developed by pupils of Saint Stephen's High School Port Glasgow, including; Adam, Eilidh, Eimar, Ethan, George, Hollie, Jake, Josh, Jude, Justin, Kerr, Meaghan, Nathan, Olly, Owen, Tyler and Willow.

Excerpts from 'Diary of H McNish Carpenter' sourced from National Library of Australia, original transcription by Shane Murphy.

Thanks to the staff of Saint Stephen's High School for supporting the project. Special thanks to Inverclyde Libraries team, particularly Craig Miller and Jennifer Horan for initiating the project and Caroline O'Connor for organising and supporting the class sessions.

Artwork and cover by Robin Henley

Published by Magic Torch Comics CIC November 2025

<https://www.magictorchcomics.co.uk>



Henry 'Chippy' McNish was born in 1874 in Lyons Lane in Port Glasgow - near where the Port Glasgow library now stands.



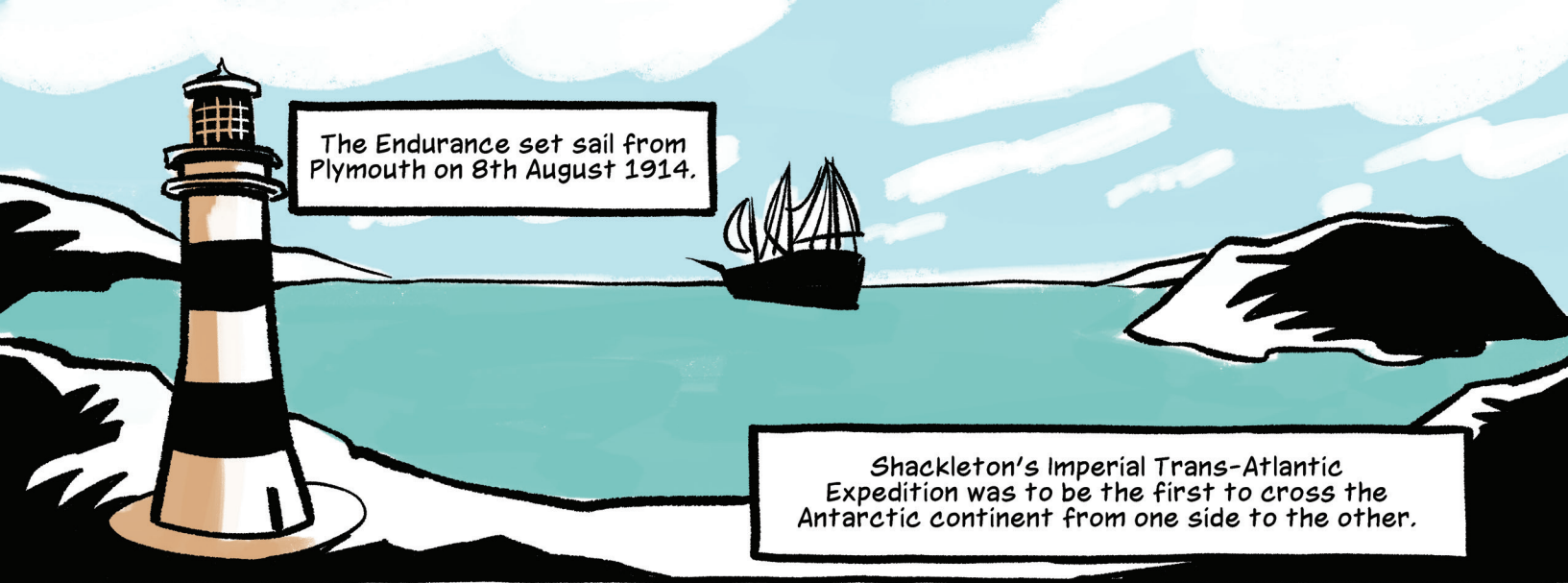
He was the carpenter on Sir Ernest Shackleton's Antarctic Expedition of 1914-17.

His work helped ensure the survival of the crew when disaster struck.



But he was one of only four men not to receive the polar medal for his efforts.

Many believe Chippy was treated unfairly and deserves more recognition.



The Endurance set sail from Plymouth on 8th August 1914.

Shackleton's Imperial Trans-Atlantic Expedition was to be the first to cross the Antarctic continent from one side to the other.



McNish liked the sound of that adventure.

But despite being a well respected carpenter, he was considered a little rough around the edges.



I must say that McNish is a tough proposition. First he sucks his teeth loudly then he produces a match, carefully sharpens it and proceeds to perform various dental operations...



...occasionally he expectorates through the window and at scooping up peas with a knife he is a perfect juggler.

We get on pretty well but - I feel sure I 'get on his nerves' as much as he does on mine.



He's a splendid shipwright.

I'm not sure... that voice...he rasps like frayed cable wire.

During the early part of the voyage to Antarctica, McNish was kept busy with lots of small tasks.



Like many on board he kept a diary, which details many of these tasks and other daily news, such as what food and entertainment the crew had.



Seal steaks and onions tonight.

McNish also acted as the ship's barber



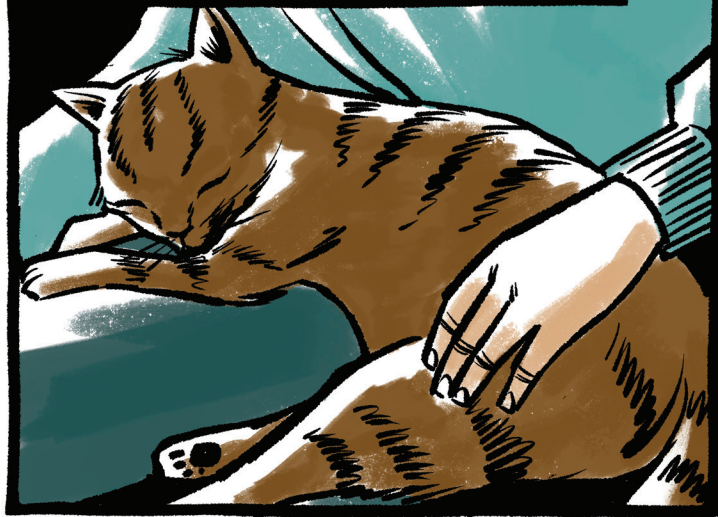
But his manner and attitude could still make him unpopular with the rest of the crew.



The carpenter has been unusually troublesome today.

He has an exceptionally offensive manner and it is very hard to be patient with him.

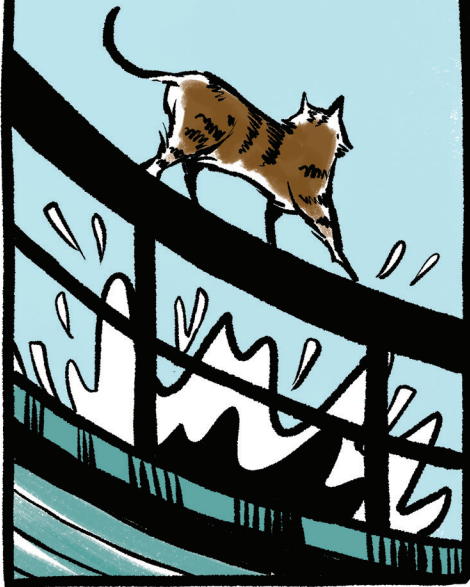
McNish owned the ship's cat, nicknamed Mrs Chippy by the crew. In fact, the cat was male, but the name stuck.



Cats were important on ships, as they controlled rodents who could eat supplies and damage ropes or woodwork.



Mrs Chippy was popular with the crew, standing on the ship's rails on rough seas...



...or climbing up the rigging like a sailor.



At one point, the cat even jumped out of a porthole and the ship was turned around so he could be rescued by the crew.

Endurance made slow progress, and became trapped by ice.



The crew had no choice but to wait out the winter and McNish built temporary shelters, including The Ritz, where the men would all eat together.



It was important to keep morale up through those long dark winter months, the crew put on shows...



...raced the dogs



...and exercised by taking moonlit walks around the ice



Or by playing football using a set of goalposts McNish built for them all.



By October 1915, the relentless pressure of the ice was too much for the Endurance.



Last night we drank the health of our sweethearts and wives but I am afraid we won't do so much longer as we have sprung a leak



I am working all night trying to stop it, the pressure is getting worse.

Things looks a bit serious now. Sir Ernest and most of the hands are packing sledges.

I am afraid it is all up with the ship



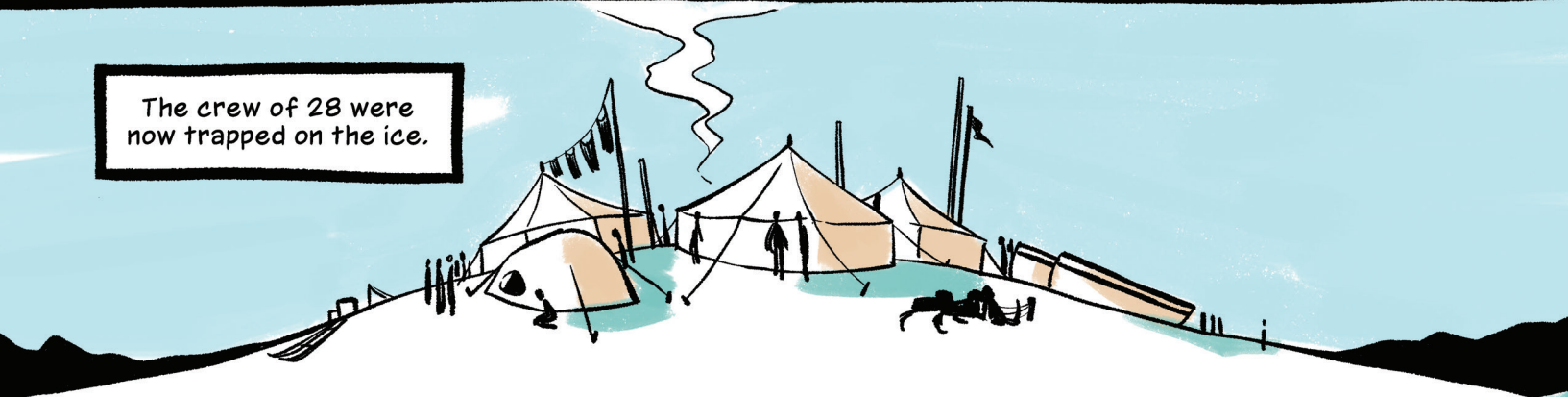
Shackleton gave the order to abandon ship on October 27th, three lifeboats were dragged onto the ice.

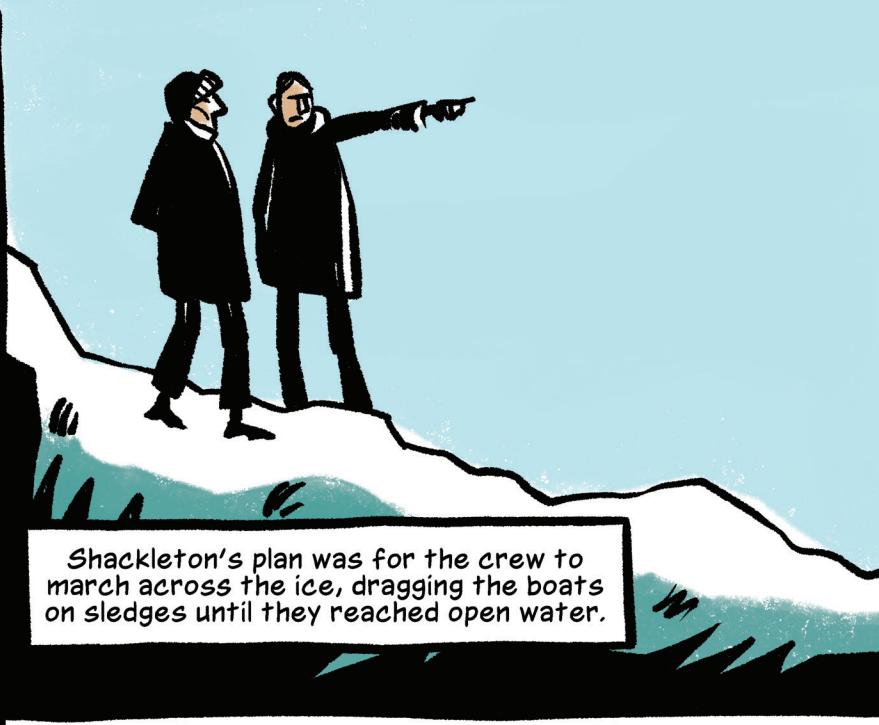


McNish was put in charge of rescuing what supplies he could from the ship before she finally drifted away or sunk.




The crew of 28 were now trapped on the ice.








It's likely that the loss of the cat and the ship affected McNish's mood.




He had always had strong socialist and religious views, but as Christmas approached, he became increasingly annoyed by the crew.

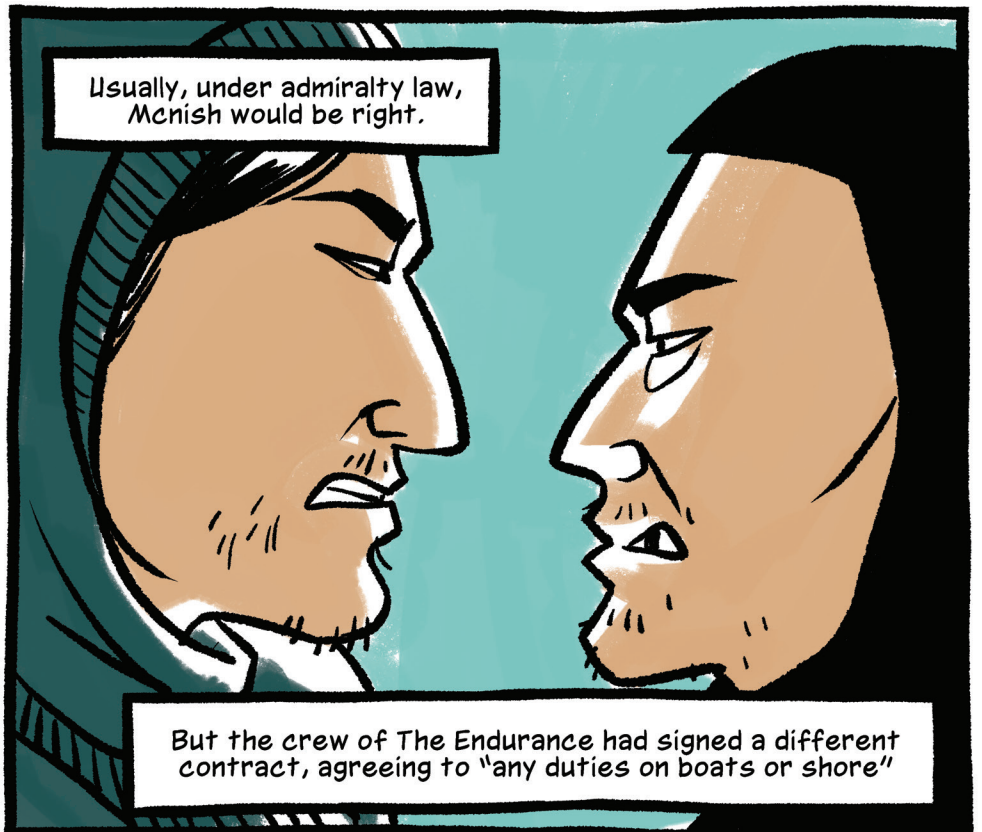


I have been shipmates with all sorts of men both in sail and steam but never nothing like some of our shore party...

...the most filthy language is used as terms of endearment and worse than all is tolerated.



As the crew marched through the ice in terrible conditions, McNish decided enough was enough.



McNish's New Years diary from a few days later suggests his mood has not improved.



Friday Dec 31st Hogmanay & a bitter one...being adritt on the ice instead of enjoying the pleasures of life like rich people...

...but as the saying is, there must be some fools in this world.



Saturday Jan 1st New Years Day which we celebrate in Scotland with cake & wine.

We are celebrating it here afloat on the Antarctic ice flocs not knowing what way we will drift next or be frozen in for another winter.



I had for breakfast a seal steak and a cup of tea. For dinner, one pancake made from flour & water fried in seal blubber. Supper, stewed seal meat & cocoa...

...then we turn into our sleeping bags on the snow and dream of the loved ones at home and happy days to come.



As the weeks dragged on, supplies dwindled.

Jan 14th - We had one of the saddest events since we left home happen. There was 27 of our faithful dogs shot to save our food supplies.

Friday Feb 11th - There is nothing for it but get into our sleeping bags. And smoke away the hunger. What Lloyd George calls a luxury for working men...

I wish to God he was here. This is where him & his fellow ministers should be for any good they ever done a working man or woman.

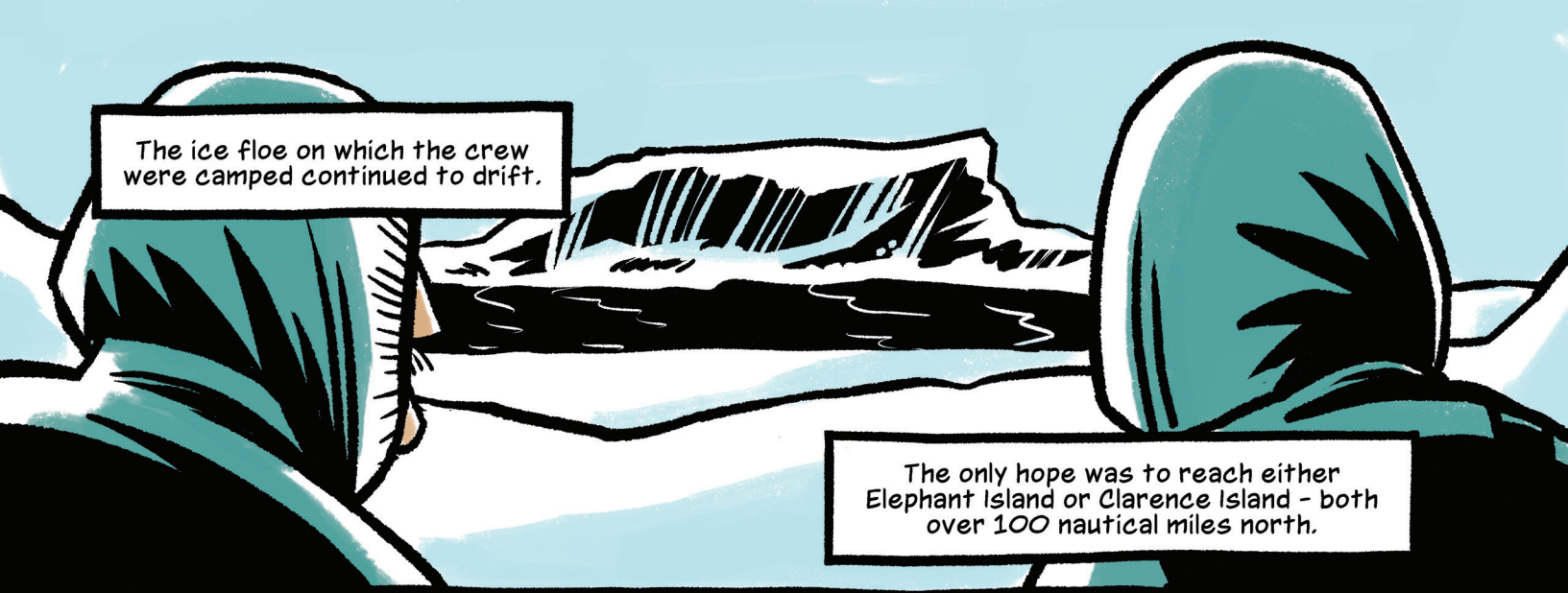
March 30th - While at breakfast a sea leopard came up and went to sleep peacefully, but it was his last sleep as Wild went out & shot him.

Then he shot the last of our faithful dogs.

We kept the five young ones for food and their flesh tastes a treat.


It is a big treat to us after being so long on seal meat and this last fourteen days on almost nothing.

We got twenty fish in the leopard stomach and we are having them for breakfast tomorrow.




The ice floe on which the crew were camped continued to drift.

The only hope was to reach either Elephant Island or Clarence Island - both over 100 nautical miles north.



From there, the crew might be able to travel to the Shetland Islands, or be rescued by whalers.



The voyage would be dangerous and would require the lifeboats to be safe and seaworthy.



McNish began repairs.

On 8th April, the crew had no option but to start their journey, when the ice floe they were camping on started to split.



All 3 lifeboats were swiftly launched.



For five days the crew battled through water and ice, with temperatures as low as minus twenty...

...and freezing cold waves soaking them.



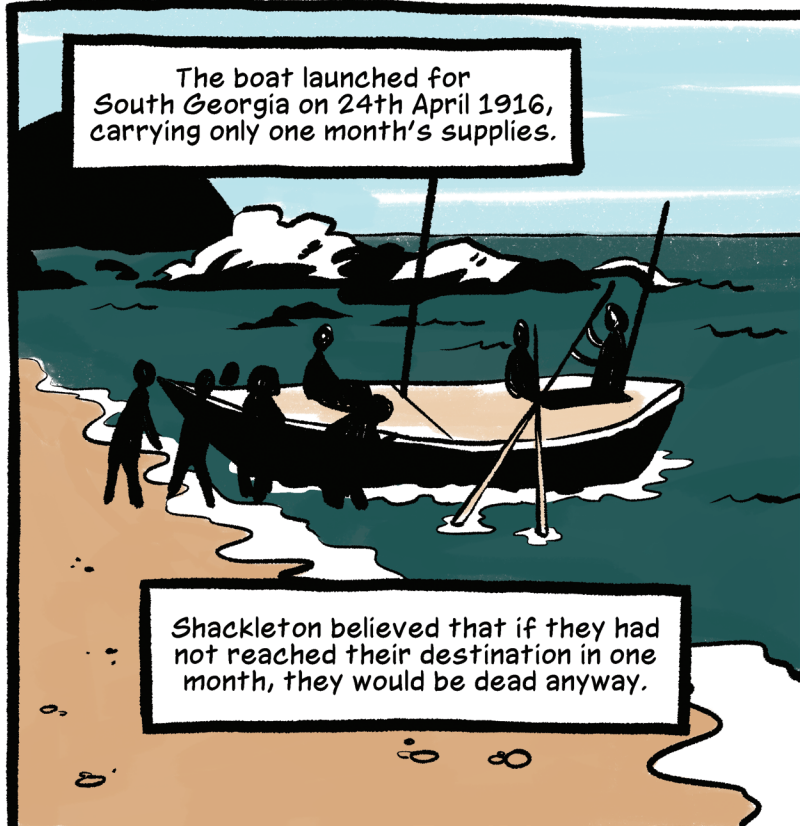
Finally, on 15 April, the boats landed on the remote and desolate Elephant Island.


It was clear they would have to travel further on find help.



And their best hope was now South Georgia, an 800 mile sea journey away...







We took goodbye with our companions and set sail on our 870 miles to South Georgia for assistance... we were in the open sea, wet through but happy through it all...

The boat and crew of the James Caird faced cramped conditions, heavy seas and high winds as they sailed onwards.

The crew had no map, with Worsley navigating by brief glimpses of the sun as the boat was battered by icy waves.

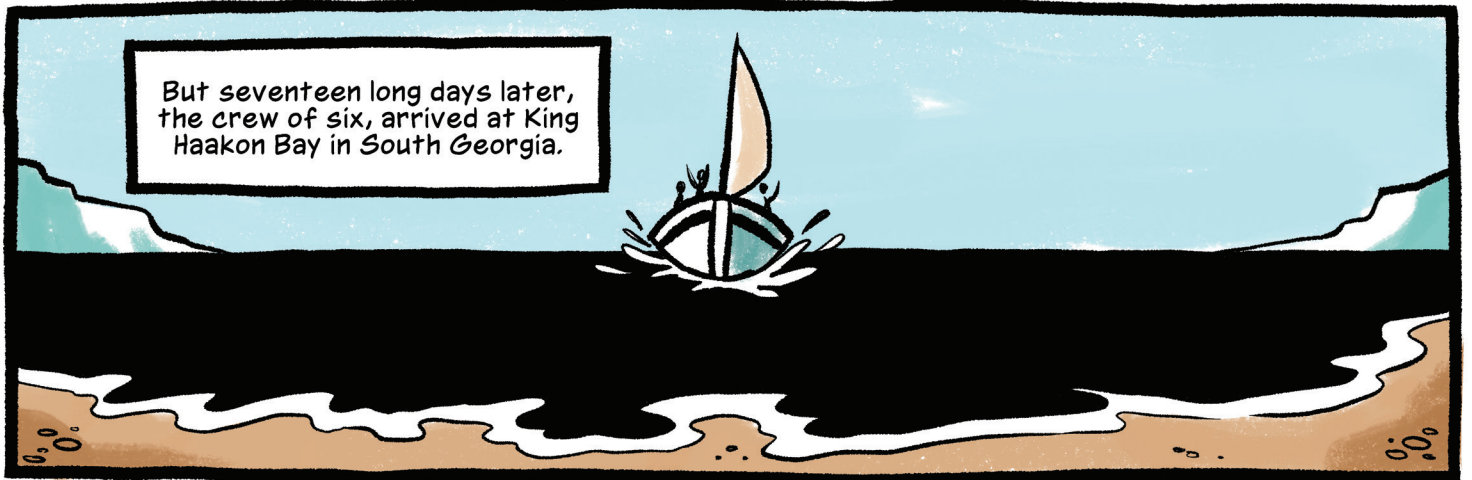
The James Caird was in constant danger of sinking and had to be bailed out continuously.



The seawater and rain froze to the boat, making it heavier and more prone to capsizing. The men had to take turns crawling out undercover to chip away at the ice.



But seventeen long days later, the crew of six, arrived at King Haakon Bay in South Georgia.



The heroic voyage of the James Caird is now regarded as one of the greatest boat journeys ever undertaken.



Briefly, the crew took some time to recuperate after their harrowing journey.

I went to the top of the hill & had a lay on the grass & it put me in mind of old times at home sitting on the hillside looking down at the sea.

We're on the wrong side of the island.

And we can sail no further.

The only way to get to the whaling station up north, is over the mountains.

It was clear, not all of the crew would be able to make that journey.

Shackleton put McNish in charge of the remaining crew, while he Worsley and Crean set out to cross the island.

The trio had no map, and so improvised a route over the mountains and glaciers.



They walked for thirty six hours, without rest, even climbing and sliding down the mountains by moonlight.

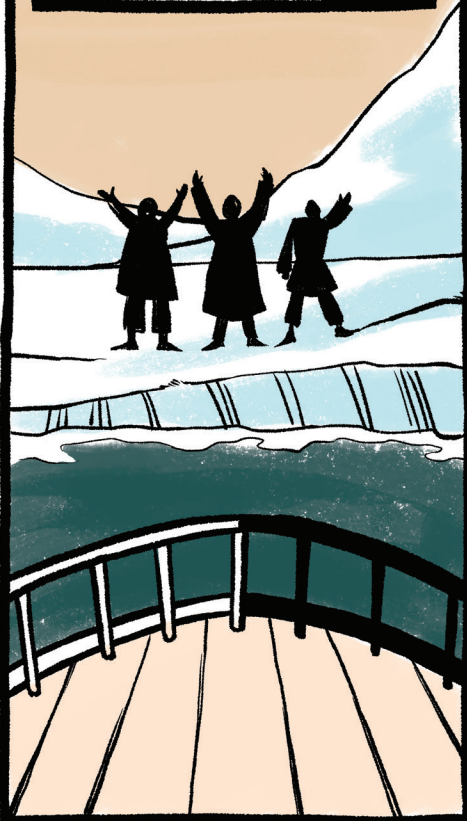


On the 20th May, they saw the town of Stromness below them, and made a difficult descent down a freezing waterfall...



...to finally reach civilisation.

Shackleton arranged for a ship to return to pick up McNish and the other two crewmen from the other side of the island.



It was three months before they were able to rescue the remaining crew on Elephant Island, by now depressed and near starving.



The rescue came just in time for McNish



The crew of The Endurance finally found their way home. It had been more than two years since they left, but The Great War was still being fought.



There was no time for heroes welcomes, the world had moved on.

Shackleton had been impressed by McNish's work on the James Caird, and by his 'grit and spirit' during that terrible journey...

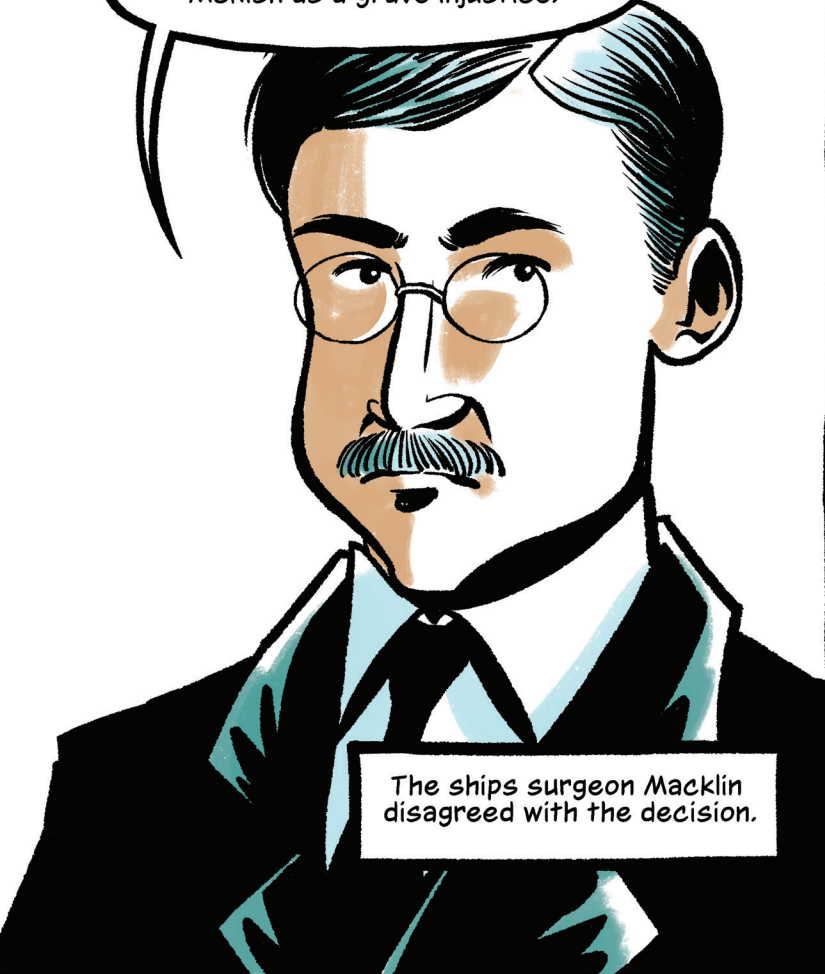


...he struck his previous criticism of McNish from the ships log.

But regardless, McNish was denied a polar medal by Shackleton.



Of all the men in the party no-one more deserved recognition than the old carpenter. I would regard the withholding of the Polar Medal from McNish as a grave injustice.



The ships surgeon Macklin disagreed with the decision.

Macklin felt that another crewmember had influenced Shackleton's decision.

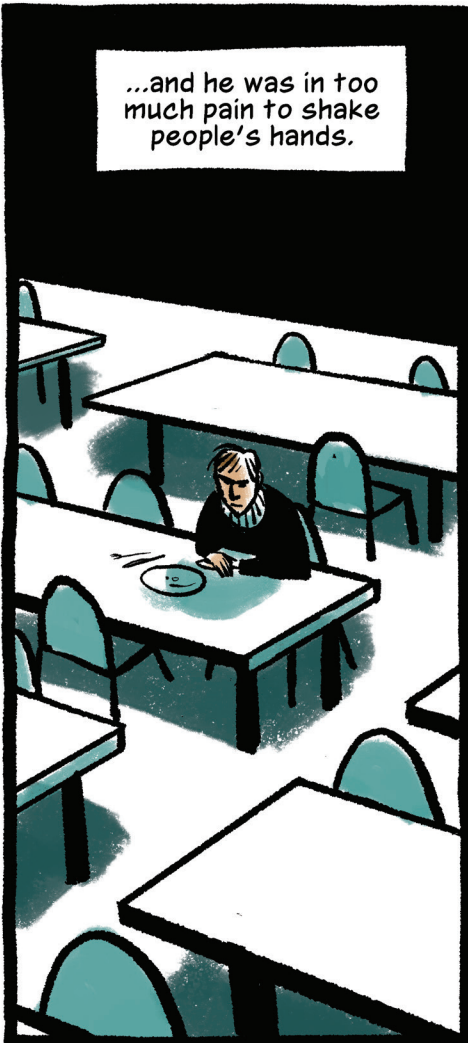


McNish returned to the merchant navy.



He complained his bones still ached from the journey on the James Caird...

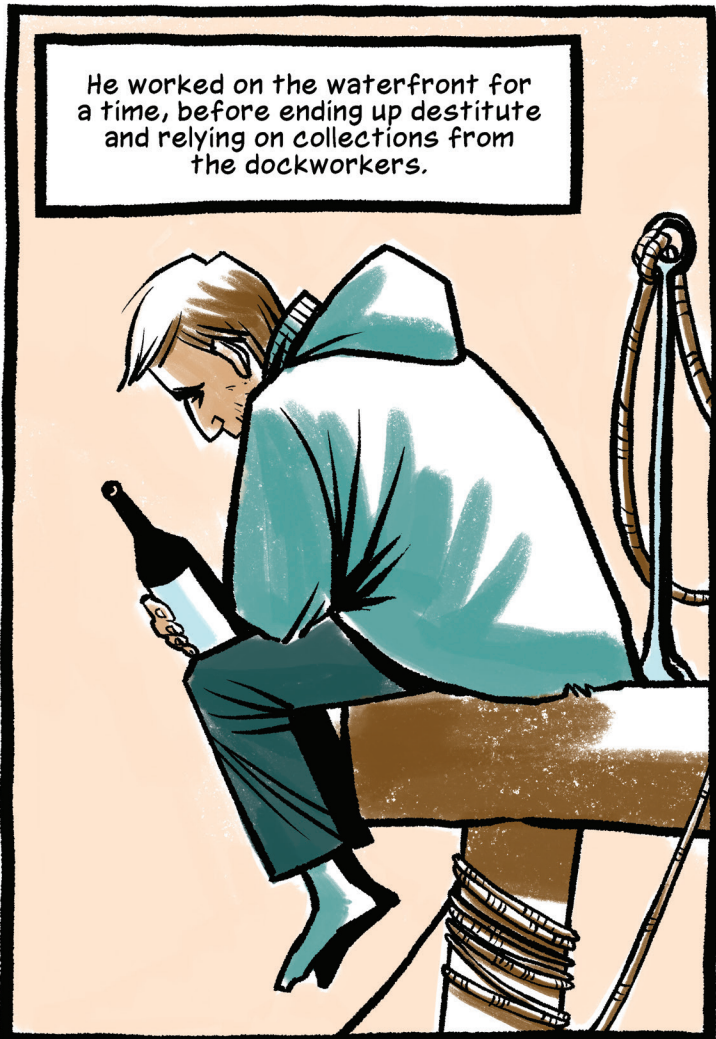
...and he was in too much pain to shake people's hands.



McNish moved to New Zealand in 1925, leaving his wife and all his carpentry tools behind him.



He worked on the waterfront for a time, before ending up destitute and relying on collections from the dockworkers.



He died on 24th September 1930, aged 56 and was buried with full naval honours.



...though his grave remained unmarked for thirty years.

In 2004, the grave was tidied and marked with a life sized bronze sculpture of his beloved Mrs Chippy, paid for by the New Zealand Antarctic Society.

McNish also has a small Antarctic Island named in his honour.

Perhaps these things would have meant more than any polar medal.



Afterword - Imperfect Heroes

Earlier this year, during the 250th Anniversary Celebrations for Port Glasgow, the town was awarded the Carbuncle award and named ‘the most dismal town in Scotland’. The Carbuncle is a tongue in cheek, slightly sneery, pull your socks up sort of award from allegedly well-meaning architects and planners – a joke at Port Glasgow’s expense, that everyone was invited to be in on. There was immediate backlash and outrage. Collectively, Port Glasgow said, “Eh, naw!” and in the ensuing fallout, the award was withdrawn and replaced with something slightly less patronising.

Folks from Port Glasgow weren’t suggesting their town was perfect...where is? Instead, people were annoyed at the positive things that were being ignored, the things they loved about the town they knew.

When we started work on this comic and I explained to the pupils of Saint Stephen’s High School, that the Port Glasgow born carpenter whose work helped save the Shackleton expedition didn’t get a polar medal when almost everyone else involved did, there was genuine disbelief in class – that sense of injustice which is often more accurately observed by young people. When we discussed why it was that had happened, there were a few suggestions; “He was cheeky.”, “He didn’t like being told what to do.”, “He liked his cat more than people.”, “He didn’t fit in.”

How many of us know someone like that? How many of us *are* someone like that?

Chippy wasn’t perfect – he did disobey an order and the logs and documents from the time do suggest he was hard to get along with. And he did not cover himself in glory in later life either. But his work on The Endurance and the James Caird helped save that crew – surely that should have been recognised?

Recent research has suggested that Sir Ernest Shackleton may well have known that The Endurance was not fit for the route he was planning, but chose to take her anyway – essentially endangering the lives of all the men (and animals) on board. No one would dare suggest Shackleton wasn’t a hero or try to remove him from the tapestry of our national myths and legends – but then, maybe some people are just born to be heroes.

And other people don’t quite fit in.

Which is why it’s important that when we find our own overlooked heroes, we don’t hold them up to some impossible standard of perfection and we judge them by all their deeds and actions, try to understand their behaviours as we do our own.

And on that measure, Chippy most certainly deserved that polar medal. Personally, I like to think he would have given it back.

Paul Bristow
October 2025



Distant Noises is exploring, recording, illustrating and sharing stories from a range of community archives throughout 2024 and 2025. The stories will be shared as a collection of graphic novels and audio dramas / podcasts / soundscapes.

The project is delivered by Magic Torch Comics CIC with the support of National Lottery Heritage Fund.

The stories include tales of the Inverkip Witch Trials, the journeys of Jewish refugees in World War 2, the people of the Britannia Panopticon, folk tales from the School of Scottish Studies and a look inside the diary of a polar explorer.

All of the material will be available to read and download for free on our website.

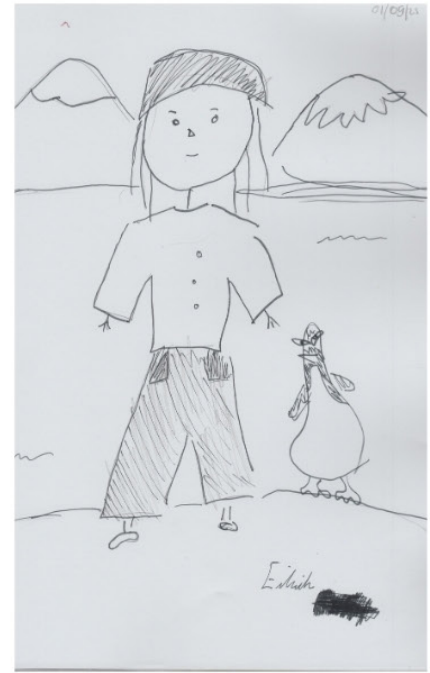
If you would like to find out more about the project, please email info@magictorchcomics.co.uk



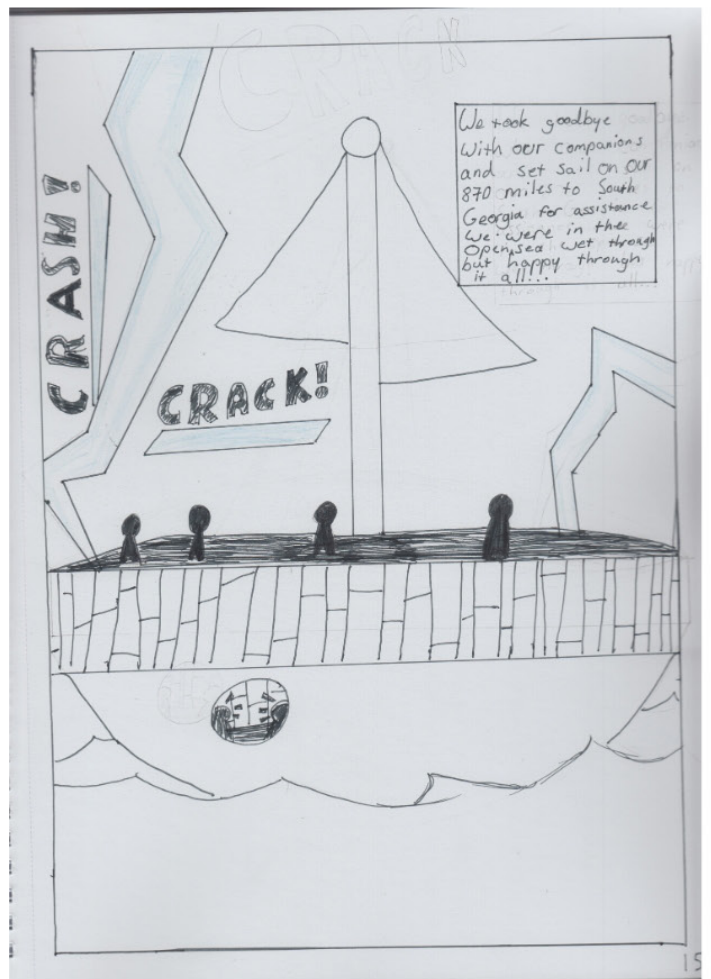
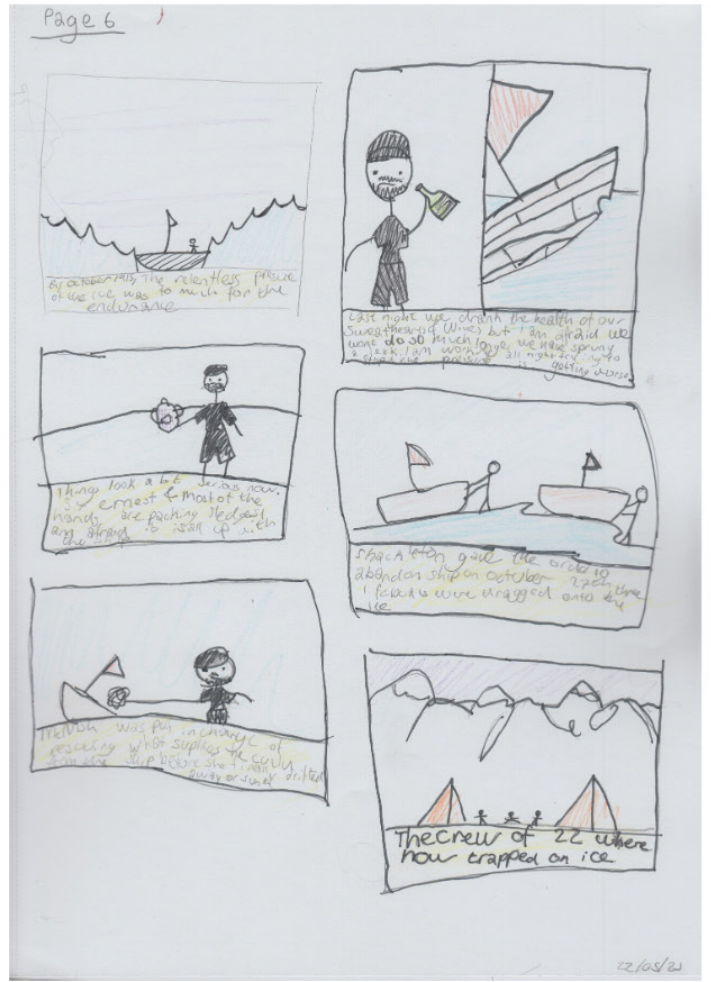
Expeditionary Crew

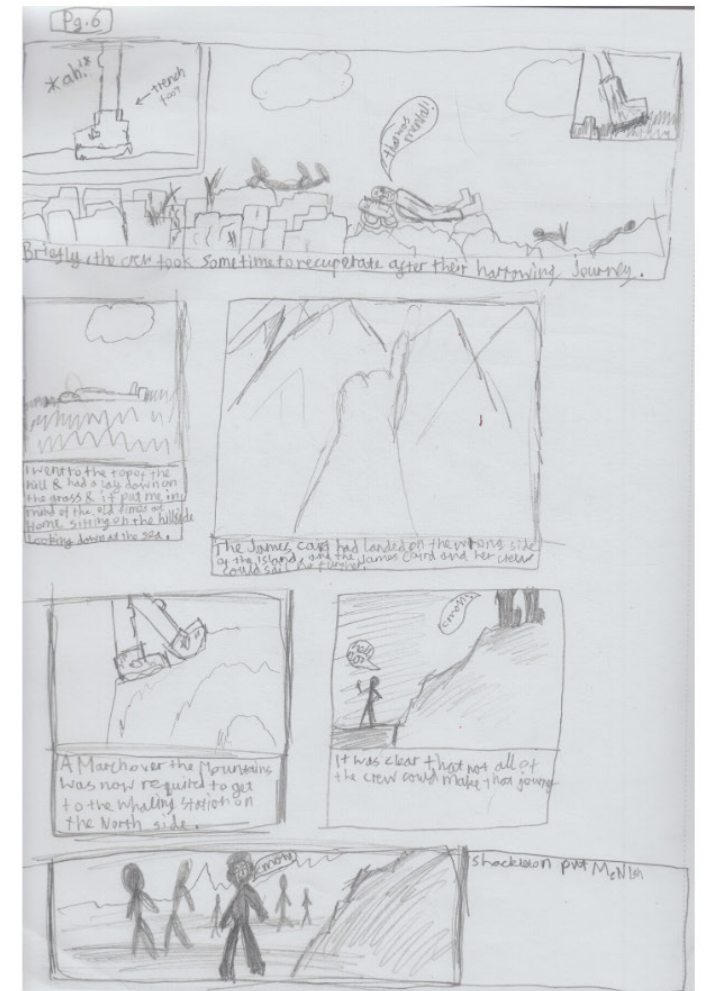
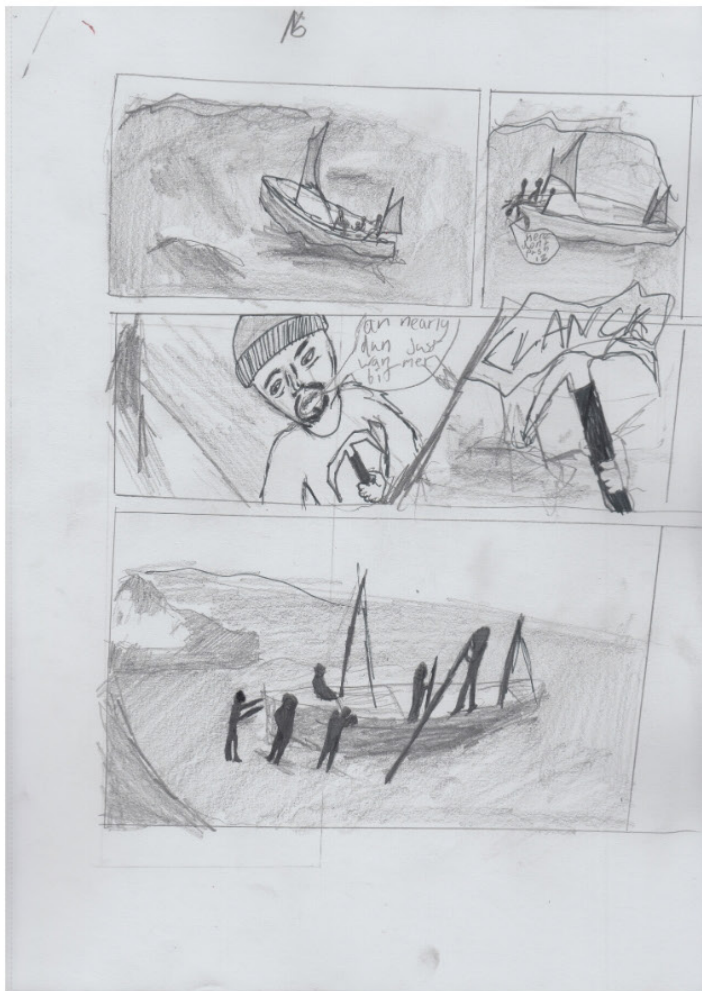
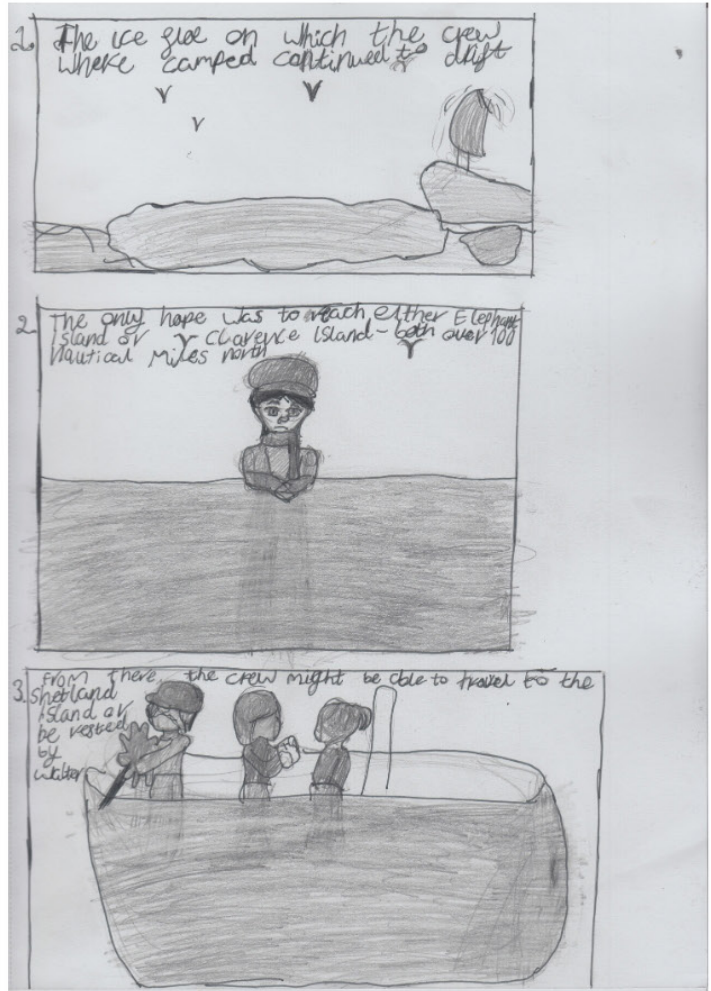
Saint Stephen's
High School

Self portraits
and page layouts
2025











The Ballad of Auld Dunrod

During the Distant Noises project, we have been fortunate to work with students of Glasgow Caledonian University applied games department, on games connected to our stories.



Fans of Mrs Chippy will be delighted to know that a game based on the cats adventures will be available to play in April 2026. Meantime, enjoy The Ballad of Auld Dunrod..Inverclyde's favourite medieval warlock and chancer has returned..as a videogame! Sneak through old Inverkip village and escape on your broomstick in this stealthy adventure.



Free to play via the QR or at <https://gcugames.itch.io>
Mrs Chippy Ship's Cat - Available to play April 2026



Listen to an Antarctic soundscape
inspired by Chippy's Logbook & Journals
on the Magic Torch Comics
Soundcloud Page from December 2025

"Friday Dec 31st Hogmanay and a bitter one...

*being adrift on the ice instead of enjoying
the pleasures of life like rich people...*

*but as the saying is,
there must be some fools in this world..."*

