

£120,000 flag from sledge of British polar explorer at risk of leaving UK

- Export bar is to allow time for a UK gallery or institution to acquire the flag
- Sledge flags like this were used on voyages by British explorers and they continued to be used in the Antarctic in the early 20th century
- This flag is one of the earliest known still in existence and dates to the early 1850s

A rare sledge flag owned by British Naval Officer Captain Henry Kellett, who was involved in two major arctic expeditions, is at risk of leaving the UK unless a buyer can be found.

Captain Henry Kellett, a proud Irishman, was a famous arctic explorer involved in expeditions charting the Northwest Passage – the sea route from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific Ocean – which had become a focus for British science, trade and geographical exploration.

During the search for Sir John Franklin's lost 1845 expedition, Captain Kellett's voyages helped map out the northern extremes of North America for Britain. The sledge flag, one of the earliest known in existence, helps to tell the story of British obsession in the 19th century with arctic exploration and serves as an important reminder of the tragedy of Franklin's failed voyage.

Sledge flags were unique to British polar explorers and helped to forge an identity among officers and crew for each sledge sent from the ship.

Arts Minister Lord Parkinson of Whitley Bay said:

This flag serves as a reminder of Britain's rich maritime history, helping to tell the story of early British sailors and their travels in search of new places. Its cultural and historical significance should be a driving force to keep it in the country. I hope a buyer comes forward for this treasure soon.

The Minister's decision follows the advice of the [Reviewing Committee on the Export of Works of Art and Objects of Cultural Interest](#). The Committee agreed that this is a fascinating example of a sledge flag and that the unique design of this flag, along with its importance within the context of British history, is of outstanding significance.

The Chairman of the RCEWA, Sir Hayden Phillips, said:

The stories that surround this Sledge Flag make it come alive. Captain Kellett commanded HMS Resolute, one of many ships which,

over at least three centuries, had sought to fulfil a British maritime obsession – finding the North West Passage. The flag and the ship were also linked to the constant late 19th century search for Sir John Franklin's doomed expedition. Like his ships, crushed by the ice, Resolute had to be abandoned but was recovered and restored by the US Government and presented to Queen Victoria. She then ordered the crafting from its oak timbers an ornate desk which She presented to the President of the United States. This Sledge Flag, of unique design, is redolent with our history and should live here.

The Committee made its recommendation on the grounds that the departure of the sledge flag from the UK would be a misfortune owing to its close connection with British history and national life.

The decision on the export licence application for the flag will be deferred for a period ending on 1 st December inclusive. At the end of the first deferral period owners will have a consideration period of 15 Business Days to consider any offer(s) to purchase the flag at the recommended price of £120,000 (plus VAT of £24,000 which can be reclaimed by an eligible institution).

The second deferral period will commence following the signing of an Option Agreement and will last for three months. Offers from public bodies for less than the recommended price through the private treaty sale arrangements, where appropriate, may also be considered by the minister. Such purchases frequently offer substantial financial benefit to a public institution wishing to acquire the item.

ENDS

Notes to editors

1. Organisations or individuals interested in purchasing the sledge flag should contact the RCEWA on 0845 300 6200.
2. Details of the sledge flag are as follows: The object is a silk sledging flag belonging to the polar explorer Captain Henry Kellett (1806-1875) made circa late 1851 to early 1852. The flag measures 595 by 885mm, within a frame of 710 by 995mm. The maker is unknown.
3. Provenance: By continuous descent through the Kellett family.
4. The Reviewing Committee on the Export of Works of Art and Objects of Cultural Interest is an independent body, serviced by the Arts Council (ACE), which advises the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport on whether a cultural object, intended for export, is of national importance under specified criteria.
5. [Arts Council England](#) is the national development agency for creativity and culture. They have set out in their strategic vision in Let's Create that by 2030 they want England to be a country in which everyone's creativity is valued and given the chance to flourish and where everyone has access to a remarkable range of high-quality cultural experiences. ACE invest public money from the Government and The National Lottery to

help support the sector and to deliver this vision. Following the [Covid-19 crisis](#), the Arts Council developed a £160 million Emergency Response Package, with nearly 90% coming from the National Lottery, for organisations and individuals needing support. They are also one of the bodies responsible for administering the Government's unprecedented Culture Recovery Fund.