

## Research Article

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**Abstract**

Much has been written about the so-called Franklin expedition (1845–), but not about the master mariners, who joined as “Greenland pilots,” as experienced whaling masters on Royal Navy expeditions were usually called in the 19th century. Having been on Royal Navy expeditions to the Arctic before, Thomas Blanky, the ice master of HMS *Terror*, was mentioned here and there in contemporary sources. But who he was and how and why he joined the expedition are still widely unanswered questions, to be dealt with for the first time here.

A great deal has been written about the search for the Franklin expedition, which disappeared in 1845 seemingly without a trace while searching for the Northwest Passage, but the role of the whalers has usually been mentioned only in passing. One exception is the late W. Gillies Ross – one of the experts on the history of Arctic whaling – who also dealt with the lost expedition in more detail (Ross 1983; 1985; 1985a; 1997; 2019). Yet even he, in his most detailed final book on the subject in 2019, gives little more than the names of the two ice masters who served as pilots aboard the expedition ships (Ross 2019, p. 24): James Reid and Thomas Blanky. Already 80 years earlier, Richard J. Cyriax had written about Thomas Blanky in his monograph on Franklin’s expedition, first published in 1939, which was for a long time the only standard work on the subject:

He seems to have spent the greater part of his life in the mercantile marine, but he served on three Arctic expeditions, before being appointed to the *Terror*. The first in which he served (as Able Seaman) was that commanded by Captain G. F. Lyon, who went to Cumberland Strait in H.M.S. *Griper* in 1824. Three years later Blanky accompanied, again as Able Seaman, the fourth and last expedition commanded by Sir Edward Parry, whose objective this time was the North Pole. The next Arctic enterprise in which he took part was that commanded by Sir John Ross; he served as Mate in the *Victory*. He then returned to the mercantile marine. He was appointed to the *Terror* because of his experience of Arctic exploration and ice navigation. (Cyriax, 1997, pp. 214–215).

With that, basically everything important was said about the ice master of HMS *Terror*, whose name was variously spelled, but who eventually went down in history as Thomas Blanky – the name therefore used here. Despite all this, he was actually no stranger to the Admiralty, and the expeditions in which he served are well documented. Although he is not mentioned by name in the account of the voyage by George F. Lyon (1796–1832) (1825), nor in William Edward Parry’s (1790–1855) (1828), but he was at least by John Ross (1777–1856), in whose expedition he was one of the officers (Huish, 1835; Ross, 1835).

Some later authors even mentioned him in books about the search for the Northwest Passage in general or about the Arctic expeditions in which he himself had participated (e.g. Edinger, 2003; Williams, 2009). But, this did not until recently lead to a closer study of either his biography or his achievements. Thus little was known for a long time about Thomas Blanky, the ice master of HMS *Terror*.

However, Sir John Ross had already written a short biographical sketch about him. But this was tugged away in an appendix to Ross’s narrative about his second expedition, the one in which Blanky had taken part. The narrative itself was a bestseller because Ross and his crew had returned safely after surviving four winters in the ice. The appendix, on the other hand – published as an extra volume (Ross, 1835a) – sold far less often, was probably little read and is not quite so easy to find today. Yet Ross’s hidden biographical sketch is well worth reading, for it contains not just the only description we have of Thomas Blanky but also information that John Ross could only have received from Blanky himself. That is why it is quoted here in full:

MR. BLANKY was born at Whitby, in the year 1800; is five feet seven inches high, stout made, has a fair complexion, with light hair; went to sea at eleven years of age, and served an apprenticeship of six years in a collier, between Shields and Loudon, on board two vessels, called the *Liberty* and the *Property*, after which he was one year in the coasting trade, and two years in the Greenland fishery, on board the *Volunteer*, of Whitby, where he filled the situation of line manager. He was twelve months in the *Swan*, revenue cutter, from which he went second mate of the *Latona*, for one voyage in the timber trade; after making a voyage as second mate of the *Lord Wellington* to Dantzic [Danzig], he went two voyages first mate of a collier. In the year 1824 he volunteered to serve on board his Majesty’s discovery ship, the *Griper*. Captain Lyon, and was on board her on that disastrous voyage to Cumberland strait. On her return he entered on board the *Navigator*, as second mate,

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and made a voyage to Alexandria; and then as first mate of the *Sprightly*, to Riga, and two voyages in the coal trade. In 1827 Sir E. Parry's attempt to reach the North Pole was undertaken, and he volunteered on board the *Hecla* as a leading man; but this attempt being also unsuccessful, he returned to the merchant service, making a voyage to Quebec, and another to St. Petersburg, as first mate of the *Almira*; after which he joined an uncle as mate, who was master and owner of a schooner, but was wrecked soon after on Flamborough Head. When he joined the *Victory* as first mate, he had been eighteen years at sea, and had become an excellent seaman, of which he gave several remarkable proofs. I may mention that on the morning of the 12th of August, when his presence of mind and decision saved the ship from being thrown into the breakers of a heavy pack of ice. His education having been neglected in his youth, he attended very diligently to instructions given him on the voyage, and became an excellent navigator. Having been before a shipmate of Commander Ross, he naturally attached himself to him, and from whom he received much instruction. Although he was the spokesman on most of the occasions of discontent particularly on the march from Victoria harbour to Fury beach, I do not blame him so much as those at whose instigation he committed the act of insubordination, and I had no hesitation in giving him my strongest recommendation to A. Chapman, Esq., M. P., who appointed him mate of one of his ships, which led to his obtaining the command of a merchant ship, and which all along seemed to be the sole object of his ambition. (J. Ross, 1835a, pp. cxxx–cxxxii.)

The incident Ross mentions occurred on 3 June 1832, after the ship had been abandoned six days earlier, on its retreat with sledges and boats north towards Lancaster Sound to Fury Beach, where William Edward Parry had left a depot of supplies in 1825 (Parry, 1826). Ross recounted the incident in his main narrative as follows:

The men seemed then much fatigued, and the mate Blanky, being deputed by them, intimated their desire to abandon the boats and spare provisions at this place, and proceed directly for Fury point. I had already suspected something of this nature; but as we should thus leave our resources in a place to which it was impossible to return, I not only expressed my refusal, but ordered the party to proceed, in a manner not easily misunderstood, and by an argument too peremptory to be disputed, after reprimanding the ambassador for the extreme impropriety of his conduct. It was the first symptom approaching to mutiny which had yet occurred.

I am not now willing to say more respecting things which I then thought it best not to notice further than was necessary for the safety of the whole party, and had declined mentioning on our return to England. (Ross, 1835, p. 645)

However, his mentioning the incident in his narrative was typical of him, because he still felt that his honour had been offended and he had been treated badly by the admiralty. Yet he does not hold the incident against Blanky. Ross was in a precarious situation, and he had had to abandon his ship and was retreating on foot with his men from the Arctic with an uncertain outcome. Had he been commanding a regular Royal Navy expedition rather than an already small, private expedition, he might have reacted differently. Nevertheless, there can be little doubt of his regard for Blanky. What John Ross fails to mention here, though, is that Blanky was one of his nephew and second-in-command's most trusted companions on his exploratory expeditions, including those to the magnetic North Pole, as described in those of the narrative's chapters written by James Clark Ross (Ross, 1835, pp. 304–319, 401–435; 549–567). This omission, however, has once again nothing to do with Blanky himself. Rather, John Ross's jealousy of his nephew, who was celebrated as the discoverer of the (magnetic) North Pole after the expedition's return and continued his brilliant career in the Royal Navy, is revealed here between the lines, while he himself was knighted but, contrary to his hopes, was not reinstated in active service in the Royal Navy.

The fact that James Clark Ross praised Blanky in his report to the admiralty on arrival back in London and in the chapters he wrote in his uncle's narrative about the voyage had the side effect that Blanky's name was certainly well known to the Admiralty, even though he returned to the Merchant Navy and did not remain in the Royal Navy.

Sir John Ross's biographical sketch, his account of the voyage, and those of William Edward Parry and George Lyon remained, for almost two centuries, the only significant sources on Blanky's life, which nobody was really interested in.

It was only in 2018, after the broadcast of the successful television adaptation of Dan Simmons's 2007 horror novel about the demise of the Franklin expedition, *The Terror* – in which Blanky plays a prominent role – that this was to change. The success of the TV series gave some researchers in Blanky's home town of Whitby the idea to take a closer look at his origins and life and to publish the results of their research online in order to reach not only some interested historians, but also the many curious fans of the series, who have since become interested in the real background of the story – Sir John Franklin's last expedition (Bullimore, 2020; Whitby Civic Society, 2021).

It soon became apparent that it was not at all easy to find out more about him. In the parish registers of Whitby, there is no suitable candidate for 1800, the year of birth given by John Ross, which led to the assumption that he could have come from a Jewish family that anglicised or shortened its name (Battersby, 2010, p. 160), because the name Blanky, under which Thomas went to sea as a sailor, mate and finally ice master on the ships of the Royal Navy, also does not appear in this form in Whitby. But Blenkey, Blencorn, Blenkhorn, Blincorn, Blinkhorn and Blakey all occur more frequently (Bullimore, 2020).

At least one of the Franklin searchers, the illustrious William Parker Snow (1817–1895) (Jones, 1979), who had been a sailor, settler and hotel manager, knew the ice master's name as the more common variant Blankhorn (Poulsom & Myres, 2000, p. 121).

That name, which is relatively common in northern England and Scotland, probably indicates an initial origin from the village of Blencarn in the traditional county of Cumberland (Hanks, Coates & McClure, 2016, p. 256.) That the different forms of the name appear in documents which, as in this case, clearly refer to the same family is no surprise. Names were spelt differently according to local pronunciation at a time when much of the population was illiterate. This was just as normal as abbreviating them for the sake of simplicity, without necessarily concealing a veiled Jewish origin.

That Thomas used the name Blanky or Blankey on Royal Navy ships may have been not only because it was the more common form in central and southern England but also because in the middle of the 19th century, especially in the English port cities, some names that existed in this or a similar form on the continent in German lands were often no longer regarded as native, but were associated with the German immigrants who came to the country in increasing numbers after the House of Hanover came to the throne in Britain in 1714. With the increased emergence of Jewish emigrants from German lands and eastern Europe in English port cities, German-sounding names were also increasingly associated with Jews, for they had originally emigrated from German lands to the East in the Middle Ages and had often retained their original names as well as their language (Endelman, 1979; Panayi, 1995). German-sounding names could lead to stigmatisation at that time, even if the family was neither German nor Jewish, as in the case of the Blankys.

Indeed, Thomas Blanky was not born in 1800, but around 1800, or more accurately probably 1804, the second child and first surviving son of the seven children of William Blinkhorn/Blenkhorn/Blenkey (c. 1769–1857), a labourer, and his wife Mary, née Hebron (c. 1781–1818) (Bullimore, 2020). That he went to sea was certainly no coincidence, since an uncle had already gone to sea, as reported by John Ross, who otherwise took no further interest in Blanky's private life. Yet it continued to be closely connected with the sea. After his return from Ross's expedition, Thomas Blanky married the widow Esther Wilson, née Walker (1797–1879) on 2 January 1834, who had already given birth to six children by her first husband. Hannah (1834–1912) was probably her only child with Blanky (Bullimore, 2020a). Through his marriage, Blanky also officially came into possession of the public house licence that Esther's first husband James Wilson (17??–1832) had held (Whitby Civic Society, 2021). That was the pub that William Parker Snow knew of (Poulsom & Myres, 2000, p. 121). Most likely, it was the Admiral Lord Nelson, also known as the Lord Nelson on 17 Pier (now Pier Road) (Whitby Civic Society, 2021). However, it is likely that Esther Blanky did not operate the leased pub alone only as a widow, but already before and also later, because her husbands were both mariners and thus away at sea for much of the time.

The shipowner mentioned above, to whom John Ross had recommended his former mate, was none other than Aaron Chapman (1771–1850) (Craig, 2003, pp. 4–6). He was not only Whitby's first Member of Parliament but also the owner of the *Phoenix* and the *Camden*, the last two whaling ships to set out from Whitby for the Greenland Sea and Davis Strait until 1837 (Young, 1840, pp. 199–200; Weatherill, 1908, pp. 125, 128–129). Thomas Blanky could only have been first mate on one of these two ships before he switched in 1835 to a merchant ship and the transatlantic trade – which like the Baltic trade he knew from his youth – when it was foreseeable that whaling would come to an end in Whitby, as it had in Liverpool a few years earlier. William White's (1840, p. 512) *Directory for East and North Ridings of Yorkshire for 1840* lists Thomas Binkhorn among the Master Mariners at Whitby, and according to Lloyd's Register (1840, B-supplement pages, Seq. № B426), the Master of the *British Tar* was called Blinkorn. This ship was one of those owned by Henry Simpson (1816–1893) (ibid.), who came from a large Whitby ship-owning dynasty that had long been involved in trading and banking instead of whaling. On 14 August 1840, however, the *British Tar* was wrecked in the Irish Sea (see, e.g. *The Standard* [London], No. 5044, 19 August 1840, p. 6). After that, Blanky apparently saw no future in Whitby and moved with his family to Liverpool, where he continued to sail on merchant ships, as no whalers had set sail from there for Greenland for a long time. *Gore's Directory of Liverpool and its Environs* for 1843 and 1845 lists Thomas Blinkhorn as a Master Mariner (Gore, 1842, Alph. list, p. 70; 1844, Alph. list, p. 76).

But despite the many winters he had spent in the ice with John Ross's expedition, a longing for the Arctic apparently remained, because at the age of over 40 he spontaneously agreed to go to the Arctic again under Sir John Franklin.

Originally, no ice master had been intended for HMS *Terror* at all – indeed, not even for the expedition. When James Clark Ross had informed his friend Francis Crozier at the end of 1844 that he would not, contrary to the Admiralty's expectations, be taking command of the planned, hopefully last, expedition in search of the Northwest Passage, and that this would now probably go to John Franklin, Crozier had immediately declared his willingness to sail under Franklin as his second-in-command too. However,

regardless of this, against the background of their joint experience in Arctic and Antarctic waters, he made another suggestion in his reply to Ross on 31 December 1844:

There is one thing I would recommend whoever goes that is to have if possible a captain of a whaler as acting Master and two 2nd Masters as before, [...] what do you think of that? (Crozier, 1844, printed in Potter, Koellner, Carney, & Williamson, 2022, p. 38)

Ross was apparently able to convince the Admiralty that an experienced whaling master as ice pilot could only be of advantage to the expedition. Finding such a person, however, was probably left to the new expedition leader Sir John Franklin. Ross had therefore also immediately informed Franklin of Crozier's proposal. The two had also apparently agreed that two ice masters – one for each ship – would be better than one, because Franklin asked Ross in a letter dated 10 February 1845 (Potter et al., 2022, pp. 53–54), when the latter was in Yorkshire near Hull anyway, not only to inquire with the whalers there about the recent Arctic ice conditions, but added: “Will you also be good enough to enquire after the Ice Masters and leading men for both ships” (ibid. p. 53).

Ross's search, however, was apparently unsuccessful. But at least word seems to have spread among the whalers that Franklin was looking for Greenland pilots. Shortly afterwards, Franklin got lucky, though, because probably on the recommendation of mutual acquaintances at the Royal Geographical Society, the Scottish whaling captain James Reid (1795–1850?) contacted him in March 1845 to join the expedition, as his letters to his wife indicate (Potter et al., 2022, pp. 64, 66; Reid, 1845). On 27 March, he signed on as ice master and pilot (HMS *Erebus*, 1845, No. 1; Potter et al., 2022, pp. 64, 66).

Even before that, Franklin must have made the same request to the whaling master that he had made to Ross a few weeks earlier, for Reid had already written to his wife the day before, on 26 March 1845:

I have Received orders to ship, another ice Captain & 6 Leadin men. I wrote to Charles about a week ago to see if he could Recomment any in Dundee but not yet Rec'd an answer. Sir John told me yesterday that he would send me down to Hull or any other place, and Look after them myself and all my expenses paid. I will know that on Monday when I get my Commission. (Potter et al., 2022, p. 67)

Apparently, he had not found any suitable candidates either in Montrose or in Aberdeen, the two Scottish ports from which he himself had sailed to the Davis Strait and the Greenland Sea, and therefore turned to his younger brother Charles (1798–186?), who had been whaling for some years from Dundee (Archibald, 2013, pp. 115, 118; Reid, 1850). Indeed, the latter found a captain who was willing to join the voyage: George Valentine (1791?–18??), presumably the son of the legendary William Valentine (1864–1829) of Dundee (Archibald, 2013, p. 223; HMS *Erebus*, 1845, No. 15). In 1817, the elder Valentine had become famous among the whalers because he had been one of two captains who, after an unsuccessful season in the Greenland Sea, instead of returning to Scotland, had sailed between the ice off the Greenland coast and the so-called middle ice in Baffin Bay and discovered the ice-free north water, where the whales had escaped their pursuers until then (Sanger 2016, pp. 97–98). The second ice master and several more suitable seamen seemed to have been found. But then James Reid disappointedly informed his wife Ann on 13 May that the Admiralty had wanted to get rid of all those he had struggled to find, had not deemed them fit enough and had dismissed them again on 25 April (HMS *Erebus*, 1845, No. 15): “Mr. Valentin[e]

wase cast for the Scurvey in his Leges and the others for several things [...]” (Potter et al., 2022, p. 104)

Even if James Reid’s efforts were ultimately to no avail, an ice master who was also agreeable to the Admiralty had nevertheless been found in the meantime, for in the same letter Reid mentions in passing: “The other Ice Master is from Whitby, the name of Brinkly [...]” (Potter et al., 2022, p. 104). That is of course Thomas Blanky.

When the candidate proposed by James Reid was not accepted by the Admiralty, probably the most important advisers on Arctic matters, Sir William Edward Parry and Sir James Clark Ross, finally came up with Blanky, whom they apparently still had fond memories of. However, he had already embarked on another ship and signed a contract when the admiralty approached him and he changed his mind. James Reid wrote to his wife on 19 May after the ships had sailed down the Thames: “the other Ice Master was taken out of the ship for £37, but I Rather think he hase got it settled” (Potter et al., 2022, p. 129). Blanky had only come aboard on 28 April 1845 (HMS *Terror*, 1845, No. 1) but does not seem to have regretted the decision. On HMS *Terror*, at any rate, he seems to have got on well with the officers of the expedition, for one of them wrote of him in one of the last letters home: “Blankey, ice master – in *Terror* – is a clever, capital chap & much liked” (quoted from Potter et al., 2022, p. 241). In his last letter from Greenland of 12 July 1845 to his wife, even Thomas Blanky himself was overflowing with optimism:

“The season is a very open one, much such as one when we came out with Captain Ross. We are all in good health and spirits, one and all appearing to be of the same determination, that is, to persevere in making a passage to the north-west. Should we not be at home in the fall of 1848, or early in the spring of 1849, you may anticipate that we have made the passage, or likely to do so; and if so, it may be from five to six years, – it might be into the seventh, – ere we return; and should it be so, do not allow any person to dishearten you on the length of our absence, but look forward with hope that Providence will at length of time restore us safely to you.” (*Morning Herald* [London], 25 February 1852, p. 5)

It could also be that Blanky was only trying to express optimism to his wife, as she had already lost a husband to the sea, but something made him optimistic about the future: the fact that he had already survived four years in the Arctic with John Ross’s expedition. To this, Esther also refers in her accompanying letter, which she sent to the newspaper together with this excerpt from her husband’s letter at the beginning of 1852. By then hope was about to be given up that the expedition would still be found alive. Shortly before, as the 1851 census records show, Esther Banky had been living with her two daughters, Esther (1832–19??) and Hannah, as “Wife of Ice Master R.N.” in Nile Street in the immediate vicinity of a shipowner and an engineer, in relatively wealthy circumstances. By 1852 she had moved, but was still living in the city centre in Hope Street, for after all, her husband had decreed before his departure that she should receive half his wages, the handsome sum of £9 per month (Lloyd-Jones, 2018, p. 2). In the edition for 1855 of Gore’s directory of Liverpool, published the previous year, the name Thomas Blinkhorn, Master Mariner, still appears (Gore, 1854, Alph. list, p. 76.). Esther Blanky did not want to give up the hope she still had and also wanted to pass it on to others. When the Royal Navy officially declared the search over in 1854 and the Franklin expedition’s members dead, the widow received only £60 a year instead of her husband’s half-pay (£117) as before, because James Reid, Thomas Blanky’s fellow ice master in the expedition, had persuaded him to make the same arrangements as he had (Potter et al., 2022, p. 104). When almost half of her income now fell away,

Esther Blanky ran into financial difficulties several times in the following years. John Barrow, Jr. (1808–1898), head of the Admiralty’s Records Office, began raising money to support her – John Franklin’s old friend and fellow traveller Sir John Richardson, John Rea and Sir James Clark Ross were among those who contributed (Potter et al., 2022, p. 448). Eventually, she moved to London, where she lived with both children until her daughter Esther married a Bohemian immigrant. In London, she was present when the monument to Sir John and his expedition was unveiled at Westminster Abbey on 31 July 1875. There were, as Franklin’s niece Catherine Rawnsley (1818–1892) noted in her diary that same evening, “several friends assemble & amongst them the Ice Masters widow Mrs Blanky, an aged woman” (Rawnsley, 1873–1876, p. 104). She also remarked after the touching ceremony: “The poor Ice Masters widow was quite overcome” (ibid. p. 105). But at least Esther Blanky lived to see the unveiling of the monument, unlike Jane, Lady Franklin (1791–1875), who had died a fortnight earlier on 18 July. Thomas Blanky’s widow died in Islington in 1879. His only daughter Hanna remained unmarried and lived in London in her half-sister’s household after her mother’s death (Bullimore, 2020a).

As Richard Cyriax (1997, p. 207) had already noticed in 1939, Thomas Blanky was among only five officers of the expedition of whom no personal relics seem to have been recovered by any of the searchers. This could mean that he was one of the “9 officers and 15 men” who, according to the message of 25 April 1848 in the so-called Victory Point Note (Fitzjames & Crozier, 1847/1848) – the only official message of the expedition of importance ever to be found – were no longer alive at that date. However, it is just as possible that things belonging to Thomas Blanky were found after all, but were not recognised as such.

The spelling in the quoted sources follows the originals. Deviations from the orthography common today have not been specially marked; additions have only been made in square brackets where comprehension would otherwise have been impaired.

**Acknowledgements.** My interest in Thomas Blanky’s biography began rather unintentionally with an accidentally discovered discussion on the Internet in which someone wondered about Blanky’s many names and another about how anybody could get the idea that he was of Jewish origin. This assumption, however, was not new. The late William Battersby had already voiced it in 2010 in his biography of James Fitzjames, claiming that his fellow Arctic historian Glenn M. Stein had not only found out that Blanky had run a pub but also that he came from a Jewish family. As a German historian who had studied Eastern European, Jewish and migration history, it was clear to me how one could come up with the idea, but I could not find evidence that this actually applied to the Blankys, too. So I finally asked Glenn M. Stein, who thankfully confirmed that it was just a misunderstanding. He had indeed referred to the pub and the original name in a conversation with William Battersby and had probably mentioned in passing that a shortening of names was not uncommon among Jewish families either. However, this had not specifically been related to Blanky’s family, but had probably led to the misunderstanding.

By then, the reference to the pub had already been given to me by a few other researchers, whom I am grateful to for this, as well as to all those who have shared their knowledge about Blanky with me and pointed me to different sources. Besides Glenn M. Stein, Apopka, Florida, USA, these are in particular Alison Freebairn, Geneva, Switzerland; Peter Carney, Hastings, East Sussex, UK; Regina Koellner, Hagen, Germany; Michael King Macdona, Bedford, Bedfordshire, UK; Russell Potter, Providence, Rhode Island, USA, and Logan Zachary, Duluth, Minnesota, USA, as well as the two anonymous reviewers. Above all, however, I have to thank Mary Williamson, Herstmonceux, East Sussex, UK, a descendant of Sir John Franklin, who provided me with material from the private family archives, and Jonathan

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