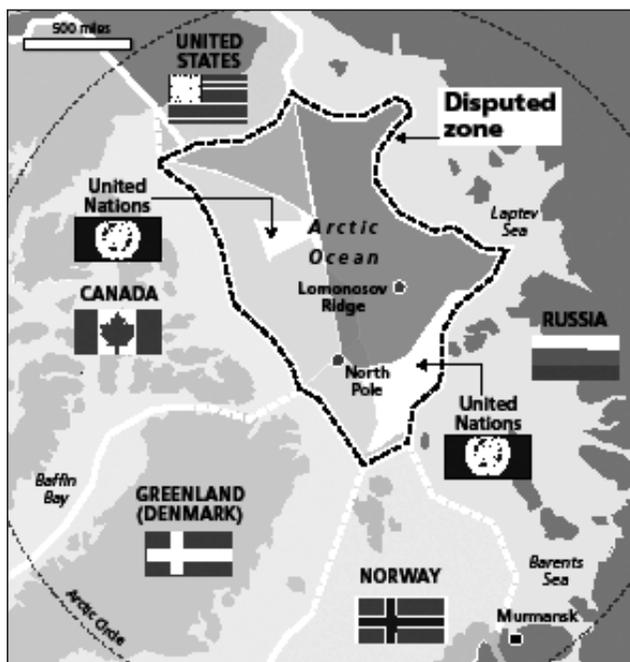


# Postcard from Svalbard

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The islands of Svalbard lie north of northern Norway, and most people know very little about them. David Cameron paid the islands a brief visit in April 2006, commenting on the evidence there for global warming, and the importance of oil exploration around the whole Arctic Ocean area. Since then, indeed, the Russians have symbolically laid claim to part of the sea-floor of the Arctic Ocean. The map, recently prepared by Durham University, shows the islands of Svalbard, dominating the Norwegian sector of the Arctic Ocean rim.



In spite of the lack of British territory in the Arctic, Britain has contributed to Arctic exploration since its early days. This postcard is a personal one arising from a recent visit in the summer of 2008, drawing attention to aspects of Britain's more recent role, and how this role is continuing now.

Our visit this summer was a personal one, with a tragic element to it. The object was to bring together members of a University expedition to Svalbard that I led in 1958. This expedition was one of many annual research visits directed by the late Brian Harland. Brian devoted much of his varied academic career to working out the geological history of this part of the rim of the Arctic Ocean, based in the Department of Earth Sciences (Geology) in the University of Cambridge.



Harland Huset, the NERC base in Ny Alesund, Svalbard

This type of research is the key to understanding the potential for oil, and is also likely to be a central element in determining claims over sovereignty.

Our expedition in 1958 was typical of the University expeditions of the time, a low budget summer project run by a young group of nine graduate students and undergraduates. Recently one of our group, Dr John Taylor, suggested that we might meet on the fiftieth anniversary of the expedition to remember our early experiences. We particularly wanted to remember the death of one of our group, John Kirton, who was killed by a rock fall while collecting fossils on a remote mountain on one of Svalbard's ice sheets. The mountain is now called Kirtonryggen to commemorate this tragedy. In 2008, some eight members of the family of John Kirton's sister were able to join six members of the 1958 expedition to visit the base from which he had sledged.

The Harland expeditions had a strong belief in their research programmes. Not only did the research seek answers to questions about the history of the formation of this area of the Arctic rim, but it helped to extend knowledge of fundamental processes, such as plate tectonics, leading to a better understanding of how the Earth has been working. We also felt that that the experience of living and working together under conditions of isolation that are rarely experienced in present-day field-work, was a challenge and educational in the widest sense.

It is very satisfactory that today, despite its lack of Arctic territory, Britain continues to cherish its Arctic activities. The Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) continues to maintain a base in Ny Alesund in north-western Svalbard, and it is good that this has been named 'Harland Huset'. The Scott Polar Research Institute in Cambridge University continues to lead work on polar processes and climate, and CASP (formerly the Cambridge Arctic Shelf Programme) linked to the Department of Earth Sciences, Cambridge, continues to play a major role in researching the deep structural history of the Arctic Ocean area.