

Thomas Witlam Atkinson (1799-1861): A Brief Biography

Barnsley is home to one of the great explorers Britain ever produced. It is time for his reputation to be restored to its rightful place. He is the great unknown explorer.

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Thomas Witlam Atkinson was born in Cawthorne in 1799. His father was a stone-mason who worked at Cannon Hall and his mother was a house-maid there. Thomas trained as a stone-mason and then became an architect, working mainly on churches in and around Manchester and London. He married for the first time in Halifax in 1819.

After Hamburg Cathedral was destroyed by a fire, a competition to rebuild it was held. Thomas travelled to Hamburg to enter the competition and there seems to have met people who suggested he travel to Russia.

Thomas set out on his travels in 1847. According to his book, the sole purpose of his journey was to sketch. He was granted a personal passport by Tsar Nicholas I to enable him to travel in safety. Despite already being married, Thomas married for a second time in 1847. His second wife, Lucy (originally from Sunderland) had been working as a governess in Moscow. She accompanied Thomas on his travels and, in 1848, gave birth to a son named Alatau. Thomas and his new family travelled in central Asia until late 1853. It is thought that, in total, they travelled 39,000 miles by carriage, by boat and on horseback.

Within a few years of the completing this journey, Thomas returned to England with Lucy and Alatau. Upon his return, he published a book about his travels entitled '***Oriental and Western Siberia; a narrative of seven years exploration and adventure in Siberia, Mongolia, the Kirghis, Chinese Tartary and part of central Asia***'. Thomas was feted for his exploration and his art; many of his pictures are of places he visited in Asia. In 1857, he shared a platform with the famous explorer Dr Livingstone. Thomas wrote a further book about his travels in 1860, but died during 1861.

After Thomas's death, Lucy wrote her own account of her travels with Thomas, giving what is thought to be a more precise description of the route they took. She died in 1893. Alatau moved to Hawaii, where he had a successful career, and eventually became a member of the US Parliament.

It is now thought that, during his travels, Thomas was acting as a spy for the British Government. At that time, there was anxiety within government circles that Russia might try to expand its empire into India.