



News Release

Talk on Thomas Witlam Atkinson during The Hidden Art of Barnsley Exhibition

By Nick Fielding, journalist and writer

14th June 2014, The Cooper Gallery, Church Street, Barnsley

Admission Free

11 am until 12.30 pm

(Gallery opening times Monday-Friday 10-4 Saturday 10-3 closed Sunday

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Talk on Thomas Witlam Atkinson (1799-1861)

By Nick Fielding, journalist and writer

“Undoubtedly one of Britain’s greatest explorers, and yet a man whose name today is barely known”. That is journalist and writer Nick Fielding’s judgment on Thomas Witlam Atkinson, the nineteenth century architect, artist and traveller in Siberia and one of the artists being celebrated as part of the Heritage Lottery funded *Hidden Art of Barnsley* exhibition, organised by Barnsley Art on Your Doorstep.

Mr Fielding will be speaking at the Cooper Gallery on Saturday 14 June, where he will present a brief history of the artist and a glimpse into the journeys he undertook with his wife and baby child.

Born in 1799 in Cawthorne, just outside Barnsley, the self-taught stone mason-turned architect arrived in St Petersburg in the mid-1840s having been inspired by two of the greatest scientists of the age – the formidable Sir Roderick Murchison, president of the Royal Geographical Society and the great German explorer and geographer Alexander von Humboldt.

Having procured an unprecedented blank passport from the Tsar Alexander II allowing him to travel wherever he wanted in Siberia, in 1847 Atkinson made his way by carriage,

river barge and horse to the Urals and the remote Altai mountain range in southern Siberia. A year later he returned to St Petersburg but only long enough to marry an English governess, Lucy Sherrard Finley, with whom he set off on a journey that was to last for the next six years.

At the end of their first year of travel Lucy was to give birth in the middle of winter in the bleak steppes of Central Asia. That their son Alatau – named after the mountain range close to where he was born – survived at all is a miracle, but even more extraordinary is the fact that he stayed with the couple for the entire period of their travels, during which they traversed almost 40,000 miles, much of it never before seen by Europeans – or, for that matter by Russians.

During their wanderings, Thomas sketched and painted voraciously, eventually returning to Britain in 1857 with more than 500 watercolours and sketches. Some he had already presented to the Tsar – who in turn presented Thomas with a jewelled ring. Not surprisingly, Thomas' first book, *Oriental and Western Siberia*, is dedicated to the Tsar.

On his eventual return to England in 1857 Thomas was lionised by the Establishment, elected to fellowships of the Royal Geographic Society and the Geological Society and spoke on the same platform as the explorer David Livingstone.

But dogged by poor health, Thomas died in 1861, leaving his widow and child almost penniless. He also left them a huge controversy, when it emerged that he had been previously married. He had written on his marriage certificate in Moscow that he was a widower, but his first wife, Rebekah was still very much alive, although she had not seen him for more than 20 years.

More controversy followed when it became clear that Thomas's second, rushed, book, was largely based on a book already published in Russian. Both issues were to damage Thomas's reputation, but Lucy continued to defend him – in her own book - and found many supporters amongst the great and the good, who raised funds for Alatau's education at Rugby School and who organised a pension for her.

During his talk Mr Fielding will present a slide show of part of the Atkinsons' journey to give a glimpse into the incredible difficulties they faced in one of the harshest environments in the world. He intends to publish his research as a book and wishes to thank the people of Barnsley, particularly the young people, who have done so much with their map project to bring the Atkinsons back to life and for celebrating their achievements.

“Thomas may not be well known today, but his achievements remain,” Mr Fielding will tell the meeting. “Gradually people are rediscovering this remarkable man, warts and all. And Lucy Atkinson is surely one of the most accomplished women travellers of all time. In the end, their story is a human one, full of triumph and not a little tragedy. Their lives are worthy of commemoration.”

Notes to editors

Using money raised through the National Lottery, the **Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF)** aims to make a lasting difference for heritage, people and communities across the UK and help build a resilient heritage economy. From museums, parks and historic places to archaeology, natural environment and cultural traditions, we invest in every part of our diverse heritage. HLF has supported over 36,000 projects with more than £6bn across the UK including £440m to over 3,100 projects in Yorkshire & the Humber alone.
www.hlf.org.uk.

BAYD is a voluntary organization. As part of the Hidden Art Project to date, BAYD has worked with over 30 schools and colleges and youth groups. The group have given talks to local organizations and a local student has made a twenty minute film portraying aspects of the artists' lives. The group have run four competitions involving young people and the winning entries will be on display at the exhibition, as will the creation of a yurt hung with textiles made by Barnsley students.

A series of talks and workshops runs in conjunction with the exhibition.

Please see our website at

<http://www.barnsleyartonyourdoorstep.org.uk>

and Facebook at

<https://www.facebook.com/Barnsleyartonyourdoorstep>

Please note that there will be original paintings by Thomas Witlam Atkinson in the exhibition which will be open on Saturday 14th June 10-3 pm.