

Thomas Witlam Atkinson (bap. 1799–1861) – On the Edge

“MR ATKINSON I PRESUME?”

In 1858 Thomas W. Atkinson shared the platform with Dr David Livingstone at a meeting of the Royal Geographical Society, Burlington House, London. The report of the meeting in the *Illustrated London News* of 16th January is headed: ‘The Travellers Livingstone and Atkinson’. By 1858 Livingstone had crossed Africa and Thomas had travelled 39,000 miles across Central Asia to territory no European had set foot on. Both had named their children after rivers in the countries they had explored. Both travelled with their wives. Now Thomas is the forgotten man, with a tarnished reputation. How much does luck, strength of character and influence ultimately decide lasting fame?

Baptised in March 1799 at Cawthorne, Barnsley, Thomas Atkinson was the son of William, a stone mason at Cannon Hall, Cawthorne, home of the Spencer Stanhope family, and Martha Whitlam, a housemaid at Cannon Hall. Martha was William’s second wife and they had married on 19th August 1798 in Cawthorne. There were two more children of the marriage: Ellen, born 1801, and Ann, born 1804. When William died in 1827, he left the tenancy in the house he lived in to his daughter Ellen and the residue of his estate to the two girls. The house was on a 42-year lease from the late John Beatson of Cinder Hill Farm Cawthorne, commencing December 1822. Thomas is not mentioned in the will.

Worthies of Barnsley records that Thomas was born in a house next to the Old Wesleyan chapel and went to school in Cawthorne. He then worked with his father on the Cannon Hall estate. Evidence of his early carving work can be seen in Cawthorne church yard where he made the headstone in memory of his mother, who died in 1817.

By 1819, Thomas was a journeyman mason and was sufficiently established to marry Rebecca Mercer in Halifax on 1st April that year. There were significant quarries in Halifax at this time and it is likely that Thomas was working at a quarry. Their first child, Martha, was born in Halifax in 1820.

Although Thomas worked away from home the Spencer Stanhope family were to have a lifelong influence on Thomas. The family had been at Cannon Hall from the late 17th century and had made their fortune from the coal and iron industries.



Headstone, Cawthorne church yard
Courtesy of Phil Cartwright

On the death of Walter Spencer Stanhope who had inherited Cannon Hall in 1775, Thomas presented in 1821 to the Reverend Charles Spencer Stanhope, Walter's son, a drawing for a tomb for Walter in All Saints Church Cawthorne. That tomb remains today. A plaque in memory of Thomas has now been placed by Thomas's descendants in the church.

John Spencer Stanhope, 1787–1873, brother of Charles, and father of the Pre-Raphaelite painter John Roddam Spencer Stanhope, had married Elizabeth, the daughter of the first Earl of Leicester of Holkham Hall. He had travelled to



Tomb of Walter Spencer Stanhope, All Saints Church Cawthorne
Courtesy of Phil Cartwright



Design on the tomb of Walter Spencer Stanhope
Courtesy of Phil Cartwright

Greece and Iberia in 1810 and found himself a prisoner of Napoleon. A personal passport from Napoleon was to later secure his release. John was a Fellow of the Royal Society and of the Society of Antiquities. In 1816 he donated to the British Museum a fragment of a marble frieze from the Temple of Apollo and in 1817 he published a topographical book, *Olympia; or, topography illustrative of the actual state of the plain of Olympia and the ruins of the city of Elis*. Elements of John's life were to be echoed by Thomas's travels and wide-ranging interests. Perhaps the familiarity with the Spencer Stanhopes led him to romanticise travel and adventure and showed him how connections to wealth and influence could be helpful in pursuing personal goals.

The Rev. Charles Spencer Stanhope was a thread throughout Thomas's life. Charles was non-resident Vicar of Cawthorne for many years, making his home in Weaverham, Cheshire. Thomas was always assiduous in later life about acknowledging his patrons' support and he donated to Charles an engraving of Barnby Choir in All Saints Church with the following words:

"To the Reverend Charles Spencer Stanhope an admirer of Antiquities. This plate is inscribed with sentiments of esteem by T.W. Atkinson."

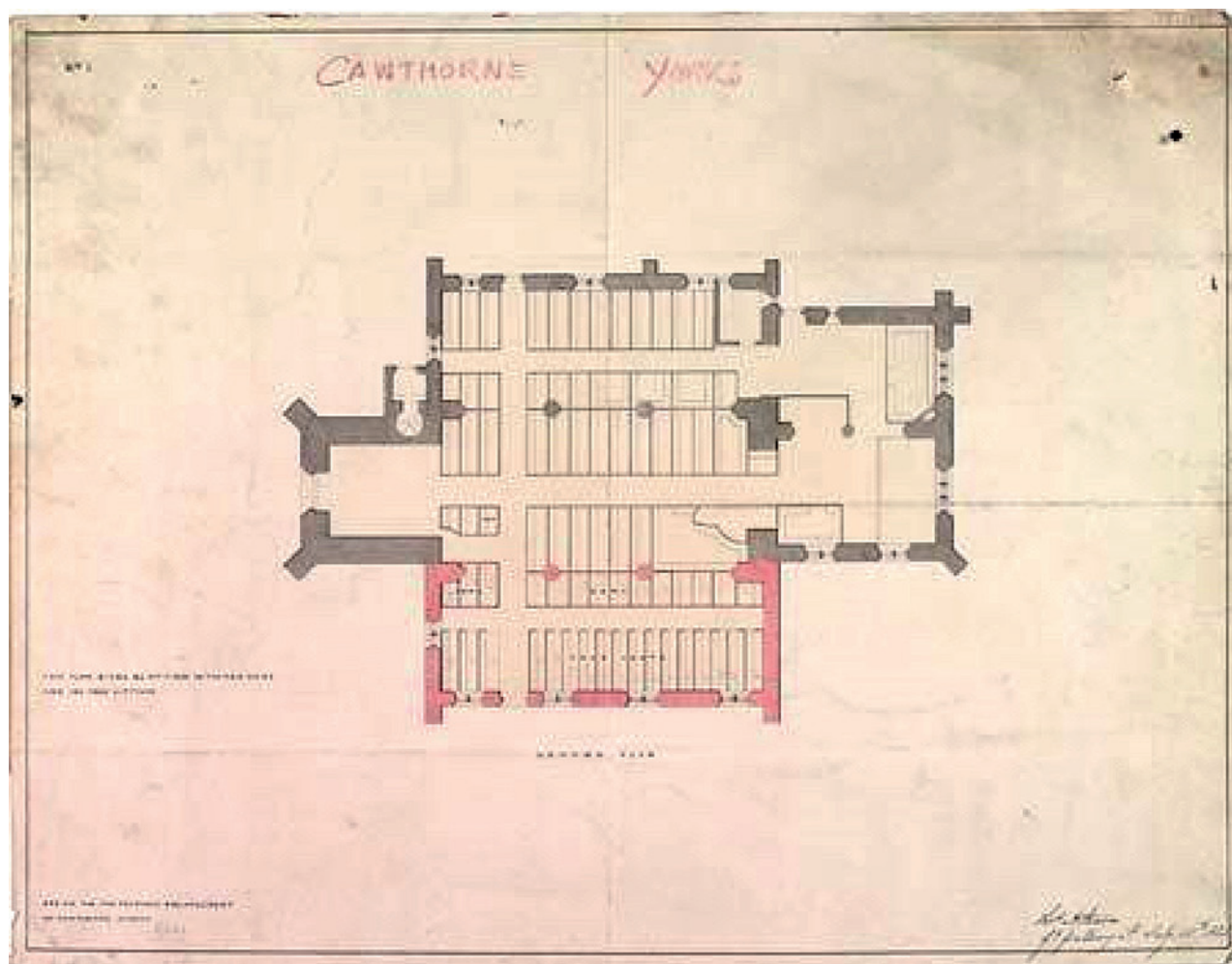
Ambitious, encouraged by the Rev. Charles Spencer Stanhope and driven by an urge for financial success, in the early 1820s Thomas set his sights on becoming an architect and had added Witlam to his name.

His knowledge of masonry and carving no doubt stood him in good stead for his new career, and through the Church Building Act of 1818 the Government had made available one million pounds for the building of Anglican churches, commonly known as Commissioners' churches. The enormous building programme is now understood as a response to major shifts in the population as people moved from rural to urban areas as a result of the Industrial Revolution and to limit the unrest which had spread throughout Europe since the French Revolution in 1789.

Thomas saw his opportunity. It is recorded in *Worthies of Barnsley* that he worked on St George's church, Barnsley, in the early 1820s. This was a Commissioners' church designed by the architect Thomas Rickman in a style of many such churches known as Gothic Revival. One of his friends and working on the church was said to be William Shaw who went on to be a well-known railway contractor living in Stanley Hall, Wakefield. It is also said that Thomas was a stone carver on St Mary's, Barnsley during its rebuilding in 1822.

Spreading his wings across the Pennines, Thomas became Clerk of Works to the architect George Basevi (1794–1845) on the building of St Thomas's Church Stockport, between 1822–1825. This was also a Commissioners' church. Another child, John William, was born during this period. Thomas then moved to work on St George's Church, Ramsgate where he is recorded as being the surveyor. This was built between 1824–1827 with a significant loan from the Church Commissioners and the architect carrying out the plans of an earlier architect was Henry E. Kendall.

In 1825 Thomas drew a ground plan for the south aisle and chancel at All Saints Church, Cawthorne which is now at the Society of Antiquities.



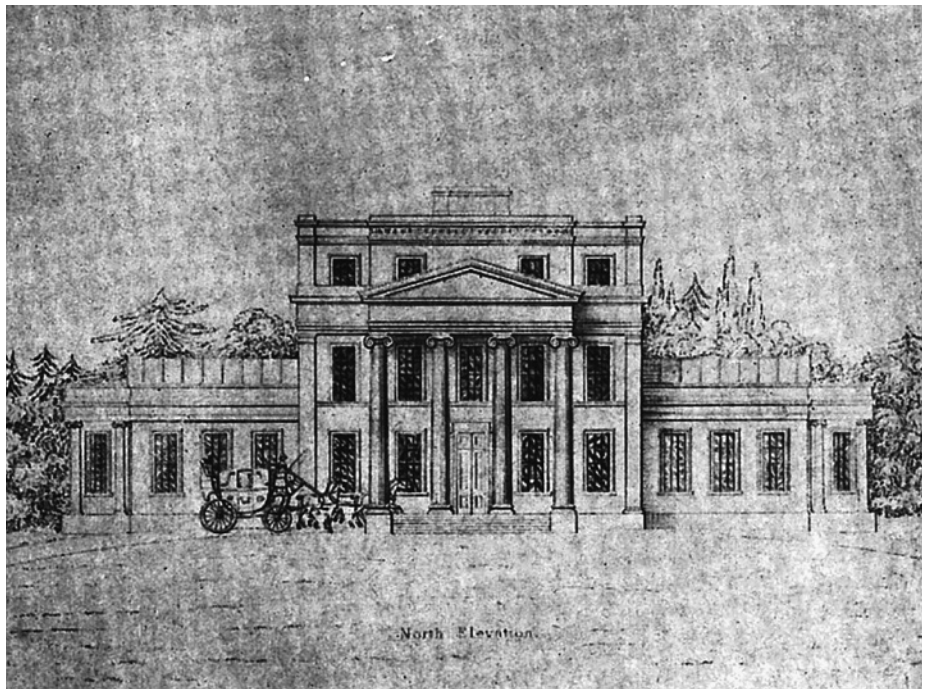
Basevi, Kendall and Thomas were united in the mid-1820s in the building of Belgravia Square, London. The architect for the terraces of the square was Basevi whilst Kendall designed the corner villa for Thomas Read Kemp MP. The London Metropolitan Archives hold an engraving after a drawing by Thomas of Kemp's villa. Whether he worked on the building of Belgrave Square and Kemp's house is not known but what the print and engraving may have done was give him a taste for publishing.

In 1829 Thomas published a work entitled *Gothic Ornaments selected from different cathedrals and churches*. This book of 44 engraved plates of Gothic ornamentation, said to be drawn from the original by Thomas and Charles Atkinson, also gives a clue to where Thomas had been in the 1820s, as the cathedrals and churches mentioned include: Canterbury, Lincoln, Lichfield, Boston and Ely. Henry Kendall had been active in this period in Lincolnshire and it may be that Thomas had worked with him.

Ground Plan by Thomas Witlam Atkinson, All Saints Cawthorne
©Lambeth Palace Library

Dr Ann Compton, Honorary Research Fellow (History of Art) at the University of Glasgow comments: "*Gothic Ornaments* is ambitious and would have been expensive to publish. It sits within a growing number

Villa design by H Kendall for Thomas Kemp, Belgrave Square
Country Life, 8th May 1969



of antiquarian texts on Gothic architecture including volumes by Lewis Nockalls Cottingham, Augustus Pugin and his son, A.W.N. Pugin. However, it is notable that in Atkinson's book there is no information regarding scale and location of the objects; in this regard it is more like a book of sample patterns for masons than a guide for architects."

The book was published with a Charles Atkinson but if and how he was related to Thomas is not clear. They may have been the architects who worked at St Margaret's Bowers church, Gifford, Essex whose partnership as architects and surveyors at 8 Upper Stamford Street London was dissolved by August 1829. It may be that Charles is the man of that name who went to Hobart in 1833, survived a ship wreck, built churches in Tasmania and died in 1837. The connection seems probable because in the details Charles gave to the authorities after the ship wreck he said he was a former pupil of Basevi and had worked on Commissioners' churches – several of the churches he named were worked on by Thomas. Charles died bankrupt in Tasmania due to underestimating the true costs of his building works, which may have been replicated in his partnership with Thomas.

A daughter, Emma, was born in about 1830 in Lambeth and in the same year, Thomas exhibited his first work at the Royal Academy. This was the drawing for Walter Spencer Stanhope's tomb at Cawthorne. Thomas had been in Cawthorne with the Rev. Charles Spencer Stanhope in February 1830 measuring up for the installation of the tomb.

The Royal Institute of British Architects hold several drawings by Thomas including a design for a London town house of March 1830, and the contract drawings for Hough Hill Priory, Stalybridge, Cheshire, dated March 1831. He



Inside page, *Gothic Ornaments*, 1829,
by Thomas and Charles Atkinson

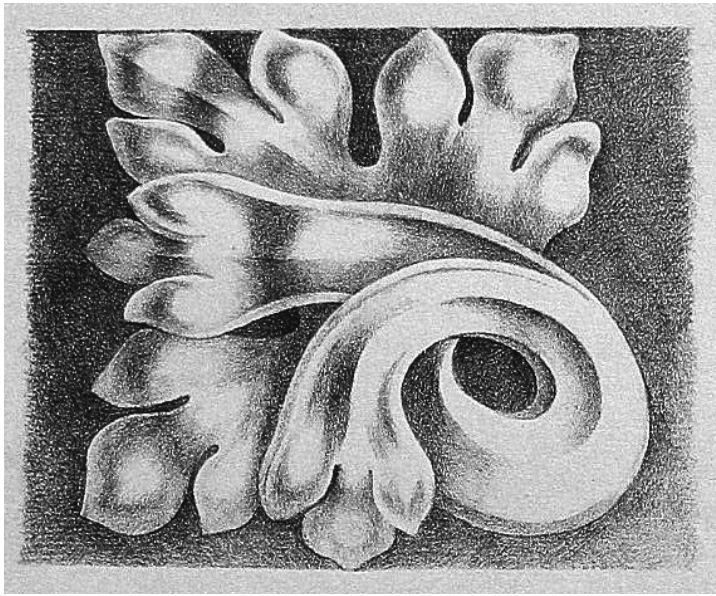


Image from *Gothic Ornaments*, from a cornice in Westminster Abbey

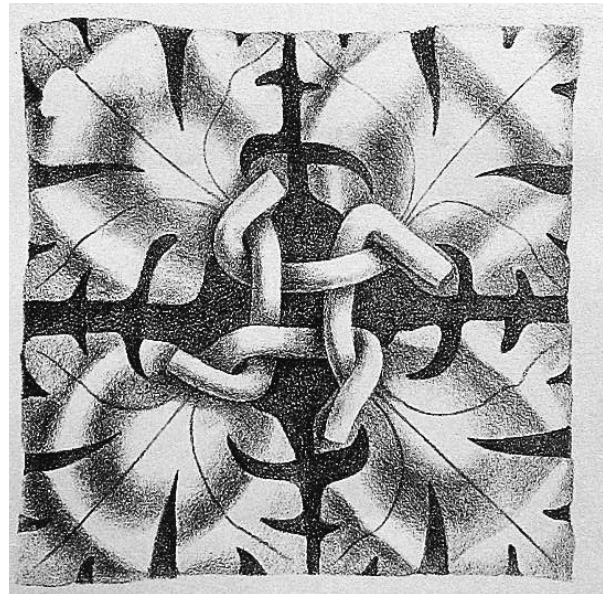


Image from *Gothic Ornaments*, from St Albans Abbey

was still in London in 1832 when he exhibited at the Royal Academy, a drawing of St Nicholas Church, Tooting, another Gothic styled Commissioners' church which still stands, for which he was the architect.

In October 1832 Thomas wrote to Sir John Soane at Lincoln's Inn Fields, from Upper Stamford Street, London asking for a reference for one Pepper who Thomas wanted to engage as a clerk of works. George Basevi had been Soane's favourite pupil and it may be that Thomas was using the request for information about a prospective employee to bring himself and his practice to the attention of Sir John. John Soane's (1753–1837) works include the Bank of England, the Dulwich Picture Gallery; he was a man very much associated with the Royal Academy and who is still remembered in the museum established at 12 Lincoln's Inn Fields, London.

In the early 1830s Thomas settled in Manchester. The railway had come to Manchester in 1830 and the city was expanding rapidly. He formed a partnership with Alfred Bower Clayton whom he may have met in London when Clayton was working on the Corn Exchange, Mark Lane. The partnership was dissolved in October 1836.

Thomas is credited as being the architect for St Barnabas Church, Openshaw; St Clement, Ashton Under Lyne and the Manchester and Liverpool Bank in Spring Gardens, Manchester. In addition he built Italianate mansions for Manchester's increasingly wealthy population.

As was to become increasingly evident in Thomas's life, things were never quite as they seemed. The *London Gazette* of 18th May 1838 records a bankruptcy petition against him. He is said to be of Store Street, Manchester and an architect, stone dealer, timber merchant, builder, dealer and chapman. This seems not to have stopped Thomas working as the Victoria and Albert

St Nicholas Church, Tooting, by Thomas Witlam Atkinson, London 1832, courtesy of London Metropolitan Archives



Museum have drawings by him for work at Markree Castle, Co. Sligo in the same year and he completed the work on St Luke's Church, Cheetham Hill, started in 1836. All that remains of this church is the tower and some walls but in its day it was regarded as a very fine piece of architectural work and attracted Manchester's smartest citizens. However Thomas was forced to defend himself in the Manchester press against accusations of plagiarism as to its design. Similar accusations as to his work in a different sphere would arise later in Thomas's life.

St Luke's features in *Modern Churches* by Richard Tress, published in 1841. The church is now in the ownership of the Heritage Trust for the North West.

In 1840 Thomas exhibited at the Royal Academy two works of St Luke's and also one entitled 'Catholic Church Manchester' which presumably relates to St Mary's which was being rebuilt in the 1830s. Thomas's daughter Martha married James Wheeler, a solicitor, in July 1840, at St Clements, Chorlton-cum-Hardy, Manchester. Thomas was a witness. Thomas and his daughter Emma were living at Chapel Road, Chorlton-cum-Hardy. Martha and James appear later in Thomas's story.

Lincoln's Inn featured quickly again in Thomas's life. In April 1841 he was before the Court of Insolvent Debtors, Portugal Street, Lincoln's Inn as a prisoner. In the details of his appearance numerous London addresses including hotels are given. It is likely that his creditors in Manchester had forced him to London where he had been arrested.

The next we hear of Thomas is through his drawings exhibited at the Royal Academy in June 1842. Somewhat surprisingly, these are of a palace in India. Thomas's address is given as Rutland Cottage, Downshire Hill, Hampstead, London, an area which was popular with artists. The works are drawings of Hazarduari Palace at Murshidabad. This was a palace designed by Duncan



St Luke's Church, Cheetham Hill, 2014
© Hugh Polehampton

Macleod from the Bengal Engineers and was built in Italianate style between 1829–1837 in West Bengal. Perhaps fleeing his creditors again, Thomas had made a journey to India from the courthouse and on the way visited Greece and Egypt. This journey cannot be corroborated but in later life Thomas spoke of travels to all of these countries. Drawings of the Hazarduari Palace were sold in 1979 at Christie's auction house, London.

In May 1842 there was a great fire in Hamburg. It destroyed the church of St Nicholas and in 1844 there was a prolonged architectural competition to rebuild the church. Ultimately this was won by the English Gothic revival architect George Gilbert Scott (1811–1878). It is said that Thomas was one of the 39 architects to enter this competition, spurred on no doubt by the success of his Gothic church at Cheetham Hill. He is likely to have been in Hamburg in the spring of 1846 as his son John William, aged 22, died there and was buried at the English Episcopal church on 6th April. His obituary in the *Manchester Times and Gazette* of 10th April describes him as being a marine artist.

What is certain is that Thomas was in St Petersburg, Russia, by October 1846. In a letter of 30th October to Viscount Palmerston, the Secretary of the Legation in St Petersburg, Andrew Buchanan writes: "Mr Atkinson, an English artist, has been recommended to the protection of her Majesty's Legation by the Earl of Westmorland."

How and why had Thomas arrived in St Petersburg describing himself as an artist? John Fane, 11th Earl of Westmorland was Minister in Berlin between 1841–51. His wife Priscilla was an artist and niece of the Duke of Wellington. If it was the Earl who had recommended him to the Legation in St Petersburg, Thomas must have been in Berlin at some point. The *Oxford Dictionary of National*



St Clements Church,
Chorlton-cum-Hardy, 2014
© Hugh Polehampton

Biography records that Thomas went to St Petersburg having been inspired by the tales of Alexander Von Humboldt's Siberian travels. Von Humboldt, born in Berlin in 1769, was the most famous traveller scientist of his day and had journeyed through Russia and Siberia in 1829. He was a friend of the Westmorlands and so it is possible that Thomas met him and decided to take up where he had left off. Von Humboldt was just the sort of man Thomas would look up to – a self-taught renaissance man, a household name in his lifetime and a talented artist.

The letter goes on to say about Thomas:

....to a professional tour which he proposes making to Siberia and the Altai and I am happy to say that, in consequence of His Imperial Highness's orders, every facility has been afforded to Mr Atkinson by the Imperial Authorities for the completion of his purpose.

Indeed Thomas had already cleared his path with Tsar Nicholas I and had been issued with a personal passport from the Tsar. He credits this to Andrew Buchanan in his subsequent work about his travels. How had he, or others, persuaded Andrew Buchanan to help him?

The letter offers a possible clue:

They will visit Kiachta and intend to penetrate as far as possible into China. I have therefore called Mr Atkinson's attention to several points of political and commercial interest on which Her Majesty's Government might be glad to receive information and he has promised to bear them in mind and report upon them to Her Majesty's Legation on his return to St Petersburg.

This raises the possibility of Thomas being a spy. It was not unusual at this time to use expeditions as a cover for espionage activities. In the mid-19th century Russia was seen as a threat to Britain's imperial ambitions particularly in the area bordering India. Britain and Russia were strategic rivals in a power struggle between their empires, known as The Great Game. A traveller moving amongst the tribes as an artist whilst also chronicling any commercial and political activities and who could report back on anything to Britain's advantage may have been seen as a valuable opportunity.

So begins the next chapter of Thomas's life – the artist explorer. Over the next seven years he was to travel, by his own account, about 15,000 miles in carriages, 3,000 miles in boats and 11,000 miles on horseback across territories no European had previously set foot on. He travelled into China and through parts of the Gobi desert. He made journals recording natural resources and weather conditions, made 560 drawings and watercolours, endured hardships and real danger. His large drawings and watercolours, sometimes five feet across, show forbidding landscapes never seen before by Europeans. He praises Winsor & Newton for the quality of their "moist colours" which withstood the extremes of temperatures he travelled through.

His books about his travels, *Oriental and Western Siberia A Narrative of Seven Years Exploration and Adventures in Siberia, Mongolia, The Kirghis Steppes, Chinese Tartary and part of Central Asia*, published in 1858 and dedicated to Alexander II, and *Travels in the region of the Upper and Lower Amoor*, published in 1860 and dedicated to Queen Victoria, do, however, leave out important information about his personal life.

He had returned from his travels in late 1847 and had married on 18th February in Moscow an English governess, Lucy Sherrard Finley, describing himself in the certificate as a widower. Lucy was born in 1817 in Sunderland and was the daughter of a schoolteacher and likely former mariner. She, by her own account, was from a large family and needed to make her own way. Perhaps due to maritime connections Lucy had gone to Russia in about 1838 to be a governess which was not such an unusual event for educated European women at the time. She was a governess in St. Petersburg to the family of General Michail Nicolaevitch Mouraviev Vilensky, who had one daughter,

Sophia. Given his ability to make social connections Thomas and Lucy's paths must have crossed.

Immediately after their marriage Lucy and Thomas set out on their travels, which lasted for the next six years. She gave birth to a son, Alatau Tamchiboulac, on the Kirghiz Steppes, Siberia in November 1848. Her experiences are chronicled in her book, *Recollections of Tartar Steppes and their Inhabitants*, published after Thomas's death. She records the birth of Alatau:

Here I have a little family history to relate. You must understand that I was in expectation of a little stranger, whom I thought might arrive about the end of December or the beginning of January; expecting to return to civilisation, I had not thought of preparing anything for him, when, lo! and behold, on the 4th November, at twenty minutes past four p.m., he made his appearance. The young doctor here said he would not live more than seven days, but, thank Heaven, he is still alive and well. He is small, but very much improved since his birth. I shall let him get a little bigger before I describe him. He is to be called Alatau, as he was born at the foot of this mountain range; and his second name Tamchiboulac, this being a dropping-spring, close to which he was called into existence. The doctor says the premature birth was caused by excessive exercise on horseback.

Nowhere in either of his books does Thomas mention Lucy or Alatau.

According to Lucy's book, published in 1863, they returned from their travels in late December 1853. By 16th January 1854 Thomas had presented himself to the Legation offering the British Government any information he obtained on his travels and requesting to stay longer in Russia. His son Alatau was baptised in St Petersburg in February 1854. It cannot have escaped Thomas's notice that relations between Russia and Britain were becoming very tense and in March 1854 war was declared. There is no evidence to suggest that Thomas and his family returned to England at the outbreak of the Crimean War. It now seems that they may have stayed, under the protection of Nicholas I and Alexander II in Russia. Thomas by this time had also cultivated many influential Russian friends. In 1856 Julian Fane, son of the Earl of Westmorland became Secretary to the Legation in St Petersburg and this may have been helpful to Thomas's desire to remain in Russia.

In England Thomas's name is mentioned in the press in October 1856. Colnaghi's Gallery, Pall Mall, held an exhibition of his watercolour drawings called *Siberian and Chinese Tartars Scenes*. There is no mention of Thomas's presence.

In November 1857, his first book was published, *Oriental and Western Siberia*, and presumably to capitalise on that he attended the Royal Geographical Society meeting with Livingstone in January 1858, the date when he and his family may have returned to England. The *Illustrated London News* of May 1857 carried

a pre-publication article and drawing from the book concerning an extinct volcano crater.

The President of the Royal Geographical Society in 1858 was Sir Roderick Impey Murchison (1792–1871) who had helped to found the Society. Murchison was a formidable, ambitious and well connected man. He was a geologist who had travelled in Russia in the early 1840s, and was in St Petersburg in 1845 to present a book to the Tsar. He was very interested in the potential future economic development of the country. He was a fixer, imperialist and a powerful man under whose patronage someone like Thomas could and did flourish. Murchison may have known John Spencer Stanhope as they were both Fellows of the Royal Society.

On June 9th 1858 a sale of Thomas's work was held at Christie's in London. Sixty-three of his topographical works from his travels were at auction. Perhaps this sale had the dual purpose of raising funds and cashing in on the publication of his book. September found Thomas in Leeds giving an illustrated talk to the British Association on the volcanoes of Central Asia. The chair of the meeting was Sir Roderick Murchison. Thomas read another paper to the Royal Geographical Society in February 1859 which he illustrated with two of his paintings. He was elected a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society in 1858 and a Fellow of the Royal Geological Society and the Alpine Club in 1859.

Life for Thomas was on the up. Finally he had the recognition and approbation he desired. He published his second book in 1860, *Travels in the Upper and Lower Amoor*, and in January 1860 he presented a paper to the Royal Geological Society about bronze relics found in sand. He is said to have returned to Cawthorne as a guest of the Spencer Stanhopes and to have dined with the sixth Earl Fitzwilliam at Wentworth Woodhouse and Sir Joseph Copley at Sprotborough. He was a guest at a meeting of the West Yorkshire Geological Society in Barnsley. This must have been a heady time for Thomas.

However, just as he was approaching the zenith of his career, his health failed. Lucy recounts in a letter of 6th May 1861 that Thomas had been thrown from an omnibus and had been attended by their doctor from St Petersburg. He also consulted a Dr Budd, thought to be George Budd of the celebrated family of doctors. She writes that her literary efforts have been stopped due to her attendance on her husband. Most surprisingly she records that Thomas has received another splendid ring from the Emperor of Russia – a large emerald set in diamonds.

Thomas and his family were living at Hawk Cottage, Brompton, London which had been advertised to rent in December 1857 and in search of sea air went to Holly Cottage, Lower Walmer, Kent. Thomas, however, fell into decline. He died on 13th August 1861 and is buried in the church yard at St Mary's church, Walmer.

Thomas's death was as mysterious as his life. It is recorded on his death certificate that Thomas was an author and traveller and that Thomas Longridge Gooch was present at his death. Thomas Gooch was a railway engineer ranking second to George Stephenson and a work colleague of another engineer, Joseph



Image of Thomas taken from *The Yorkshire Post*, March 1999

Locke. Why Thomas chose to go to Walmer and what Gooch was doing in Walmer is not known.

Something stranger was to follow. Lucy applied to the Government for a pension which Thomas was owed. She was told that she was not his wife. The estate had been claimed by Rebecca who Thomas had married in 1819. The shock to Lucy of being bigamously married must have been tremendous and she now found herself a wronged woman with no visible means of support.

In a letter to Lord Ashburton of 26th May 1862 Lucy refers to an ownership dispute of some paintings by Thomas, at Bath House (an Ashburton London home) and says that Thomas's son-in-law has claimed there is another wife and it is up to him to prove that she is still living and she believes he will not be able to do that. However, Rebecca had already been granted letters of administration to Thomas's estate in October 1861. The estate was valued at less than £300 (later re-sworn as under £20).

The son-in-law was James Wheeler who had married Thomas's daughter Martha. This scenario raises some intriguing questions. Did Thomas think he would be exposed as a bigamist? Did he believe enough time had passed for his family to think he was dead? Did he think that given the passage of time Rebecca could be dead? How had Rebecca supported herself in his absence? How could Martha and James have remained ignorant of Thomas's return when he was so high-profile in the newspapers? Did Thomas omit any mention of Lucy and Alatau in his work so as not to reveal a second wife but if so, why did Lucy not comment on the omission? Lucy recounts that Wheeler had written to all the senior people at the Royal Geographical Society, so he, Rebecca and Martha were not keeping a low profile and clearly felt Rebecca the wronged woman.

James Wheeler had prospered. He was an eminent railway solicitor much in demand. In particular he was the solicitor to the Trent Valley railway of which Thomas Gooch was the chief engineer. Was it really coincidence that Gooch was with Thomas when he died? If he was a friend of the Wheelers, how could he explain to them Lucy's presence?

In June 1862 Christie's held another sale containing "the remaining portion of the works" by Thomas. This sale contained personal works and topographical works. It is not known who benefited from the proceeds of this sale.

Sir Roderick Murchison, amongst others, came to Lucy's aid after Thomas's death. He organised a subscription at the Royal Geographical Society for the education of Alatau at Rugby School.

In 1930 a nephew of Sir Roderick gave some of Thomas's works to the Royal Geographical Society where they remain today. The Society also holds Thomas's travel diaries. A further watercolour work, 'The Black Irkout', dated 1852 is held by the Victoria and Albert Museum London. They acquired the work in 1954. The Harris Museum in Preston has a work said to be by Thomas titled 'Nave of York Cathedral'. The City of Athens Museum holds a painting by Thomas and there must be many more works by Thomas both in the U.K. and abroad in private collections and waiting to be discovered.



What became of Lucy and Alatau? Lucy lived until 1893 and is buried in Tower Hamlets cemetery, London, with her father. She published a well-received book of her travels with Thomas, *Recollections of Tartar Steppes and their Inhabitants* in 1863 which she had alluded to in her correspondence with Spencer Stanhope, and received a civil list pension in her own right in 1870.

Alatau became a prominent citizen of Hawaii. He was a newspaper editor, conducted a census, was Inspector of Schools and campaigned for the annexation of Hawaii to the USA. If one perhaps needs to have a description of him, think of the character Uliassutai Karkoram Blake in James Michener's book *Hawaii* published in 1959. Although a novel, one person is said to have been drawn from his research about the island – the school teacher. Being named after a river and a mountain range, bearing a strong physical resemblance and having adventurous parents are just some similarities to Alatau. Alatau died in Hawaii in 1906.

Rebecca died in London in 1872. Her death certificate states that she is the widow of Thomas Witlam Atkinson, architect. Martha Wheeler, their daughter died in 1899 and is buried about one hour away from Walmer.

In the opening paragraphs of *The Moon and Sixpence* by W. Somerset Maugham, based on the life of the artist Paul Gauguin, the narrator says that he believes the most interesting thing in art is the personality of the artist and if that is singular he can excuse a thousand faults. Lucy was devoted to Thomas and makes no criticism of him in life or death. His travels were a fantastic achievement and show a bravery and strength of character at odds with perhaps some personal

'Hawk Cottage', Brompton by William Cowen (1791–1864, born Rotherham)
Courtesy of Local Studies, Kensington
Central Library



Headstone of Lucy Atkinson
Courtesy of Tower Hamlets cemetery

frailties. Thomas's achievements, which put him on the edge of greatness and which should now be re-examined, definitely outweigh the frailties.

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