

Barnsley's brave explorer stays largely unknown

BY GAIL ROBINSON

BARNSLEY produced one of the country's greatest explorers who was also an artist – and yet a man whose name today is barely known.

Tomorrow the real story of Thomas Witlam Atkinson, 19th century architect, artist and traveller in Siberia will be revealed in an illustrated talk at the Cooper Gallery.

Born in 1799 in Cawthorne, Thomas, a self-taught stonemason-turned-architect, arrived in St Petersburg in the mid 1840s.

Having procured an unprecedented blank passport from 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.

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 given to the Tsar – who presented Thomas with a jewelled ring.

On his eventual return to England, 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.

Nick Fielding, journalist and writer will present the talk tomorrow at 11am. At the same time an exhibition of Atkinson's work will open in the Cooper.

Nick said: "Thomas may not be well known today, but his achievements remain. Gradually people are rediscovering this remarkable man."