



RETURN TO THE GREAT STEPPE

The Atkinson family's return in July 2016 to Kazakhstan to visit the birthplace of their ancestor.

Alatau Tamchiboulac Atkinson, the son of British explorers Thomas and Lucy Atkinson, was born on 4th November 1848 in the tiny settlement of Kapal in the Zhetysu region of what is now Eastern Kazakhstan. 168 years later ten of his British, American and New Zealander descendants returned to Kapal to visit the places after which he had been named. This is the story of that remarkable visit.

By Nick Fielding

The Background

In the summer of 2014, together with my wife Ros, I made my first journey to Eastern Kazakhstan. Before starting out on that journey, I had met Mr Nurlan Abduov, the director of the Kazakh Geographic Society (KazGeo) in London to ask for his support. It was my intention at that point, as part of the research for a book I was writing, to locate the town of Kapal, where Thomas and Lucy Atkinson had spent the winter and spring of 1848-9, to visit the Tamchiboulac Spring and also to explore the Djungar Alatau Mountains. In the late 1840s Kapal was possibly the most remote place in the expanding Russian Empire. Cossack troops were in the process of establishing a chain of forts and bastions along the border with the Chinese Empire, partly in order to claim these great steppe lands and partly to control and break the power of the nomadic Kazakhs who inhabited these lands. It was also the place where in November 1848 Lucy gave birth to her son, Alatau Tamchiboulac Atkinson.

I was fortunate enough to secure Mr Abduov's support for my journey, as well as assistance with flight costs from the British-Kazakh Society in London. Once we arrived in Kazakhstan, using KazGeo guides, vehicles and translators we were able to visit Kapal and the Tamchiboulac Spring, as well as to make some initial forays into the Djungar Alatau Mountains. We spent several days in the Kora Valley, as well as following the valley of the Ac-Sou River up into the mountains until we were stopped by the difficult terrain. All these places were associated with Thomas Atkinson, who describes them in detail in his books *Oriental and Western Siberia (1858)* and *Travels in the Regions of the Upper and Lower Amoor (1861)*.

From that first trip I was able to bring back to England bottles of water from the Tamchiboulac Spring and later that year H.E. Erzhan Kazykhanov, the Ambassador of Kazakhstan in London, presented the bottles to members of the Atkinson family, with whom I had become acquainted in the course of my research into a book about the Atkinsons. At around this point it first occurred to me to organise a trip to take the descendants of Thomas and Lucy's son Alatau, back to his birthplace – an idea I decided to store away for a future date.

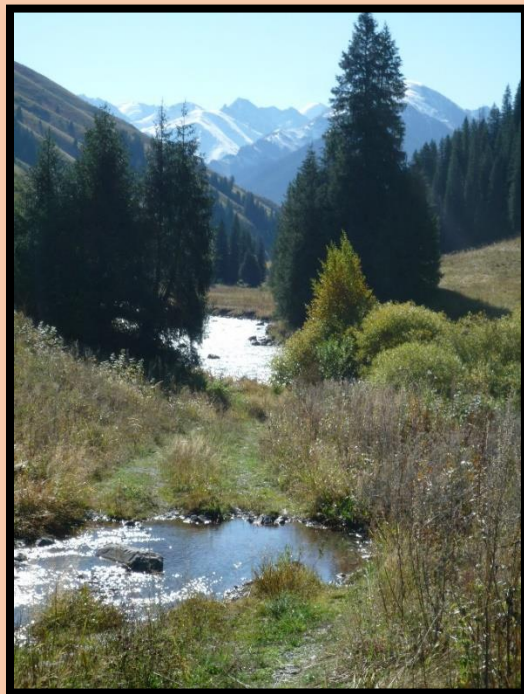
The following year was a busy one for me. In May 2015 Ros and I travelled to Hawaii to meet the Dahlquist family, also descended from Alatau Atkinson, who had eventually settled there, following his return from Russia to England. Paul and Charlene Dahlquist hold a remarkable archive of documents connected to Thomas Atkinson which they kindly allowed me to study as part of the research for my book.

In September 2015 I was invited to visit Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan, to take part in a gathering of experts called together to celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Kazakh Khanate. I decided to extend that trip and flew on to Oskemen (Ust-Kamenogorsk) in north-east Kazakhstan where I met up with Vlodimir Gostyevsky, the translator I had used the previous year. We hired a car and driver and headed south on the 1,000-km journey towards Almaty, visiting *en route* all the places we could find that were associated with the Atkinsons. Our journey took in Lake Zaisan and Lakes Sassykol and Alakol before we eventually reached the Zhetysu (Seven Rivers) region and the Djungar Alatau Mountains.

Here too the aim was to visit as many places as possible associated with the Atkinsons. We visited the valleys of the Lepsu, Bascan and Sarcand Rivers and in the Djungar Alatau National Park were able to ride on horseback to the Zhassylkol (Green Lake), so clearly described by both Thomas and Lucy. From

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there we followed the old Cossack road along the base of the mountains, crossing over the Hasford Pass from Zhansugarov to Arasan and then onwards to Kapal.



Valley of the Little Bascan River



Lake Zhassylkol in the Djungar Alatau National Park

This second visit to Kapal allowed me to learn more about the background to the town and gave me useful material for my book, which was now progressing rapidly. On my return to England I finished writing the book, *South to the Great Steppe: the travels of Thomas and Lucy Atkinson in Eastern Kazakhstan 1847-52*, which was published in November 2015, with support from Samruk-Kazyna, a Kazakh charitable foundation. The launch took place at the Royal Geographical Society in London where the introductory speech was given by Mr Kazykhanov. Three other ambassadors attended the event. Also present were many of the descendants of Thomas and Lucy Atkinson. It was following this meeting that I decided to try to arrange a special visit to Kazakhstan for the descendants.

Once again, I found that the assistance of Mr Kazykhanov was indispensable. With his support – and the excellent organisational skills of First Secretary, Mr Askar Zhiymbayev - the process of organising a visit could begin. KazGeo agreed to host the visitors in the south of the country, together with support from the office of Almaty Regional Governor Amandyk Batalov. In Astana, we received support from the Mayor, Asset Issekeshov and especially from Mrs Umutkhan Daurenbekovna Munalbayeva, general director of the National Academic Library. Flights for the whole delegation were provided by Air Astana. Bit by bit the trip came together. It was agreed to provide 10 places for Atkinson relatives, which they decided upon between themselves. Of course, more would have come if it had been possible, but they will have to wait for another occasion.

Finally, it was agreed that the journey would take place between 23 July and 2 August 2016. Five descendants from England, three from Hawaii and one each from Florida and New Zealand decided to join the group, along with myself and photographer David O'Neill. This is the story of what happened.

Our arrival in Astana – 24th July

From the moment we arrived at Astana airport, it was clear that this was going to be a special trip. We were greeted with songs, dances and special sweets and bread, organised by Mrs Umutkan Munalbayeva, general director of the National Academic Library.



Our arrival in Astana where we were met by Mrs Munalbayeva

Our first day was spent sight-seeing. The group was taken to visit the Museum of the First President of the Republic of Kazakhstan and also the National Museum. Several members of the group were also taken to a meeting with Kazakh Prime Minister Mr Karim Massimov. He told them how delighted he was that the Atkinson family delegation had arrived in Astana and wished them well for the rest of their journey. As the meeting got underway, one of the relatives, Paul Dahlquist, gave a traditional Hawaiian greeting which was highly appreciated by the gathering.



Pippa Smith, Belinda Brown, Nick Fielding and Paul Dahlquist meet the prime minister, Mr Massimov

Our second day started with a meeting with the mayor of Astana, Mr Asset Assekeshev, who told the delegation that he would be interested in discussing the possibility of opening a special museum

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dedicated to the Atkinsons. Two members of the Atkinson family delegation dressed in character as Thomas and Lucy Atkinson for the meeting, wearing costumes they had obtained at the National Theatre in London.



Pippa Smith and Steve Brown dressed as Thomas and Lucy Atkinson for the meeting with Astana's mayor, Mr Issekeshev

The meeting with the mayor was followed by the launch of *South to the Great Steppe* at the National Academic Library in front of an audience of around 150 people. The whole building was festooned with giant blow-ups of the book's front cover and illustrations drawn by Thomas Atkinson. Press interest was overwhelming, with dozens of journalists covering the event.

Following a slide-show presentation of the book, numerous Kazakh academics and experts – including Director for the Institute of State History of the Ministry of Education of Kazakhstan Mr Burkit Ayagan and renowned writer Sharbanu Beisenova, as well as Mr. Darkhan Mynbay, Mr Sherubay Kurmanbayuly, Mr Zhambyl Artykbayev - spoke to express their support for the book and its importance for providing new information about the early modern history of the Kazakh people. Leading ideologue Professor Myrzatay Zholdasbekov said it was important that the book was translated into Kazakh and Russian so that young people could learn about this important period in history.

Many gifts were exchanged, including a plaque from the Minister of Culture that was given to Paul Dahlquist on behalf of all the descendants and a similar plaque presented to Nick Fielding thanking him for his part in strengthening cultural and historical ties between Britain and Kazakhstan. Mrs Munalbayeva received a copy of a portrait of Thomas Atkinson, drawn by delegation member Peter Brown. Overall this was a hugely successful event that showed the extent of Kazakh interest in the story of the Atkinsons.

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Nick Fielding at the press conference and a group photo with the staff of the National Academic Library in Astana



Paul Dahlquist is presented with a plaque from the Culture Ministry and Mrs Munalbayeva receives a portrait from Steve Brown

Later, there was a visit to the site of Expo 2017 – a huge sustainable energy project that aims to put Astana firmly on the world map. Afterwards, the American descendants were hosted by their embassy in the city. Sadly, a similar event with the British Ambassador had to be cancelled when our schedule slipped.

Overall, our reception in Kazakhstan's capital was wonderful. Interest in the story of the Atkinsons was widespread and genuine. It is clear that this is due in substantial part to the attitude of Thomas and Lucy themselves. Unlike many nineteenth century travellers, the Atkinsons did not look down upon the people they came across as they journeyed across the steppes. You will search in vain for examples of condescension or cultural superiority in their writings. They took people as they found them. On the Great Steppe, despite this being a time of change and tumult, they were looked after and protected from the dangers that surrounded them.

Thomas' portraits show that he felt great warmth towards his subjects and regarded the people of the steppe with admiration for the way they lived despite the very harsh conditions. On only one occasion was Thomas threatened with violence in the Djungar Alatau. The protagonist had believed him to be a Russian military officer and when he found out that this was not the case, he calmed down. Otherwise, the couple and their baby son were treated with kindness and great hospitality everywhere they travelled. In the course of almost 170 years little has changed.



Thomas Atkinson's painting of Sultan Beck and his family

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Arrival in Almaty

On Tuesday 26th we flew, courtesy of Air Astana, to the south-east corner of the country, to the former capital, close to the border with Kyrgyzstan and only separated from China by the imposing Tian Shan Mountains and their smaller cousins, the Alatau Mountains. Outside the airport we were greeted with vans decked out in special livery and by the KazGeo representatives all wearing special T-shirts marked with the slogan '*Alatau Tamchiboulac: From Great Britain to the Great Steppe*'.



We were taken by cable car to the mountain resort of Shymbulak, at an altitude of 2,300m, where in the glorious sun we enjoyed a wonderful lunch. It was the first time the descendants had had a chance to relax after a hectic schedule during the previous three days.



Time for relaxing at Shymbulak

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From Shymbulak it was on to the British Council in Almaty where Nick Fielding gave a slide presentation based on his book to a packed room. Most of those attending had responded to a social media campaign informing them about the talk.



Meeting at the British Council in Almaty and later at the Beatles statue at Kok Tobe

For dinner we were taken to Kok Tobe in the mountains above Almaty. After the obligatory pictures at the statue of the Beatles – who are revered in Kazakhstan – we sat down for dinner. Out of nowhere a storm arose, forcing us to seek shelter indoors. As lightning bolts lit the sky and thunder shook the ground, we ‘kept calm and carried on’, as our hosts, KazGeo, presented robes of honour to the men and beautiful silk scarves to the women.



Sheltering from the storm: robes for the men and silk scarves for the women

The next day, Wednesday 27th July, started with a visit to the Kasteyev State Museum of Arts, where we were shown the impressive collections of traditional embroideries and jewellery, as well as paintings and sculptures by Kazakh artists. Later, we visited a vineyard outside the city and then ate a wonderful meal in the open air, alongside a mountain torrent.

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Dinner in the countryside outside Almaty

There followed a long journey by road to Taldykorgan, a large city close to Kapal, the little town where the following day we were due to commemorate the birth of Alatau Tamchiboulac Atkinson in 1848.

Celebrations in Kapal – Thursday 28th July

Before leaving Taldykorgan for Kapal, the descendants met with Mr Amandyk Batalov, the governor of Almaty region. Mr Batalov was well informed about the story of the Atkinsons and spoke of his honour in receiving their descendants as guests. He told the family members that Kazakhstan's president, Nursultan Nazarbayev, had taken a personal interest in the story and asked rhetorically if it could be the case that the Atkinson family members were in fact Kazakh citizens, as their ancestor had been born in the country. He then presented a beautiful *dombra* – Kazakhstan's national instrument - to the party, as well as books extolling the landscape of the region, in particular the Djungar Alatau National Park, with its untainted rivers, forests of apple trees and rich flora and fauna, including snow leopards, lynx and bears. Camera traps recently captured images of five snow leopards in the mountains only a few miles from Almaty.



Almaty Governor Mr Batalov presents a dombra to Paul Dahlquist

The meeting with the governor was followed by a press conference at which all the national networks were present.



Press conference in Taldykorgan

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Then it was time to make the 75km journey to Kapal. On the way the party stopped at the statue of Batyr Kapal, the founder of the town, for a photograph. Once again Steve Brown and Pippa Smith were in costume, this time with the added surprise of a 'babe in arms'.



The party at the memorial to Batyr Kapal, the 17th century warrior who founded the town where Alatau was born

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Nothing could have prepared the group for the sight which met their eyes as they drove into Kapal, now a mainly agricultural village, tucked beneath the Djungar Alatau Mountains. A large crowd had assembled in front of the covered memorial, which was flanked by a display illustrating the lives of Thomas and Lucy Atkinson. A group of dombra players stood on one side of the memorial, as the master of ceremonies and two assistants, all splendidly dressed in national costume, stood on the other side.



The welcoming party in Kapal

Women in traditional costume handed out a special bread and threw sweets into the crowd. Speeches were made and Paul Dahlquist was asked to cut the ribbon on the imposing monument commemorating the birth of Alatau Tamchiboulac Atkinson. Over two metres high and carved in solid granite, the monument's inscription in Kazakh, Russian and English says: *“Alatau Tamchiboulac Atkinson, the son of Thomas and Lucy Atkinson, who were the first British explorers to come to Kazakhstan in the 19th century, was born here on 4th November 1848.”*



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Celebrating the new monument to the birth of Alatau Tamchiboulac Atkinson

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From the newly installed memorial, it was only a short walk to the Tamchiboulac Spring, after which Alatau was named. For the next hour or so dozens of people crammed into the space around the spring, where the water falls directly from the rocks in front of you, tasting the water and bottling it to take away. Lucy says in her book that she bathed Alatau daily in the water from this spring, which even in the harshest winter – such as that in 1848 – never freezes.



At the Tamchiboulac Spring

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Once they had visited the spring, the descendants were in for a shock. They had no idea what was still in store for them. Close by, the inhabitants of Kapal had prepared a wonderful *shildekhana* pageant detailing the story of the birth of Alatau. Performed by actors, singers and dancers, it was fully choreographed and even included a splendid example of horsemanship.



The pageant, known in Kazakh as a shildekhana, in Kapal



Singers and dancers tell the story of the birth of Alatau

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After the singing and dancing, we were invited to take part in a special feast, given in celebration of the birth of a child. Dish followed dish, including Kazakh favourites such as *besbarmak*, *manti*, *chorba*, *laghman* and, of course, *koumis* – the slightly alcoholic drink made from fermented horse milk. Special congratulations are due to descendant Kristine Dahlquist, who as a vegan was able to survive remarkably well in Kazakhstan, despite the preponderance of meat-based dishes.

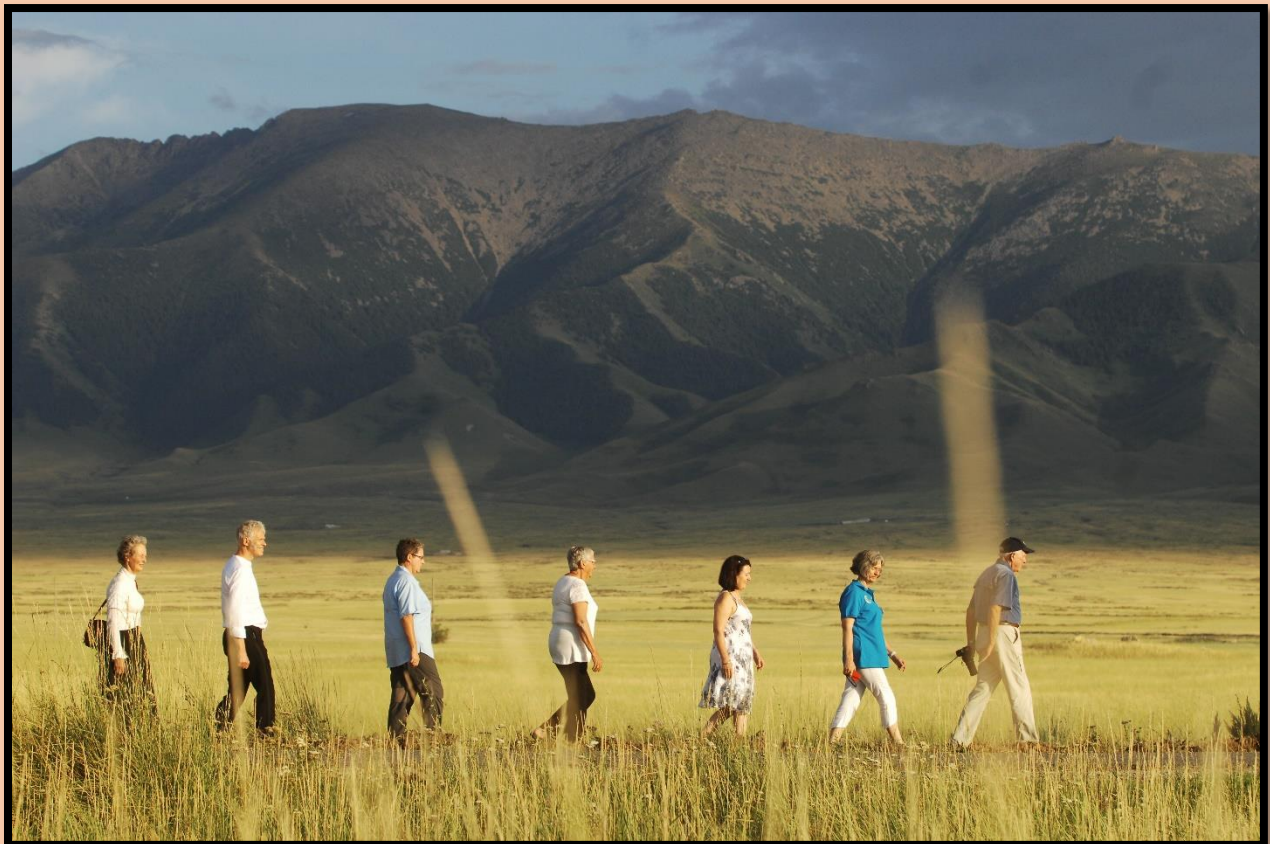


A fine feast had been prepared for the descendants, accompanied by singers and musicians.

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Soon after, we said our goodbyes and left Kapal, our heads full of the images of vibrant song and dance and with a sense of the wonderful reception that had been given to us strangers from lands many thousands of miles away. These are memories that will always be treasured.

As evening drew in, we headed north-east towards Sarcand, travelling along the same road used by Thomas and Lucy Atkinson as they left in the spring of 1849. We passed through Arasan where the residents of Kapal had held a party for the Atkinsons and where Thomas had bathed in the hot springs for which it is famous. And we were able to take in some of the glorious views towards the Djungar Alatau Mountains. Everywhere we looked we could see the mounds of *kurgans* – ancient burial chambers built more than 2,500 years ago that testify to the long period of occupancy of this remote region.



Soon we were crossing the Hasford Pass on an unmetalled road, heading toward Zhansugarov and then on to Sarcand, where we arrived at our hotel late in the evening. We were now in the heart of the Zhetysu (or Semirechye) region, the home of the seven rivers. Thomas and Lucy, along with the baby Alatau, had systematically explored each of these river valleys during the summer of 1849 and we were here to see something of the sights that greeted them - almost unchanged today, despite the passage of time.

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In the Zhetysu – 29th July

Sarcand is home to the headquarters of the Djungar Alatau National Park, a remarkable wilderness covering tens of thousands of hectares and stretching up from the steppe to snow-capped peaks of around 4,500m. Large parts of the lower slopes of the mountains are covered in dense apple forest, home of the famous Sievers apple, which is thought to be the ancestor of all eating apples. We drove out to the Terekte River – painted by Thomas Atkinson - where some of us mounted horses, whilst others took to jeeps to ride deep into the apple forest to visit a lodge. It was a spectacular ride, at first though open ground and then in the dense forest.



On our return we visited an exhibition of local handicrafts before once more heading north-east to Lake Alakol, the most northern part of our journey, where we arrived late in the evening of Friday 29th July.

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At Lake Alakol – 30th July

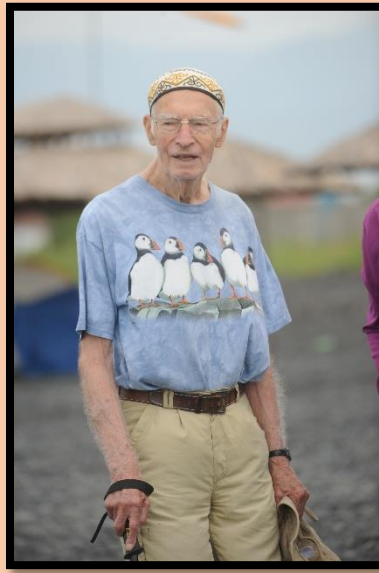
As we had arrived in our small hotel on the shores of Lake Alakol, it was clear that the weather was going to be a problem. The clouds had darkened and it was beginning to rain. By the following morning, the bad weather had set in and we decided to adjust our plans. We had originally intended to spend time on the black beaches of the slightly salty lake, but that was now unthinkable. Instead, we went to the shoreline to take in its sheer size - 1,020 sqms. It is impossible to see across the lake, which is home to flamingos, the rare relict gull and about 40 other species of bird.

By the time Thomas and Lucy reached the lake in the late summer of 1849 they had traversed much of the Zhetysu region, watching and travelling with the nomads as they took their herds from their winter pastures alongside Lake Balkash high up into the pastures of the Djungar Alatau. From now on they would be facing the flat steppelands as they made their way north to the Altai Mountains and Barnaul, the town where they would spend the following winter. Reaching Alakol somehow puts their visit to Kapal and the Djungar Alatau Mountains into perspective. Looking back towards the mountains they could see the places that had been their home for the best part of 18 months. In front of them lay the open spaces and flatness of the Great Steppe. Neither of them would ever be able to forget their experiences in the Zhetysu.



On the shores of Lake Alakol looking back towards the Djungar Alatau Mountains

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L to r: Molly Fay, Belinda Brown, Peter Brown, Pippa Smith, Gillian Brown



Steve Brown takes the plunge into Lake Alakol

We stayed in Kazakhstan for another two days, but to all intents and purposes this was the end of our journey. The days had been filled with wonderful sights and fascinating meetings that it will doubtless take some time to digest. Thank you Kazakhstan for making this such a memorable and moving experience!

Members of the delegation of Atkinson descendants

Belinda Brown:

Belinda, now in her eighties, is Thomas and Lucy Atkinson's gg granddaughter and mother of Steve Brown (see below). While her father, an army officer, was posted abroad she lived with her grandmother, who was Alatau Atkinson's daughter. For five years in WW2 she was evacuated to live with her other grandparents in Canada. On her return she studied Natural Sciences at Cambridge, and then worked for five years on antibiotics at Glaxo Laboratories. She lives in Birmingham with her husband Peter and has four grown-up children, all married and working as doctors or scientists.

Peter Brown:

Peter is Belinda's husband. At the age of 17 he was the first in the family to opt for science, and then go to Cambridge University where he obtained a degree in chemistry. From there he worked for five years in industry and two-and-a-half years in the Royal Navy. He spent his working life teaching biochemistry to university students in Birmingham. He enjoys the outdoor life and together with Belinda has travelled widely - but never before to Asia. He is very proud of his nine grandchildren, all of whom are studying various (mostly science) subjects and sports.

Dr Archibald 'Steve' Brown (MB BS DM MRCPsychiatry):

Steve, 58, is a ggg grandson of Thomas and Lucy Atkinson. His mother and father, Belinda and Peter Brown, and his wife Gill are also on this trip. He grew up in Birmingham and studied medicine at Nottingham University. He is a specialist in psychiatry and has worked in the UK, Australia and Africa. His research about the physical health of people with serious mental illness is acknowledged internationally. He now works as a consultant psychiatrist in Southampton and is an Honorary Senior Lecturer at the University of Southampton. Steve enjoys cooking, surfing and music - he plays saxophones in a local blues band. He has three adult children - David, Helen and Catherine.

Gill Brown

Gill is Steve Brown's wife. She has worked as a children's nurse for many years and now specialises in child protection. Outside work Gill likes to spend time with her family and friends, walking in the countryside and going to the cinema and theatre. She also enjoys singing in a local choir and also with a friend as part of a harmony duo.

Paul Dahlquist:

Is the great-great grandson of Thomas and Lucy Atkinson. He was born in Honolulu, Hawaii in 1940 and was educated at Punahou School, at Yale University and the Ohio State University. He is a cultural anthropologist and taught at Ohio Wesleyan University for 20 years. He did his field research in Pohnpei, Micronesia and Tokyo, Japan. On returning to Hawaii he became curator and executive director at the Lyman Museum in Hilo, Hawaii.

Charlene Dahlquist:

Charlene is the wife of Paul Dahlquist. She was born in Clarington, Ohio in 1938 and educated at Laings School and the Ohio State University. She taught social studies at West Jefferson High School. She also taught English as a Second Language at Ohio Wesleyan University. Later, having moved to Hawaii, she became librarian and archivist at the Lyman Museum in Hilo. She archived the papers of the Dahlquist Atkinson collection.

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Kristine Kinau Dahlquist:

Kristine is the daughter of Paul and Charlene Dahlquist and ggg granddaughter of Thomas and Lucy Atkinson. She was born in Marysville, Ohio in 1967 and was educated at Westtown School, Oberlin College, Ohio Wesleyan University and the Ohio State University. She is a teacher of mathematics at Hawaii Preparatory Academy – which currently has three students from Kazakhstan.

Molly Kinau Fay:

Molly is the gg granddaughter of Thomas and Lucy Atkinson and sister of Paul Dahlquist. She was born in London, England in 1936. She was educated at Punahou School in Honolulu, Hawaii, at Annie Wright Seminary and at Skidmore College. She is the widow of John Fay, mother of four and grandmother of 14.

Pippa Smith:

Pippa Smith is a ggg granddaughter of Thomas and Lucy Atkinson and is sister to Rose Whitehead. The family emigrated to New Zealand but she returned to UK where she qualified as a bi-lingual secretary (French the second language) and later a teacher. She is married to Denis with two sons and one daughter, and one grandson. Her particular interest since the mid-1990s has been in protecting children from harmful media imagery and messages. Most recently she has been involved in online safety and the successful adoption by the UK's four major internet service providers of network level filters.

Rose Whitehead:

Rose Whitehead, sister of Pippa Smith, was born in England, but has lived in New Zealand for the past 50 years. She is a ggg granddaughter of Thomas and Lucy Atkinson through their son Alatau and his daughter Edith Kapiolani. Rose has three daughters and lives with them and her partner Mark in the middle of the North Island of New Zealand beside Lake Taupo. She works as a sonographer for a private radiology company. She likes to keep active and she belongs to the local harriers club and also works out at the gym.

Plus:



David O'Neill, photographer, who took almost all the pictures in this report.

Comments from the Atkinson descendants on their experiences in Kazakhstan:

Belinda Brown:

"My overwhelming feeling was admiration for my gt-gt-grandmother Lucy Atkinson. She was newly married when she accompanied her husband to these then virtually unknown regions. They were the first Europeans to have travelled in so many places, particularly in Central Asia. She learned to shoot and ride astride, having previously only ridden side-saddle. She frequently spent all day in the saddle, and found herself fording deep rivers, or edging along precipitous ledges.

She continued like this even when pregnant. Her baby was born three months early in November 1848. That was one of the coldest winters known, and her baby, Alatau, was the only child in the region to survive through to spring. She cut up her husband's shirts to make him baby-clothes.

Lucy spoke fluent Russian, and translated for her husband. And inevitably that led her to a social role too, entertaining local people. She deserves more respect than she gained in her lifetime."

Gillian Brown:

"For me this wonderful trip has been a life-changing experience. I felt overwhelmed by the genuine warmth and generosity shown to us by the people of Kazakhstan everywhere we went. The beauty of this country - from the mountains to the Steppes to the grasslands - is like no other place that I have visited. It is literally breath-taking. There is also a feeling of calmness and acceptance from its people and from the nature of the land. I can so understand why Thomas and Lucy spent so much time exploring this country, as every day brings a new scene and a new adventure.

During this trip I was really moved by the importance of Thomas and Lucy to the people of Kazakhstan, of what they achieved and subsequently documented about its landscape and the way of life of the people that lived and travelled the Steppes. I don't think any of the family members that came on this wonderful trip fully appreciated the enormity of what Thomas and Lucy had achieved. We only had a tiny flavour of the distances they travelled and of the wonderful people they encountered.

Two highlights stand out for me. The drive over the Hasford Pass in the fading light where we were able to stand on the land and soak up the sounds and beauty of this wonderful country. Just magical! Second, the welcome, warmth and generosity of the people we met in Kapal and the wonderful pageant they performed for us. Not to mention the place itself - Tamchiboulac Spring. It was a wonderful experience, and holds a special place in my heart.

I will be returning Kazakhstan with my children and am already working as an unofficial ambassador encouraging all who will listen to visit this amazingly beautiful country."

Peter Brown:

"As the village feast at Kapal came to a close, I felt it was the time to give out personalised plates having the image of Thomas Atkinson. The first few went to dombra musicians. These men received them politely. But a message went out to the ladies, and I was besieged! Shoulder to shoulder they lined the room with happy faces shining eyes and hands outstretched. A girl 12-13yrs old remembered her mates, and shyly asked for three.

Next I recognised a singer in her 30's with a striking voice who welcomed us to the unveiling ceremony in Kapal. She'd changed her ruby red national costume for a modern dress of the same shade – it suited her. She too held out her hand. I wanted to clasp it and thank her, but her desire for a gift was more urgent.

I wasn't fast enough, and Aigul from KazGeo came to help out, and we worked the room together. On the far side a line of four matrons in selected shades of national costume - red, green, purple, and black - were sitting side by side. Smiles on their faces, eyes gleaming, too reserved to ask, but delighted when I went over to them. I knew the deep pleasure they felt from dance partners in my past.

The rest of our group had gone ahead and I doubt if any had seen this; but as we came to the top of the staircase I felt too shaky to be safe. Again Aigul came to my rescue, and we processed down the flight and out to the courtyard arm in arm."

Steve Brown:

"I knew a little about my gt-gt-gt-grandparents as part of our family narrative. I knew that they had travelled in Siberia sometime in the nineteenth century. But no-one outside of the family were aware of their travels so I just

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assumed that they couldn't have been that significant. I also knew very little of Kazakhstan. I knew that the Russian space programme was based there, that Kazakhstan had formidable oil and mineral resources and I had supported the Astana cycling team, but without making the connection to Kazakhstan.

We were knocked sideways by our reception at Astana airport, staggering through the arrivals doors into a battery of cameras and people in national costume, singing songs of welcome and presenting gifts. I was startled and amazed by the modern marvel that is Astana. I loved the culture of Almaty. But I would have to say that my most lasting memory of Kazakhstan will be the endless steppe, the enormous blue sky and the beautiful mountains. I suppose the second impression was the friendliness and helpfulness of the people. The organisations who managed the tour were great but so was everyone else that we met. We soon adjusted to the professional filming but being asked to pose for selfies, even in the airport on the way home, just felt surreal. And the enormous feasts, the local hors d'oeuvres, huge platefuls of horsemeat and the kourmis. I didn't realise kourmis was alcoholic, which may explain some of my slightly blurred memories.

I think that the experience which will stay with me longest was the reception at Kapal. I am sure that this was carefully orchestrated – the singers, dancers and other performers must have practised their turns – but the spontaneity of our reception by the local people just took my breath away. The costumes, dancing, songs and speeches were amazing, though for me the drama depicting Alatau Atkinson's birth felt uncomfortably close to the nativity story. Then the feast and the songs and picking up the similarities to Irish folk music, saying our clumsy goodbyes and back over the mountain pass to our hotel.

I am very grateful to have had the opportunity to spend time with my parents and to be able to support them in this marvellous experience. It was also great to travel with cousins who I would probably otherwise have never met and to think about the life I might have led if my great-grandmother had not returned to UK.

The other important thing that I have gained from this trip is a far better understanding of my great-great-great-grandparents' achievements and significance. Though we travelled in modern vehicles we were able to get some idea of the vast distances that they covered, if not of the hardships that they endured.

It was also hugely humbling to be welcomed and honoured in Kazakhstan merely because we were members of their extended family. I very much hope that Thomas and Lucy will eventually receive the appreciation in their own country that their achievements deserve.

Thank you very much to Air Astana, Kaz Geo, to everyone from the Kazakhstan Embassy, to David for the photographs and humour, to the local authorities and everyone else who helped to set up this amazing trip."

Charlene Dahlquist:

"I think Kazakhstan is a young country and is looking to its history to help establish a sense of identity. Thomas and Lucy's trip was an important part of their history.

By bringing us to Kazakhstan it will show the nation that other countries have an interest in their country. It certainly showed us what friendly and generous people they are. It also showed us that they are a hard-working people with goals to improve their status in the world. More power to them. We want to thank them for the trip."

Kristine Dahlquist:

"Never in my wildest dreams did I ever think I would travel to Kazakhstan. Before the trip was planned I did not know much at all about Kazakhstan other than it was where the international space station was sent supplies from and it is a former Soviet Union state. Although I do have students from Kazakhstan, I am ashamed to admit that I didn't ask them much about their country; instead I was concerned about their academics and the like.

I know better now. I did not know what to expect when our group headed to Kazakhstan. The reception we got from the Kazakh people blew my mind. From being met at the airport by camera crews, musicians, and dancers to the pageant and feast at Kapal to the wonderful people of KazGeo. Everything we did was completely unexpected and wonderful. I am amazed by the hospitality we were shown.

To learn about my gt-gt-gt-grandparents by traveling a small part of what they travelled was truly beyond measure. It is hard to believe they were able to travel through Kazakhstan 168 years ago. I am in awe of them and their adventurous spirits. This was a trip I will never forget. I hope to one day return to Kazakhstan but if I do not I know this country has imprinted itself on my heart and soul."

Return to the Great Steppe

Paul Dahlquist:

"What did the trip mean for me?

1- It opened my eyes to some family history I was not particularly familiar with.

2- It really felt like I was living a part of my family's history. To be riding horseback where Thomas and Lucy Atkinson had ridden so long ago was sublime. To be traveling roads (maybe not very much changed in terms of bumps!) that Thomas and Lucy travelled was amazing. To see places they had seen. To meet with people maybe not so different from those that they met. To eat the foods they must have eaten. To drink the waters of the Tamchiboulac spring as they did. All these things and more added up to a truly wonderful experience.

3- As always, travel opened my eyes and showed me once again that people, no matter what their nationality, ethnicity, or religion, are people just like me, and they are really interesting to get to know even if only for a little bit."

Molly Kinau Fay:

"This was an incredible trip, the chance of a lifetime for me and one not to be forgotten. The people were so warm and welcoming and fun loving. They truly wanted us to love their country and all it has to offer. The mountains are astounding. I loved the gondola ride with the rushing stream below and the snow-capped mountains above, even the wind and rain!!! And then there was Kapal. Once again it was the warmth of the people that shone through. No wonder Lucy and Thomas wanted to get there for the birth of their baby as well as for shelter from the elements; and how lovely to know that Alatau will always be remembered. So many thanks to all the Kazakhstan people who made this incredible journey possible."

Pippa Smith:

"For several years I'd thought how wonderful it would be to follow in our gt gt gt grandparents' footsteps and see the beautiful places they described in their books. So the trip to Kazakhstan was a dream come true. I was overwhelmed by our visit which vastly exceeded my expectations from beginning to end, and it would be difficult to find such kind and generous hospitality anywhere else. To be part of the Kazakhstan story and heritage is quite awesome and I feel truly blessed. I am thankful to all who made it possible and for the special friendships we have made."

Rose Whitehead:

"I feel very privileged to have had the opportunity to travel on the trip to Kazakhstan to retrace some of the travels of Lucy and Thomas Atkinson, my gt gt gt grandparents.

The amazing work and insight that the Kazakh government showed - from the ambassador in UK believing in the value of the trip, through all the other people involved in the mammoth task of organising the itinerary, travel planning, obtaining visas, and generally making us feel cared for and valued while we were in Kazakhstan - a big thank you.

It is humbling to have been a recipient of such a gift of the trip, of being able to catch up with extended family and actually meet members for the first time during the trip and experience some of the many wonderful things Kazakhstan has to offer people who travel there.

The most important and valuable gift that the Kazakhstan people give travellers is themselves as they are so honest, open and friendly and genuinely interested in the rest of the world while retaining a very deep understanding and knowledge of their own identities which, especially in some of the younger generation of the world, seems to be lacking in these modern times.

Also the pro-active drive for education and success was evident in many different people I talked to, which impressed me greatly and gave me a lovely positive feeling to bring home with me about Kazakhstan in general. I wasn't properly prepared for the vastness of the country and even in the small part we travelled in I was amazed at the beauty and natural magnificence that was everywhere in great abundance and have had trouble trying to describe it to people here as my amateur pictures don't do the justice to it that it deserves.

It is hard to express all the different feelings and emotions I have now that I am back and I feel so grateful that the trip was able to go from an idea to a reality and that I was part of it.

So once again thanks to everyone involved, from the President and Ambassador thinking it was a good idea, to all the government staff, National Academic Library of Kazakhstan, Kaz Geo people who are a credit to their

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organisation, Vlad our amazing interpreter, photographers and lastly Air Astana for sponsoring our flights and looking after us so well. It was a huge team effort over two countries showing a good partnership."