

## WILLIAM THOMAS REED ATKINSON Violin Maker - 1851 to 1929

*1992 vignette by Professor B. W. Harvey, Faculty of Law, University of Birmingham*



**William Atkinson's** career is different to other eminent Victorian violinmakers, in that his working life spans a period from 1869 to the year of his death, 1929. His mature work, therefore, belongs to the reigns of Edward VII and George V.

There was also sufficient interest in Atkinson's life for biographical snippets to be published before his death in local newspapers. We have, too, the benefit of the accounts drafted by the indefatigable Meredith Morris, who did a profile of this maker for the *Strad* of **November 1900 [p.203]** and then reused much of his material in the biographies contained in the two editions of his book *British Violin Makers*.

The present author had the additional advantage of the reminiscences of Atkinson's living granddaughter, **Daphne Bradley**, for whom Atkinson made one of his best violins.

Atkinson has been selected because, in the present author's opinion, he is one of the most refined makers of the early part of the twentieth century in England and, unlike some of his professional rivals, made every part of his instruments himself, down to the purfling.

William Thomas Reed Atkinson was born in Stepney, London, on October 23<sup>rd</sup> 1851. He had the advantage of a 'pay-school' education at a grammar school in Mile End Road, Stepney, until the age of 11. Atkinson always maintained that he made his early acoustical and varnishes experiments at school.

The family then moved to Liverpool and Atkinson was put to work behind the bar of his uncle's public house near Birkenhead. Morris states that this was much against the boy's inclination, but he had no choice.

When he was a little older, Atkinson joined the Merchant Navy where, as a teenager, he served as second steward on board several steamships. His granddaughter says

that on one occasion Atkinson's ship took in tow the encased and floating Cleopatra's Needle, now standing on the Thames embankment at Westminster, which had broken away in a storm from a ship chartered to bring it to London.



**William's son, William Thomas Camper Atkinson, outside the family shop in Church Road... c. 1940s**

Atkinson's parents then moved back to London and Atkinson left the Merchant Navy to become apprenticed to a joiner. His first instrument, dating to 1869, was made at this time.

He married in 1880 and shortly afterwards moved to Tottenham, to the north of London, and not connected to the metropolis as it is now.

(Development at Tottenham occurred partly because the rail service from Liverpool Street to Enfield went through the area.)



**William Atkinson's shop at 13 Church Road, Tottenham**

Atkinson took a double fronted shop, in Church Road, which was a general hardware and drysalter's store, selling, as his granddaughter remarks, *'Most things from a pin to a pitchfork: oils, pigments and varnishes were a speciality'*. The shop also

displayed specimens of Atkinson's work: violins, violas and cellos, which were fashioned in the workshop to the rear.

The marriage produced three sons, one of whom died and another who eventually took over the shop from his father. Atkinson worked there until 1911.

The building no longer survives but Haringey Council, having compulsorily acquired it, made in 1972 what is perhaps a unique gesture for any local authority, by naming a nearby precinct for the elderly (thirty-nine one-bedroom flats) after a British violin maker: 'William Atkinson House'.



**William Atkinson House - January 1991**  
(Photographs by great-grandson Peter William Thomas)

Early in the 1900s, Atkinson suffered a serious accident while helping his brother-in-law, the builder (Arthur Porter) who was responsible for the construction of some local churches and the first stand to be created in the Tottenham Hotspur football ground. Atkinson's leg had to be amputated below the knee and, for the rest of his life, he had to wear a wooden prosthesis.

Atkinson set great store by his **varnishing**. In an interview with a reporter from the *Southend Standard*, in October 1928, he is quoted as saying, 'If I were asked what was my greatest gift, I should say it was to make a violin, but I would not spend five minutes on it if I had not got the varnish I use. That varnish is my own, and I would stake my life it is the same varnish the old masters used.'

This oil-based varnish took a long time to dry. Atkinson said he could make a violin in a fortnight, but he would need two years in which to dry it.

Finding the Tottenham air, with increased urbanisation, too smutty to be satisfactory for varnish drying al fresco, in 1911 he moved to the village of Paglesham, near Southend-on-Sea, Essex.

This village remains comparatively unspoilt and Atkinson's end cottage, where he ran the local Post Office and general stores, remains, though converted into a simple house. His granddaughter remembers its oil lamps, uncarpeted winding stairs, and primitive toilet and washing facilities.

Atkinson also became a churchwarden of St Peter's Church in the village, and that was an important part of his life. He continued to combine violin making with running his modest business with the help of his wife. Presumably a significant amount of Atkinson's time was actually taken in making, his family running the other side of the business.

This had great advantage in that he never felt economically pressured in the way that the unfortunate Walter Mayson did. He was able to take time to make instruments completely to his satisfaction and was ruthless in rejecting anything, which did not come up to scratch.

Atkinson was also liable to strip off the varnish if it was not perfect. It is thought that he made about 300 instruments in the white, but only 250 (including four violas and nine cellos) are accounted for, the rest having probably been destroyed. The obituary, in the **Strad of February 1930 [p.566]** states that he had, in recent years, sought out and destroyed many examples of his early work, which did not reach his mature standard of excellence.

Atkinson clearly continued to experiment with varnish for many years, but essentially the oil varnish was put on by between eighteen and twenty-four coats, each having to dry before the next coat was put on. In the summer the instruments were dried by the simple expedient of stringing the violins up between two poles in the garden – the tall poles being thought by many of the villagers to be something to do with a wireless aerial.

The natural colour goes from pale straw to deep red-brown. Poidras states that there was no added colouring matter in the varnish and Atkinson thought that it was similar to the varnish used by Italian painters of oils.

As with so many English makers of this period who experimented with oil varnish, the results are sometimes not entirely satisfactory. At least one instrument has been seen where there has been noticeable deterioration and craquelure. But, in most cases, it seems to have survived very well, although its soft texture means that it is easily rubbed off by vigorous or careless usage.

Atkinson never revealed the secret of his varnish to anyone. The contemporary newspapers report a deathbed attempt to convey the recipe to his son. *'The old man realised too late that he was dying, and tried to impart the secret to his son, but the effort was too much for him. He fell back on his pillow dead.'* (**Daily Express, December 24, 1929**)

Morris did a detailed analysis of Atkinson's violin construction and the following is taken from his profile in the **Strad of November 1900 [p.203]**.

*'He works on two original models. The measurements of model No. 1 are as follows:*

<i>Length of body.....</i>	<i>13 <sup>15</sup>/<sub>16</sub> inches</i>
<i>Width across upper bouts.....</i>	<i>6 <sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> "</i>
<i>Width across middle bouts.....</i>	<i>4 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> "</i>
<i>Width across lower bouts.....</i>	<i>8 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>16</sub> "</i>
<i>Depth of ribs at bottom.....</i>	<i>1 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> "</i>
<i>Depth of ribs at top.....</i>	<i>1 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>32</sub> "</i>
<i>Length of sound holes.....</i>	<i>3 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>32</sub> "</i>
<i>Distance between sound holes at top..</i>	<i>1 <sup>19</sup>/<sub>32</sub> "</i>
<i>Elevation from ½ to .....</i>	<i><sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> "</i>

*The measurements of model No. 2 are the same, except that at the top, middle and bottom bouts, it is <sup>3</sup>/<sub>32</sub> inches (3mm) narrower .....*

*Mr Atkinson's wood is excellent. The figure of his maple is, as a rule, of medium width. His pine, which is from Berne, is simply perfect, having a "reed" rather under medium width, perfectly straight and well defined. His outline is in the best Italian style. It is gracefulness incarnate. A very strong expression, but a true one. As the form of the gazelle is to that of the ordinary antelope, so is the outline of Atkinson to that of the ordinary fiddle.*

*The scroll is a masterly conception and of Pheidian beauty.... The first turn parts suddenly from the boss, as in the best examples of Stradivari. The edges are softened down gently, with black lines to emphasise the extreme outline.*

*The button is nearly semi-circular, with toned-down edge, and in perfect keeping with the contour. The margin is one-fifth (inch) (5 mm) wide. The edges are strong and rounded; but the 'rounding' is not over-pronounced. The elevation of the edge above the purfille-bed is almost imperceptible. The margin and edges present a delicately refined appearance. In fact, everything about the Atkinson violins betokens aristocratic refinement. The purfling is one-sixteenth (inch) (1.6 mm) wide, the inner strip having a width which is slightly greater than that of the outer ones combined.*

*The varnish is beautiful, ranging in colour from pale straw to light ruby, and of the most delicate tints. On a specimen recently seen by me, and which had been examined and most flatteringly commented upon by the late **Duke Saxe-Coburg-Gotha**, the varnish was straw coloured and of the richest and tenderest hue. It is perfectly transparent and elastic, and soft as velvet to the touch. It is laid on in very thin coats and dried in the open air. Sometimes as many as twenty coats are given, but the final thickness of varnish is scarcely more than one-sixty-fourth of an inch (0.4mm).*

*Mr Atkinson's tone is quite remarkable. It is not exactly like the tone of any other maker, classical or post classical, that I am acquainted with. The size of the instrument would lead one to expect a tone of small volume, but such is not the case. The tone is strong without being loud, penetrating without being piercing. One need not go to Atkinson for mere loudness. His is a mellow tone with a silver ring. Its echo in a large hall is like an anvil struck at a distant smithy and borne by the breeze. It is the tone of the dulcimer magnified, clarified, beatified. It is a delicious tone! For this reason the Atkinson fiddles are pre-eminently solo instruments. For the same reason it would not be wise to furnish the same*

orchestra with them throughout. That the gods rain honey on flowers is a kind provision; if they did it on grass they would spoil the world.'

Atkinson normally branded his instruments just below the button with his monogram. His label is written in the copperplate he undoubtedly learned at grammar school in Mile End Road, Stepney, and is varnished over to preserve it.

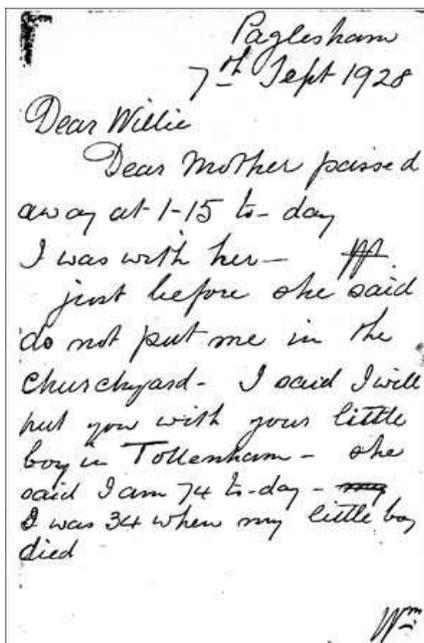
During his life the quality of his instruments was well recognised, and, in his earlier years, he won a **bronze medal in Paris in 1889** and a **silver medal at Edinburgh in 1890**.

As **Morris** says, 'Since 1890, he has developed his ideas considerably, and has freed himself entirely from the trammels of the French school.'

**The Duke of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha** took an active interest in his work, and Atkinson's catalogue reproduces commendatory letters from **Joseph Joachim.... [November 12, 1904]** - 'I have seldom met with new instruments that pleased me so much, and I think that they would also carry in a large room'.

And from the well known expert, **J. M. Fleming**: 'The design and execution are the work of an artist, the degree of excellence displayed in any one point being maintained under every aspect that the instrument presents... the tone is really exquisite.'

Consistent with his policy of strict quality control, and as a consequence of his not having to rely on selling every instrument, Atkinson made instruments of one quality only and charged £15 for violins, £20 for violas and £30 for cellos. (The directory gives current auction prices.)



Postcard written by William Thomas Reed Atkinson on the day Mary died - sent to his son, William Thomas Camper Atkinson

William Atkinson survived until 1929, losing heart when his wife died. A contemporary local press report quotes him as saying:

'There is no pleasure in the work for me now. A little time ago my wife died on her birthday and she was the "best man" about the shop.'  
(**Southend Standard, Oct. 1928**)



Mary Elizabeth Atkinson  
c. 1906

Atkinson's working regime and honest business practices sprang from a character of considerable strength and colossal integrity. He is buried with his wife in Tottenham Cemetery.

