



The Reverend John Atkinson: ‘Forty Years in a Moorland Parish’

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Anyone with an interest in the North Yorkshire Moors and its traditions and folklore must read this fascinating record of life in and around the village of Danby, published in 1891 by its rector, the Revd. John Christopher Atkinson. The book is remarkable in its depth and detail of a way of life which was already fading fast when he arrived in this remote corner of the world in the mid-19th century.

Born in Essex in 1814, John Atkinson came from a strongly religious and academic family. He studied at St John’s College, Cambridge, and was ordained in 1841. Revd. Atkinson’s association with North Yorkshire came through obtaining a position in 1847 as Lord Dawnay’s Chaplain. In 1850 he was presented with the living at Danby, shortly after his marriage to Jane Hill. The couple arrived to find an insular and neglected parish, and so Revd. Atkinson set about establishing himself and gaining the trust of the locals.

For a man with a passion for nature and history, the remote parish provided a fascinating wealth of tales, legends and details. Alongside the challenges of daily ministry, he fathered eight children, but suffered the loss of his wife Jane in 1860. Having remarried in 1862, to Georgina Mary Slade, he had five more children but

again was widowed before marrying for a third and final time in 1884, to Helen Georgina Brown. He wrote a series of children’s books and on ornithology and birds’ eggs, but it his work on local history for which he is best remembered.

‘Forty Years in a Moorland Parish’ is a collection of topics covering everything from the style of houses to local customs. Some of the most fascinating chapters cover local legends. The folklore Atkinson gathered revealed how ingrained some of the old beliefs still were at all levels of society. There are tales of hobs (small household spirits) and fairies as well as the more usual superstitions relating, for instance, to magpies.

The material had to be gathered slowly as many people were initially reluctant to open up, for fear of mockery. Quite often the source of the tales was deliberately left vague to protect people’s identity.

Atkinson recognised that the old customs were fading fast as the modern world encroached. The very rural nature of his parish meant that he could reach further back in time than would have been possible in a town or more industrial area. The nature of farming was beginning to change with small family farms merging into larger ones, with traditions merging with them. Years

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of officiating at baptisms, marriages and funerals also gave Revd. Atkinson unique insights, and he also found the time to explore the connections in tradition between North Yorkshire and Scandinavia.

One such tradition involved the humble honey bee. A local practice was to put bee-hives into mourning after the death of their owner. Often the widow would go to the hive and inform the bees that one master was dead and tell them who their new master was, whilst offering them food and drink. A theory advanced by Atkinson was that this tradition stemmed from Scandinavian beliefs in Valhalla and the fear of restless spirits returning from beyond the grave. By telling the bees who they were to obey and providing them with sustenance, they would ignore any returning spirits seeking to steal them away.

Many dialect words and phrases were also disappearing as schooling and ways of speaking became standardized. Younger generations did not always continue to use the distinctive style of describing people:

“he’s that thin, he’s lakh a ha’porth o’ soap after a lang day’s weshing” is so much more evocative than “he’s rather thin”!

Atkinson was not just an observer: he also enjoyed getting involved in the physical discoveries made in the area. His writing on barrows and earthworks reveal how he would often be invited to excavations along with other academics and passionate volunteers. He opened up around 90 barrows on Westerdale Moor and described the stone axe-heads found on Skelton moors.

‘Forty Years in a Moorland Parish’ was a huge success. It has been reprinted several times since 1891 and remains a key reference source for local historians and academics.

In the same year as his book was published, Revd. Atkinson was installed as Canon of York Minster, although he remained in his beloved Danby until his death in March 1900. He left behind an invaluable legacy, for which we historians are truly grateful.



Find out more

‘Forty Years in a Moorland Parish:
Reminiscences and Researches in Danby in Cleveland’ by J.C. Atkinson (1891, facsimile edition 2006)

Atkinson’s entry in an index of British naturalists:
<http://www.natstand.org.uk/time/AtkinsonJcTime.htm>



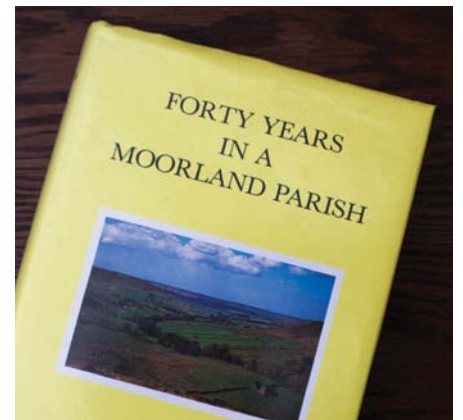
Rev. John Atkinson's grave, St Hilda's, Danby



The Rev. John Atkinson in his study



St. Hilda's Church, Danby Dale



Atkinson's renowned book