

Herbert Atkinson of Prospect Farm

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Herbert Atkinson, (1863-1936) lived permanently, after the First World War, at the family home at Cottesmore Farm, (now known as Prospect Farm), and he became recognised as a world authority on the breeding of Old English Game Fowl, (our oldest breed of poultry). He founded the Oxford Old English Game Club in 1885 and extended his influence to become the Honorary Vice President of the Game Fowl Club of South Africa. He achieved fame as an author, a bird and animal artist and as a sculpture of racehorses.



Prospect Farm

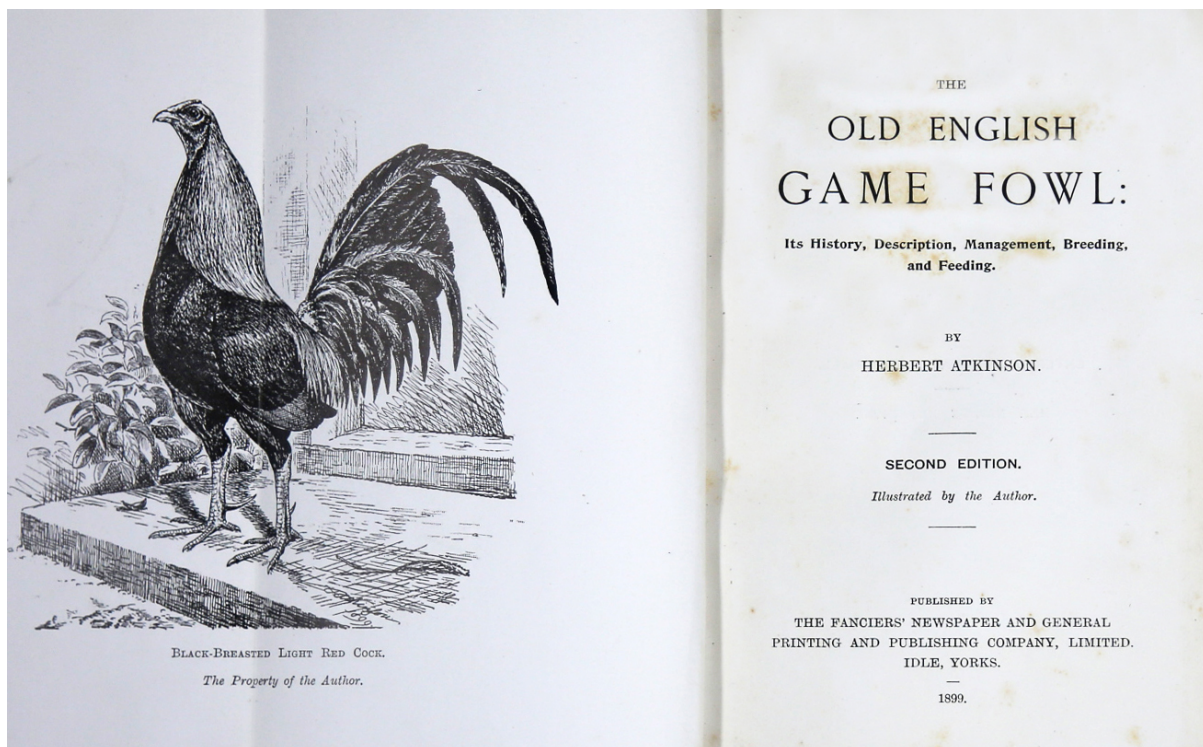
However, we were surprised to learn in 2015 that 79 years after his death, Herbert Atkinson, is ‘big’ in Australia. Indeed, his famous paintings of his colourfully plumaged Game Fowl are still adopted as being the standard to which to breed ‘chooks’ in Australia! When Michael Paterson from Melbourne, Secretary of the ‘*Old English Game Fowl Club of Australia*’, contacted the Society last summer, he said that Ewelme is regarded as the ‘mecca’ for Game Fowl breeders and accordingly, he wished to make a ‘pilgrimage’ to Prospect Farm. Fortunately, the property was empty prior to sale, so on the day of his visit he was able to wander around the grounds, take photographs and ‘commune’ with his mentor.

Michael subsequently wrote a heartfelt article in the OEG Club of Australia’s official newsletter entitled ‘*A Visit to the Home of OEG Royalty*’, describing Ewelme, Prospect Farm and including material from two Ewelme Archive documents written by George Cannon and Tony Munday, which were emailed to him prior to his visit.

We reprise some of the information he included, to illustrate what a remarkable man Atkinson was. “*Herbert inherited his love of sport from his father, Dr William Atkinson, (1811-1890) an eminent*

surgeon and practising local doctor in Victorian times, who had been a member of the first organising committee of the Henley Royal Regatta. Herbert wrote a world-famous work "Cock Fighting and Game Fowl" and the introduction described him as a "naturalist, explorer, painter, sculptor and sportsman, he could cast a fly equally well with either hand, or in painting at the easel, could use either hand as he pleased. His writings on game fowl arose out of practical knowledge. He had studied on the spot, in their native habitat the jungle fowls of India, Ceylon and the Malay states. For many years he wintered in Ceylon or India. He was a fine horseman and at one period regularly hunted with the Devon and Somerset. He was a dead shot with rifle or scattergun and a zealous fisherman. His artistic flair extended beyond painting game fowl, he completed bronze and silver sculptures of racehorses and was commissioned to paint King Edward VII's racehorse "Minoru" after it had won the English Derby in 1909." [Minoru went to stud in Russia and was allegedly 'executed' by the Bolsheviks in 1917].





Michael continued... *“As the property was vacant, I was able to have a look around the grounds and sit in the garden and imagine where the ‘chook’ pens would have been positioned, and Herbert tending to the birds. There were several outhouses and stables in the grounds – several of great age which would probably have been constructed in Herbert’s lifetime. The gardens were full of old gnarled fruit trees – mainly apple and plum, and also multiple rose bushes of great age – perhaps Herbert ate fruit from those trees while he tended his fowl, and wore a rose from those bushes in his lapel as he went around town. An interview conducted by the Local Historical Society in 2000, with a local who had lived in the village all her life (this was Moira Hampden Calvert who lived at the neighbouring [Cottesmore] Mansion) who remembered Herbert from her childhood, and details how she recalls that he was a famous artist known for his paintings and that he kept Game Cocks in his back yard. He was also remembered as an elderly ‘Victorian’ gentleman who dressed with a high collar and wore a cravat and bowler hat. He was often seen around the village driving his pony and trap.*

In closing, it was a memorable visit and one I shall never forget. Whilst I do not think I will ever be able to afford an original Herbert Atkinson painting, I was fortunate enough to stumble upon a hand written letter on the internet that a bookseller was selling. The handwritten signed letter details Herbert’s acknowledgement for an order of 100 copies of “Life and Letters of John Harris” a book he had privately published. This together with the memorable visit to Herbert’s home village encourages me to continue to breed fowls as depicted in his paintings.”

The Atkinson family originated in Wallingford and Dr William Atkinson MRCS., JP., bought ‘Cottesmore Farm’ circa 1867 where he and his wife Amelia raised three sons, and probably had a surgery there - as a metal name plate engraved ‘The Old Surgery’ was subsequently found in some rubble. He died in 1890, Amelia died in 1905 and a son George in 1919 - all three are buried in the churchyard. Herbert, a bachelor, died in Ewelme on January 3rd, 1936, but there is no record of a burial service here. (Another son Henry emigrated to Adelaide and his descendants still live in Australia).

Ewelme Village Archive