

Slide maker “J.A.”
probably John Atkinson, 1842-1901

by Brian Stevenson, Kentucky, USA

Brian Bracegirdle’s *Microscopical Mounts and Mounters* features several pages of microscope slides that were distinguishable by their maker’s or owner’s initials on labels. Plate 40, slide D, illustrates a mollusk palate slide bearing a diamond-shaped label with the monogram “J.A.” Such slides are only occasionally encountered at auction, a relative scarcity which suggests “J.A.” slides came from a private collection. A recent find identified that microscopist as “J. Atkinson” (Figure 1).



Figure 1. An enlargement of J.A.’s monogram, and two of his slides. The left slide identifies J.A. as J. Atkinson.

All known “J.A.” slides come from England. Literature searches identified two people named J. Atkinson who were involved with microscopy in 19th century England. A John Anderson presented mosses and leaves to the Manchester Microscopical Society in 1882. However, that is the only such record I found regarding involvement with that club. He was probably the same “Mr. Atkinson” who also exhibited mosses, etc. to the Manchester Cryptogamic Society at the same time, and so was more likely a moss and fungus enthusiast than a microscopist. On the other hand, a John Atkinson, of London, was a member of the Quekett Microscopical Club from 1865 until 1882. That gentleman’s hometown is consistent with the current location of the slide shown in *Microscopical Mounts and Mounters*, and with the provenance of the “J. Atkinson”-labeled slide in Figure 1. Those data suggest that this second J. Atkinson is the most likely source of “J.A.” slides.

John Atkinson (of London) was born during the spring of 1842, the first child of Alfred and Jane Atkinson. Alfred was a master/merchant tailor. He was apparently a significant producer of clothing, with census records indicating that he employed half a dozen or more men in his shop. The Atkinsons lived in the fashionable St. George – Hanover Square – Mayfair area of London. John and his brothers remained at their parent’s home on Brook Street throughout their lives.

By the spring of 1861, then 18-year old John was employed as a tailor, presumably working for his father’s business. Two of his brothers, Edmund and Alfred, also eventually worked as tailors. The youngest brother, Lewis, became a civil servant and diamond expert.

John Atkinson joined the Quekett Microscopical Club on December 22, 1865. As such, Atkinson was a very

early member of the Club, which was formed the previous summer. He displayed slides at several Annual Soirees, such as a “*foot of blow fly*” in 1872, “*sole skin*” in 1874 and “*foot of fly*” in 1877. Atkinson’s name disappeared from the Club’s roster in 1883. His father, Alfred, died early in 1886, so it is possible that declining health of the widowed father required that the eldest son spend more time with the family business and less with hobbies such as club microscopy.

The 1891 census listed John as the head of household, still living with his three brothers at the old home, 33 Brook Street. None of the four Atkinson boys is recorded as ever having married. John Atkinson died in early 1901, at the age of 58.

This and other articles on historical microscopy can also be seen at <http://microscopist.net>

Resources

Atkinson, Lewis (1888) A report to the New South Wales government upon its diamonds, *New South Wales: Her Commerce and Resources*, Gilderoy W. Griffin (ed.), C. Potter, Sydney

Bracegirdle, Brian (1998) *Microscopical Mounts and Mounters*, Quekett Microscopical Club, London, pages 57 and 184, and plate 40, slide D

England birth, death and census records, accessed through ancestry.co.uk

Journal of the Quekett Microscopical Club (1872) Annual Soiree, March 15, Vol. 3, page 49

Journal of the Quekett Microscopical Club (1874) Annual Soiree, April 17, Vol. 3, page 299

Journal of the Quekett Microscopical Club (1877) Annual Soiree, April 13, Vol. 4, page 295

Journal of the Quekett Microscopical Club (1882) List of Club members, Series 2, Vol. 1

Journal of the Quekett Microscopical Club (1883) List of Club members, Series 2, Vol. 1

Microscopical News and Northern Microscopist (1882) Reports of the Manchester Cryptogamic Society and Manchester Microscopical Society, Vol. 2, page 124

Microscopical News and Northern Microscopist (1883) Reports of the Manchester Cryptogamic Society, Vol. 2, page 54

The Quekett Microscopical Club website (accessed Oct., 2011) The origin of the Quekett Microscopical Club, <http://www.quekett.org.uk/files/about/about.html>

Third Report of the Quekett Microscopical Club and List of Members (1868)

Feedback to the author Brian Stevenson welcomed,
email: [brian.stevenson AT uky DOT edu](mailto:brian.stevenson@uky.edu)

Published in the November 2011 issue of Micscape Magazine, www.micscape.org