

Kazakhstan and the UK

An historic relationship

Some of the first to discover this vast country were British travellers, most famously Thomas Witlam Atkinson

“Writing about contemporary Kazakhstan is like making a journey into unexplored territory, for it is one of the least known yet most surprising nations of the post Soviet world.”

So wrote Jonathan Aitken in the introduction to his book *Kazakhstan: Surprises and Stereotypes after 20 Years of Independence*, published in 2012. In the five years since, Kazakhstan has taken many steps on the global stage and most recently came to international attention through EXPO 2017, which attracted visitors from all over the world. But Aitken’s words also hark back to a period when the land that is now Kazakhstan truly was “unexplored territory”. And some of the first to discover this vast country were British travellers.

The earliest and most famous of these was Thomas Witlam Atkinson, who travelled the Eastern Kazakh Steppes with his wife Lucy in the mid 19th century. Various described as a quarryman, stonemason, architect and artist, Atkinson recorded the astonishing scenes he encountered in a series of vivid drawings and watercolours. One of the views he painted was of Tamchiboulac Spring, the second name the couple gave to their son Alatau, born on 4 November 1848 in eastern Kazakhstan.



The couple’s intrepid journey is recounted in the book *South to the Great Steppe: The Travels of Thomas and Lucy Atkinson in Eastern Kazakhstan* written by Nick Fielding and published by FIRST. The Atkinsons met many important Kazakh leaders during the travels and Thomas’ portraits of the Sultans in their finery, surrounded by their hunting eagles, horses, camels and livestock, give a striking and unique insight into Kazakh life at the time.

Others followed in their footsteps. Major Herbert Wood of the Royal Engineers and the Royal Geographical Society travelled widely through what is now western Kazakhstan in the

early 1870s, later reporting his observations and opinions in his book, *The Shores of Lake Aral* (1876), describing the Kazakhs he met as “well-fed and good-looking”.

Shortly after Wood came the dashing Captain Frederick Gustavus Burnaby of the Royal Horse Guards regiment, who chose in 1875 to cross Kazakhstan on horseback in winter. According to Christopher Robbins in his book *In Search of Kazakhstan: the Land that Disappeared* Burnaby had the reputation of being the strongest man in the British Army. Following a traditional trading route of Kazakhs and Cossacks, Burnaby would have needed all his strength as he crossed the Kazakh steppe during one of the coldest winters on record on his way to his final destination of the fabled city of Khiva in what is now Uzbekistan.

Soldiers were not the only British drawn to the Kazakh steppe. From the spring of 1886 to the autumn of 1887 the naturalist William Bateson travelled widely in the region, later publishing *Letters from the Steppe*, his entertaining private diary of his exploits and discoveries.

And after explorers and biologists came those intent on commercial activity. One of the first recorded British investments in Kazakhstan came in 1907 when a British company bought the concession to the coal mines in Karaganda, bringing with them English miners to work the rich seams.

It was perhaps with such historic connections in mind that in early 1992 the UK was one of the first countries to recognise Kazakhstan’s independence. Now celebrating 25 years of diplomatic ties, the two countries have strengthened their links across many sectors, from trade and security to education and the law, as we explore in the following pages. British architects have been heavily involved in the creation of the country’s new capital of Astana, which attracts many visitors from the UK, not just for commercial interests, but as a jumping off point for tourism across the world’s largest landlocked country. And in a fast-changing land, British tourists can still expect to find some of the timeless scenes that so memorably caught the eye of Thomas Atkinson.

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The Spassky copper-smelting plant

Britain has a long commercial history in Kazakhstan. The large penetration of English capital into the Kazakh steppe began at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, when the Russian tsarist government, in view of the lack of its own resources, the necessary experience and technology, allowed British, French and other concessionaires to start mining ore and minerals in Central and Eastern Kazakhstan.

By that time Great Britain was strengthened in to role as the world’s leading industrial power, whose technological superiority in all sectors of the economy was undeniable, and this allowed large business enterprises to seek new natural resources in any part of the world.

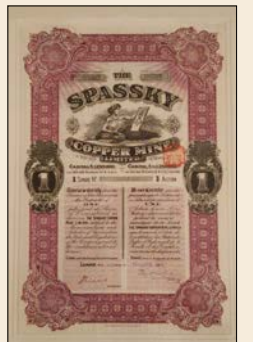
Despite its considerable distance from the main transport routes of that time, by the time of the October Revolution of 1917 English capital had concessions in Atbasar and Spassko-Uspensky copper, Ridder polymetallic mines, Karaganda and Ekibastuz coal mines, and a number of oil sources on Emba.

According to researchers, in 1909 the British acquired the Dzhezkazgan mine with the Baikonur lance from the Russian merchants of Ryazanov for 260,000 rubles. The company, organised in London, had a fixed capital of 250 thousand pounds sterling. In Central Kazakhstan,

the British joint stock company “Spassky Copper Ore” developed the Spassko-Uspensky copper mine and the Karaganda coal deposit; Joint Stock Company “Atbasar Copper Mines” was developing the Dzhezkazgan mine and began building the Karsakpai copper smelting plant. In East Kazakhstan, the British Ridder Mining Industrial Joint Stock Company was developing the Ridder, Zyryanovskoye and other deposits of polymetallic ores, while the British joint stock company Kyrgyz Mining Company was developing the Ekibastuz coal deposit. Both these companies were subsidiaries of the “Russian-Asian Corporation”.

In 1905, the British interests acquired Spassky enterprises from the heirs of Ryazanov. The Spassky copper-smelting plant, the Uspensky mine and Karaganda coal mines were transferred to the disposal of the British. On July 1, 1907 in London, a joint stock company “Spassky Copper Ore” with a fixed capital of 3 million pounds was set up. This joint-stock company built the Spassky copper smelter, with a production capacity of 300 thousand tons per year between 1906 and 1907.

Thus advanced technology at that time, and experience in developing mineral resources around the world, helped British capital to penetrate the heart of the steppe.



Certificate for the Spassky copper-smelting plant opened in Kazakhstan



Top: A bard entertains a group of Kazakhs on The Steppe. Bottom: Thomas Atkinson’s watercolour of Lucy and her guides on lake Altin Kool