

OBITUARY

GEORGE ATKINSON 1885–1974

(M.B.A. STAFF 1904–1910)

By the death of George Tatton Atkinson at Lowestoft on the 30th November, 1974, in his ninetieth year, the last link is broken with those famous pioneering days when the M.B.A. undertook, on behalf of the Government, the first official English fishery investigations by opening a special laboratory at Lowestoft in 1902 under the direction of Dr Walter Garstang. It is fitting that the life of George Atkinson should be recorded in our pages. Born in 1885 he came from a great sea-faring family and combined his love of the sea with an intense interest in marine natural history. As soon as he left school in 1904 he joined Garstang as an assistant working particularly on the biology of the plaice.

It was during these investigations that Atkinson made a most important contribution to fisheries research and to the problem of over-fishing. He made a voyage on one of the first trawlers to visit the Barents Sea in 1907 and took the opportunity of making a detailed study of the age composition of the plaice that were caught on this 'virgin' ground – one never fished before. He saw at once the striking difference between the state of the stock here and that of the heavily fished North Sea with which he was familiar. His classic paper in volume 8 of our *Journal*, pp. 71–98, published in 1908, makes the significance of this difference abundantly clear. The stock of the unfished ground consisted of a very high proportion of old fish in poor condition, the majority of the younger fish, so poorly represented, having been starved to death by the rapacious demands of the larger fish for food. In the overfished North Sea the opposite condition held: a relatively small proportion of good-sized fish and a majority of small young fish of poor economic value. Here was the key to the over-fishing problem and it was Atkinson who brought it to light. On a virgin ground the bulk of the available food goes to support old fish in poor condition – little of it going to increased growth; on an over-fished ground the young are not given sufficient time to grow to an economic size before they are caught. Up to a point, fishing improves a fishery, beyond this point overfishing yields a poorer and poorer return. Let us not forget George Atkinson's important discovery – made so soon after leaving school. It soon brought him into contact with all the leaders of fishery research in Europe.

In 1910, when the Board of Agriculture and Fisheries took over fishery investigations, George Atkinson moved to the headquarters in London. Shortly after this transfer he joined the newly formed Inspectorate of Fisheries and there followed a period of intensive travel round the many fishing ports of Great Britain, where his scientific background and wide knowledge of the Industry was of great help.

During the 1914–1918 War he served in the R.N.V.R. as Intelligence Officer at Lowestoft Naval Base where he was responsible for measures to ensure the safe working of East Anglian fishing fleets in the North Sea, and for selecting skippers to command

the armed smacks being used as decoys against U-boats. After the War he returned to the Fisheries Service and became Inspector of Fisheries for the Eastern Area. His great and abiding interest was the East Anglian herring fishery. Whilst the Industry had seen its golden days just before the War, it was still of vital importance in the post-war years. Unfortunately it was now in decline, due to overseas trade restrictions and the growth of the foreign fishing fleets. This affected him deeply and he travelled widely in Western Europe to give technical advice in connexion with the complicated international legislation beginning to affect the Industry's overseas market. He lectured, broadcast and wrote many articles on the herring fisheries.

In the Second World War he was appointed Port Fisheries Captain for Lowestoft, working in close collaboration with the Naval Officer in Charge and the Commanding Officer of the Patrol Service Depot. He was commended by the Admiralty for his work in salvaging the S.S. 'Royal Crown' in early 1940.

After his retirement in 1946 George Atkinson kept up his lively interest in the Fishing Industry and in 1948 gave the Buckland Lectures. He married Miss Jean Anderson Cooper in 1914 and after she died in 1971 he continued to live in the house in which they had so long lived together overlooking his beloved North Sea. They leave three sons. George will long be remembered with affection and admiration as one of the notable characters of East Anglia and the North Sea.

ALISTER HARDY