

## THE ATKINSONS AT HOME

*William Gaul*

### BACKGROUND

History – somewhat loosely defined here as "*a record of events and of the doings of people*" – becomes accessible to us in various forms: the written word, the oral tradition, pictograms of various types, and in terms of more recent history at least, via audio recordings and photographs. It is this latter source of historical information on which my focus falls in this article, and the history that it deals with is very specific: that of the house in which I live and the family who built it and first lived here. Most often, though, old photographs, unless they are well documented, don't provide too much historical information: unrecognized faces and unknown names and places are all too frequently all that is revealed, perhaps with some indication of fashions in clothing, hairstyles and furniture the only real historical yield from such pictures.

Soon after moving into the house about twenty-five years ago, I was informed that it had a name – *Cragside* – which was apparently customary in Parktown when the house was built in 1910. Since there were few houses, particularly on this western side of the old Government road (now Jan Smuts Avenue), there was little point in giving the isolated, far-flung dwellings numbers – hence the need for names to identify each house. Why the name *Cragside* was chosen must for the present remain a matter of conjecture: the house *is* built on a site which ends on its southern side in a precipitous drop of about four or five metres, and a "crag" is defined as a "*rugged rock or cliff*"; or perhaps the original owners named it, tongue-in-cheek, after the magnificent house in Northumberland, built by the industrialist, William Armstrong (Pettit: 1986). Whatever the case, it was largely the name of the house which led to the unfolding of the story that follows.

Several years later, a tourist on one of the P&WHT tours must have seen the nameplate on the gate – the house occasionally forms part of the Parktown West tours – and contacted Flo Bird to say that she had come across a photograph album among her father's belongings. She did not know or recognize any of the people in the photos, but among the captions was mention of certain places in Johannesburg: Crown Mines, Belgravia - and Parktown. Even more to the point is that reference was made to a house in Parktown called *Cragside* – and she had recently seen that name on her tour!

She was told that a member of the Trust lived at *Cragside* in Parktown, and was given our contact details. She e-mailed me, and a meeting was set up, at which she produced the album which is the subject of this article.

The album – a typical late-Victorian tome of mock leather embossed in gold - contains some 120 photos, which, together with their captions, provide what must be a unique insight into the lives of the members of a young, middle-class English family who settled at the beginning of the last century in the rapidly developing town of Johannesburg.

### The photographs

Like those in most family albums, the photographs are not arranged in strict chronological order, which, to some extent, complicates the story that they have to tell. Some of the images are faded, but the majority are in surprisingly good condition: whoever it was that developed and printed them was obviously an expert in his field. The same has to be said of the photographer/s. Although the photographs are not professionally taken images (apart from one or two), they nonetheless reflect a certain expertise on the part of the photographers.

Obviously in monochrome, they have withstood a century with remarkable tenacity: many still contain a sparkle and verve that highlight the lives that they reflect. Unlike many late Victorian and early Edwardian photos, they avoid that stilted quality so characteristic of the early days of photography. Even where they have been posed, a certain lightness and *joie de vivre* is readily apparent.

### The family

RC Atkinson<sup>1</sup> appears to have come out to South Africa from England aboard the RMS Briton in 1900, to "... *join the forces – Boer War*"., according to the caption. He is shown, oddly enough, with a party of revelers on deck, most of whom are in fancy dress as though they were about to attend a fancy-dress ball. Atkinson, however, with one or two others, is in full military uniform, but without any rank or regimental insignia visible. His uniform is that of an officer, according to Mr H Gillespie (2010) of the National War Museum: he wears a Sam Browne belt (not the ordinary form where the

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<sup>1</sup> The names of Mr and Mrs Atkinson are never mentioned in any of the captions to the photographs – they are referred to as "Daddy" and "Mother". Atkinson's initials were obtained from the original house plans, which I have in my possession. His baptismal names – Robert Charles – were obtained from the title deed of the property. The first photograph in the album gives the full name of Atkinson's daughter Katherine Marie (Mollie) Atkinson.

strap passes diagonally across the chest, but in the form where two straps drop from the shoulders to the waist belt); a holstered side arm, and bears a sword with a large sword-knot. Tucked into Atkinson's belt is what appears to be a leather covered swagger stick. The Sam Browne, the side-arm and the sword all suggest that he was a commissioned officer, probably a lieutenant. His uniform further consists of a battle-dress jacket, riding breeches with leggings, and a forage cap. It would appear that Atkinson was coming to South Africa as a member of the Imperial Yeomanry, that body of Volunteers raised in Britain in the aftermath of Black Week. The reason for the absence of regimental insignia could possibly be that he was at the time not yet assigned to a regiment<sup>2</sup>



*Fancy dress Ball on RMS Bbriton 1900*

Mrs Atkinson remains something of a mystery. She appears to have been older than Atkinson, and the only indications that we have that she, too, came from England are, first, a photograph of her on the Isle of Wight, at Shankley, taken in 1898. She is wearing gloves, so there is no way of telling whether or not she was married at that time. Secondly, when the family traveled to England in 1909, they appear to have visited two sets of grandparents: Mrs Atkinson's family seems to have lived at North Shields, where the two Atkinson children, Osmer and Mollie, are shown with "a crowd of cousins"; and Atkinson's parents lived in Southampton. A photograph of Atkinson, his parents and Mollie is captioned "*The three generations*".

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<sup>2</sup> It is possible that he was, in fact, also in "fancy dress" – but this seems unlikely on a ship *en route* to SA during the Anglo Boer War. Also, the caption does indicate that he was on his way to "join the forces".



*The Three Generations – Southampton 1909*

### Family Life

What we do know is that by 1902, Mr and Mrs Atkinson were married and settled in their "*first cottage*" at Crown Reef. Presumably, Atkinson had left the army and had found employment as an engineer on the Crown Reef mine. It is quite remarkable how quickly after the war, people were able to begin or resume normal civilian life in Johannesburg – probably largely attributable to the existence of the Witwatersrand mines and their seemingly inexhaustible demand for labour.

A photograph, taken indoors, presumably using a primitive form of flash, shows a charming domestic scene: Mrs Atkinson is sitting at the dining table, reading. The table is covered with a heavy, brocaded cloth, and the dining chairs are of a solid construction, upholstered in leather attached with brass studs. The dining room walls are covered in pictures and other ornaments, suspended from the picture rail – among them is the famous "Monarch of the Glen", which must have been a favourite, as it appears as a smaller print, in a another photo, taken at a different time and in a different house. Hanging from the tongue-and-groove ceiling is a rather ornate light fitting, apparently powered by gas. At the time, the gas would have been manufactured on site from a mixture of carbide and water. The heavy side-board, ornately carved, is

covered by the family silver, while the centre-piece on the table at which the chatelaine sits is a bowl of flowers.



*Mother and Daddy – First Cottage – Crown Reef - 1902.>*

Atkinson sits at the open upright piano, not playing, but relaxed and looking back over his shoulder into the room. The piano, too, is bedecked with ornaments, clock and candle sticks. The lady of the house has very quickly created a stylish space in what must have been a bleakly stark wood-and-iron dwelling. This picture has the caption: "*Mother and Daddy in our first cottage at Crown Reef before we had any Osmer or Mollie*";. Osmer was, however, soon to make his entrance.

A 1903 photograph shows Mrs Atkinson, obviously in "a delicate condition", sitting in the cottage yard in a large wicker armchair, supported by a well-plumped cushion and covered by a strategically placed rug. She is closely attended by her husband, who leans over her protectively, as well as, strangely enough, "*Our first servant, Steamer*". Steamer stands proudly, one hand on his hip, the other clutching the top of the wicker chair; he is resplendent in long white apron, bow tie and striped braces. Accompanying the party is a small white dog, the first of many family pets, named "*Flossie*".



*Mother. Daddy. Our first servant, Steamer & Flossie - 1903>*

The fact that Steamer was male points to an interesting sociological phenomenon: the demand for black male domestic servants arose simultaneously with the arrival of the first wagons in the mining camp (van Onselen 2001:210). According to this author, the historical process of proletarianisation had resulted in the domestic service sector being dominated by black males – and it was only between 1906 and 1908 that a significant number of black women began to compete for employment as domestics. Their arrival in Johannesburg and elsewhere on the Witwatersrand was as a result of various factors, such as economic depression, cattle disease and drought (2001:223). Certainly, the family was still served by a male domestic, named Jim, in 1904 – he is shown holding a one-year old Osmer, and he wears the badge of service: a large white apron, albeit with collar and striped tie.

Another interesting side-light on the picture showing Steamer with the family is that it demonstrates clearly the importance of conserving water in early Johannesburg: a rather intricate set-up of corrugated iron water tanks is shown, together with the down-pipes leading from the cottage's roof. This was still the case when the Atkinson's built their Parktown (or "Park Town" as the township was then known) house, where at least two large tanks were installed.

Osmer arrived in October 1903. Little is known of his very early life: the first we see of him is in his play-pen at the age of eleven months, and then together with his three



*Osmer 11 months – Resident engineer's House – 1904*

week-old sister and Mother. In this photograph, he is about eighteen months old, and is still in what I believe were called "short clothes", but to which there is very little contemporary reference. These were clothes at which most modern parents would look somewhat askance: they were very feminine, comprising a type of smock top over what look suspiciously like petticoats. Male infants today tend to be dressed in clothes - more or less from birth - that can only be described as macho. Not so with Victorian and Edwardian children – the "cult of the baby", flowing from Queen Victoria's having had nine of them, was still very much part of family life. The three week-old Mollie is dressed in what might well be her christening robe – satin and lace seem to predominate in this beautiful creation.

These early photographs of the children are also interesting because they contain another clue to the social standing of the Atkinsons. According to van Onselen (2001: 237), it was only immediately after the Anglo-Boer war – and the increase on the Witwatersrand of the number of wives and mothers -that the demand for professional children's nurses began to be felt.: *<photo 6 already inserted Katherine Marie (Mollie) Atkinson ... with Sister Williams - 1905>* Sister Trilby Williams, who was the attendant at Mollie's birth, seems to have been part of the



household. She is shown sitting on the stoep of the wood-and-iron "*Resident Engineer's Residence*", in the familiar high-backed wicker chair, holding a tiny Mollie. In full nursing regalia – long white dress, veil, high collar, cape and medallions - Sister Williams cuts an impressive figure. Not only is she dressed in a manner that indicates and, indeed enhances, her professional status, but she also exudes intelligent confidence. The fact that the family was able to employ one of her calibre surely indicates that they were relatively well-off financially. Even when the children have reached the age of six or seven years, they still are attended by a full-time (white) nurse. They are shown on what is obviously a family outing, sitting on a rock in the "*Yokeskey*" (a direct translation of "Jukskei") river with "*Nurse Downs*".

### Clothes

Naturally, the clothes that the children wear change as they grow older. Osmer soon finds himself in knee-breeches and sandals with socks. The harsh African sun was warded off with a variety of head gear for both children: Osmer wears a sombrero when he is playing in the garden, and Mollie sports wide-brimmed hats, usually flower-bedecked. She is most often shown in white dresses and pinafores, with sandals and what would later be called "bobby socks" – strangely, of a dark colour.

Very typical of the era are the sailor-suits worn by Osmer; as he gets older, the suits become more elaborate, and at one point, he is dressed as a "*sailor captain*", complete with peaked cap, double-breasted tunic and telescope (a roll of paper). In an age devoid of canned entertainment, dressing up in various costumes was very much part of entertaining children, and military- style costumes were favoured by Osmer. He is shown as "*Colonel Osmer*" is what appears to be the uniform of an Hussar, standing alongside Mollie dressed as a lady with voluminous skirt and brocaded top.



*Colonel Osmer Atkinson and Lady Mollie – 1908*

Most of his ordinary clothing seems to have a military flavour: brass buttons and heavy leather belts.

This entertainment factor in dressing is most apparent when the children – particularly Mollie – don fancy dress. She is shown as a "little Jap", in kimono and appropriate headdress.



*Osmer & Mollie – a little Jap*

Sandals for both children appear to have been de rigeur; Osmer wears boots and shoes only when he has reached school-going age.

One of the stranger (at least to modern eyes) aspects of dressing the children, presumably for entertainment, is the practice of cross-dressing: Osmer is shown as "*Miss Osmer*", in dress and hair ribbons, and Mollie as "*Master Mollie*", in double-breasted, brass-buttoned top and short trousers.

Fancy dress seems to have been very much part of adult life, too. As referred to above the first picture of Atkinson is taken with a group in fancy dress aboard the *RMS Briton*, although he himself is dressed in military uniform. Later, in 1909, on the voyage back from a holiday in England aboard the *SS Galician*, both Mr and Mrs Atkinson are photographed in fancy dress, he as Napoleon, and she as a nun. Any Freudian interpretation is left to the reader.

As Osmer gets older, we begin to see him in his school uniform. Even on the beach while on holiday in Durban, he is in full uniform with the initials of his school – Park Town School – emblazoned on the floppy hat. When he reaches the age of nine, the uniform appears to change. He is shown in basher, Eton collar, short jacket (known, I believe, as a "bum freezer") and waist coat. Here, for the first time, he wears long trousers and lace-up shoes.



*Osmer at P.T.S. - 1912*

Adult dress also provides some interesting side-lights. Mrs Atkinson, while relaxing (if that rather formidable lady ever really relaxed) on the beach in Durban, is attired still in Victorian – very early Edwardian – clothing, even to the wearing of gloves. She never allowed herself to be photographed in *dishabille*. Always immaculate, with high collar, and long sleeves, she chose to wear a veil when motoring, and sometimes appears in spectacles – which tend to make her look a little owlish, but which also has the effect of softening her usually grim expression.

Atkinson himself is never shown collarless; the closest he comes to letting his hair down is when he is pictured in front of his newly built Park Town House, still in jacket, collar and tie, but in a comfortable-looking pair of tartan slippers



*Osmer, Daddy & Mollie - 1910.*

He appears to have favoured flat caps, and, for motoring, he chose a solar tope.

#### Childhood Toys and Activities

Both Osmer and Mollie are shown at various stages of their childhood with an array of toys, and engaging in different forms of play. Osmer is shown shortly after the move into the Resident Engineer's house at Crown Reef in his new play-pen (the price tag is still attached), in the still uninviting back garden.

Slightly older, the children are shown with their father and a beautifully carved horse, complete with flowing mane and tail, saddle, bridle and stirrups, set on a skate-board type contrivance. A second photograph shows Osmer mounted, in military-style uniform, "... *breaking in a spirited horse*".

Slightly more tranquil is the image of Osmer and Molly at work in the garden, using a beautiful miniature wooden wheelbarrow, filled with soil. Again the children are dressed for the part – Molly, for example, wears a pinafore and a Cossack style hat, while Osmer wears his sombrero. Gardening – or more accurately, the growing of plants – seems to have loomed large in the lives of the Atkinsons. Not only do the photographs reveal surprisingly vigorous plant growth in the outdoor spaces, but the family was not averse to planting in any type of container that came their way. Particularly useful were 5-gallon paraffin tins and wooden vats which had been cut in half. One of the more prominent outdoor features of the house eventually to be built in Parktown is a pair of large cast-iron pots which stood – and still stand – on either side of the front steps. Photographs show Osmer and Mollie sitting in these pots soon after having moved in. Gardening seems to have been a particular pleasure for the children, either working by themselves, or with their mother. Mrs Atkinson appears to have had green fingers, as she was able very quickly to turn a bare yard into surprisingly lush garden beds.

The children were exposed to a variety of other pastimes and activities: they are shown "...*paddling at Mulders Drift*", walking along the edge of Florida Lake, and bathing in the "*Yokeskey River*"

By 1907, Osmer had graduated to a proper rocking-horse – again, a very impressive beast, with all the usual equestrian accoutrements. He is shown "... *on his favourite charge*", in the Crown Reef nursery. The nursery itself is revealing of a certain way of life: first, the very fact that the family had a special room set aside as a nursery tells us that they undoubtedly belonged to what sociologists today might refer to as "middle middle class" (as opposed to "lower middle class" and "upper middle class"). People at this level of society were usually professionals (Mr Atkinson, as the resident engineer at Crown Reef mine, certainly was). They obviously had sufficient disposable income (the sociological jargon is regrettable) to be able to afford, not only a professional live-in nurse and separate nursery, but also the obviously costly toys and clothing that their children enjoyed. Of course, many people today prepare a nursery when a child is expected – but this is soon converted into the child's bedroom; it does not remain a nursery for very long.

Secondly, the nursery gives a clue to a certain way of rearing children. An echo of the Victorian idea of children being "seen and not heard" may be discerned here: although the Atkinson's appear to have been very kind and caring parents, the nursery as we see it in the photographs suggests a place where the children spent much of their time, rather than in, say, the drawing room or kitchen, as might be the case with children today. This notion is strengthened by a photograph of Mollie presiding over a doll's tea-party in the nursery at Christmas in 1907. The nursery is decorated with bunting, prominent among which is a Union Jack, and central to the picture is a large Christmas tree, decorated with a multitude of baubles and gifts. This surely suggests that the nursery was the centre of the children's indoor lives. It was furnished with an upright piano, iron bedsteads and the ubiquitous wash stand with ewer and basin – and was home to their many toys.

1907 sees Osmer at the wheel of a pedal car.



*Osmer & Mollie – Crown Reef Garden 1907.>.*

Apparently made of metal, the strange-looking vehicle's make is tantalizingly just out of sight. The pedals are clearly visible, as the car is suspended relatively high above the large wheels. Again, this toy gives the appearance of having cost Mr Atkinson a few pounds. The following year was when the family moved from Crown Reef to Belgravia and by this time Mollie had acquired an impressive collection of both dolls and Teddy Bears – one of which was easily as big as she was then.

Two toys remain to be mentioned: Osmer is shown holding a kite which, as in most contemporary illustrations showing these playthings, has a curved top, rather than the more usual diamond shape seen today. Finally, on Osmer's ninth birthday in 1911, a photograph shows him operating a most superior-looking steam engine.



*Osmer and his birthday present - 1911*

His birthday gift seems to give some indication of the career direction his father had chosen for him. While of course none of the toys shown in the pictures could be described as "hi-tech", it is clear that Mr Atkinson, probably because of his engineering background, chose toys for his son that, at the time, were "cutting edge". The pedal car and steam engine are two examples that spring to mind.

### Motor Cars

Atkinson's partiality to things mechanical is to be seen also in the photographs taken of him in the two cars that he owned between 1905 and 1911. "*Daddy. First Drive in First Car*" is the caption of a photograph showing a slightly bemused Atkinson – he has not yet quite acquired the dash of a Toad of Toad Hall, his Edwardian contemporary - clad in gaiters and flat cap, at the wheel of his beautiful 18-20 Astor.



*Daddy. First drive in his first car - 1905*

He is shown driving out of the gate of his residence on Crown Reef in 1905 in the car, with its one central headlamp, and numbered simply "43". One of the notable features of this collection of photographs is that in none of them do horses feature (apart from Osmer's "steeds"), nor is there any sign of a bicycle. Again, for the family to have acquired a car as early as 1905 suggests their rapid upward social mobility. That a motor car was considered to be a powerful symbol of prosperity is suggested by the fact that in many of the photographs, the family car appears in the background. Not for this family the nuisance of having to stable and feed a horse; not for them the indignity of having to cycle. Outings were frequent, and they took place in the family car.

By 1909, the family had already exchanged the Astor for a Buick, again strangely designated an "18-20", and Mother, Mollie - and Osmer "*at the wheel*" - are shown returning from a trip to the "Yokeskey" in 1910. The vehicle is magnificent, with gleaming brass headlamps, wooden-spoked wheels and sumptuously curving hooter, topped with a rotund black bulb.

A third vehicle – with the registration number TJ 73, is photographed with Atkinson standing with distinctly proprietorial air, alongside, in front of the newly built *Cragside* in 1911.



uncaptioned

This car was presumably the seventy-third to have been registered in Johannesburg, which indicates that Atkinson was not only one of the earliest motor vehicle owners in the town, but also one of the first to be registered as such. The make of the car has not been identified, but it appears to have been a type of sports car – very much smaller than the family Buick.

### Houses

We have traced the progress of the young family from their "*first cottage on Crown Reef*", through the rather imposing wood-and-iron "*Resident Engineer's House*" into which they moved soon after Osmer's birth, in 1904. This rectangular house had a trellis-enclosed stoep running across the front, with a centralized small gable on the verandah roof, directly above the front door. Flanking the door are a pair of large sash windows, and two imposing chimneys are symmetrically placed at the apex of the corrugated iron roof. To the right of the house is what appears to be a three-faceted bay window, with a sash let into each facet. Rising from the central point of the stoep roof is a stately flag pole, adding to the impression of solidity and status that the house suggests.



*Resident Engineer's House – Crown Reef - 1904*

Crown Reef was one of the wealthiest of the early Rand mines, and the accommodation offered to its officials reflects that status.

In 1909, the family was prospering to an extent that permitted them to travel by rail to Cape Town, where they embarked on a voyage "home" aboard the *Dover Castle*. In England, they visited both sets of grandparents – his in Southampton, and hers at North Shields –and the children were introduced to "a crowd of cousins". They also enjoyed that quintessential Victwardian (to coin a phrase) holiday treat: riding donkeys over the sands of Tynemouth. Either before they left for England, or on their return, the family moved from Crown Reef to a house in the then select suburb of Belgravia – or at least to a house which they referred to as "Belgravia" - where they were living in 1910. Presumably, this was stop-gap accommodation while they waited for the completion of the Parktown house. Little is known of "Belgravia House", except that it was brick-built, and had imposing columns on either side of the front door. We are also shown a flight of twelve steps leading up to what was presumably the back entrance. It may be assumed that they lived here while "Cragside" was being built – because they had moved into the Parktown house by the end of 1910.

A photograph, dated 1910, and captioned simply *Osmer, Daddy & Mollie*, shows a very complacent Atkinson, sitting in a wicker chair and flanked by his equally self-satisfied children, in front of the obviously just-completed *Cragside*. Atkinson sports a flat cap, three-piece suit with wing-collared shirt - and tartan slippers, while Osmer wears his trade-mark sailor-suit, and Mollie is dressed in a party frock, with matching shoes and socks and hair ribbon. The ground on which they are photographed still carries the

evidence of recent building activity, and would later form part of the bricked oval driveway at the front of the house.

The family had reason for complacency: their beautiful new home in Parktown was now a reality. They had come a long way in a relatively short period, from the Crown Reef cottage to *Cragside*, a double-storey house on half an acre of ground. This was Parktown – where Atkinson's ultimate boss, Lionel Phillips had recently built his home, "Villa Arcadia". Certainly, "Cragside" was not in the same mold in terms of either size or style; nonetheless, the house points to the Atkinson's astonishing upward social mobility and financial prosperity. In 1911, just after having moved into their new home – never an inexpensive exercise - they took a holiday in Durban, where they enjoyed the usual treats, such as rickshaw (sic) rides and sea bathing.



*Osmer & Mollie enjoying a rickshaw ride. Durban 1911*

Atkinson, as a senior Corner House official<sup>3</sup>, was reaping the rewards, not only of his own hard work and professional skill, but also of being part of "... the most profitable amalgamation of (mining houses) the formation, in 1909, of Crown Mines by which the Crown Reef Gold Mining Company absorbed the Paarl Central, Langlaagte Deep, Robinson Central Deep, South Langlaagte, New Vierfontein mines, South Rand Gold Mining company and South Deeps Limited (which) proved to be ... far and away the most successful gold mining company yet established" (Cartwright 1962:237).

What, then, was the nature of this house, built by one who had arrived in South Africa as an obscure junior military officer, in the middle of an energy- and wealth-sapping war, barely ten years before? "Cragside" was designed by the architects Arthur and

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<sup>3</sup> He is so described in a caption to a group photograph which appears in "The Golden Age" by AP Cartwright (19XX:YY).

Walter Reid, Fellows of the Royal Institute of British Architects, of Regis Buildings in Johannesburg<sup>4</sup>. The house was placed on the stand facing due south. The reason for this orientation must remain a matter of conjecture. Perhaps they subscribed to the principle enunciated by Herbert Baker's partner, Wilmot Sloper – a near neighbour to "Cragside", and who had orientated his own house similarly. Sloper had said that the orientation should depend on the prospect, and the prospect here to the south was at the time of designing the house very much more expansive than that to the north, which is cut off by the Parktown Ridge. Whether this is or is not the case, the orientation of the house has resulted in the one major alteration that has been effected during the house's hundred year history: the enclosure of the first-floor verandah, which would have been out of bounds during the winter months, and also the enclosure of two of the three arches in the ground floor façade. In the case of the first floor, this was done by inserting a large, louvered steel window, and in the case of the arched openings on the ground floor, by inserting custom-made steel windows. The arches were thus not lost.

The photographs available to us unfortunately never reveal the whole façade – only tantalizing glimpses of the house as background to family shots <insert photo 16 *Osmer. Mother. Mollie. Cragside 1911.*>. They do show, however, a rather strange bay window (confirmed in the original drawings) set at 45° to the house at the south-west corner. With the enlargement of the drawing room to include the ground floor verandah, this unique feature was lost.

The house stands four-square on a plinth of dressed stone. The front entrance is approached up a stair way with low plastered walls on either side. The stairs widen welcomingly as they reach ground level, and are decorated on either side by low pillars, on which stand the cast-iron pots mentioned above. On the east side of the front entrance is a bay window, which extends to the first floor. The single gable rises above this double volume bay, and it contains a miniature replica of the bay windows. A dentilated cornice runs along the façade, and the east and west walls bear chimneys, two on the east and one on the west sides. The chimneys terminate in elegant stacks. In all, the house gives the impression of solidity and presence. – which is presumably precisely what the owners sought.

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<sup>4</sup> The Reid brothers were responsible, either jointly or severally, for the design of several other domestic buildings in Parktown. They also designed the Cosmopolitan Hotel (still in existence) at the eastern end of Commissioner Street; the second Rand Club building; and the Polana Hotel in Lourenco Marques, now Maputo.

Photographs of the house invariably show members of the family, either alone or with friends. Osmer's eight birthday, for example, is recorded by a group photograph of a number of his friends and other children, much younger than he. Another is of the mothers present at the party – all of whom, apart from Mrs Atkinson, wear large hats, ornately decorated. What is interesting in these photographs are the stones used to edge the garden beds alongside the house – stones which remain there today, a century later. Certain of the photographs show a metal garden arch following the curve of the arch over the front entrance, erected some time between the completion of the house and 1912. This structure was discovered shortly before the album was acquired, buried under years of leaf-mould at the bottom of the garden. It was resurrected on the north side of the house, where it today plays host to a rambling rose and wisteria creeper.

Very few interior shots are presented, but one – of *Mollie's Birthday Party Table* – taken presumably in the dining room, show that the walls were covered with a patterned wall paper.

Some features of the original building, which are not shown in the album, but which may be of interest to the reader, include a beautiful art nouveau stained glass window, let into the north wall above the stair-well, and that staple of Victorian domestic life: a cauldron, or "copper". This satisfyingly rotund, heavily riveted vessel of the eponymous metal was built into the wall of what was called the "motor shed", over its own fire-place and with its own chimney, and was used to boil the household linen.

This, of course, points to a time – before washing machines, detergents and bleaches - when "the weekly wash" was a matter of some moment for the household, and, if undertaken as prescribed by the authorities of the era, took place over two or three days. First, there was the need to sort the wash, do any mending necessary, and soak on the day before wash day, which was to commence early. The washing process involved a number of steps: lighting the boiler fire and adding some of the resultant hot water to the soaking clothes, which were then washed out to remove any stains – the soaking "... will have rendered hard rubbing almost unnecessary" (Mrs Black 1886:129). (One cannot help suspecting that it is perhaps in the word "almost" that the true rub lies). The clothes are then put in a second tub with warm water, and washed again – "always beginning with the finest articles". The clothes are then dropped into a *third* tub of cold water, where they are left to lie. The copper is then filled with cold water, to which is added "a quarter of an inch of soap" to each gallon, and a dessert spoon of washing powder ("soda is not nearly so nice, as it gives linen a greyish

colour"). The clothes are roughly wrung and placed in the boiler, where they are boiled gently for ten to fifteen minutes, after which they are removed, and the next quantity is placed in the boiler. The washing that has been removed from the boiler has cold water poured onto it, and rinsed "once or twice", remembering to use hot water for the first rinse. After the last rinsing, they must be blued. Each item is to be dipped into a tub containing a small quantity of water, tinged with blue; after this, clothes must be wrung, shaken, folded and set aside. Blue needs to be added to the water from time to time "to keep up the shade". This process to be repeated till all clothing is done – and then the process to be repeated with the bed and table linen. And we haven't even begun to think of the drying and ironing that must inevitably follow!<sup>5</sup>

I have presented this far-from exhaustive (but pretty exhausting) exposition on Victwardian household washing simply to high-light how one artifact – a "copper" – may lead one to discover aspects of life we generally never pause to think about – as, on a larger scale, the photograph album has done.

One final feature of the house that has to be mentioned is the wall that runs along Escombe Avenue. Made of an extremely hard stone known colloquially as "blaauwklip", a type of quartz, the wall is made up of two layers: the inside layer being of a type of "random rubble" construction, while the outer, street-facing layer is of hammer dressed blocks – each cut square by hand with a hammer and chisel. How long it took to cut the stones in this way is unknown – but what is known is that, today, there are very few, if any, craftsmen who could undertake this level of work.



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<sup>5</sup> The difficult process involved in keeping clothing and bedding clean explains the need in early Johannesburg for the "amawasha" and, later, the steam laundries such as Rand Steam laundry



And so we close the album which has afforded us the privilege of glimpsing briefly into the lives of the Atkinson family at the beginning of the previous century. Although our meeting with them has necessarily been but superficial, we come away with some appreciation of the way in which they – and many others – lived in Johannesburg at that time.

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