

# 100 Years in East Meon

## The Cumbrian Migration

It was the state of farming in this part of Hampshire at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century that led to a migration of a group of individual, yet neighbouring, farmers to sell up, in what was then Cumberland, and bring their families, livestock, goods and chattels down to East Hampshire. The land was 'Corn sick' and said to be "only capable of growing grass". The only water supply being the river Meon & dew ponds on the hills. But that was no problem to sturdy Cumberland farmers.

## Hud Smith

In 1890 **Hud Smith** came to manage Basing Park Estate, just north of the A272, and owned by one of the Nicholson Gin family. Hud Smith told other Cumbrian Farmers that they could come to Hampshire and take on big farms (500 to 600 acres each) at very low rentals. Currently they farmed between 40 and 80 acres in the northern Lakes, under Skiddaw one of Lakeland's highest mountains.

## Westbury Manor and Riplington Farms

As a result of this information **Robert Hind** of Millbeck Hall and **Isaac Wren** of Lowgrove Farm came down by train to West Meon from Keswick in 1893, to look at two farms in the Meon Valley, one was Westbury Manor Farm and the other Riplington Farm. Each man liked the other's farm better, so Robert took Westbury Manor Farm from Colonel Le Roy Lewis who owned Westbury House, and Isaac Wren took Riplington. The rent for both farms was 5/- (25p) per acre/annum.

Robert had four children, and the two boys, Alfred and Reginald, farmed Westbury after his death. The line died out as none of the children

married or had any offspring. Isaac Wren farmed Riplington Farm until his death, when it was taken over by his son Arthur who farmed it until the mid 1950s. Arthur had five children, Cyril who farmed at Liss, Arthur, Peter, Jean and Mary who is married to Tom Luff and farms at Ramsdean with their eldest son Graham and wife Debbie.

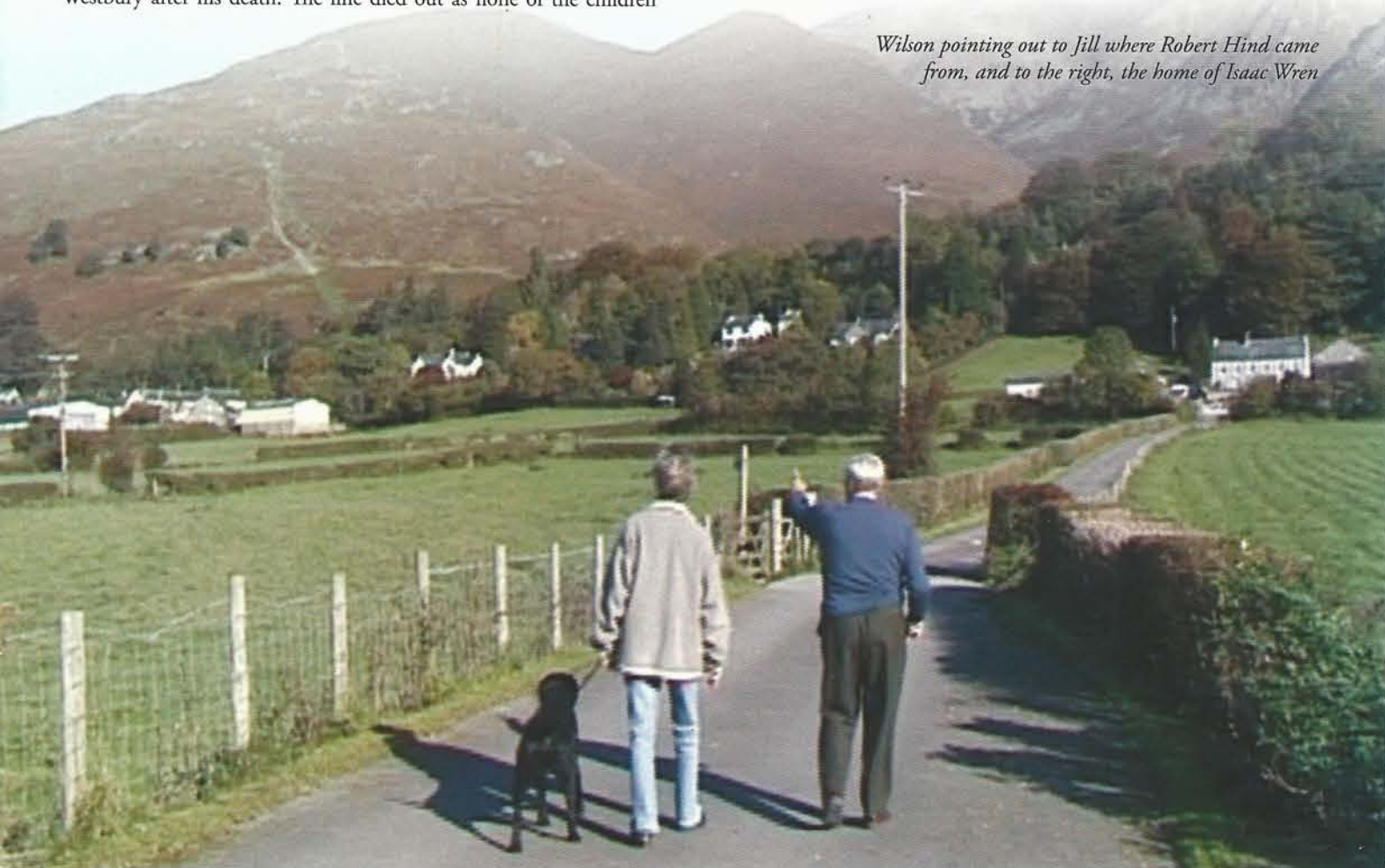
There is a story about the two families and the move down from Keswick. They booked a special train to bring them to Petersfield. They loaded livestock, a few implements and furniture on to the train and boarded a passenger coach themselves. The train was timed to arrive at Petersfield at 10.am and the carters with wagons from both farms were sent to meet them. Owing to delays en route, the train did not arrive until late afternoon, by which time the carters had spent a 'happy hour' or two, in the nearby pub and were quite merry by the time the train arrived. Happy Hampshire carters met travel weary Cumberland farmers, neither of whom properly understood each other's accents. What a recipe for disaster.

## Other Cumbrian Farmers Arrive

**John Fawcett** was next, moving to Manor Farm, West Tisted. **Fred Rook** followed in 1898, and after a period as a pupil of John Fawcett, took on Church Farm, Priorsdean. Today, Fred Rook's grandsons, Ian and Nicholas, farm at Manor Farm, Clanfield.

**John Edgar**, a close neighbour to the Wrens, was next. He looked at Tigwell Farm (now part of the Bereleigh Estate) but came to Old Place, East Tisted. In those days farms traditionally changed hands at Michaelmas (Sept 29<sup>th</sup>) or Lady Day (March 25<sup>th</sup>), the times in the year when rent was due to the Landlord. The **Mitchell's** who lived around Loweswater, one of the loveliest lakes in the Lake District, came, not to East Hampshire, but settled at Elsted just across in West Sussex.

*Wilson pointing out to Jill where Robert Hind came from, and to the right, the home of Isaac Wren*





# The Atkinsons of Skelgill Farm, Newlands Valley, Keswick, Cumberland

George and Mary Atkinson came next and took South Farm, East Meon from September 1905, but did not move down till March 1906. After them two further families came, Alf Stanley, went to Liss and Edwin Stanley to Bydean Farm, Froxfield.

This made a total of 9 families who came down to farm in Hampshire from Cumberland between 1892 and 1925, but apart from The Mitchell's of Elsted who still farm the same land, only one of the original nine families continue to farm and live in the same farmhouse to which their forebears came, and that is Michael Atkinson and his family at South Farm.

The name of Atkinson has been synonymous with Farming and Community matters in East Meon for just about 100 years. George and Mary Atkinson arrived with their family of five girls and two boys, from the small 40-acre Skelgill Farm, about 5 miles south west of the town of Keswick and at the start of the Newlands Valley. Skelgill is situated under the mountain called Catbells overlooking Derwentwater, the Lake in Beatrice Potter's story of Squirrel Nutkin, and seen in the picture opposite with Wilson Atkinson, the grandson of George Atkinson standing outside it in October 2004.

The actual date on which they came down is unknown but it was about the 19<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> March 1906, because farm records held at South Farm show an entry in the diary of certain fields being sown with grass seeds on 22<sup>nd</sup> of that month. The family, like Isaac Wren before them, hired a special train to bring family, livestock and goods and chattels down from Cumberland, but this time to West Meon.

*Pictured right (Sepia photograph): George Atkinson and family*  
*Pictured below: The Atkinsons of South Farm*  
*Pictured opposite page: from left, Wilson, Jill, George, Elizabeth & the boys*



*Wilson in front of Skelgill Farmhouse*

## South Farm

George Atkinson took the tenancy of South Farm from the executors of John Bonham Carter of Buriton with effect from September 1905. Isaac Wren of Riplington ran South Farm for George Atkinson for 6 months until he was in a position to move south in March 1906. The farm was 568 acres (129 hectare) with a rent of £293/annum, just over 10/- (50p)/acre.





# South Farm Mill

The farm included a working water mill, described in auction particulars as “The valuable recently erected brick and slate turbine water mill, driving a pair of gristing stones and all the machinery for chaff cutting, cake crushing, winnowing, having three fine large stores, with hoists to same.” At the sale of the previous tenant’s effects, George bought 5 Steers at £5 each and a further 7 at £4.50 each (£4.25 in today’s money). Other purchases from around the district included a water cart (£7). A tip cart (£9) and a saddle and bridle (16/- (80p)).

## Milk Production at South Farm

In the accounts for October 1909 the sale of milk from the farm first appeared and continued unbroken for 92 years until 2001 when milk production throughout the whole of the top end of the Meon Valley ceased due to poor prices. In those days the farmer received 1/6 pence per gallon (equivalent at today’s prices of just over 1.5p/litre).

## Sale of South and Lower Farms

In May 1908 the Bonham Carters sold 1450 acres made up of Hyden and Coombe woods (530 acres), South Farm (576 acres), (George Atkinson being the tenant at the time), Lower Farm (257 acres), with Sam Hardy as tenant, and Hyden Farm (87 acres). Lord Hotham’s Trustees purchased it. What is interesting about **Lord Hotham** is that he created an ambitious water supply scheme which involved putting in a pumping station at South Farm, almost adjacent to the springs the official source of the river Meon, and pumping the water to a reservoir on the top of the downs at Salt Hill and from there supplying by gravity “The Estate and the Village”. This today is still the main water supply for the village.

George and Mary Atkinson, the tenants of South Farm, seen in the picture left, with their five daughters and two sons. **George Wilson** sitting on the left was the eldest, and his younger brother **Joseph** (sitting on the right).

George Wilson joined the army during World War 1, and was taken prisoner by the Germans in France in March 1918. He was posted as missing. By coincidence **Albert Smith**, the village thatcher who lived at Frogmore, was also taken prisoner of war in May 1918. He met George Wilson at a reception camp and in a letter home to his family mentioned that they had met. That was the first indication that George Wilson was alive. On returning from being a P.O.W. in Germany, he arrived at Petersfield Station in the middle of the night, and walked home to South Farm, arriving around 4.30am unannounced, to the joy of the family and the herdsmen, Arthur Dowlen and his two sons, Sunner and Charlie who were milking at that hour.

George Atkinson senior died in the Petersfield Cottage Hospital on the 31<sup>st</sup> May 1922. George Wilson and his younger brother Joseph carried on the farming business at South Farm as partners. **Wilson Atkinson**, George’s grandson, told me that his father, George Wilson, fell in love with Sarah Cowx and as they wanted to get married, decided to take on the tenancy of Lower Farm from Sam Hardy when it came available in Michaelmas 1926. By this time **Lady Peel of Leydene House** was the landlord and the rent was £216 for just under 300 acres, 72pence/acre. In 1928 Lady Peel granted to the two brothers the grazing rights over Hockham and Small Down, plus Hockham Cottage, (where Wilson now lives with his wife Jill) a total of 159 acres for a rental of £35/annum. In addition, a further 52 acres was added in 1942, which brought the total farmed up to 1079 acres. A great increase from the 40 acres their father had farmed in Cumberland.

## Lady Peel & the Leydene Estate

In 1949 Lady Peel died and is buried in East Meon churchyard. In 1953 an auction sale was held in London when 10,309 acres of land were offered for sale. It included, under Lot 12, all the land that the Atkinson’s farmed, comprising, by now, some 1178 acres. All the farms had tenants and it was believed that Sir Dymock White, who owned a large part of the Southleigh Estate outside Havant, met some of the farmers on the north side of the Southdowns Way at The Bat & Ball, and suggested that they not bid against him as he would be bidding for the whole estate and would be prepared to sell them their farms after the sale. This is what happened, and in 1953 both Lower and South Farms were bought by George Wilson and Joseph. The brothers continued to farm the two farms in partnership until George Wilson’s death.





# Farming now & in to the Future

George Wilson died on 26<sup>th</sup> June 1958 and the Partnership of G.W. & J. Atkinson was dissolved on the 31<sup>st</sup> October 1958. J. Atkinson Ltd. was formed at South Farm by Joseph and then farmed by himself and his son Michael, until Joseph's death on the 22<sup>nd</sup> December 1965. Since then the farm has been run by Michael, and more recently by his two sons, Nicholas and Matthew.

At the same time Wilson Atkinson took over at Lower Farm and farmed it, and Peak Farm, West Meon, until his retirement in 1990 under the name of Wilson Atkinson Farms. His only son, George and daughter-in-law Elizabeth, now farm it. George has a young family of **James, William and Oliver**, and I wonder which one will be the farmer taking over from their father. This year they are celebrating 80 years at Lower Farm.

Currently Michael divides his time between the farm, where his idea of retirement is “doing what he wants to do when he wants to do it” and not “to do what needs to be done when it needs doing”, and his hobby which is his passion for Vintage Tractors. Of these he has about 20. He also has a commitment to the Village though the Parish Council, which, like his cousin Wilson before him, he currently is the Chairman. **Nicholas**, married to **Sue** who runs Harvesting Cream Teas through the summer at Parsonage Farm, has two children **Tilly**, and **Jack** seen in the picture with a lamb.

**Matthew**, Michael's youngest son, has three children, **Jenny and Joe**, and **Florence by his second wife Tina**. Joe, at the age of 13, is a very keen Rugby player and has just been selected for the Hampshire Under 14's Rugby Team. Jenny, is seen at the head of the scratch team of girls pulling against the boys in the Tug-of-War at the 2005 May Fair.

As we go into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, imagining what happened 100 years ago this month at South Farm, it may be difficult for readers to comprehend the brave decision that the Atkinsons took at that time, in moving 'lock stock and barrel' from one part of the country to another? Farmers, by their nature have to be adaptable, as weather, the public's buying habits, government legislation and many other factors influence their



lives. Will the Atkinsons be the farmers of one of the loveliest parts of East Hampshire, and still living here in another 100 years time? I leave it to our readers to muse on that one. In the meantime, the Editors of Meon Matters would like to be one of the first to wish all the Atkinsons, and their extended families, congratulations on their first 100 years in the valley, and to thank them, and farmers like them, for continuing as custodians of our lovely East Meon countryside.

Denys Ryder



Above: Jack with lamb



Above: Oliver, William and James with lambs

Left: Jenny at the Tug of War

The author of the article acknowledges with many thanks permission from Mary Luff to use excerpts from papers left by her brother the Late Cyril Wren of Liss, who was born at Riplington Farm, and wrote about the Cumbrian Migration. Also for the help that both Wilson and Michael in sorting out Atkinson family papers, where it appears to be a Cumbrian tradition to confuse the reader by calling ones' offspring either, Joseph, George, Wilson, or even George Wilson. I hope you the reader have got a clear picture of all the names. If so you deserve 100 extra bonus points!!