

October 2023



Dear Club Members,

In the past women in science often carved out roles for themselves adjacent to men, serving as assistants to their fathers, brothers and husbands. Their involvement varied, sometimes they were the driving forces behind much of the research, other times they acted as cataloguers, organisers, and in the case of Anna Atkins as illustrators. The role of these women was largely unacknowledged, with the man usually getting all the credit, but in the case of Anna Atkins, her work was recognised in her own lifetime.

Born in 1799 she was largely raised by her father, her mother died shortly after Anna's birth. He encouraged her education, with a particular emphasis on science, extremely unusual for the time. In 1823, two hundred years ago, her father, John George Children, translated *Genera of Shells*, the book written by Jean-Baptiste Lamarck. Lamarck was the first to use Biology as the word to describe the study of living things, and wrote extensively about evolution, though his theory about how species changed and evolved is no longer considered correct. He also created many taxonomies of invertebrates, taxonomy is the identifying, defining and classifying of species, and he has a particular interest in animals without backbones. Anna created over 200 illustrations for her father's book, something which would have required her to have great skill, and a good understanding of the anatomy of the creatures she was depicting.

Three years later she married John Pelly Atkins, a London West India merchant, but this doesn't seem to have halted her scientific career. Both her husband and father were friends of William Henry Fox Talbot, a pioneer of photography. It's from him that she learned the technique of "photogenic drawing" via a Royal Society meeting in 1839. An object is placed on light sensitive paper, and left in the sun. The sun changed the colour of the paper, and the object acts as a resist, leaving the area underneath white.

Both Anna Atkins and Constance Fox Talbot (wife of William), are considered the first female photographers, we know Anna owned a camera in 1840, but sadly none of her photographs survive.

The process of creating a cyanotype was developed by John Herschel, the polymath credited with inventing photography, and another family friend. In 1842 Anna applied this process to seaweed, her book *Photographs of British Algae: Cyanotype Impressions* was published in October 1843. It's considered to be the first book with photographic illustrations. Each book contained over 400 plates, each one produced by Anna herself. Over the next ten years 3 more volumes were published. There are now only 17 copies of her original book in existence.

Anna died in 1871, aged 72, but her work has proved to be a long lasting record of early photography, She collected plants throughout her life, supplying specimens to the archives at Kew Gardens, and her entire herbarium was donated to the British Museum in 1865.

Your fibre is inspired by her beautiful cyanotypes, and the seaweed that was used to create them. The power of the internet means her work is now digitised for us all to enjoy. The process she used is largely unchanged, and in comparison to much of the chemistry in the past is relatively safe, so next summer you could try the process for yourself.

Happy Spinning

Katie

Fibre Content- In case your parcel is missing the label

62.5% Corriedale

12.5% Seacell

12.5% Sari Silk

12.5% Mulberry Silk

Further Reading-

British Algae- [https://nhm.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/view/BookReaderViewer/44NHM\\_INST/12190875980002081](https://nhm.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/view/BookReaderViewer/44NHM_INST/12190875980002081)

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/286656>

Anna's life and work- <https://www.nhm.ac.uk/discover/anna-atkins-cyanotypes-the-first-book-of-photographs.html>

<https://artsandculture.google.com/story/the-forgotten-story-of-anna-atkins/IQLScKOCxpGpLg>

<https://scientificwomen.net/women/atkins-anna-162>

<https://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/caring-for-our-collections/a-blueprint-for-the-future-cyanotypes-by-anna-atkins>

<https://www.getty.edu/art/collection/person/103KDM>

<https://aperture.org/editorial/anna-atkins/>

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bTK\\_YU75Wbc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bTK_YU75Wbc)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vX8VC9ZUaIY>

Creating Cyanotypes-

<https://www.kew.org/read-and-watch/cyanotype-photography>

<https://www.gathered.how/arts-crafts/guide-to-cyanotype-printing/>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KQ438yKOEYA>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fcl13Kd9Aqc>