

OBITUARY: Peter Atkinson, connoisseur of gold, wine and cycling

Bernie Napp - Mon, 7 Sep 2020

A prominent figure in the Coromandel gold exploration and mining scene over three decades, Peter Atkinson (78) passed away last Thursday, in Queenstown.

Former colleagues recount stories of a Western Australian geologist who fought hard against a ban on mining on the peninsula, had a well-stocked wine cellar, and was a keen cyclist.

“Gold fever ran strong in his veins in a good way,” says Kristy Christensen, formerly a junior geologist for one of Atkinson’s companies, Prophecy Mining, in the South Island.

“I worked for him on a drilling project on the Carrick ranges for two weeks until we got chased out by snow. He had a massive love of New Zealand mining,” she recalls.

The call of the Coromandel

Retired geologist Richard Barker says he met Atkinson in the early 1980s when seeking to set up a company in New Zealand to explore for epithermal gold deposits in the Hauraki goldfield.

Atkinson incorporated Heritage Mining in 1985, acquiring a group of licences to the north of Thames in the Coromandel peninsula, and “floated the company on those in 1987”.

“Peter was extremely tenacious and a perfectionist who drove himself hard and could be a tough negotiator,” Barker says.

“But he was very loyal to those he worked with including me, and was always generous with his time and ideas. He gave me valuable support when I set up as an independent consultant in 1986, an arrangement that lasted until I retired in 2018.”

Heritage Mining changed its name to Heritage Gold in 1997, and then to New Talisman Gold Mines in 2012. Listed on the ASX and the NZX, the company today is concentrating on bringing a former underground mine in Karangahake back into gold production.

Murray Stevens, a director of NTGM and former exploration manager of Heritage Mining, says of Atkinson: “Peter above all else was a genuine mentor and friend to me for over 30 years.

“He provided employment opportunities to many young mining professionals who started with Heritage in the Coromandel, a number of whom have gone on to take up senior roles internationally as well as locally.

“He was also a great advocate of university research into the mineral deposits of the Coromandel and in providing support of student research projects.”

A government lobbyist

Atkinson knew on arriving in the Coromandel that mining there was a hot topic. He joined, and later became president of, the New Zealand Mining and Exploration Association, which had an office in Wellington.

Barker says: “As president, Peter played a major role in keeping the organisation and the industry together through tough times.”

The organisation changed its name to the New Zealand Minerals Industry Association in 1991, which transitioned into Straterra in the early 2010s.

Atkinson was a frequent visitor to the precursor of New Zealand Petroleum & Minerals in Wellington, to advocate for better conditions for exploration and mining, recalls Tony Christie, a geologist with GNS Science and active member of the NZMEA and NZMIA councils.

“He was passionate about the industry, and had a good sense of humour too. He ran very efficient meetings; he was a really good chairperson.”

The NZMIA worked on the economic impact of gold mining in New Zealand and the opportunity cost of the country’s mineral potential. It ran school education programmes, submitted on policy consultations, sought government funding for airborne geophysical surveys, worked with councils on better plan provisions for exploration and mining, and developed guidelines for access agreements with the Department of Conservation.

Atkinson was also interested in health and safety, which over time led to the formation of MinEx, the extractives industry health and safety council.

He was a member, then fellow, of the Australasian Institute of Mining and Metallurgy for 56 years until his resignation in April 2020.

A cyclist and wine enthusiast

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After moving from Auckland to live in Queenstown in 2000, Atkinson founded a cycling group, the Queenstown Pedallers. In 2017, he received Rotary's Paul Harris fellowship, its highest community service award, in recognition of his efforts.

Atkinson told Mountain Scene at the time that soon after his arrival in New Zealand a woman told him he was overweight and unfit, "which I found quite offensive so I ignored her".

"Then she gave me a bike for Christmas, and at that stage the last thing I wanted in my life was a bike."

Thus was a passion for road cycling unleashed, almost always starting and ending at a café, initially in Auckland with a growing number of enthusiasts, and then replicating the role of cycling "pied piper" down south.

On Atkinson's tastes in wine, Christie says: "He had an impressive wine cellar and could talk very knowledgeably on wines, particularly recommending some good labels and vintages. I often followed his advice on good purchases."

Peter Robert Atkinson is survived by Heather, his wife of more than 30 years, and his children, Juliana, George, Josephine and Melanie.

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