

**Radio Wiltshire talks to David Webb on 25 February 1993**

**The Atworth bier**

**A bier was used a century or so ago and this is the subject of this week's 'Inside Wiltshire' with Keith Steiner.**

**“During this series we have visited quite a few places. Today, we are in the tiny village of Atworth near Melksham to find out more about a coffin carrier. It is trundling along, rather like a large perambulator. It has four large wheels, a canopy on the top and it is constructed of wood with a metal chassis. To find out something more about it, I am going to have a chat with one of the local historians, David Webb.”**

**“David, I know there is going to be an obvious answer to what is an obvious question. What is a coffin carrier?”**

**David Webb:** “The correct name in days when they were used would have been a bier, but it is not spelt as the beer we drink, it is *bier*, not *beer*. This Atworth bier is not as old as some of them might be and when at one time we decided it ought to be preserved we did offer it to one or two museums, but they thought at the time that it was not old enough and they were not interested. We decided it would be wrong to get rid of it unless it was going somewhere where it would be preserved, so we have kept it ourselves in the village up to today.”

**“It would carry coffins to the local burial grounds and we are talking about the history of the last 100 years or so. How would coffins be carried? It has a steering mechanism. How would you get the coffin on to the carrier?”**

“As you can see, the bier has three rollers, which makes it much easier to roll a coffin in and also if you look at this end there is a brass handle which you pull out. By pulling that out, it does allow you to lift off the top of the bier to carry the coffin and the canopy with the platform into the church if need be.”

**“So, it is quite portable. The coffin could quite easily be manhandled on to the bier. There are leather straps, too, to keep it on.”**

“I would imagine that, once it was on the rollers, the coffin would be strapped down. Otherwise, whilst you were walking along the road with the bier the coffin would have been moving about. The straps would have tied it down tight and kept it in position.”

**“Would this have been the equivalent of today’s modern hearse? Would it have been the only form of transport for carrying a coffin?”**

“It would have been the forerunner to a hearse for most villages. You do see occasionally the lovely horse-drawn hearse, but I would imagine that these are few and far between now. This bier would have followed on, maybe, from people carrying coffins through the village, which of course could have been very tiring.”

**“You mentioned that at one time it was painted a bright yellow. It seems a surprising colour for a bier.”**

“From information I have been able to obtain, the original colour would have been brown. For some reason it was then painted yellow. It became rather unpopular in the village when it was yellow and some of the village people would instead hire one of the neighbouring village biers. At a later date it was grained, but it was still not black, which I imagine was the preferred colour.”

**“Is there a record of when the bier was last used to carry a coffin?”**

“We have a record book, which at the moment is kept at the Trowbridge Records Office. The last record in the book is in 1937. The record book does, in fact, go back to 1913 and there is a little brass plaque on it to say it was purchased in 1912. The highest number recorded was 10, in 1914. The next highest number is 7, in 1924. Numbers then trailed off. In 1930 it was

4, in 1935 it was 2 and in 1937, 1. The records do, in fact, tell us who was carried on the bier and the last name recorded is that of Mrs Sarah Allen.”

**“The bier today is about to get a coat of preservative. It has a good home and no doubt you will continue to look after it.”**

“We have a thriving History Group in the village and I think they will ensure that the bier does not get lost or smashed to pieces.”

**“David Webb, thank you very much indeed. I think it is time we moved the bier back into the garage. The Atworth bier goes back into its place in a protected garage, into the dry before it receives its coat of preservative. We can tell that it is not an easy vehicle to steer.”**

**Keith Stainer, going ‘Inside Wiltshire’, finding out about the bier, which you might not say ‘cheers’ to.**

## **AWORTH VILLAGE BIER**

Presented to Atworth Parish Council in 1912 by the  
Committee appointed to commemorate the Coronation of  
H.M. King George V.

It was originally painted black, but at some time it was painted brown and grained. This proved unpopular and the bier at Shaw was preferred.

First used on 9th August 1913 for Mr G. Hayward  
costing One Shilling

The cover was purchased on 11th August 1914 costing  
Four Shillings Four Pence

Repaired by Mr Greenland in 1924 at the cost of Twelve Shillings

Last used in 1937 for Mrs Sarah Allen.

Mr David Webb was interviewed about the bier in 1993 by  
BBC Radio Wiltshire.

It has recently been restored by Mr Adrian Bray.

Over the years it has been stored by Mr LeFevre, Mr Webb,  
Mrs Chaplin and Mrs J. Percy. It is now stored in its  
original storage place next to the Village Hall.

Wiltshire and Swindon Records Centre holds the  
Record Book (shelf number 276/14).

Notes compiled in 2008 by Atworth History Group.