

A History of Atworth from the Romans to the Third Millennium

Welcome to Atworth

Most of the area covered by the village of Atworth stands on a thin layer of limestone, called “cornbrash”, laid down over 140 million years ago when this part of the country was beneath the sea. Under this layer is another one of impervious Oxford clay which traps all the water that seeps through the limestone. This means that there is very easy access through shallow wells to fresh water; the necessary ingredient of all life.

This easy access to water explains why the households of the village are relatively widely dispersed, and why there were once 76 wells and six public pumps in Atworth: in the market place, on Bradford road (Pump Row), Bath Road, next to the White Hart, Purlpit and Titchen Yard (formerly an area by the Village Hall).

Cornbrash soil is quite fertile, so crops grow well, and to the north of the village the cornbrash gives way to an outcrop of limestone which overlies beds of Forest Marble and the famous oolite limestone, known as Bath stone, hence the quarries.

What did the Romans ever do for us?

So, Atworth is a desirable place to live. Almost 2,000 years ago the Romans thought so too. Close to the Roman road which runs east-west on the ridge above the village there is a Roman villa. Indeed, there are the remains of 6 Roman villas within 3 miles of Box. So there was quite a little community hereabouts.

In 1936 a 12 year-old boy, James Rawlings, found a coin in the field beside Cottles Wood. He showed it to the headmaster of Atworth School (as it then was), and this led to the discovery of the remains of a Roman villa just six inches below the surface. It was fully excavated between 1970 and 1975. There were subsequent finds of 326



coins dating from 168-378 CE as well as many other artefacts, which are now housed in the Wiltshire Museum in Devizes.

The villa appears to have been started around the end of the 2nd century. The east wing and part of the north wing were built first, and various additions were made over the next 150 years. There were baths and underfloor heating.

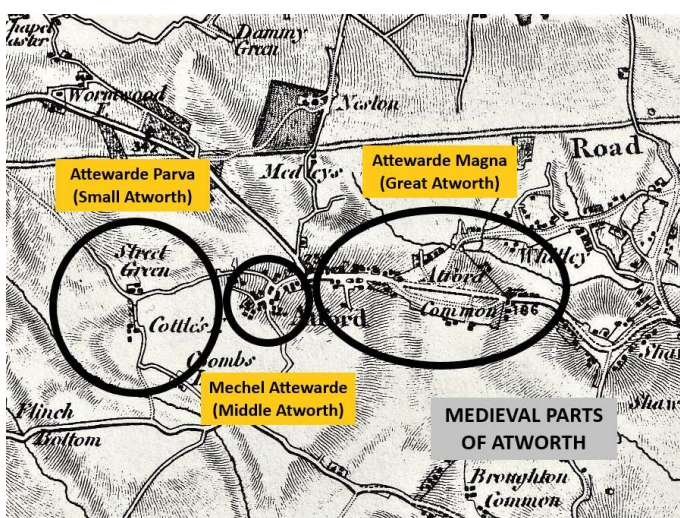
What do we know about the lives of the people who lived here? The various artefacts discovered may give us some hints. The imposing building and some silver jewellery may suggest that the occupants were wealthy, and probably able to read and write because writing instruments (styli) were found. Lots of brooches, beads, bracelets, rings, earrings, hair pins and nail cleaners may point to women concerned with their appearance, whereas some military metal work and regalia, a scabbard and a dagger, may point to Roman soldiers also living there.

We know a little about their diet too, for a rubbish heap revealed bones of cattle, pigs, lambs, deer, wild boar, fowls and even the remains of oysters. There is evidence also that horses and dogs were domesticated. They were growing crops, too, because there were crop driers – and they may have also been producing beer. So, with crops and an abundance of cattle bones, they were surely using local people to do the farm work for them; it's unlikely they were doing it themselves.

When at the beginning of the 5th century (407 CE) the Roman occupation of Britain came to an end, the villa doubtless fell into ruin. Some of the stone was certainly looted over the centuries and is to be found in a few of the older buildings in Atworth.

The Medieval Period (1001-1542 CE)

If the Romans found Atworth an attractive place to live, so did their Anglo-Saxon successors (c 800 CE). The first mention of the village we have is in a charter of King Ethelred the Unready in 1001 CE granting the land to the Abbess of Shaftesbury with permission to build a church. There is some evidence that even earlier there was a monastery on the site of what is now Cottles House, founded by St Aldhelm, who was bishop of Sherborne by 705 CE. King Ethelred's charter refers to the village as "Aettenwrth" (Aetta's Farmstead) which implies that the land was indeed being farmed, just as it had been by the Romans.



The name of the village takes various forms in medieval documents: "Attennuith" (1249), "Attenarde" (1354), "Attewrde" and "Ateworth" (1451). "Atford" (the ford was in the dip in the road just beyond the Bear Garage) and finally, "Atworth". This name was not officially settled upon until 1858.

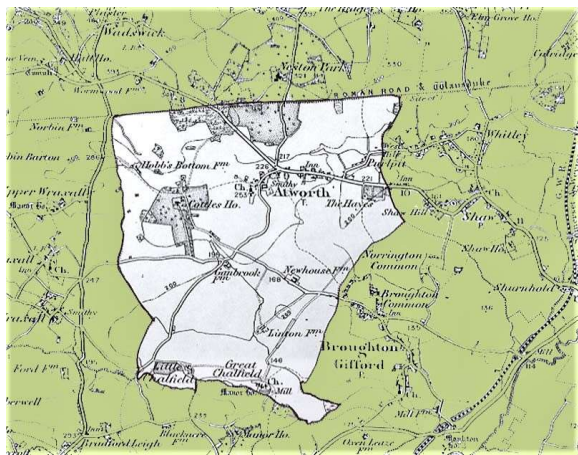
Often a distinction was made between 3 parts of Atworth:

“Attewarde Magna” (along the present A365), “Mechel (Middle) Attewarde” (Bradford Road and the market place), and “Attewarde Parva” (Cottles, now Stonar School).

For over 500 years – from 1000 to 1536 – Atworth was owned by the Abbess of Shaftesbury as part of her Bradford-on-Avon estate. There were three manors or farms: Manor Farm, Cottles and one other of which there is now no trace. The peasants who worked on these farms produced milk (hence “Milktown”, or Melksham, as we now call it), and crops like wheat and oats. Other trades, such as blacksmithing, were essential for farm tools and for shoeing horses. There would also have been local jobs in quarrying, too.

The 14th century Tithe Barn at Church Farm was built to store the tithe crops which were owed to the monastery at Shaftesbury. Also there is a record of 1330 that tells us that 30 hens per year were to be paid to the Abbess; and at the time of the dissolution of the monasteries under Henry VIII in 1536 the village was still paying £7.02d per year to the monastery.

How many people were living and working here then? Well, not many, it seems. In 1377 the Poll Tax returns listed 57 people over 14 years of age, and in 1428 Atworth was included in a list of parishes with fewer than ten households. Did the Black Death bubonic plague of 1348/9 onwards come to Atworth and deplete the population? We can’t know the answer to that question, but it is a possibility.



For several centuries life would have remained almost unchanged, apart from a bit of inclement weather (the cold of the first half of the 14th century), and perhaps the occasional bout of plague.

The area around the present house at Cottles was a small separate manor that seems to have not been part of the land given to Shaftesbury Abbey in 1001. The limits of the land in the charter skirt around

what is described as “Ælfgar’s border at Atworth”. It now takes its name from the Cotels who were a rich and powerful family, owning extensive estates in Wiltshire, including Atworth, Alwick, Chelworth, Wraxall and Farley Wick. Sir Robert Cotel came over after the Norman invasion (in 1102), and lived at Atworth into the 14th century, intermarrying along the way with the Tropenells of Great Chalfield. It was later held by members of the Beaushyn family during all of the 15th and 16th centuries until sold to William Poulett in 1604.

So, the owners of Cottles and Great Chalfield were the same for many years. One lady owner of Great Chalfield married more than one owner of Cottles – indeed she married four times, and the records say she “lived a naughtie life” which included sleeping with her cousin (to whom she was not married) and who was a bishop!

There has been a church building on the site of the present church of St Michael and All Angels since about 1070. It must have been quite basic, since in 1107 the Abbess of Shaftesbury gave money for it to have windows put in. Somewhere in the 13th century the church almost burnt down and had to be repaired. Two centuries later, in 1451, it was rebuilt with its impressive saddle-back tower, and four hundred



years after that, in 1831, the church was in such a bad state it was decided to rebuild the chancel in the style of a chapel alongside the medieval tower, which is all that remains of the 15th century church. In fact, the tower houses the oldest surviving evidence of that medieval church – a bell dated 1350. On the east side of the tower you can still see where the roof of the medieval church originally joined on.

Atworth: From Henry VIII to Queen Victoria

So, for 500 years Atworth was the possession of a monastery at Shaftesbury, but after Henry VIII’s dissolution of the monasteries between 1536 and 1541, things began to change. The rising gentry, who were the new owners of the manors and farms of Atworth, were free to develop the use of their lands as might be most profitable.

By the early years of the 17th century Atworth was being influenced by the flourishing wool trade in Bradford-on-Avon and almost certainly some of the villagers had taken to weaving. In 1639 a certain resident, Nicholas Goldsborough, was described as a “clothier”. We may conclude that there were now more sheep in the fields, alongside the dairy cattle, than had been the case in earlier centuries. The field called “Pennings” was used to hold sheep before being sold in the market place on Bradford Road.

And the population was growing too. We know that in 1657 there were 73 families here – perhaps 300 to 400 people? Probably the growth in numbers and in prosperity accompanied each other.

The increased population was despite a high rate of infant mortality. The parish registers reveal that even as late as the second decade of the 19th century there

were 78 burials at Atworth church and 22 of them were of infants under the age of one year (that's nearly 30%!), and 45 of them were under 40 years of age (that's nearly 60%!). By contrast, in the 1930s there were 47 burials and only two were under the age of one, and only 6 under 40. So, we were getting healthier though life was hard, and restricted by present day standards.

One cannot but help but notice that, looking at the register of marriages in the 18th century, on one page 16 out of 17 marriages were between people who were "both Atworth", and on another 17 out of 20 were "both Atworth" (the other three were Melksham, Broughton Gifford and Cottles, so not exactly far and wide!). And many of these marriages were of young couples who were only around 20 years of age, who went on to have 6, 7, 8, 9 and sometimes more children – many of whom, as we have seen, did not survive their infancy.

Still, it seems that the 17th and 18th centuries were years of progress and growth and were accompanied by a new self-confidence in the inhabitants, because by 1669 we have a reference to the "ardent dissenters of Atworth" – possibly 20 or 30 heads of households – who were holding illegal religious services. These, then, were people who had enough self-confidence to reject the laws which required them to worship according to the rites of the official church. So they weren't ignorant peasants! Some of them may have been Anabaptists who believed that those who had been baptised as infants should be re-baptised, for one could only be a true Christian, they thought, if baptised as an adult. Indeed, in the parish registers between 1697 and 1705, there is a separate list of Anabaptist and Quaker births (not baptisms notice) and some burials mentioning ten different family names. Attempts to suppress such firmly held beliefs do not (as we know) usually succeed. Doubtless these illegal meetings continued until after the coming of religious toleration in 1689, when such people were free to worship as they saw fit.

It is no surprise, therefore, that finally, in 1790, the Independent Church was built to accommodate these "dissenters" (or "nonconformists" as they were called), and the church was officially recognised by the Bishop of Salisbury before the end of the century. Later, in 1860, a group split off from the Independent church and founded the Atworth Ebenezer Baptist Chapel (those Anabaptists again!) which was in use for over a hundred years and only closed in 1979. It's now a private dwelling at the junction of the Bath Road with Purlpit.

We need to realise that these dissenters were certainly literate. You cannot claim that the Bible is telling you something different from the accepted interpretation unless you can read it for yourself. Indeed, one of the glories of Atworth in the 18th century was the coming of education.

The story of education in Atworth starts with Bernard Paulett, who died in 1699, and his sister Jane Brown, who died in 1706. Both were owners of Cottles, and both made bequests that allowed a school to be opened in Atworth. The “Dame’s School”, as it was called, had probably opened in 1701 and was situated behind what is now 96 Church Street. The porch way, which led to the school building, is still to be seen there. Unfortunately, the building itself was demolished sometime in the 1960s. After Jane’s death she left £10 per year for a teacher, Frances Phillips, to “instruct the poor children of Atford to read English, without reward”, and £1 per year for books. The full version of her bequest is inscribed on her tombstone just east of the medieval tower of St Michael’s church. So, literacy was definitely a possibility for the 18th century inhabitants of Atworth.

It was a later owner of Cottles, Sir Robert Blagden Hale MP, who built the present school premises (now Churchfields) in 1828. His family’s arms can still be seen in a carving on the wall of the school. A report of 1834 tells us that the schoolmistress, Jane Jones, “teaches all the poor children of the tything English, gratis. She has now about 20, and a few paying students besides. The duties are as well discharged as can be expected.” It is recorded that in 1846 there were 184 pupils, when Atworth’s population was only 824. Is that possible? Well, the school buildings were enlarged by the Fuller family in 1898, with space for 200 pupils, though this was soon reduced to 172. Reflecting on these high numbers, we need to remember that nearly all of the pupils were at the school right up to the school leaving age of 14. So, all their education was completed at this school. Only a few left at 11 to go to other schools in the district. This was the case right up until 1953.

In the last quarter of the 19th century the school came under the control of the 1870 Education Act – it became a so-called ‘Board School’, and it was not supposed to teach a religious catechism which was distinctive of any particular denomination. It did not keep to this, and in 1875 some Atworth parents complained that their children were being denied entrance because they had not been baptised in church. Presumably they were from Anabaptist families, so they wouldn’t have been, would they? The dissenters were sticking to their principles.

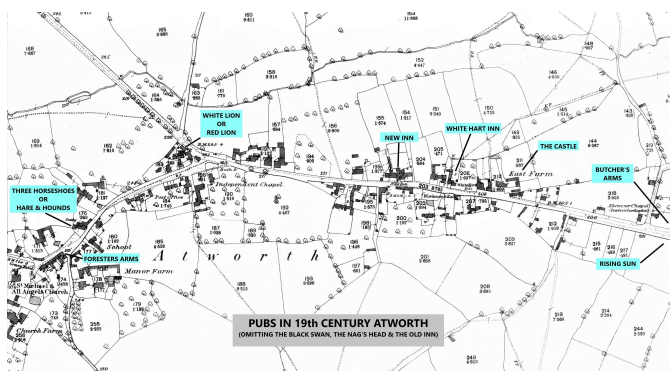
Meanwhile the curriculum was widening beyond the “3 Rs”. Music, PE, Geography and Gardening were now being taught, and the boys learned how to measure fields. The girls were taught sewing, knitting and domestic science. It was realised that most of the boys were likely to go into farm work, and the girls into domestic service. And all this under the leadership of very young headmasters – one of the first was only 20 (and his two sisters were the rest of the staff!), and the next two were 24 and 27 respectively.

Most of these developments took place under the leadership of the two Inkpen brothers, John and Henry. Between them they were in charge of the school for almost 50 years (1885-1934). At the turn of the century, about the time of Queen Victoria's death, the school numbers were fluctuating either side of 100 or 110 pupils, who were writing on slates (because paper was costly) and learning their times tables and much else by rote. However, the width of the curriculum gained a glowing report from the Government Inspectors in 1925. Indeed, when the school won the Bathurst Shield in 1911 for the best kept school garden in Wiltshire, the presenter of the award made the immortal remark: "What we want is more Inkpens and less pen and ink".



Perhaps most remarkably of all, by 1899 Henry Inkpen had introduced evening classes for adults which included shorthand, commercial arithmetic, profit and loss, drawing, commercial geography (whatever that is!) and the Science of Common Things (e.g. the lever, pulley, wheel and axle). Thus the school was teaching the whole village, and not just the children.

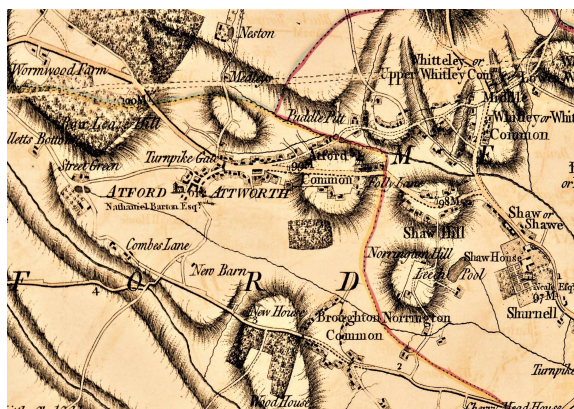
By the last half of the 19th century we may imagine, therefore, an increasingly literate and multi-skilled population in Atworth – which according to the 1891 census was 767. The baptismal registers between 1837 and 1890 mention 47 different occupations between the villagers: labourers, yeomen, quarry workers, chandlers, hawkers, maltsters, shoemakers, carpenters, wheelwrights, thatchers, excise men, gamekeepers and blacksmiths among them.



And, it seems, they were a thirsty lot, because at one stage in the 19th century there may have been as many as 11 ale houses in the village: the Foresters' Arms (Market place, Bradford Road), the White Hart (still in existence on Bath Road), the Three Horseshoes (110 Bradford Road – now the Old Forge), the Rising Sun (17

Bath Rd), the Lion or Red Lion (next to the Bear Garage), the New Inn (143 Bath Rd), the Butcher's Arms (199 Bath Rd), The Castle (East Farm), and three more of which there is no longer any trace: the Black Swan, the Nag's Head and the Old Inn. Of

course, these were not pubs as we are used to today, but were literally places where a worker could get a pint (or two?) of ale on his (or her? Probably not!) way home. No one was buying beer from a supermarket in those days! And the landlords had other jobs – in the 1920s, Mr Wills at the Foresters' Arms was a tailor.



Movement through Atworth (or Atford) was changing too. If we look at the 1810 Andrews & Dury maps we can see that the preferred route had been from Purlpit (then called “Puddle Pit”) to Main Street (or the Bath Road, as we call it) and then along Bradford Road to either Green Street or the way to Bradford on Avon. But in the late 18th century it became important enough to

travel from Melksham to Bath through Atworth, and so the Turnpike Act required the local JPs to ensure the upkeep of the road. Consequently, in 1773 the toll keeper’s porch was added to the front of what we now call the Toll House so that the toll keeper could sit there and make sure that payments were being made for the use of the road. Bath Road was growing in importance, and so the 1924 map shows that Green Street and part of Purlpit have completely disappeared.

What houses stood along these roads and byways at the end of the 19th century? Who were the people, and what were they doing with their lives? Can we get a picture of Atworth (as it had by then been agreed to call our village) in 1900?

Atworth in 1900

I think if we could transport ourselves with a time machine back to Atworth just over 100 years ago, the main difference we would notice would be how self-sufficient and self-contained it was then compared with today. A list of all the trades and crafts and shops which were thriving in the village would show that the inhabitants (almost 800 people according to the 1901 census) could quite easily live out their whole lives here without needing to go even as far as Melksham – and doubtless



some did! And, with the building of the Atworth Institute in 1913 (now called the Village Hall), the villagers had a central focus for their activities (a role previously fulfilled by the church hall), and they had baths! Yes, the main attraction for some was that they could come to the Institute and take a hot bath for 6d, since hardly anyone would have had a bathroom in their own house.

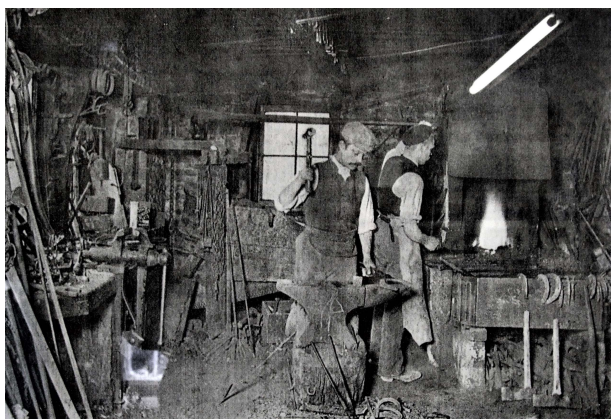
So, just after the widowed Queen Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee, and the building of the Clock Tower in 1897 (at a cost of £120 raised by public subscription), the old queen

died and the new century dawned. The self-sufficient residents of Atworth were looking after each other as best they could. There was a Pig Club and a Coal and Clothing Club – both were mutual cooperative societies into which the members paid to protect themselves (and each other) against an accident or hard times: the loss of a pig or the need for warmth and something to wear. They even came together in defence of their bachelor vicar, a certain Rev. Bacon, when George Fuller (who owned the vicarage) tried to reduce the clergyman to the status of a lodger in his own house by insisting that his own Agent should live there too. Rev Bacon threatened to resign, and 300 (yes, 300!) Atworth residents petitioned Fuller to change his mind. He didn't, and a new vicarage had to be built virtually next door (also by public subscription). The Parsonage, as it was known, later became Dial House.

Only a few years later, George Fuller, who by then was an MP in charge of the government's Northern Ireland portfolio, needed protection himself, provided by his own estate workers, in response to threats from Sinn Féin.

Meanwhile, the families in Atworth experienced all those joys and sorrows to which most were then exposed. For instance, Thomas and Louisa Carter were living in a 1 up 1 down cottage in Church Street bringing up at least 9 children. One, Sarah, died before she was 1, another, Emily, lived to 101 and died in 2000. Yet another, Annie, married William Nicholson who was killed in the First World War, while a brother, Tom, was killed in a quarry accident in 1934. Some quarrymen, by the way, had heard that wages were better in the Welsh coal mines, and several left Atworth (as Tom himself did for about ten years) to seek a better paid (if no less dangerous) life in the valleys' coal mines.

Back at home, the turn of the century brought tragedy to the Bushell family. Their daughter, Annie, married to Herbert Hampton, the blacksmith at the Old Forge in Bradford Road, died giving birth to her fourth child, Dorothy, in 1899. The very next year her brother, George, sailed with 300 Wiltshire Volunteers to Cape Town to fight



in the Boer War, only to die of fever shortly after he arrived. To compound their grief, Annie's husband, Herbert, left alone to run a business and to look after three children (Dorothy had been fostered by the people across the road) fell into a depression and hanged himself in his own forge in September 1903.

1914: And then came the war

139 men from Atworth served in the Great War. If the population, according to the 1911 census, was still just less than 800, then 139 men, say between the ages of 18 and 40 years of age, must have been about half the adult male population. 21 of them did not come home. They were killed in action; in Italy, in Mesopotamia and elsewhere. Two of them as late as October 1918, only days before the end of the conflict. One fought in the battle of Jutland (1916) – thought to be the largest sea battle ever staged – and survived. Another was torpedoed in the Irish Sea, and drowned. Five brothers from one family, the Watts (bakers and stalwarts of the Independent Church) fought together, and three Jones brothers, plus two of their cousins.

But, also significantly, some women from Atworth went to work in the munitions factory set up at Spencer's Foundry in Melksham, and so became part of an important social change – that new awareness of the vital role that women could play outside the home as a crucial part of the war effort, which led in 1918 to the first legislation giving adult women the vote. One such was Bessie Button, the mother of Ted Carter.

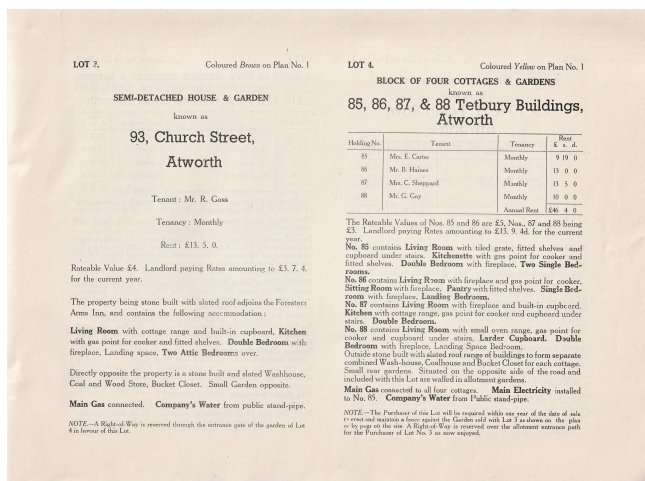
Life was changing, and WWI accelerated that change.

The times they are a changin' 1914-1945

But, don't get too excited, they weren't changing very fast. Many residents were still relying on some essentials of life being delivered by horse and cart: milk and bread, coal and paraffin, pots and pans, fish and vegetables. And then there was the door to door clothes salesman, not to mention the peripatetic knife grinder.

At home, many were still providing for themselves with what they grew in gardens and allotments, and by keeping pigs. Nearly everyone kept a pig according to one account, and the day "Percy" pig went to slaughter (behind the house at 133 Bath Road) all the children of that family were in floods of tears! Others were keeping chickens, or knitting and spinning and making gloves – but in poor light, for it was not until 1924 that gaslight appeared on the streets of Atworth and in a few homes. We had to wait until 1933 for electricity to make its appearance, and then only slowly. It was not common in houses until well after World War II.

If you look at the catalogue prepared for the sale of 34 properties in Atworth by the Neston estate in 1949, you will see that gas is almost always mentioned, but electricity gets only an occasional mention.



And then there was the matter of hygiene. In the sale catalogue of 1949, almost every house has mention of a bucket closet. Even into the 1950s many of the houses in Atworth only had a bucket loo in an outside WC with no running water. Going to the loo was an experience. So, off you go, down the garden in all weathers, clutching your squares of newspaper (or Izal toilet paper if you could afford it). And, if you

wanted a bath, unless you could afford 6d to go down the Institute (village hall) on a Friday evening to enjoy a hot bath, you were confined to a tin bath at home, filled with water fetched from a pump, heated in the boiler that was also used for the laundry. I don't think you could expect much privacy in a tiny house with kids running around.

There was piped water from the 1930s onwards, but at first it was simply pumped from the village's wells – mains water was not available until after WWII, and mains sewerage had to wait until the late 1950s.

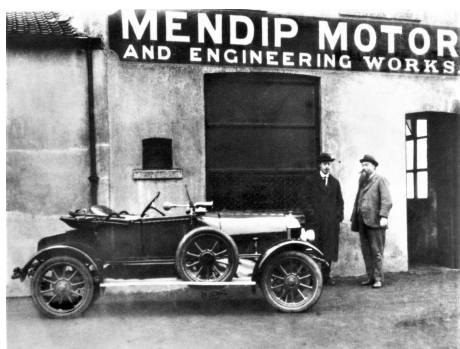
Still, there were some pluses to life in Atworth in the early 20th century. There was a village policeman, and a doctor held a surgery on Tuesdays and Fridays. There was also a resident nurse, and a dentist came once a week. Oh, yes, and you could get your hair cut in one of the pubs.

And there was lots going on to enjoy. The Independent Church and the Baptist Chapel's combined Sunday School could boast 70 children, and they went on outings, even as far as London. The St Michael's church choir boarded charabancs to Weymouth, Swanage and even Bournemouth. There were dances "down the Stute", and a keep fit class, a Women's Union, and football and crickets clubs from the end of the 1890s. There were village fetes and celebrations – like the one for the coronation of George VI. Ted Carter remembered that he travelled to London by train, went to the theatre, ate out at a Lyons Corner House, bought a packet of fags, and had a pint on the way home, and still had a few pennies left out of a £1! But, as he pointed out, he was being paid only 7/6d (or 37½ p) per week, so he had to save hard to finance the trip.

Or, of course, you could play in the streets – football in the market place being a favourite spot – there was only one car owner in Atworth in 1930! Hilary Jordan, looking back at her childhood in the 1950s wrote: "I liked living in the village as a child, there was a sense of freedom. We could go out all day over the fields with

picnics, no one bothered about us. They knew we were safe. There were a lot of children here then.”

Yet, things were changing. If one looks at the Kelly’s Directory entries for Atworth we see that the list of occupations and trades in the village in 1903 was much the same as the entry for 1848 – farmers, shopkeepers, shoemaker, blacksmith, quarrymen etc. But in the 1939 entry we find, alongside the doctor and nurse previously mentioned, a cycle agent and repairer, motor engineers, an oxyacetylene welder, a wireless dealer, and a battery charger. Wirelesses, motor cars! Oh, the farmers were still here, of course, but the blacksmith doesn’t get a mention.



One of the engineers mentioned in Kelly’s Directory was Wilf Greenland at the Bear garage, the other was a man called George Thatcher and with him we come a story which was to change Atworth for over half a century, and the course of the WWII. George and his brother Arthur came to 22 Bath Road in 1922 with their Mendip Motor and Engineering Works (which later became New Mendip Engineering Company). They were making cars, but

as the 1920s wore on they started also to make aircraft parts, all done in a small tin shed workshop in the back garden, with a workforce of only about 12 until the mid-1930s. But George has been described as an “engineering genius”. He became subcontracted to several aircraft manufacturers including Westlands of Yeovil (the helicopter people). In 1938 something crucial happened. Vickers Marine of Southampton were developing a new fighter aircraft called the Spitfire, but they had a problem: the aircraft’s elliptical wings buckled when the plane pulled out of a dive. Vickers spoke to Westlands about it, and they said “ask George”. So they did. George said he could draw a jig for the wing, but he couldn’t afford a piece of paper large enough, so he took a roll of wallpaper, laid two lengths of it parallel on the floor and drew a full-scale design. The design was approved, and so George built a bigger workshop in his back garden and constructed the jig. It worked. The Spitfire could fly. So, if the battle of Britain was “our finest hour”, Atworth played an important part in that victory.

This breakthrough made a difference to our village also. By 1939 “The Mendip” (as everyone called the works) was employing, staggeringly, 600 workers, 400 of whom were women. Many of were being bussed in every day from Bath and Chippenham and the surrounding villages. The business and its premises expanded, and it began to sponsor a Sports and Social Club with judo, a skittle alley, a shotgun club, a motor enthusiasts club, an angling club, not to mention a football team. And, there were dances once a month with live bands.

But ... then came war, again! 1939

Sixty-nine men and six women from the village saw active service in WWII. Only one failed to return. Charles Wheller, almost before the war had got started in anger, was killed on the retreat to Dunkirk in May 1940. On that beach too was Ted Keyford who at the start of September '39 proposed to his sweetheart, Margaret Clark by telegram from his training camp in Exeter. He sent it on a Tuesday, and it read: "Make all arrangements. Getting married on Saturday". They enjoyed a long and happy marriage, and the processional cross in St Michael's Church was bought by Margaret after the war to express her gratitude that Ted came home safely.

Others from Atworth were to be found in all the theatres of war. David Clark spent his war at sea as a telegraphist fighting the Battle of the Atlantic sinking both German and Japanese U Boats. Francis Lucas was at El Alamein, the Salerno landings and the D Day landings. He was joined there by Walter Beall (who later came to live in Atworth), aged 20, who was piloting a landing craft onto Utah beach. Frederick Sealy took part in the siege of Monte Cassino. One of the Arlett brothers, Ken, fought in the Ardennes offensive towards the end of the war, while the other, Leonard, was with the Chindits in Burma marching hundreds of miles through dense jungle destroying roads and railway bridges behind Japanese lines.

Those back home were doing their bit too. There was an Atworth Home Guard, and some women were again working on munitions at Spencer's in Melksham. James Rawlings (remember, the lad who found the Roman coin?) became a 'Bevin Boy' and was conscripted to work in a coal mine in Pontypridd.

Some of the residents did their bit by taking in evacuees (with their 2x underclothes, 2x shoes, 2x towel, and toothbrush, and, of course, the ubiquitous gas mask). On 2 September 1939 250 Jewish children arrived at Melksham Station from London. 85 came to Atworth. According to the Wiltshire Times they were "received with the utmost courtesy". After a couple of days, however, one boy stole a bike and ran away. The children were taught in the school or in the church hall by their own teachers who had come with them.

Atworth was not exactly an enemy target, but possibly it was on the route back to Germany from bombing Bristol (and on one occasion, Bath). One bomb fell near Ganbrook farm and shattered some windows in the village, and a string of incendiary bombs were dropped along the path between the church and Cottles – or Stonar School as it had become since the beginning of the war.

And so, to the Third Millennium

We have noted that in 1900 Atworth was a village still very self-sufficient and self-contained. However, in the second half of the 20th century this was changing. But,

was it for the better?

The population of the village was strangely steady, around 750 to 850 people, for most of the century until the millennium. But, what were the inhabitants doing, and how were they interacting? In 2000, remembering the 1950s, Hilary Jordan wrote: “There was a great community spirit in the village. When I was a child everyone was brought up in the village, no one moved around. There was a great sense of occasion for village events that you don’t get now”.

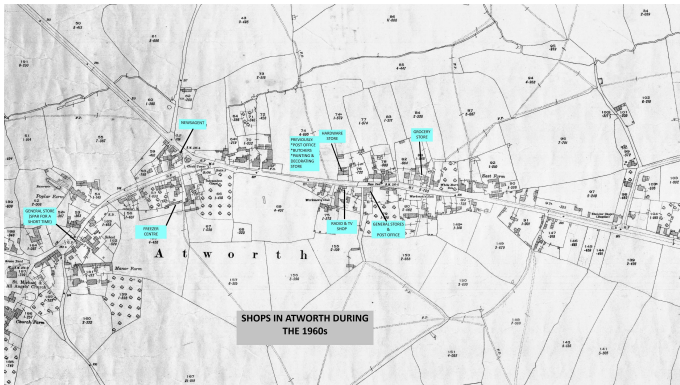
If she’s right, when and how did this change happen? A certain Christopher Berry wrote a pamphlet in 1963, entitled “Atworth: A Village Survey”, in which he lamented that “the age of easy transport and the television set has killed the village community feeling, and it is only in the public bars of the two inns (Foresters and the White Hart) that any sense of community and friendship can be felt”. Was he right?

The developing bus services to Melksham and Bath, and the ease of transport by bicycle and motorcycle (now that the roads were tarmacked) meant that more people were working elsewhere – although in 1963 there were still only 88 cars in the village. Berry surveyed 198 of the working age population and found that only 84 were finding work in the village – 51 of these at “The Mendip” and 16 on farms. Of the other 114, 64 were working in Melksham, mostly at the Avon Rubber works and Spencer’s, and the rest in Bath and Corsham. You can see what was happening.

At least, Berry thought *he* could see what was happening. He wrote: “the village no longer has a true centre, for the increase of population at the east end has taken away completely any claims that the old market place might have had”. So, “Middle Atworth” (as we saw it was once called) was no longer the middle of the village.

This shift in the centre of gravity, apart from being something to do with the growing importance of the Bath Road, was certainly also something to do with Dowty Fuel Systems who had taken over New Mendip in 1948. In 1963 it was employing about 450 people and making helicopter parts for Westlands and fuel systems for many other makes of aircraft (including the “Concorde” and, indeed, for guided missiles). Dowty were responsible for the first bungalows in Mount Pleasant in the 1950s, and by the ‘60s Mead Park was under construction too. In 1963, of the 220 dwellings in Atworth, 90 had been built in the 20th century.

So, the village was expanding eastwards, but at the same time the facilities it needed to offer were contracting. Gone were the blacksmith, the butcher, the baker, the milkman and the doctor. Berry lists that in 1963 eight stores were still open in Atworth: 2 general stores, 2 grocers, a newsagent and sweet shop, a hardware store, a painting and decorating store and the radio and television shop. Even then, the owners of these stores and the two publicans, all, bar one, had other



jobs – because they could not rely upon that income to make a living. The only two shops which were the sole form of employment were run by women. By 2000, as one villager noted, “there’s nothing local you can buy in the village any more”.

Of course, life was getting much easier in many ways. We have

already mentioned the coming of gas and electricity and mains water and drainage – all coming “as standard” by the end of the 1950s. But on the downside, by 1963, the football and cricket teams had folded, and the dramatic society and the youth club, the Cubs and the British Legion had ceased to meet. Only the Mother’s Union, the WI, the Guides and Dowty’s own soccer team survived. And the 8 pubs or ale houses which were found in the 19th century had been reduced to 2 with the closure of the New Inn in 1956, the White Hart and the Foresters Arms being the only survivors.

And what of the effect of television? On 2 June 1953, the Hamptons at the Old Forge in Bradford Road invited the neighbours in the Market Square to join them to watch the coronation of Elizabeth II on television because they had the only set in that part of the village. The other set was probably with the Jordans who ran the radio and television shop. The “telly” was bringing people together. But not for long. It was not long before everyone would have their own “telly”. Berry noted that at night the younger generation could be seen leaving the village for the cinemas and dance halls of Melksham and Bath, and “in the houses they leave the blue glow and faint audience laughter indicate the new leisure preoccupation of the older generation”. He feared that Atworth was becoming a “dormitory”, a “bungalow suburb”.

Development has continued and the population has increased. Mount Pleasant (1950s) and Mead Park (1960s) have been followed by Godwin’s Close (1980s) and later, Nursery Close, Hayes Close, Chapel Rise, Atworth Court (on the site of the old Dowty’s office block), Prospect Fields, Greenland Close and Clock Tower View. All have sprung up since 1950.

The comment that “there’s nothing local you can buy in the village any more” means nothing grown or made in the village. But, there is a shop and a post office at the Texaco garage, though, of course, we are shopping online and in Bath, and even at Cribbs Causeway ... because we can! True, the only visible employment and businesses (apart from the farmers, the builders and the Bear garage) are on the Industrial Estate at the entrance to Studley Lane. But, underground (so to speak) there’s lots going on. A glimpse at the Companies House website in 2023 reveals

that in Atworth now there are 3 carpenters, 2 publishers, 2 management consultants, 2 IT consultants, an advertising agency, and two other enterprises – a clothing and footwear marketer, and sports services provider – not to mention a facilitator of restorative justice. Unless you are running one of those – how many did you know about?

And social activities are alive, too, some centred at the White Hart and the Village Hall. The WI still flourishes, the Youth Club still meets, keep fit is ongoing, the Camera Club is still shooting, and the Atworth History Group reached its 50th anniversary in 2023.

This talk was presented to over 200 people during 2023 and early 2024 as part of the Atworth History Group's celebration of its 50th anniversary. The material used was, to a large extent, taken from research undertaken by the history group, and the many booklets subsequently produced. Special thanks are extended to Joan Coccozza who did much of the research and compiled many of the booklets. Joan used Ted Carter as a source of interesting anecdotes about life in Atworth during the 20th century. Ted lived in Atworth all of his life. He was born in Church Street, and for 86 years he lived at 85 Bradford Road. Ted died in 2008 aged 92.

With just a few changes, this document is the one compiled by Gervase O'Donohoe for the talk in 2023, and we thank him for his hard work.

*David Hough
Chairman
July 2024*