

Radio Wiltshire talks to Professor Dowdeswell in 1989

Atworth Museum

“Atworth Village museum, near Melksham, has to be one of the smallest, yet one of the most comprehensive village displays of memorabilia in Wiltshire.

“James Harrison recently took a trip around Atworth History Museum with Professor Wilfred Dowdeswell of Atworth’s local history group.”

James Harrison: “We are actually walking into what is Poplar Farm, I understand, where the museum is based”.

Professor Dowdeswell: “Yes, this is a very beautiful 18th century barn, where the roof fell. It missed a herd of pigs by about half an hour. It was subsequently reconstituted by the present owner and the museum is upstairs. The downstairs, as you will see, is occupied by a Bugatti racing motor car dating from 1926 and is by far the most valuable thing here.”

“When was the museum set up?”

“The museum was set up by accident, as these things so often happen, as a result of an exhibition of antiquities that we mounted in the school. It resulted in a great deal of local interest and people said couldn’t the exhibition be preserved. The owner of this building here said why don’t you put it upstairs in our barn? That is where we are now. The roof was repaired by local people and when the man put the narrow staircase in, it unfortunately made it impossible to get any furniture upstairs. The original intention was for the owner to restore ancient furniture here. You will see why that was impossible.”

“It is a very incongruous setting, isn’t it?” You would not know there is a museum here, it is very hidden.”

“The museum is entirely to do with the village of Atworth. We have nothing here that is not concerned with Atworth.”

“How big is the village?”

“The village is about 800 and if you take in the outlying area it is perhaps one thousand. It has been that way for the past 4 or 5 hundred years. We have hardly fluctuated in numbers of population over that time.”

“There are not many villages in Wiltshire which have a museum, so this must be quite unique.”

“I do not know of any.”

So, you must be quite proud.”

“Yes, we are quite proud.”

“What does it actually consist of?”

“It consists of a number of local exhibits and, as you might expect, exhibits which interest the local people. Where did the village come from in the first place? In this exhibit, you can see that we have dated all the local houses. The oldest part of the village is at this end. This is our house, built in 1660. It was the local pub, The Three Horseshoes, in 1660, and then it later became a forge. If you look at the map, what you see is that the village has evolved from west to east. The west side is ancient, the east side is modern and has evolved towards Melksham. This map shows you at a glance what has happened to the village in the past.”

“It is quite a long village, isn’t it?”

“It is quite a long village and if you drive through the village on the A365 it seems longer still and, of course, there is a speed trap there. The village is still expanding. I think the interesting thing is how little the place has changed in many respects. Look at the pub, for example, the Foresters Arms. Here it is as it was in 1900 and here it is today. You notice one very important difference and that is the plaster has been taken off the front and look what it revealed. It revealed that it was not one house, but two houses. You see, there are the corner stones of one house and there is the second house and

they are obviously different dates. As you can see, the windows are much older in this house than that one.”

“Have you managed to find out any more about the history of the pub?”

“Oh, very much so. We have found out a lot more about the pub. We know now the dates when the different parts were built and perhaps who built it. We do not actually know who lived in the pub. I think it has been a pub for a very long time.”

“Of course, people are fascinated by seeing before and after, aren’t they?”

“People love to see before and after. They love seeing people and an exhibit around the other side of the museum will illustrate that point rather nicely. These exhibits are not permanent, we change them around. We try to have one or two new exhibits a year. This is one of the newer ones, Atworth Sport. We happen to have a member in our History Group who is very keen on this kind of thing and has accumulated this remarkable collection of pictures.”

“So, were the people of Atworth quite sporting people?”

“There is a charming picture here, for example, Atworth Keep Fit in the 1930s. Girls in their immaculate white blouses and black shorts and the men, you will notice, wearing boxing gloves. I like the title, don’t you, ‘Beauties and the Beasts’?”

“You cannot talk about sport without talking about football.”

“We have had football over the years and we still have football today. Here we have the lady who used to wash the footballers’ clothes, Mrs Taybor, a great character, and here we have got members of the different football groups. People love coming to look at these pictures, their descendents and families who have been involved with football over time.”

“Now, these photographs, where have they come from?”

“They have come from all over the place. You will have to ask Des Rice, who accumulated them, where they have all come from. People love giving us photographs. People accumulate these things and they know we have got a museum. They know I am interested in history. Only this morning I have received some more photographs from the headmaster of the school. Now he is retired and lives in the north. They have just turned out some photographs and sent me a big package of them. So, one gets these things from all over the place and if people know you are interested they generally supply these things for you.”

“Of course, the village school is often regarded as the hub of the village, apart from the pub, perhaps. What was Atworth Village School like?”

Here is Atworth Village School from the beginning, as you see in another of our exhibits. It was a charity school originally. It was founded by one Mrs Jane Brown. Jane Brown was from the Pawlett family living at Cottles, which is the big estate, now Stonar School for girls. The estate was at one time known as Atworth Parver (Little Atworth), which was rather nice. It is just down the way, here, across the fields. Jane Brown is buried in the churchyard and here is a photograph of her tombstone, on which is recorded her bequest. Her bequest was made in 1706, and that enabled the school to be founded in the first place. It was called the Dame’s School.”

“So, the school has been here for some time, then?”

“The school has been here since about 1706, early 18th century, so it has been here a long time.”

“How has it progressed? Have there been a lot of children in the village?”

“It is very interesting to know how it has changed. We know very little about what happened in the Dame’s School, except latterly, when it became involved more formerly with what you might call the Charity Commission, but that was very much later, getting on into the early 1800s. In 1828, this present school building was built by Robert Blagden Hale. He was then the occupant of Cottles. The occupants of Cottles contributed a great deal to the village and they were the genuine lords of the manor.”

“This is the main school building?”

“This is the main school building. Notice a rather interesting thing, it has a headmaster’s house attached to it. It was assumed the headmaster would live on the premises. Modern buildings have been built behind. It is a charming, very good example of a 19th century school, with Blagden Hale’s crest on the building and the date, 1828. The school is still very functional today.

“The History Group has written a number of histories, including one on the history of education in Atworth as seen through the eyes and experiences of the children who were there. We could not go back, obviously, to the beginning of the century, but we have a most fascinating account of the school as seen by the pupils.”

“That is often the best way to find out about a place, isn’t it?”

“It certainly is.”

“What else do you have in the museum?”

“Here, we have Atworth homes, with some oddities and possessions from homes. For example, how to make a hot cross bun as performed in the 1880s. Here is Sunny Jim from Force Wheat Flakes. Here is a remnant of the Penny Post with the actual stampings on the weights. This would, of course, have come in the first place from the Post Office. I do not know who gave it to us, but here you can see the prices of the letters on the weights.”

“This has caught my eye. Asbestos sad iron.”

“A sad iron apparently is an iron with a point at both ends so that you don’t simply run the iron one way, but you can run it both ways, backwards and forwards. Obviously, if you have a flat end, you can only run it one way. It has lost its top, unfortunately, but I think it is rather unusual. We have conventional flat irons here.”

“What is this unusual object here which looks like a lamp?”

“This is a primus stove which was used for heating instead of cooking. Here we have a Leclanche cell, the batteries used for driving bells, which used to be linked up in a series one after the other. I think this is rather nice, ‘Consult Me For All You Want to Know’, an encyclopaedia dated 1887.

“All these items have come from people’s homes?”

“Yes, all donated from Atworth homes.”

“Of course, farms and farming are very important in a rural area. What have we here?”

“We have a remarkable collection of farm implements here, some of which are quite valuable. For example, a hot rick borer. Not many people know that there ever was such a thing. A hot rick borer was something you took to the top of the hay rick and you pushed it into the middle of the rick to stop it catching fire. You will notice that you could start by boring a small distance, then you took the handle out and you then bored again and you continued boring until you got down to the bottom. It is an extraordinary object. I have not seen one in a museum before. These items are from a couple of our local farmers. We have a farmer nearby who is interested in local history and his loft has been a wonderful source for implements of one sort or another.”

“I suppose the fact that you have set up a museum is because local people have an interest in their surroundings.”

“Some, particularly, and they happen to be farmers. We have a lot of interesting farming things here. For example, we have an egg incubator which dates back to the last century. This one dates from the late 19th century. It runs on paraffin and it has a complete temperature regulator. It has got an expanding bar thermostat and a paraffin heater inside. A wonderful thing!”

“Let us talk about the church.”

“We have had several churches in Atworth going back to Saxon times. The present church is based partly on the medieval tower. It had a small tower

and a small nave. Around about the early 1800s, the nave began to fall down and also the congregation was increasing in numbers. It was decided to pull it down, but the tower was left standing. The problem was how to build a bigger nave to fit the small tower, as the two things would obviously have looked incongruous. It was decided that, instead of putting the nave end on to the tower, it would be built on the south side. So today we have a medieval tower with a 19th century nave set side by side, with a corridor joining them together.”

“Again, that is quite unique.”

“That is quite unique and here are the details of it all. 1832, with seating for 428 persons. The interesting thing was that 263 of that number are ‘hereby declared to be free and unappropriated for ever’. In other words, presumably, the rest of them were paid for and had to be hired.”

“What makes Atworth tick? What makes Atworth special compared with other local villages?”

“I think one of the things is, that compared with many villages it is not quite such a dormitory area as some. We have different organisations going on here, such as the 60+ Club, the 18s to 80s and other institutions, some of which have young people participating, like the Judo Club, and that keeps the place ticking over. I was on the local recreation field yesterday, where one of our residents had between 25 and 30 small children playing football and this is the kind of thing which, I think, keeps the village together.

“I think the History Group does that to some extent. We do not just study history. We are very much a social group, as well, which enables people to talk to one another who normally do not meet.”

“So, there is a real community spirit here in Atworth?”

“I think there is more of a community spirit here than in some places. It concerns us greatly because obviously it is something that needs to be maintained and we wonder how we are going to do it. In the History Group we have a debate going on at the moment called ‘Atworth 2000’. What would we like Atworth to be like in the year 2000? We have various people coming to talk to us about housing, byways and such things and we have a

project, for example, of mapping all the local pathways here. So, we are doing quite a lot to try to maintain the local community spirit.”