

Shrivenham's old Bier.

Until this year in the Spring I had never seen the Bier although I knew of its existence but had not heard of anyone who could tell me about it. I had heard that it was stored in an old barn belonging to the village school. I also knew that the old school barn was demolished about 35 years ago. It was only when Robert Gay who farms at Sandhill Farm, Shrivenham invited me to see some new-born lambs and mentioned that I might like to have a look at the Bier because he knew of my interest and work with the village Archives. And there it was in another barn where Robert, then a Councillor, had agreed to house it when the school could no longer keep it. He and his helpers wheeled it out and I took several photos. Yes, it was old and looked its age but my attention was drawn to the brass plaque which read: *'Donated to the Parish of Shrivenham by Rear-Admiral Sir Robert C. Drury on the death of his beloved wife who died on the 9th February 1900 at Beckett.'*

Neil Maw and I have worked together on the history of the Estate at Beckett, owned by the Barrington family since 1720. The estate is mentioned in the Domesday Survey. So we investigated and found that the Rear-Admiral had married Robert Whitehead's eldest daughter, Frances. At that very time we were working on a presentation about the life of the inventor of the torpedo who just happened to have spent his last few years living in Beckett House. This all fitted in with what we knew of the Barrington family and we also knew that members of the Whitehead family had actually bought or rented houses close by so as to be with Robert Whitehead in his decline.

I've been lucky enough to find 6 people in the village who remembered the Bier. They are:

1. Dennis Stratton 92/93 from a long established Shrivenham family. His Grandfather was with General Roberts on his famous 300 mile march to Khandahar from Kabul. Dennis tells me that the Bier was housed in the small old building in the churchyard along with the tools needed to cut the grass and keep the churchyard tidy. He regularly assisted his father in this and whose responsibility was also to make sure the Bier was in good and clean condition both before and after the event. He would have been a boy of about 8 in the early 1930s.
2. Bob Miller DOB 1925, again from another long established family and of a similar age to Dennis, spent the greater part of his life in Shrivenham and Watchfield before moving to Wroughton. He remembers the Bier very clearly for it was sometimes taken from Shrivenham to Watchfield. It would have been trundled along the mile or so distance between the 2 villages there and back in the days before motor transport made it almost redundant.

3. Gordon Miles who died recently in October at 94 and whose successful life can be encapsulated in "*From a push bike to a fleet of Nine Coaches*" told me that when he eventually achieved his dream of having his own car when he was aged about 19 in the early 1940's he was often asked to take people at short notice in his car to say the Maternity home in Swindon or to collect someone stranded. This helped him decide on his career in transporting people to their destinations. He mentioned that once or twice he helped deliver the Bier to Watchfield by hitching a trailer or something to his car to transport the coffin. (Exempted from the Services on account of his asthma). He well remembers Billy Dike and his father the undertakers. Clearly remembered the Bier in use in the 1930's and 1940's .
4. Alec Chambers 92 , who moved with his parents at the age of 3 to the Barrington Arms where his father was a highly respected Landlord. Not only has he been described as a fair man but he would brook no nonsense from his customers. Alec's father, Ted Chambers died in 1954 and Alec, then 19 clearly remembers the day of the funeral. The Barrington Arms is situated in the centre of the High Street almost opposite Church Walk. Alec says the Bier was trundled across the road and up Church Walk to the lych gate about 70 yards away.
5. Sheila Turner 87 was brought up in Shrivenham from a very young age. Her father was a signalman on the railway. She never leaves her home now but clearly remembers the old Bier and also the undertakers Tom Dike who had the village shop where one could buy nearly anything) and his son Billy. A throwaway remark was "*a bit soft in the head.*" From other people I've heard that Billy had a problem. While Sheila was unable to attach any names she came out with this remark: "*I should not have been there that day but I was in the churchyard and saw the Bier stop by a freshly dug grave. I was only young and stopped to watch. I saw the coffin being taken off the Bier and put into the hole. Then I saw some money being put in as well. I didn't dare tell my mother cos I knew I'd get into trouble.*" This must have been during the mid '30s I guess. I did not know about the old custom of pennies being put on to the eyes of the occupant.
6. Ross Muir a farmer whose family have farmed in the area for a long time, remembers seeing the Bier at "*Dike's place where they made the coffins.*" This workshop has long gone and the new vicarage stands there today. He was unable to give any further details.