

Amerton Farm Ltd

The History of Bow Top Wagon

Romany or Gypsy Wagons have been around for a very long time, having once been used to transport showmen and their families around. However, Romany Gypsies themselves only adopted them around 170 years ago.

The wagons were first created not to transport goods around, but as mobile homes, drawn along by the power of horses. They are said to have originated in France around 1810, first coming to the UK in the 1820s, having primarily been seen with travelling circuses, before being adopted by Romany Gypsies around 1850.

These wagons were highly cherished possessions that the Romany Gypsies called 'vardos'. A vardo is a traditional horse-drawn wagon used by British Romany people as their home. Possessing a chimney, it is commonly thought of as being highly decorated, intricately carved, brightly painted, and even gilded. It was rare for the gypsies to build their own wagons, instead opting to commission one. This was usually done following a special occasion such as a wedding or the birth of a child. It cost around £50-150 at the time and would take six months to complete. Popular materials for the wagons included oak, ash, elm, walnut and pine.

The British Romany tradition of the vardo is seen as a high cultural point of both artistic design and a masterpiece of wood crafters art. The heyday of the living wagon lasted for roughly 70 years from the mid-1800s through the first two decades of the twentieth century. They are not used for year-around living today, however are often shown and seen at horse fairs held throughout the year. The best known is the famous Appleby Horse Fair.

There were typically six styles of vardo : the Brush, the Reading, the Ledge, the Bow Top, the Openlot and the Burton. Each of these styles has their own distinctive features. It was said that the style that the Romany Gypsy couple owned would say a lot about them, including their wealth. The outer decoration of a vardo is typically very decorative and over the top, with beautifully engraved carvings and paintings in addition to ornately designed wheels. The Vardo certainly made a statement!

The Bow Top

The Bow Top wagon is possibly the most recognisable, and certainly the lightest of the styles. The classic curved design is one of its most distinctive features, alongside the fact that it was often painted or camouflaged with materials made from tones of green. This meant it easily blended into the woodland and could be hidden away when necessary. The three-quarter size Bow Top, the type we have at Amerton Farm, was often commissioned for a family member and used just to sleep in. It would be pulled by a horse, and follow the rest of the family on their travels along the country lanes.

A small cast-iron cooking stove called a 'Queenie' was used from about 1830 on and is a common fixture of these wagons. It was only used in bad weather as the Romanys preferred to cook outside on a fire and a cooking stove necessitates a chimney to vent smoke. A vardo chimney is always on its left side as viewed from its front doorway. The reason for this is that as it travels

along the left side of the road, the chimney is in less danger from low-hanging tree limbs. The stove would rest in a wooden fireplace.

The vardo interior was typically outfitted with built-in seats, cabinets, a wardrobe, with bunks in the rear of the wagon. The bunks are where the children would sleep and were located below the main bed which sometimes pulled out. There was a glass-fronted china cabinet which would house the family china which was always on display except when travelling, when it was packed carefully away. It was the first thing to be unpacked when stopping somewhere.

In *The Old Curiosity Shop* (Ch. xxvii), Charles Dickens described Mrs. Jarley's well-appointed van:

'One half of it...was carpeted, and so partitioned off at the further end as to accommodate a sleeping-place, constructed after the fashion of a berth on board ship, which was shaded, like the windows, with fair white curtains... The other half served for a kitchen, and was fitted up with a stove whose small chimney passed through the roof. It also held a closet or larder, several chests, a great pitcher of water, and a few cooking-utensils and articles of crockery. These latter necessaries hung upon the walls, which in that portion of the establishment devoted to the lady of the caravan, were ornamented with such gayer and lighter decorations as a triangle and a couple of well-thumbed tambourines.'

The life of a Romany when bow tops were in use as living wagons was dictated by the seasons. The start of the year was when the first flowers appeared, usually snowdrops, and the travellers would know where to find them in abundance. They would fashion them into small bunches and sell them in the town to the passers-by or knock on people's doors. The Romany was feared as they had a reputation for being clairvoyant and this unnerved people. Therefore, they did well in their sales. Following on it would be daffodils and the Bow Top would move on to woods where they knew these grew wild.

For some Romany families there were hops to pick, pegs to make and potatoes to sow and reap. Some farmers had a good relationship with particular travellers and their families. These farmers expected them at certain times of the year and provided a suitable place for them to pitch up. Quite often however, the travellers were moved on by the Police and had trouble finding an area of land to stop for a while.

All the Romany families tried to get together for certain celebrations in the year. They would all head to a certain place to meet up with cousins and friends they hadn't seen since the last event. These were times of great celebration. Older children would find their future husband or wife at these celebrations, as it was frowned upon to marry outside the traveller community. Weddings were major events, as were funerals. Respect within the Romany community was huge between the families.

The Little Bow Top – Romany Wagon Project at Amerton Farm.

We believe our Romany Wagon here at Amerton Farm, was originally built in the 1800's and has been restored along the way until its final restoration in 2017 by Jeff Williams and Andy Thomas. It was purchased by a dealer as part of a job lot from an auction at Appleby Horse Fair. Jeff and his best friend Andy restored it and sold it to the last owner Klara Plumtree and

it was sited at Amerton Farm. After a few months of absence the " Little Bow Top - Romany Wagon Project "as it is now known, has returned to its former home at Amerton Farm.

Jeff Williams, who painted our Bow Top was born in London, trained as a joiner and moved to Norfolk. He had excellent art, woodwork and carvings skills. Jeff met up with Romany travellers and started painting their wagons as commissioned. Jeff became very much in demand and was accepted by them as one their own. He went to all their meet ups and lived in bow tops most of the later years of life, until more recently when he traded that life for his narrow boat which was moored at Stone, in Staffordshire. The little bow top was the last thing Jeff restored and painted before he died in 2018.

The Little Bow Top based at Amerton Farm will be used by Angels Attic from Stafford and other third parties for: Tarot Card Readings, Mediums, Clairvoyance, Psychics, readings etc, on a session by session basis. It will also be offered as a part of extra activities for school children. Pupils will be able to view The Little Bow Top - Romany Wagon as part of a curriculum area of history, British customs and traditions. The wagon is decorated inside in a traditional manner to reflect its history and outside it is highly decorated by one of the finest Romany artists.