

Travellers, Gypsies, Roma:  
The Demonisation of Difference



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Edited by

Michael Hayes and Thomas Acton



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## INTRODUCTION

The social history of Travellers and Roma remained largely undocumented up to recent times. In Ireland the Traveller community scores high on all indicators of social disadvantage relating to health, unemployment, education, and infant and adult mortality. Their social history shares many similarities with the Roma (Gypsies) who number at least twelve million people worldwide. Roma are referred to by a variety of different names - Gypsies, Tsigani, Tzigane, Cigano, Zigeuner, and quite a few more. Like the Irish Travellers they too have suffered a long history of discrimination in terms of employment, education, health care and other services. While the pogroms of the Nazi terror of World War II - the Porrajmos (Holocaust) - with estimates of deaths ranging between 400,000 and 1.5 million Roma - is the most infamous example of anti-Roma prejudice in European history, the collapse of the communist regimes post 1989 have rekindled anti-Roma sentiment in both Eastern and Western Europe. A resurfacing of national and ethnic tensions in the former Eastern Bloc has contributed to increased levels of anti-Roma prejudice and often violent attacks against Romani immigrants and refugees has also acted as a catalyst for some Roma to migrate to West European countries, such as Ireland and the U.K., in search of a better life.

The scholars and activists contributing to this volume have all engaged with such questions as ethnicity, identity, ethnology, linguistics, racism, cultural expression and the new historiography that characterise the disciplines now referred to as Traveller Studies and Romani Studies. Of particular concern to this volume has been the necessity to address these broader issues within the context of the ever-changing dynamics of representation, modernisation, globalisation and the re-construction of the nation-state within the European Union. It is hoped that this volume of essays will function as a catalyst for the disciplines of Irish Studies, Traveller Studies, Romani Studies and Migration Studies.

This volume of essays is an eclectic mix of brief narratives and more academically oriented essays on areas as diverse as: an English Romani perspective on the Surrey Project (Jake Bowers); human rights (Thomas Acton); policing in the U.K. (Colm Power), housing (Joanna Richardson) and anti-trespassing laws in Ireland (Tony Drummond); the Cork Traveller women's network (Louise Harrington & Michael Hayes); language, identity and

interpretation (Ian Hancock; Michael Hayes; St. John Ó Donnabháin; David O'Donnell).

Multiculturalism is not new. What is new is the acknowledgement of diversity and multiculturalism within an emergent more cosmopolitan understanding and the necessity to create a dialogue between “mainstream” society, older minorities such as Irish Travellers and newer “immigrant” communities such as the Roma. A precondition for such cosmopolitan understanding to emerge is that the voices of Travellers and Roma are listened to and that their distinctive worldviews be provided with a platform for expression and that their input finds its way into policies that directly impact on their everyday lives. We hope that this volume makes some contribution towards the development of a more open and welcoming cosmopolitan European society. It is only through such a process that we may uncover a more critically productive discourse and understanding of the relationships that exist between Irish Travellers, Roma and the rest of Irish, British and European society.

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## CHAPTER ONE

# HUMAN RIGHTS AS A PERSPECTIVE ON ENTITLEMENTS: THE DEBATE OVER ‘GYPSY FAIRS’ IN ENGLAND<sup>1</sup>

THOMAS ACTON\*

### **Preface**

This essay focuses on the annual Gypsy fair in Horsmonden, Kent. It charts the development of the fair and evaluates an attitudinal survey of village residents undertaken by the Gypsy Council, following moves by the local authorities to close the fair down. Unlike previous campaigns by Romani groups, which were cast in the discourse of ethnic exceptionalism, the campaign for Horsmonden represents a move towards the use of the human rights approach and the issue of non-discrimination by Romani activists. Instead of arguing for the continuation of a past privilege, the campaigners at Horsmonden defended the fair by claiming the right to freedom of assembly, based on the democratic support of the community where the fair was based. The use of an attitudinal survey to examine the opinions of non-Gypsies was novel; although sociological surveys have been used in Romani studies, in the past they generally entailed questionnaires aimed at Gypsies themselves, not at members of the community at large. The results of the survey showed that a majority of the villagers surveyed supported the continuation of the fair, in opposition to the local council decision to close the fair down. The general benefit and positive attitudes to the fair suggest that the refusal to allow permission for the fair grows out of racial prejudice and is not based on the general concerns expressed by the local community with regard to the fair.

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper first appeared in the Essex Human Rights Review 2004 Vol.1, No.1 pp 17-28 - <http://projects.essex.ac.uk/ehrr/archive/pdf/46.pdf> “Human Rights as a Perspective on Entitlements: The Debate Over 'Gypsy' Fairs in England” (Online: <http://projects.essex.ac.uk/ehrr/>)

## Introduction

Within Great Britain the struggle to retain what are seen as ‘Gypsy Fairs’ is one of the earliest manifestations of collective political action by English Romani people, going back to the 1930s,<sup>2</sup> with battle being rejoined in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>3</sup> Some of these gatherings were in fact dependent on large horse-racing gatherings, such as those at Epsom and Doncaster. Others are descended from medieval fairs and markets, which are no longer patronized by Gaje.<sup>4</sup> In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries it was only possible for Gypsies to gather in large numbers without appearing threatening to the non-Gypsies at occasions when even larger numbers of non-Gypsies, strangers to each other, were present as a kind of cloak to the Gypsy gathering. Now, the Gypsy gatherings remain long after the non-Gypsy economy has moved on, and are defended as essential parts of Romani community life, for trade, culture and family life among those who are still nomadic and still seen as threatening when they gather together more than a few families.

Most of the earlier attempts by Romani groups to defend the continuation of these fairs were cast within a discourse of ethnic exceptionalism. They were defended as a part of tradition, as an exception to the normal rules of modern society, to be tolerated for the sake of an archaic community, rather than as the exercise of a normal human right to social and economic assembly. This paper will examine what may be the first political attempt to adopt a universalistic human rights approach to the defence of a fair, by the Gypsy Council at Horsmonden from 2001 onwards. The Gypsy Council, perhaps because the historical roots of this fair are believed to be only around a century old – it lacks any feudal documentation – sought to defend it by a direct appeal to the sympathies of the surrounding population, suggesting that it is a normal activity which brings, or can bring general benefits, and which no-one would think of opposing were it not for entrenched racial prejudice. This method – seeking to undermine the decision of political authority by appeal to democratic sentiments, as opposed to the supplication of authority to retain past privilege

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<sup>2</sup> T. Acton, *Gypsy Politics and Social Change* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974) 102.

<sup>3</sup> R.A.R. Wade, ‘The Saving of Appleby Fair’ (1966) XLV (1-2) *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society* 29-39; R.A.R. Wade, ‘A Travelling Traders’ Guild’ (1968) XLVII (1-2) *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society* 29-31; and T. Acton, *Gypsy Politics and Social Change* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974) 178.

<sup>4</sup> Gaje is the generalized plural Romani term for non-Gypsies. In the English Romani dialect it is pronounced ‘Gaujos’ or ‘Gorjers’. The singular is ‘Gajo’/‘Gaujo’/‘Gorjer’.

which has marked classic defences of fairs as by Gordon Boswell of Appleby<sup>5</sup> – has been linked to new intellectual methods of underwriting the political appeal – the adoption of contemporary social-scientific methodology in the form of a survey carried out by the Gypsy Council of local residents in a Kentish village.

This also marks out the human rights approach of the Gypsy Council as specifically anti-racist, where much traditional Gypsy politics remain enmeshed in special pleading. An example of the latter is the petition to the House of Commons from the Derbyshire Gypsy Liaison Group to write an ethnic definition of the term 'Gypsy' into the Housing Bill<sup>6</sup> to determine who can go on 'Gypsy Caravan Sites'.<sup>7</sup> This has been opposed by the Gypsy Council.<sup>8</sup>

The Gypsy Council believes that the right to reasonable choice of type of accommodation, and the right to stable and secure family residence within cultural tradition are human rights that all people, regardless of ethnicity, should enjoy. It believes, therefore, that well managed and designed caravan sites should in principle be allowed to be built on any land that is zoned for residential purposes. If, however, planning permission for caravan sites is to be restricted, priority should be given to those who travel as part of their occupation or economic, cultural or social way of life.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> R.A.R. Wade, 'The Saving of Appleby Fair' (1966) XLV (1-2) *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society* 29-39.

<sup>6</sup> 'The petition of the Derbyshire Gypsy Liaison Group and supporters declares that Gypsy people have for centuries been in the U.K. and that we are a distinct ethnic group sharing common ancestors, a distinct language, cultural beliefs and a common oral history. The Petitioners therefore request the House of Commons to introduce amendments to the 1/94 guidelines on planning and settlement applications to align them with the Mandla criteria of 1988 (*CRE v. Dutton*) in order to prevent racial discrimination against Romani and other ethnic Traveller peoples. The Irish Traveller community received ethnic status in 2000 (O'Leary).' The Derbyshire Gypsy Liaison Group, *Petition to Parliament* (2004).

<sup>7</sup> At present the definition of 'Gypsy' in planning legislation, following on from the 1968 Caravan Sites Act, despite its repeal, is 'a person of nomadic habit of life, regardless of ethnicity'.

<sup>8</sup> 'Asylum Seekers and EU expansion' Resolution Adopted at Gypsy Council AGM, Blackpool, 24 Apr. 2004 (Proposed: Thomas Acton, Seconded: George Wilson, all members present adopted the resolution); and 'Policy of the Gypsy Council on Site Planning Issues and Ethnicity' Resolution Adopted at Gypsy Council AGM, Blackpool, 24 Apr. 2004 (Proposed: Thomas Acton, Seconded: A. Bagehot, Andrew Ryder abstained but all other members present adopted the policy).

<sup>9</sup> 'Policy of the Gypsy Council on Site Planning Issues and Ethnicity' Resolution Adopted at Gypsy Council AGM, Blackpool, 24 Apr. 2004.

The Gypsy Council argues that the right to live in caravans must be a human right, not an ethnic privilege, and that the proper place to assert ethnic rights for Roma is in the Race Relations Act, or new anti-discrimination legislation, where everybody's ethnic rights are asserted as an element of their human rights, not as something peculiar to Gypsies:

The Gypsy Council calls on the Commission for Racial Equality and on the police to ensure that anti-discrimination laws are fully applied to end the present discrimination against Romani groups in access to residential and touring caravan sites, and in the operation of the planning process. It calls on the government fully to acknowledge the traditional ethnicity of Romani and Travelling groups within its policies for anti-racism, inclusion and diversity.<sup>10</sup>

In this way, the debate between the particularistic Roma Rights approach, and the universalistic human rights approach finds a manifestation even in England.

### **Sociological Methodology and its Implications**

It used to be part of the received wisdom that questionnaires would never work in research on Gypsies. Although the very first serious study of Gypsies in England<sup>11</sup> depended partly upon sending out questions to helpers, who visited Gypsy encampments in various parts of England to put those questions to the residents, this gave at best an outsider's view of their culture. Not until Goulet and Walshok put attitudinal questions to Spanish Gypsies in 1967-8 was modern survey methodology employed.<sup>12</sup> Even relatively recently, Okely, commenting on Mends'<sup>13</sup> use of a questionnaire in a study of Gypsy attitudes to Christianity in England, comments on its limitations:

There is little room for volunteered replies and comments. This is not to say that the questionnaire is by definition inappropriate, but whether used to interview minorities or majorities in the dominant society there are often severe limitations. It is best suited for large samples and simple questions where accuracy is more likely to be built in.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> J. Hoyland, *The Gypsies*, (York and London: W.M. Alexander, 1816).

<sup>12</sup> D. Goulet and M. Walshok, 'Values among underdeveloped marginals - the case of Spanish Gypsies' (1971) 13:4 *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 451-72.

<sup>13</sup> B. Mends, 'Researching the Religious Affiliations of Travellers and their Beliefs' in T. Acton and G. Mundy (eds.) *Romani Culture and Gypsy Identity*, (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 1997) 158-63.

<sup>14</sup> J. Okely, 'Cultural ingenuity and travelling autonomy: not copying, just choosing' in T. Acton and G. Mundy (eds.) *Romani Culture and Gypsy Identity*, (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 1997) 188-203 198.

In the same paper, however, Okely remarks how, during the Economic and Social Research Council Romani Studies Seminar at Greenwich University in 1993-4, Travellers who had read some of the gajé [sic] texts about their groups now, as self-ascribed members, were using outsiders' theories but trying them out in terms of their own identities and the wider political context within which Travellers have to survive.<sup>15</sup>

It might be objected that it is never clear where theories originate and whether they ever unambiguously belong to 'outsiders'; but, whatever their origins, Okely is right to suggest that scientific theory and methodology can never remain the exclusive property of one cultural group; they will be appropriated by whoever has a use for them. The present paper refers to what may be the first example, in Western Europe at least, of formal sociological research carried out by Gypsies on non-Gypsies, as opposed to the many examples the other way round.<sup>16</sup>

The initiative to do this arose out of the campaign by a loose coalition of Gypsy organizations led by the Gypsy Council, to keep Horsmonden Fair open in 2001. Although the present writer, a Gajo professional sociologist, was brought in at the stage when the first draft of the questionnaire was put before the Gypsy Council executive, and later helped with the analysis, the proposal and the distribution of the questionnaire were carried out by Gypsy members. Their objective was not in the first instance to put forward over-ambitious generalizations about Gajo-Gypsy relations in general, but the more modest one of trying to understand better the extent and nature of support for, and opposition to, the traditional fair in Horsmonden, and to use the facts they uncovered in negotiation with the local authorities. The research both uncovered a surprising groundswell of support for keeping the fair alive, and indicated various policies for eliminating sources of nuisance, such as bad parking, through a joint management committee, which were approved both by supporters of the fair and moderate opponents, and thus represented a way forward for compromise. It will be suggested that these have more general human implications for the relationship of social policy research to human rights action.

The questionnaire took the format of yes and no questions relating to the fair and further included a section regarding the demographic of respondents. The first section contained general questions regarding the respondents'

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> T. Acton, J. Lee, C. Smith and G. Wilson, *Studying the Gaujos: Using Social Science to Inform Romani Approaches to Local Communities* (unpublished report to the Gypsy Council, Aveley, Essex, 2003).

awareness of the closure of the fair, their attitude to its closure, and whether they felt consulted on the closure. There were further questions for those positive to the fair relating to potential improvement including: having fewer stalls on the green, having the horse parade through the village but keeping the main events in another place, and having a proper management group to run the fair. For respondents against the fair the questionnaire queried whether any other way of doing it would meet their needs, including reducing the size of the fair, holding all the horse events in another field, improving parking outside the village 'so that residents can live their own lives', and developing 'a more receptive management committee, which has Gypsy people, residents and police on it to make sure things are done better.' Finally, respondents were asked to give a number of details about themselves, including gender, age, ethnicity, occupation and home ownership.

## **Horsmonden Fair**

The traditional fair at Horsmonden in Kent is not a 'charter fair', that is granted by an ancient royal charter, nor does it boast the antiquity of some other fairs. It is popularly believed to have grown out of a 19th century 'Hop-Pickers' Sunday', an event organized as recreation for casual agricultural labour, many of whom, of course, were Gypsies. When I first visited it in the 1960s it was small and had no 'amusements' such as roundabouts, but had a number of stalls selling china, shoes, curtains and cushion covers, and harness. It represented a serious shopping opportunity for many rural Travellers who fought shy of going to town centres. By late afternoon there would be a regular ebb tide of young mothers wheeling pushchairs laden with purchases back to their husbands, motors parked some way from the fair green at the outskirts of the village. The fair lasted only one day, so very few people except stallholders actually brought their trailers to stay overnight. There was also a fair amount of horse-trading. A small contingent of non-Gypsy evangelical Christians traditionally preached there in the days before the 'Light and Life' evangelical Romani movement spread to England. Over the years these were to be joined by stalls representing the Traveller Education Service (specialist teachers working with Roma/Gypsy/Traveller children) and even specialist Health Visitors (community nurses) working with Travellers.

As other fairs were closed down or threatened with closure, and as the English Gypsy community began to experience more prosperity after the 1968 Caravan Sites Act took the edge off earlier persecution, so Horsmonden fair grew during the 1970s to the point where there was justifiable concern about overcrowding of the small village green. At the beginning of the 1980s, the Romany Guild, another Gypsy organization, led by the late Tom Lee, negotiated

with the local authority a shift of the fair to a large field rented from a farmer near Paddock Wood some miles away. At first this was a great success, with a considerable increase in the horse-trading and in the numbers of trailers staying overnight. Romanestan Publications even ran a bookstall there in 1983.<sup>17</sup> The Romany Guild, however, found it difficult to make a financial success of the fair, and ceded its administration to a smaller Kent-based organisation run by Tom Odley, an activist somewhat tainted by his association with the neo-fascist National Front.<sup>18</sup> Under Odley's direction the Paddock Wood fair shrank still further and was abandoned, leaving a few local Gypsies to gather back on the village green in Horsmonden. This much-reduced fair was quite successful, but its memory was marred by a fight which took place a fortnight after the fair in 1987 between some Gypsies and the one pub landlord who, in defiance of police advice, opened his pub. The incident is described vividly in a poem by Charles Smith.<sup>19</sup>

Although this incident was deplored by Gypsies and Gaje alike, it perhaps had the paradoxical effect of keeping some people away from the fair, and thereby keeping it smaller and more manageable. We can, in fact, see a kind of cyclical effect. When the fair is small, there is little trouble or nuisance, and the pleasant atmosphere causes the fair to grow. When it grows, there is more crowding and tension, which leads to trouble of some kind, and so the fair shrinks again. During the later 1990s it began to grow again, and opposition to it also grew.

### **The Biggest Stand-off with the Police since the 1960s**

It is quite hard to ban an event that is not actually being organized by anyone, as was the case with Horsmonden Fair in the early 1990s. After the end of the Paddock Wood arrangement, Gypsies just turned up in hope with horses on the traditional day, and traders turned up in the hope of selling them – and the villagers – shoes, hot dogs and harness. The Parish Council could announce the fair was cancelled and place all the injunctions it liked, but unless someone were effectively to warn off the Travellers, they would still turn up, ignore notices, which often they could not read anyway, and at the end of the day the local authorities would still be organizing the clear-up. As they did so, Gypsy

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<sup>17</sup> T. Acton and D. Kenrick (eds.), *Romani Rokkeripen Todivvus*, (London: Romanestan Publications, 1984) 6.

<sup>18</sup> Searchlight editorial, 'Racial Romany gets left-wing platform' *Searchlight*, 1989 March, 165:8.

<sup>19</sup> C. Smith, *The Spirit of the Flame* (Manchester: Manchester Traveller Education Service, 1990).

organizations, responding to complaints by Gypsies attending Horsmonden, started to campaign to keep it going.

In 2001, the local authorities made their most determined effort yet to stop the fair. Their strategy was to ask for an enormously-increased police presence, which was beyond the budget of the Kent Police Authority, while at the same time trying to legitimize their action by holding consultations with the Gypsy Council, who patiently undertook prolonged negotiations with the virulently opposed district and parish councils, and with the police, which failed to find a compromise. Finally the Home Secretary banned the fair by making the village an exclusion zone and authorized a huge police presence, in the end much greater and doubtless more expensive than the 'impossible' police presence that Kent County Council had refused to fund. Legal challenges to this failed, and one of the broadest coalitions of Gypsy organizations since the 1960s assembled to make a non-violent challenge to the exclusion zone on the day. Among prominent leaders were Charles Smith and Josie Lee, Chair and President of the Gypsy Council, and the late Eli Frankham, President of the National Romany Rights Association, while Grattan Puxon, the veteran former secretary of the International Romani Union, came out of retirement to co-ordinate publicity.

A massive number of police, estimated at between 600 and 700 officers, prevented perhaps half that number of Gypsies from entering the village. As a compromise the police agreed to allow 3 horses and wagons and a hundred marchers to go through the village, but at the point of entry they allowed only one horse and wagon, driven by Eli Frankham, and fewer than 50 marchers. Everyone else was left waiting impotently, horses literally champing at the bit, behind lines of police in helmets blocking off all access to the village.

Once through the police lines, however, the marchers did not encounter the hostility they had expected. Instead there were posters up in windows that said 'Save our Fair!'. As we progressed through the village people willingly took our leaflets and some asked if they could join us. Once a few did so, others joined them, some running into the houses and calling others. By the time we reached the end of our march the column of people was over 300 strong, with old age pensioners, mothers pushing toddlers in pushchairs, and young people walking and earnestly asking Gypsies present about Gypsy life. It was a beautiful day, and even the police relaxed as they realized that the villagers did not actually need protection, and there was no threat to public order, unless perhaps from villagers who resented the 'protection'. The overwhelming welcome of the villagers did more to take the sting out of the racism of the authorities than anyone could have thought possible. Only the other Gypsies, held back at police checkpoints with restive horses and small children

sweltering in the hot sun, were still frustrated and unhappy, cut off from the little miracle of reconciliation happening inside the ring of steel.

It was this practical demonstration of support from the villagers that led the Gypsy Council committee<sup>20</sup> to decide to carry out a survey of residents as a way of helping them to communicate with the authorities, and of testing public opinion. A questionnaire was devised, then revised, and delivered with a stamped and addressed envelope for response to the 350 households living nearest to the village green which is the traditional site of the fair. There were 143 responses, a 41 per cent response rate, which is much higher than the normal response rate for a postal questionnaire, frequently as low as between 20 and 30 per cent.<sup>21</sup> Of these 143, eighty (56 per cent) took the trouble to write out their own additional comments, as well as responding to the close-ended questions. An absolute majority of seventy-nine (55 per cent) were against the closure of the fair, as opposed to forty-eight (34 per cent) who wanted the fair closed and sixteen (11 per cent) who could not make up their minds.

Who were these citizens of rural England who defied their parish council to welcome the Gypsies, and who were the ones who opposed the fair? Was it true, as many of those in favour of the fair wrote in their comments, that it was recent immigrants to the village, who were out of sympathy with old customs, who opposed the fair? And how strongly did people on both sides hold their views? An analysis was carried out using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) and using the Chi square test to measure the significance of association between variables.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> The Gypsy Council includes both Gypsies and non-Gypsies in its subscription-based membership, and in its executive committee, although most of its office-holders, who initiated this research, are Gypsies.

<sup>21</sup> C.A. Moser and G. Kalton, *Survey Methods in Social Investigation*, (London: Heinemann, 2nd edn., 1971) Ch 11

<sup>22</sup> The 'statistical significance' of an association is the chance that it could have come about by chance if answers were given randomly. Where we say that an association is significant, we are using a sociological convention that there is less than one chance in twenty that we could have got the result in question by pure chance. Sometimes we give an actual 'significance value', a figure between 0 and 1. This is a precise statement of the chances that something could have come about by chance. For example the Chi square significance of the association between gender and broad occupational class categories was 0.010, which means that there are only ten chances in a thousand (or one in a hundred) that the differences in occupation found between men and women could have come about by chance.

## **The Respondents: The People of Horsmonden**

The people who replied were probably not demographically unrepresentative, though a number of people, predominantly those against the fair, refused to give details of their age or gender, writing comments such as ‘What difference does it make?’. Just under 20 per cent refused to state their sex, while just over 45 per cent were female and 35 per cent were male. So if it is true, as some methodologists suggest, that questionnaires given to households are filled in by the most powerful person in the household, then Horsmonden is not short of powerful women. There was, however, no significant difference between men and women in attitudes to the fair closure, or any other attitude questions, although it is interesting to note that the female respondents were significantly less likely to be higher professionals than men, and vastly more likely to be home-makers or housewives (no men reported themselves in this category). Fewer female respondents than male reported owning their home outright, but this difference was not statistically significant even at the 0.05 level. There is, however, a significant association between occupational class and home ownership. All the non-manual workers were home-owners, which was not true of any other occupational category.

Some 30 per cent of respondents reported owning their house outright, 25 per cent on a mortgage, 22 per cent were non-owners and 24 per cent failed to respond. That is, 71 per cent of those who answered this question were home-owners, not too dissimilar from national patterns. Those who did not own their own homes were significantly more likely to be over 68 or under 40 than any age group in between.

As a group, the respondents were older than the general population. Again, if that reflects on who in the house filled in the questionnaire, it shows that Horsmonden respects the wisdom of the aged as well as that of women. Setting aside the 23 per cent who felt their age was private, the remainder fell into four nearly equal age groups of 15-40 (twenty-eight), 41-52 (twenty-five), 56-67 (twenty-eight) and 68-88 (twenty-nine). Twenty-three per cent had lived in the village for less than 10 years, 22 per cent 11-20 years, 23 per cent 21-40 years, 17 per cent between 43 and 88 years, and 15 per cent refused to tell us how long they had been there. Those over 52 were significantly more likely to be manual workers than those in younger age groups.

The Gypsy Council had its own criticism of the simplified and rather racist ethnic labels used in the official British 2001 census, which did not encourage Romani people to state their ethnicity, and which included ‘White’ as an ethnicity. Rather than force such pre-defined racist ethnic labels onto respondents, as the census did, the Gypsy Council decided to ask respondents

how they defined their own ethnicity. This, however, puzzled many of the respondents. Nearly half (46 per cent) left the question unanswered. Some (around 11 per cent) gave answers that might be described as ideological, describing themselves as 'anti-racist' or 'same as everyone else' or gave their religion. Some 13 per cent described themselves as British, 10 per cent as English and 13 per cent as White (14 per cent if we add the 2 who described themselves as Caucasian). Only eight people (5.6 per cent) gave any other ethnicity, including Irish, Celtic, South African, Iranian and two respondents who declared themselves 'Romany' (there are more Romani residents of Horsmonden, but they tend to live on the outskirts.) So those who would conventionally be defined as from an ethnic minority were very few. Nonetheless we shall see that how people defined themselves or did not define themselves in terms of ethnicity shows significant association with their attitudes. It also showed an association with their age. Younger people were significantly more likely to call themselves 'White'. Of those who described themselves as British only two were aged under 53, whereas half of all those who described themselves as White or Caucasian were in the youngest quartile, under 40. (Other ethnic categories were more evenly spread.) It is also interesting that no manual workers described themselves as 'White'. This generational shift in subjective ethnic identification had a knock-on effect on home ownership figures: The 'British' were four times more likely to own their homes outright than still be paying a mortgage, while 'White' home-owners were six and a half times more likely not to have paid off their mortgages yet. Nonetheless, as we shall see below, both categories are more likely than those who self-identify as 'English' to support the fair.

### **Attitudes: For or Against the Fair?**

Simply counting up the numbers for or against the fair would produce a misleadingly polarized view of the village. There are only a small number of people on either side who hold their views so strongly that they are actually hostile to the other side. The overwhelming majority are prepared to compromise, and show this in their written comments. Those who are for the fair often want to see concessions made on parking, on limiting the size of the fair; those who are against the fair are mostly prepared to say that if these same concessions were really implemented then the situation would be much better. We can see the size of this moderate majority if we look at things that most people agree upon, whether they are pro or anti.

The most important of these is that if the fair is to continue, there needs to be a balanced management committee with representation by all interested parties, including the Gypsy Council. Of the 75 per cent who answered this

question, those against the fair were 73 per cent in favour; those for the fair were 97 per cent in favour. Just five antis and two pros said no to this. Also, of the ninety-three who answered the question on parking, an overwhelming 88 per cent were in favour of better parking outside the village, with only two antis and nine pros dissenting.<sup>23</sup> These are the absolute diehards on both sides; those who thought that any acknowledgment of Gypsies was a step too far, or who thought the fair was too wonderful to need managing and any change would be unnecessary interference. They were not more than 10 per cent of the whole; the great majority wanted a harmonious solution, and believed that more could be done to achieve it. While it is true that those who agreed with the fair were significantly more likely to feel they had not been consulted about the fair, 43 per cent of those who wanted the fair closed also felt they had not been consulted. Some 75 per cent of the total answering this question felt they had not been consulted.

On other questions about what might improve the fair there was no general party line, and a much higher level of 'don't knows', between 30 and 50 per cent. Of those who did answer, 52 per cent were in favour of a smaller fair, and 55 per cent were in favour of having fewer stalls on the green. Forty-two per cent were in favour of having a horse parade in the village but putting other activities outside, while 46 per cent were in favour of putting horse events outside the village. Only on the last of these issues was there any significant association with overall attitudes to the fair's survival: only 12 per cent of those who were against putting the horse events in another field outside the village came from the anti-fair camp, but they were 36 per cent of those who did want to move horse events in this way. The Chi square significance of this association was 0.007 (only seven chances in a thousand it could have come about by chance), but still it must be noted there are dissenting minorities in both camps.

So the issues that seemed to command general consensus were the improvement of parking, and the setting up of a management committee. Another issue that might have brought a similar response was the need for more support for the clear-up after the fair; this was mentioned in many of the comments. As for other issues – well, that would be for a management committee to work out what would be for the best.

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<sup>23</sup> Curiously there was a small but definitely significant association (Chi square significance 0.012) between the gender of respondents and support for parking outside the village: women were 96 per cent in favour, whereas men were a mere 79 per cent in favour.

Who was for and who was against the fair? We have already said there was no significant association with gender. Equally there was no significant association with home ownership status.

When it comes to age, the only significant association is that those who refused to tell us their age were far more like to be against the fair (by three to one). Almost half of those who refused to tell their age said they felt they had been consulted about the closure of the fair, significantly more than any declared age group. Amongst those who did tell us their age, the balance of antis and pros was almost the same in each age group, drifting slowly down from around a third of the youngest age group being against the fair to around a quarter of the oldest age group.

A similar picture can be seen when we ask how long people have lived in Horsmonden. Those who say they have lived in the village less than 20 years are around 61 per cent in favour of the fair; those who have lived in the village between 21 and 40 years are 80 per cent in favour, while among those who have lived in the village between 41 and 88 years, the majority in favour falls to 72 per cent; those who refuse to say how long they have lived in the village are 78 per cent against the fair. If we do some sums, and look at the differences according to the proportion of peoples' lives they have spent in the village, or cross-tabulate support of the fair with the number of years they have lived outside the village, then there is no significant association.

In other words, although a number of written comments by those for the fair suggest that those against it are mean-spirited recent arrivals, the evidence does not support this. It may be that there are one or two relative newcomers who are high-profile opponents of the fair, but other newcomers should not be judged by their example; equally there are one or two very longstanding residents who are against the fair.

When it comes to occupation, there are some weak but significant associations. The only group where there is a majority against the fair is again those who refused to state their occupation, but only about a fifth of manual workers and the retired are against the fair as opposed to around a third of non-manual workers and housewives.

The most interesting attitude differences are by respondents' self-ascribed ethnicity. As in all the demographic questions, the only majority against the fair (by thirty-one to twenty-seven) is among those who did not answer the question at all. But amongst the twenty-one people who put themselves in an ethnic minority or gave a response in terms of religion or being anti-racist, only two people opposed the fair. Among those who called themselves White or Caucasian, 29 per cent and 27 per cent respectively were opposed;

but this rose to 43 per cent among those who called themselves English. The Chi square significance of this table was 0.003. There would appear to be quite complex links and associations between how people think about their own ethnic identity and their attitude to the Gypsy fair, which would warrant further research.

## Conclusion

Although the attitudes of those who did not respond may differ from those who did, they are unlikely to hold stronger opinions than those who did respond, or to negate our strongest findings.

We can say that Horsmonden seems fairly representative of an English rural village a little over 50 miles from the centre of London. It is, on the whole, a hospitable, moderate-minded place. It is a desirable place to live and outsiders are moving in, including small numbers from ethnic minorities. The incomers tend to be younger and better-off than some of those who were born in the village or have been local for longer, but actually the attitudes of most of the incomers are not so different from long-term residents. It is a place where the old are respected and women are assertive, even though conventional differences in gender-roles remain.

By and large it is welcoming to the Gypsy Fair. A clear 55 per cent majority were in favour and a 73 per cent majority thought they had not been consulted over the decision to close the fair; these majorities are even higher if one eliminates the 'don't knows'. But both among pros and antis an overwhelming majority wants to see a sensible solution. Very few respondents can be described as hardened opponents – usually individuals with some particular bad experience. Some still remember the fight which happened in 1987, or a meeting at which some parish council members felt Gypsy Council representatives had been rude. On both sides there was a majority belief that more could be done, especially on parking and on clearing up afterwards, through better management, with a management committee representing all interested parties.

Sensitive and dedicated local councillors can make a difference. For example, trouble over a much larger fair at Stow in Gloucestershire has been defused by the patient and untiring work of Cllr. Vera Norwood, who had been for many years a member of the Stow Parish Council (now Town Council), and was Mayor of Stow (and also a member of the Gypsy Council executive). Like all other Stow Councillors, Cllr. Norwood stood for the Council as an independent. She was for many years an active member of the Conservative Party. Disillusioned by the Conservative stance on Romani and some other issues, Cllr. Norwood (who anyway dislikes party politics taking too much

prominence in local government) stood in 2001 for the District Council against the official candidate and won. Subsequently she resigned from the Conservative Party. This is possibly the first time that someone refused an official candidacy for being too pro-Gypsy has gone on to win in such circumstances. She also joined the Gypsy Council committee some years ago, where she sits alongside its chair, Charles Smith, who was a Labour Councillor and was elected Mayor of Castle Point in Essex. Sadly, both Norwood and Smith lost their seats in 2003 - not at the height of their human rights struggles, but after the campaigns had abated.

It can still therefore be argued that there is mileage yet in a more universal human rights approach, which seeks to use normal politics to confront prejudice head on, rather than seeking to sidestep it through exceptionalist politics which sees prejudice as inevitable. The public spirit evident in the care and thoughtfulness with which so many people responded by writing long additional comments showed that people, both English/British, Romani or from other ethnic minorities, were genuinely concerned to reach the compromises which could make a success of the fair. By using social survey methodology, the Gypsy Council was also reaching out to villagers, saying 'We are human beings like you', rather than warning 'We are irredeemably different to you - please don't make us obey normal rules!' This difference of approach will become crucial as the Romani, Gypsy and Traveller organizations move on to confront the debates over revision of the law on caravan sites, housing and other accommodation.

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## CHAPTER TWO

# GYPSIES AND TRAVELLERS ACCESSING THEIR OWN PAST: THE SURREY PROJECT AND ASPECTS OF MINORITY REPRESENTATION

JAKE BOWERS



I'd went to a funeral for my Uncle Jobie and it occurred to me that all the old folk were dying and taking a lot of their history and culture with them.

—Janet Keet-Black, Secretary of the Romany and Traveller Family History Society, UK

From Oxford's Gipsy Hill and Windsor's Tinkers Lane to Worthing's Romany Road, the historical contribution of Britain's 300,000 Gypsies and Travellers is hinted at in place names across the southeast of England. Yet despite being here for at least 500 years, the history and culture of Britain's travelling peoples has rarely been visible within public museums, libraries and archives in the region. This essay describes a new and innovative project as recently undertaken by Gypsies and Travellers in Surrey where an attempt was made to remedy this fact. The project entitled **Roads to Your Past** was based at the Surrey History Centre and involved the collaboration of Gypsies and Travellers from a wide range of counties in south-eastern England. Funded by the European Union and the South East Museum Library and Archive Council the Traveller Project was designed to encourage greater access to the region's museums, libraries and archives for the region's large Gypsy and Traveller population. The project is the British contribution to a 3- year pan-European effort to remove barriers in accessing cultural heritage. The project involved an indepth survey of Travellers and Gypsies and their attitudes to the manner in which they had been represented (if at all) as a community in places such as museums and libraries in the past and how they would like to see their identity and culture displayed in future initiatives involving museums, libraries, archives and other public institutions. A desire to explore the potential of museums, galleries, archives and libraries to meet the needs of Travellers and Gypsies and to encourage greater access to such public institutions on the part of these minorities was one of the principal *raison d'être's* behind this project as was the incorporation of the principles of Action Research to a study which would have a strong collaborative ethos as developed between both the Traveller and Gypsy community and the non-Traveller community. The researchers on this project were conscious from the very beginning of how easy it could be to fall into the trap of speaking of an 'us' and a 'them' in the context of a project such as this, with 'us' being, in this case - the staff of cultural institutions - and the "them" being Travellers. An us/them approach to such a project would have been considered counter-productive for a number of reasons. It would have suggested antagonism and hostility between two communities whose cultures and histories, while including many similarities, are also very different in many ways. An element of divisiveness would immediately be apparent where there ought to be only mutual understanding and cultural acceptance or conversely. The second pitfall that had to be circumvented was the danger in going to the other extreme and over-compensating in terms of the homogeneity that exists in relation to the history and representation of both Travellers/Gypsies and non-Travellers. Gypsies, Travellers, museums, Showmen, archives and libraries are all institutions and groups which are complex and diverse. None of these institutions or groups are easy to categorise or "locate" definitively and all

incorporate a dynamic which cuts across both ethnic and class barriers.

This research revealed that there is another ‘us’ (perhaps without a ‘them’) out there, an “us” which assigns significance to different aspects of contemporary culture but nevertheless is nevertheless concerned to preserve, understand, commemorate, record, account for and celebrate our human past. While being firmly rooted in the needs and concerns of Travellers, many of the themes and concerns identified by the Travellers and Gypsies who undertook this research echo concerns and issues that are current in many cultural institutions. These concerns are wide-ranging and include such issues as the ethical questions of ownership, the rights to interpret particular cultural phenomena and present aspects of them to the greater public and the practical questions of preservation methodologies, and classification terminology. One of the most important outcomes of this research was the usurpation of the “myth” that Gypsies and Travellers are communities which are “difficult to reach”. The research demonstrated the opposite in fact. The overwhelmingly positive response to this research showed that there is both a phenomenal need and a desire within the community to share and preserve its history. Unfortunately, there is also a quite uniform experience of being ignored by museums, libraries and archives.

The settled population, who can make very little link between the romantic images of the past and the deprived and excluded images of the present, are also denied opportunities to learn about and interpret this recent history. While at times British Gypsy history may have been a painful and controversial story it is without question that it is still an important part of the national narrative.

Cognisant of the importance of collaboration between both the Traveller and Gypsy and the non-Traveller communities, it was noteworthy that a Romani journalist and writer Jake Bowers was employed as the project’s researcher. His work began with identifying collections currently held within the region’s museums, libraries and archives. He went on to consult members from all of the region’s travelling communities: English Romanies, Romani refugees, Irish Travellers, New Travellers, Showmen and Circus People, about how best to preserve and celebrate the unique heritage of travelling people. It is hoped that his research, as outlined in this essay will act as a catalyst for the implementation of plans and guidelines as regards the future work of museums, libraries and archives in the area. At a time when anti-Traveller hostility is on the rise, it is extremely important to recognise the long history of travelling people in the south-east of England. This project was not only designed to celebrate that history but to make it more accessible and visible in a way that was informed by the community itself. A central aim of the project was the hope that it would lead to the development of further and increasingly innovative pilot

projects that would encourage more Gypsies and Travellers to explore their history, thereby creating an enhanced understanding in the wider community about all of Britain's nomadic cultures. The fact that there is strong evidence to suggest that Gypsies and Travellers represent the largest ethnic minority in counties such as Kent, Hampshire and Surrey and are also significant minorities in many other south-eastern counties made the objectives of this research even more crucial.

## **Research Methodology**

The research consisted of two primary elements: research within the existing museums, libraries and archives community to identify current good practice, and action research within the community to identify ways of building upon this good practice. Existing good practice was documented where possible as tangible examples of how Gypsy and Traveller heritage is currently preserved, celebrated and represented. The current good practice served as a departure point from which to develop innovative ideas to further improve the representation of Gypsy and Traveller culture within the region's museums, libraries and archives. Research in conjunction with the Traveller and Gypsy community consisted of two aspects. An initial series of qualitative, in-depth interviews with leading Gypsy and Traveller activists, historians, family history researchers and craftsmen focused on common themes and ideas about how those already looking at heritage issues would like to see the Gypsy and Traveller heritage work develop. It is these insights that are the primary focus of this essay. This initial series of interviews was followed by a second series of quantitative interviews which, while less thematically-specific were more wide-ranging and consulted Gypsies and Travellers of all ethnic backgrounds and accommodation situations in all south-eastern counties about how the community would like to see its history and culture preserved and represented. The quantitative research also examined existing use of and attitudes towards museums, libraries and archives in order to provide a baseline with which to judge whether long term work has been successful. Half of these 100 interviews were done by the author, but the other 30% were done by the Traveller Education Service or other local authority staff in an attempt to increase the sample size, geographical coverage and statistical validity. A further 20% of results were gained through sending the questionnaire out to members of the Romany and Traveller Family History Society (RTFHS). The responses from all quantitative interviews were recorded anonymously. The ethnic background, sex, age and accommodation status were recorded however to ensure that the research was balanced and broadly representative.

## Qualitative Stage

Before the beginning of this research personal experience suggested that while public museums, libraries and archives have already gone some way to engaging Gypsies and Travellers, the greatest work by far to preserve the community's heritage had been done by private individuals and institutions. The qualitative stage therefore focused on in-depth interviews with a number of known "practitioners" in the area of Traveller and Gypsy cultural heritage.

These were:

- Janet Keet-Black of the Romany and Traveller Family History Society.
- Gypsy activist and author Len Smith who designed the Romany Museum at Paulton's Park in Hampshire.
- Gary, Obie and Frank Brazil who have received heritage lottery funding for their private Romany museum in Marden, Kent.
- Henry and Paula Elliott who are establishing a Romani museum in Cranbrook, Kent.
- Gypsy historian Simon Evans in Kent

All of these individuals live in the south-east England area and all of them with the exception of Simon Evans - who has done a lot to improve the representation of Gypsies and Travellers in museums and libraries - are from the Traveller or Gypsy community. The insight of this group who have not only helped invent the wheel of preserving Gypsy and Traveller heritage, but set it in motion, were invaluable in setting the agenda in this research. All ethnic and occupational Traveller communities were included in this research project although Roma refugees from Eastern Europe were not included - as although, they form a part of the wider Gypsy and Traveller community in Britain - their experience of being excluded from mainstream services differs from indigenous Traveller and Gypsy communities as a consequence of differences in lifestyle and national origin. The communities were:

- English Romanies
- Irish Travellers
- New Travellers
- Showmen

## Travellers in houses

The south-east is home to the second highest population of Gypsies and Travellers according to the Office of the Deputy Prime Ministers Bi-annual Caravan Count.<sup>1</sup> Despite being recognised as separate ethnic minorities under British race relations legislation (by a decision of the Court of Appeal: see *Commission for Racial Equality v Dutton*, Court of Appeal, 1988), English Gypsies and Irish Travellers are absent from the census and most forms of ethnic monitoring. An estimated 50% of all Travellers and Gypsies are now housed, either through choice, or often through a lack of accommodation. Statutory and voluntary services are primarily targeted towards Travellers living in caravans however irrespective of whether these Travellers are living on the roadside or on private or public sites. They are, after all, the most visible part of the Traveller population, but like the tip of an iceberg they do not represent what lies beneath the surface. In some respects this approach is understandable. Traveller Education Services, for example, specifically target Travellers living in caravans or on Gypsy sites and have difficulty identifying housed Travellers, frequently because they do not reveal their ethnic backgrounds to education authorities. In other cases, however, service providers are still very much using a gorgia (non-Gypsy) definition of what a Traveller is. That is, they are defined by their lifestyle (living in caravans) rather than by their ethnicity. But an English Romani or Irish Traveller does not lose their culture and heritage as soon as they move into housing. Research - (see Power, 2004 for example) - suggests that Travellers in housing are often more vulnerable to ill health<sup>2</sup>, racist abuse, isolation and assimilation.

Travellers in housing also appear to be live at either end of the wealth spectrum. They are either in houses because they are wealthy enough to buy their own houses and have chosen to live that way, or they have been forced into social housing. Whether in housing through choice or compulsion, Travellers in housing are often in the most urgent need of service provision and arguably have the most to gain from accessing and celebrating their cultural heritage. They are isolated from their community, unable to live a traditional lifestyle, and sometimes, because of this, in conflict with those around them. For many in housing, the picture is bleak and their accommodation is perceived as a very real attempt to assimilate them into mainstream gorgia (non-Gypsy) society. It was a

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on the Biannual Gypsy Caravan count see: [http://www.odpm.gov.uk/stellent/groups/odpm\\_housing/documents/page/odpm\\_house\\_027373.hcsp](http://www.odpm.gov.uk/stellent/groups/odpm_housing/documents/page/odpm_house_027373.hcsp)

<sup>2</sup> For more information on the ill-health experienced by Gypsies and Traveller in England please see the University of Sheffield report "The Health Status of Gypsy Travellers in England." Available at: [www.shef.ac.uk/scharr](http://www.shef.ac.uk/scharr)