

Showwoman and Parish Councilor Sue Peak, one of the 100 Gypsies and Travellers interviewed for this research with granddaughter. Photo: Matt Cardy.

2. Methodology

The research consisted of two 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.

The community research consisted of two stages. 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. The insights gained by these interviews are repeated and attributed throughout this research. See qualitative stage below.

A second series of interviews informed wider ranging, but less in depth, quantitative interviews which 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 Traveller Education Service or other local authority staff in an attempt to increase the sample size, geographical coverage and statistical validity. A further

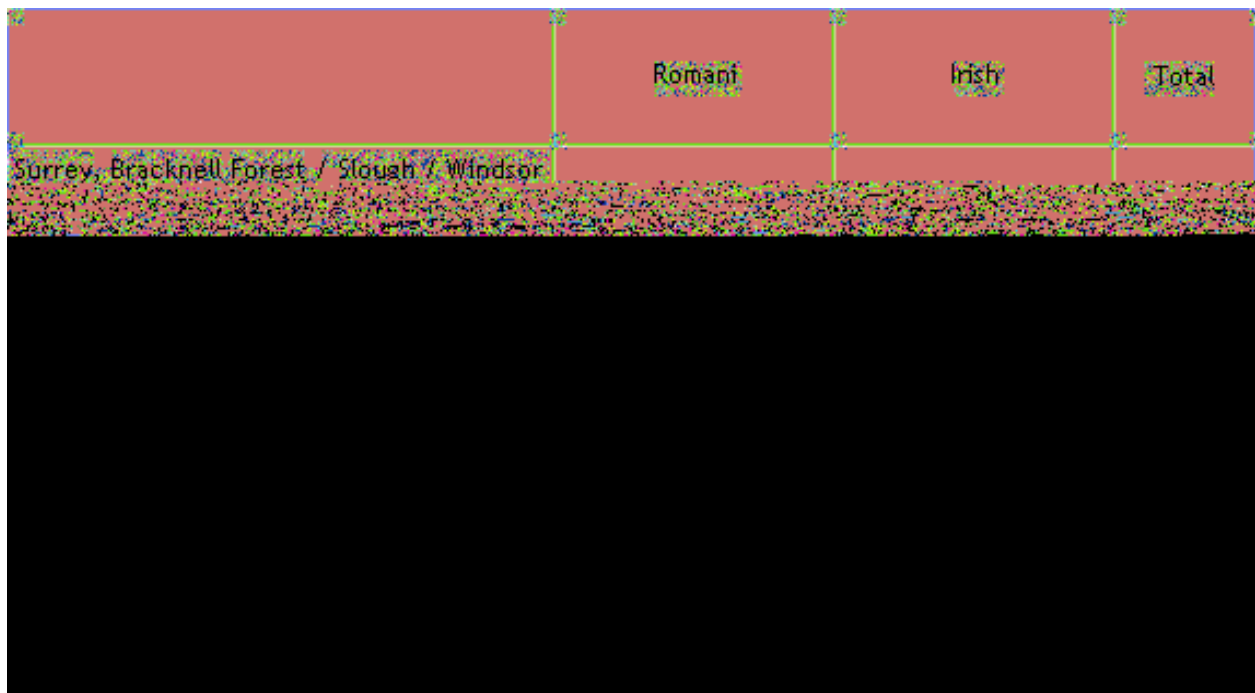
is also strong.

The following tables show the number and diversity of subjects that were interviewed. There is a natural bias towards greater representation in the three counties of Hampshire, Surrey and Kent where Gypsy and Traveller numbers are large and the political will to celebrate Traveller heritage

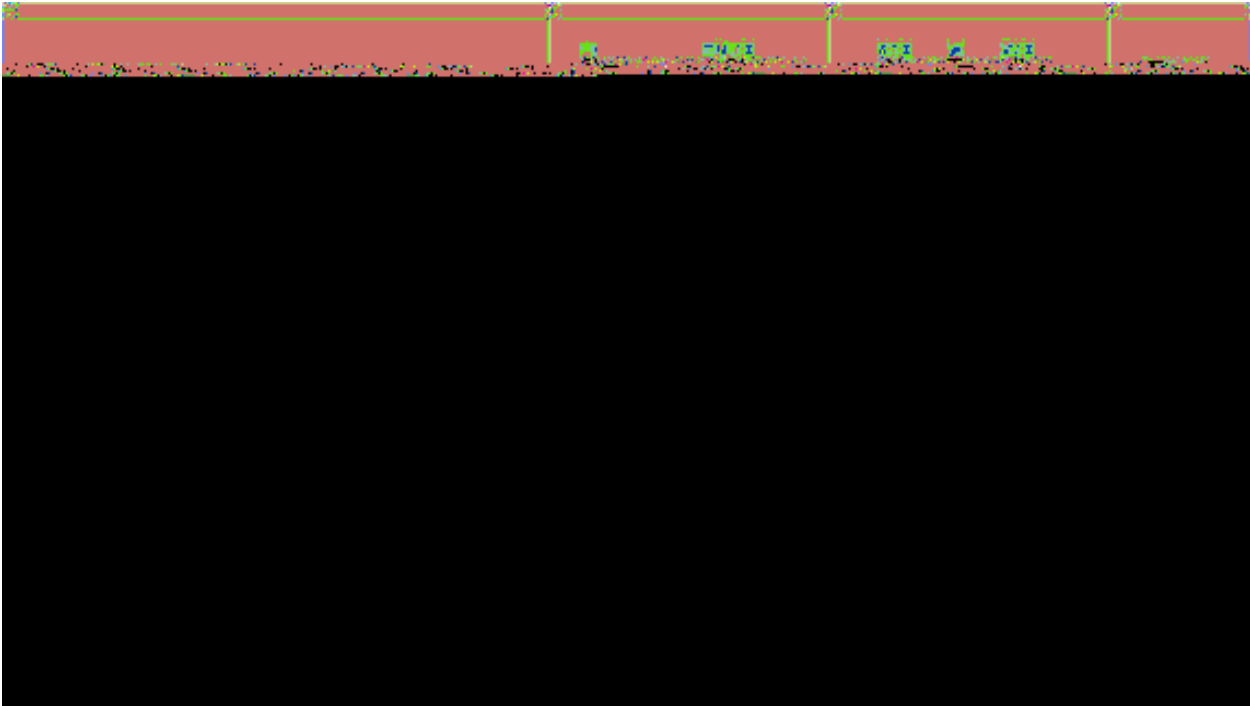
These numbers are broadly balanced and were constantly reviewed to deliberately reflect the diverse backgrounds and accommodation situations that Travellers experience. The consensus among Travellers groups and researchers is that approxi-

mately 50% of traditional Travellers are now housed. Of those remaining in caravans, 70% are thought to be living on either private or public sites and 30% are living in unauthorised (roadside) encampments. It also is based upon the assumption that 80% of Travellers in the south east are Romani and

Number of ethnic Travellers interviewed by county and ethnic background

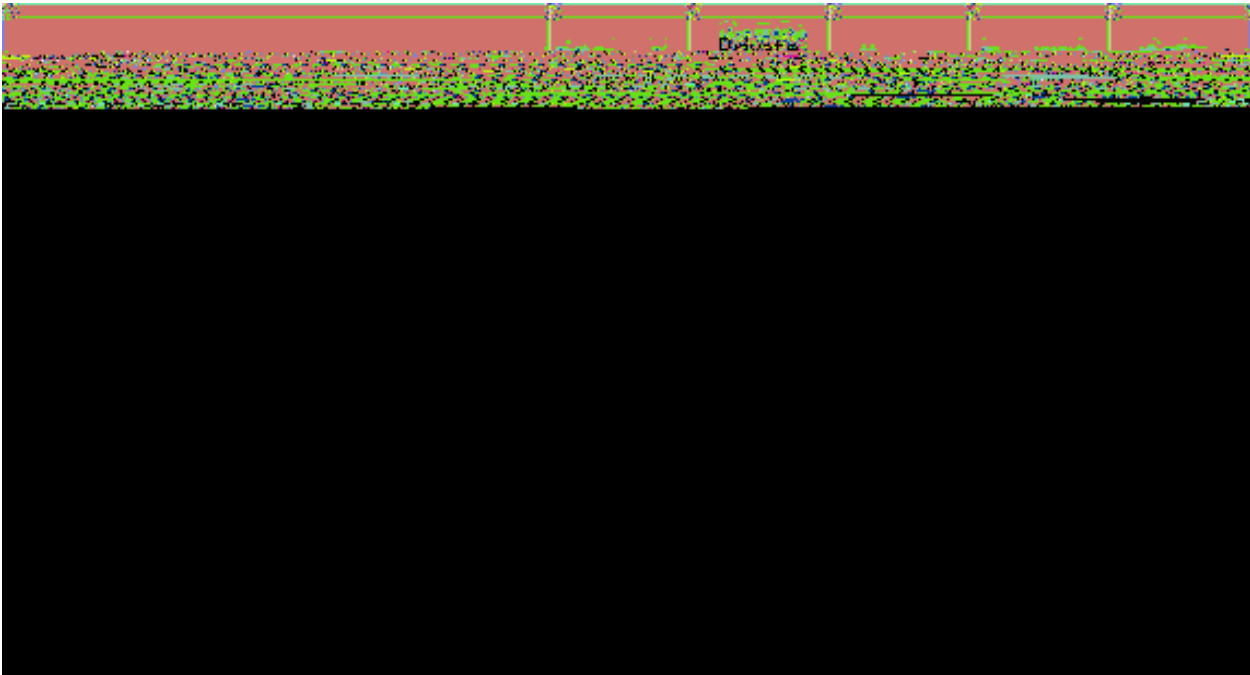


Number of occupational (non-ethnic) Travellers interviewed by county



Note: Unlike ethnic Travellers occupational Travellers are defined by their lifestyle. That is, an occupational Traveller ceases to be a Traveller as soon as they move into bricks and mortar.

Accommodation situations of those interviewed



This research actively sought to consult Gypsies and Travellers in housing as part of a conscious attempt to include the hidden majority within an invisible minority.

20% are of Irish Traveller heritage.

Travellers in houses

An estimated 50% of all Travellers are now housed, either through choice, or often through lack of accommodation. But statutory and voluntary services are primarily targeted towards Travellers living in caravans, whether at 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 cases this is understandable, Traveller Education Services, for example, specifically target Travellers living in caravans or on Gypsy sites and have difficulty identifying housed Travellers, often because they do not reveal their ethnic backgrounds to education authorities.

But 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 suggests that Travellers in housing are often more vulnerable to ill health, racist abuse, isolation and assimila-

tion.²

Travellers in housing appear to be at either ends 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.

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Age and Sex

35% of those interviewed were men and 65% were women. 14% were under 16, 17% were aged between 17 and 30, 41% were between 31 and 45, 27% were between 46 and 65, and 1% were

over 65.


Accessible to all

This research is presented in two forms: the written research you are currently reading and an audio form.

The audio form of this research consists of a 20 minute audio documentary featuring the executive summary and highlights of the quantitative and qualitative interviews. The research is presented in an audio form because many within the community have limited literacy skills, but still need to be informed of the results. The audio report will also give the community ownership of the research and allow them to press for its recommendations.

The written report, audio interviews and photographs taken will also be incorporated into a DVD used throughout Europe to train heritage professionals as part of ACCU: Access to Cultural Heritage, an EU wide project looking at removing barriers in accessing cultural heritage.

² 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



A travelling 'Egyptian' blacksmith being chased from a village. Metal work remains an important trade for some Gypsies and Travellers. Photo from 'Stopping Places: a Gypsy history of south London and Kent' by Simon Evans.

3. Findings

This research has looked at two basic issues: the community's experience of how it has been served by museums, libraries and archives in the south-east in the past, and the way in which it would like to be represented in the future. But none of this can be discussed in isolation from Gypsy history in England, because it is this very history that has informed the experiences, views and attitudes recorded in this report.

A short Gypsy history

Ever since Gypsies arrived in Britain in the 16th century we have aroused fear, loathing and occasionally fascination. When Henry VIII sat on the throne, the penalty for simply being a Gypsy was execution. The 1554 "Egyptians

Act" forbade Gypsies from entering England and imposed the death penalty on those of us who remained in the country for more than a month

The earliest record found to date in Surrey, dates back to 1st March 1569.³ A copy of a letter sent from the Privy Council to William More describes Queen Elizabeth's concern at disorders created by a "universal negligent and wilful permission of vagabonds and sundry beggars commonly called rogues and in some parts Egyptians [Gypsies]."⁴ In October of the same year, a letter from the Privy Council to the High Sheriff and Justices of the Peace in Surrey, orders that "Egyptians" and other rogues be arrested and treated as vagabonds "whereby they may be driven by punishment to change that wicked and dangerous form of life."

In more enlightened times, the death sentence was reduced to transportation. The 1597 Vagrancy Act made it possible for those that "will not be reformed of their roguish kind of life" to be conveyed to "parts beyond the seas". Nowadays, official policy towards Britain's travelling population recommends "toleration". The relationship between Britain and its Gypsy population has come a long way in five centuries, but it still has a long way to go. Many within the community feel its time our culture was not just tolerated, but celebrated.

The twentieth century saw a rise in the conflict between Britain's nomadic and settled population that has still to be resolved. Despite the widespread and continuing closure of traditional stopping places, enough common

³ Loseley Manuscripts in the Surrey History Centre, Woking. Reference: 6729/11/52

⁴ Surrey History Centre reference LM/COR/3/561

land had survived the centuries of enclosure to provide enough lawful stopping places for people whose way of life was or had become nomadic. But in 1960, the Caravan Sites and Control of Development Act gave local authorities the power to close the commons to Travellers, which many proceeded to do with great energy. In the 1960s the pressure for the continual eviction of Gypsies with bulldozers and private security firms reached crisis point. In 1964 the leader of the Labour group on Birmingham Council called for "the extermination of the impossibles".

After a wide-ranging campaign of resistance to evictions, a new Caravan Sites Act was passed in 1968, ordering local authorities to provide sites for all Gypsies residing in or resorting to their areas. For the first time in 500 years, the British state had recognised its responsibility to provide secure, legal stopping places for British Gypsies.

Few non-Gypsies have ever visited an official Gypsy site. Many epitomise the definition of a ghetto - a racially segregated and enclosed settlement. Many have been built near rubbish dumps, sewer works or noisy industrial facilities. In 1994, the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act removed the legal obligation to provide even these sites. As a result, some local councils have privatised and closed many of the legal stopping places available to

Britain's travelling population. Government policy currently recommends that travellers should house themselves. But Gypsy families that attempt to live on their own land are often denied planning permission. Over 80% of planning applications from settled people are granted consent, while more than 90% of applications from Gypsies are refused. The current conflict over "illegal" Travellers sites is in part caused by this history.⁵

Within the past 50 years the Gypsy and Traveller community has experienced dramatic and often traumatic change as economic change and draconian legislation have undermined its traditionally nomadic way of life. The community's usefulness as agricultural labourers has declined due to mechanisation and the importation of cheaper eastern European and asylum seeker labour. Yet despite the huge upheavals, the community has done its best to preserve its own heritage with the resources it has had at its disposal.

Whenever genuine requests to explore and represent that heritage have come from outside the community they have been enthusiastically responded to. What follows is a description of some of the results of those efforts and the key characters involved in preserving Gypsy and Traveller heritage to be found in the south-east of England.

It is not an exhaustive description

of all the good practice to be found, partly because some of the best examples of work to preserve and celebrate Gypsy and Traveller heritage, such as Peter Ingram's Romani Museum in Selborne Hampshire, no longer exist. But the case studies below do illustrate the general point that the community's heritage has almost exclusively been preserved by private individuals and institutions and largely ignored by public heritage bodies: despite the fact that Gypsies and Travellers probably constitute the south-east's eldest and largest ethnic minority.

The case studies below exemplify some of the good practice that has got the ball rolling. In some cases, they are as a result of partnerships between private institutions and individuals, occasionally they are the result of partnerships between private individuals and public authorities, but they all draw on the dedication of individuals who have dedicated their lives to preserving the community's heritage. Gypsy people usually judge a character on the basis of quality of their work and the company they keep. So there can be no better way of introducing the movers and shakers of Gypsy heritage in the south-east than by what they have already achieved. They haven't just invented the wheel of preserving Gypsy heritage, they have set it in motion and their pioneering work provides solid foundations for future efforts which are discussed later in this report.

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5 In 1997, Research by ACERT (Advisory Committee for the Education of Romanies and Travellers) showed that whereas 80% of all planning applications were accepted, 90 per cent of Gypsy and Traveller applications were initially rejected (although more were passed on appeal). Reference: ACERT and Wilson M. 1997. Directory of Planning Policies for Gypsy Site Provision. Bristol: Policy Press

Obie, Frank and Gary Brazil of the South East Romany Museum, Marden, Kent. Photo: Jake Bowers.

4. Private Past: Qualitative Research

4.1 The Brazil Family and The South East Romany Museum

www.medwaytownsrc.co.uk/SERM%20Home.htm

Tel: 01622 831681

Situated in Howlands Lane, Marden in the heart of the Kent countryside, the working museum is in the early stages of development. The museum plans to exhibit Romany culture and life.

It is very much a living museum as the site is the home of the Brazil family. The museum has already had several official visits from

schools, individuals and libraries and is viewed as an important project for bringing Romany culture into the community.

Visitors can expect to see several traditional wagons including those of Reading, Burton and Barrel types, two of which require restoration and pre-date the first world war. Also on display is an assortment of carts and trolleys and large-scale models of Reading and Ledge wagons.

The preservation work, building and painting of wagons is undertaken by the Brazil family in an open workshop that houses

artefacts, wagons, craft tools and items of Romany and Traveller interest.

Future plans include the building of a conference room, wagon shelter, tea room, picnic area and visitor facilities. At present visits are arranged by appointment only and there is no admission fee but donations are gratefully received. The museum has applied for charitable trust status.

Inside their mobile home, Gary, Obie and Frank have a lot to say about the way their culture has been treated in the past and what they are doing. But its Frank that

does most of the talking. Walking into their home, you get to see Gypsy life as it is today and always has been. But not a thing is preserved in a glass case.

Why are you involved in preserving Gypsy and Traveller heritage?

"This has been our way of life ever since I can remember." says Frank. "We've messed about with wagons, all Gypsy type of things. Its just a way of life to us. And now its time for people to see how Gypsies do live and how they carry on."

"Gorgia (non-Gypsy) people used to come down here and say it was like going back in time. They said it was like a museum. So we thought why not turn it in one and show people how we still live!"

They have had a few problems, but still feel that they've achieved a lot and have great plans for the future.

What obstacles have you encountered?

"We've had problems with the local council. They don't like Gypsies in the local area anyway. We've been here for 32 years and the council still treat us like foreigners and outsiders. We've had parties of school children

down here from all over Kent and people have really liked what we are doing. It has opened their eyes to the fact that we are not all vagabonds or rogues."

What more would you like to do?

"In the future what I'd really like to do is get it up and running as a museum. Not just to have nice pretty things on show, but to show everything of the old ways. They weren't all rich people, they had good and they had bad. And I'd like to show all aspects of the Gypsy life, down to the tents, wagons and all the crafts that go along with it, like repairing wagons and bringing them back to the full glory."

4.2 Janet Keet-Black, Secretary of the Romany and Traveller Family History Society and Editor of Romany Routes

<http://website.lineone.net/~rtfhs/>

Janet Keet-Black is, by her own admission, no stereotypical Gypsy. As secretary and editor of the Romany and Traveller Family History Society, Janet has helped create a family history society that has probably done more to foster Gypsy and Traveller pride in their history and culture than any other single organisation in the UK. Based in East Sussex, she had this to tell me about her work.

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1% of those people it makes a very big impact."

What more would you like to do?

"In general I'd like to see something much more rooted in the here and now, the problems that gypsies and travellers are

Stopping Places - A Gypsy History of South London and Kent. Some of his contemporary photographs are also used throughout this report.

How are you personally involved in preserving Gypsy and Traveller history and culture?

"Through my work mainly as a writer broadcaster and photographer. I'm a documentary photographer of contemporary Gypsy lifestyles - also a Gypsy historian so I have done a lot of work on Gypsy history in Kent and also I do a lot of radio work with the travellers around Gypsy culture."

Why have you done this work?

"I don't know it's just one of those things that you get latched into. I first got involved 20 years ago. Once you are involved you are involved and its gone from there. Also I recognise from my own family because half of my family come from the East End of London and I just see cultural connections between history culture and gypsy culture in the south east of England so it's been part of a wider working class culture of Kent and south east London. It all fits into that."

What obstacles have you encountered in this work?

"Obstacles usually arise from misunderstanding of what I'm doing and why I'm doing it. Or what it is exactly that I'm after. In terms of broadcasting or making radio programmes or taking photographs there are two obstacles. The first is travellers' reluctance to be involved but once they know me and what I do then that reluctance tends to dissipate."

"Also the obstacles are the people who may be commissioning programmes might also have misunderstandings about what the gypsy and romany culture is that I'm trying to put forward. For instance the commissioning editor at Radio 4 - we had an exchange of emails about doing Romani culture or Gypsy culture. He emailed me back and said that in his experience it was difficult to get folklore on radio 4. He thought Romani culture was just about the past and its folklore rather than contemporary culture that's here and now."

"As far as writing is concerned and