

Romani mothers and children on the Epsom Downs. Photo: Courtesy of Bourne Hall Museum.

5. Case Studies

The following case studies illustrate two of the pioneering partnerships that have been undertaken to preserve the heritage of Gypsies and Travellers in the south-east of England.

5.1 St. Barbe Museum and Art Gallery

In 2003, the St Barbe Museum and Art Gallery in Lymington, Hampshire, organised an exhibition entitled "Sven Berlin - paintings from Shave Green" which featured many paintings by the colourful, bohemian artist Sven Berlin on the fiftieth anniversary of his journey

"The Gypsies had been barred from camping in the open forest in the 1920s and were given the choice of living in one of six compounds or in council housing."

5.2 Bourne Hall Museum Exhibition

In 1999, Jeremy Harte, Curator of the Epsom and Ewell museum created an exhibition about Gypsy history in cooperation with residents at the local Cox Lane Gypsy site in Epsom. The exhibition was shown for 4 months to wide acclaim from people within the community and continues to be remembered as an example of good practice by Gypsies and Travellers in Surrey. Among other things, it drew on the experience of local Gypsies and explored not just the community's general history and culture but also its deep and ongoing connection with a very specific event and place in Surrey. The exhibition revealed a hidden history that many did not know about it. It stated:

Every year, Gypsy families meet at the Derby. The painted vans may have been replaced by stunning chrome-covered trailers, but for many families the get-together is as important as it was two hundred years ago. A certain amount of horse trading still goes on, but dealing now centres on cars, vans and other commodities. The Gypsy community and the Derby have developed together. Until the 1820s, the race was of little interest to the general public. Epsom Downs was a sheep

pasture, and Gypsies stopped here as they would on any other open land. Seven families were camping out on census night, 1861: they were making a living by making mats and baskets, sharpening knives and selling from door to door. Ten years later there were eleven Gypsy households.

By 1891 there were forty Gypsy households. This was a time when Gypsies were arriving from all over southern England for the race meeting. Derby Day mania reached its height in Victorian times. Along with the crowds came the travelling people - Gypsy fiddlers, flowersellers and palmists, of whom the 1829 *Times* said they were 'capable of telling everybody's fortune but their own'. Spielers shouting the attractions of the booths or sideshows were there, as were the wandering pedlars, entertainers, acrobats, stiltwalkers, and the men with their three-card or thimble-rigging tricks.

Epsom's response to this influx of outsiders was mixed. Some local people campaigned in their support, like Thomas Hersey the bicycle dealer of South Street. Others suspected that they were bringing in trouble. In 1895 there was a scare that they were bringing infectious disease with them - something unlikely, as Gypsies rarely stay in one place

long enough to pick up an infection.

Derby Day, with its colour and excitement, has long been a magnet for artists - and the Gypsies are part of its attraction. After the drab years of World War I, the race seemed to be a celebration of everything that was alive. Sir Alfred Munnings wrote: 'Never have I quite felt the alluring, infectious joy of the races, the tradition of Epsom, as I did in that first year after the war, 1919'. Munnings was a professional painter of horses and their jockeys, but he had an eye for the Gypsies, too - they struck him as a picturesque, swarthy crowd, especially the women, with black ringlets and heavy ear-rings visible under their large black ostrich-plumed hats.

In the 1930s, when Gypsies were faced with attempts to remove them from the Downs, they found an unexpected champion in Lady Sybil Grant. She was the daughter of the fifth Earl of Rosebery, who had had been Prime Minister in Queen Victoria's days. She was herself fond of caravanning and also held a hawkers licence so that she could sell from door to door for charity.

There was conflict between the Gypsies and the Downs administrators at this time, and Lady Sybil hoped to defuse it by

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