

The lack of access was not down to overt discrimination, only 5% said they had been denied access to a museum, library or archive because of their identity

Overt discrimination in museums, libraries and archives

But some did mention experiencing more subtle forms of racism than actually being barred on the grounds of their race. Gypsy family historian Janet Keet-Black was one.

“I was in a library once and I heard someone say “well of course all the real Romanies are filthy rich and living in houses!” And I just leant over and said to her “well I can assure you that I’m not filthy rich!” It’s that sort of thing that you overhear and this woman knew that I was from a Traveller background.”

As a result, Janet Keet-Black says that she feels museum, library and archive staff should be given Gypsy and Traveller cultural awareness training. Including how to identify and deal with racist incidents where the racist behaviour is by someone other than a member of staff.

“They should be trained properly in cultural awareness, including that of Gypsies and Travellers, because they are not, and have absolutely no idea about what Gypsies and Travellers are or what their history is. And this is sometimes reflected in how they treat you. I went to the research

centre down in Lyndhurst. And even though the chap there knew I was a Gypsy, he insisted on telling me that they locked Gypsy material up because Gypsies come in and steal it. The thing is I’m not your stereotypical Traveller, so I probably get treated differently to other Travellers. You should ask someone like my friend Betsy Stanley who is stereotypical, she’s an old Traveller woman. She’s uncomfortable going into places. She’s come up against prejudice just standing in the street!”

But thankfully such experiences were rare. The community feels not so much barred or actively discriminated against as omitted – or written out of local and national British history. Some might argue this is a far more insidious and powerful form of racism. Those who write a nation’s history, or even present a nation’s history, have the power to consign individuals and entire communities into the limelight or the shadows.

The past representation of Gypsies and Travellers in museums, libraries and archives

The results from the 100 quantitative interviews revealed the following statistics:

50% had seen something about Gypsies and Travellers in a museum, but only 15% thought it represented the “truth”.⁷ A staggering 98% of people thought museums should present Gypsy and Traveller culture and history. 44% of people had seen something

about Gypsies and Travellers in a library, but only 25% thought it represented the “truth”. An equally resounding 96% of people thought museums should present Gypsy and Traveller culture and history.⁸ 11% had seen something about Gypsies and Travellers in an archive, but only 17% thought it represented the “truth”.⁹ But 96% of people thought archives should have documents, photographs and other information about Gypsies and Travellers.

Put into a nutshell, people thought that museums, libraries and archives had done badly in the past and should do far better in the future:

Only 2% thought museums, libraries and archives had done enough to celebrate and represent the history and culture of Gypsies and Travellers in the past. 100% thought museums, libraries and archives should do more to celebrate the history and culture of Gypsies and Travellers.

⁷ For comparison: 37% of all adults in the South East had visited a museum in one year (source: Arts in England: Participation and Attitudes 2001 Research Report 27)

⁸ For comparison: 45% of adults in the UK visited a library in the last year (Data manipulated by PLB in Users and Non-Users of Museums Archives and Libraries : Review of Available Data (<http://www.mla.gov.uk/documents/id630rep.pdf>) from data in Skelton, A (2002) Arts in England: Attendance, Participation and Attitudes in 2001)

⁹ For comparison: 1.3% of all adults in the South East had visited an archive in one year 104,221 visits in the South East. Source CIPFA (2003) Archive Service Estimates 2003-3, and population of 8,122,200 Source: South East England Development Agency (<http://www.southeast-ra.gov.uk/>)

6.2 Could do better

But why does the community think museums, libraries and archives have done so badly? To find answers, we need to listen to our movers and shakers again. I asked them all: "Do you think museums, libraries and archives have done enough to make Gypsy and Traveller heritage visible and accessible?"

Simon Evans said:

"Historically, no! Before you can make it visible, those who look after museums, libraries and archives would have to recognise there is such a thing as Gypsy culture. One of the major problems has been that it has been an oral culture. Libraries, museums and archives actually rely upon tangible evidence, that is in the written word or artefacts. Now if the written word isn't there one of the major problems is that things are written about Gypsies and not by Gypsies. Outside people looking in."

"So historically there's a problem. Also there's a class problem as well because history and the written word as found in libraries, tends to be from the literate classes or historically the middle classes and upwards so there's a problem where the working class culture is represented in these institutions - let alone Gypsy culture. But having said that strides are now being made and I do find that there are

6.3 A role in education

I asked: "Do you think museums, libraries and archives have a role in educating the wider public about Gypsy and Traveller culture and history?"

Paula Elliott echoed the thoughts for many when she said: "Well it is the only way to educate them isn't it really? Where does everyone get their information about any culture or any race from other than through libraries, museums and education? So yes, they've got to play a role haven't they? but likewise Gypsy people have got their role to play as well. Like Henry [her husband] doing what he is doing."

6.4 Improving the use of museum, library and archive services

I also asked what could be done to encourage more Gypsies and Travellers to use the services provided by museums, libraries and archives?

Simon Evans said: "The representation in libraries, museums and archives is probably hidden and inadequate. For instance, if you do have a local museum, then I think efforts should be made to ensure that the museum fairly represents all the cultures that exist in that area historically. And that simply isn't the case."

"Also I think for school libraries - when I was doing a project in a local school a couple of years ago - a young teenage traveller said to me if I go into my school library and ask for books on my culture or my people's history it's not

there - it's absent. "

"So all I think it requires really is that there is representation there in books on the shelf or artefacts in museums, or displays in museums and the Travellers will go and use that resource but they are not going to want to go to these places to constantly get gorgia history. It's racism by omission."

6.5 A cultural audit

All of the movers and shakers were enthusiastic about the idea of cultural audit which would locate the many resources already possessed by county record offices and archives in the region. Simon Evans said:

"I'd like to see them collect the truth. They want to do it right, but not use it against us the same as the Germans did in the 2nd world war. If something did go wrong, they would know where every Gypsy is and who their ancestors were."

Janet Keet-Black felt similarly, but the issue was partly how the information would be made available, and one of over-exposure rather than invisibility. She said: "There is a site on the web called 'Passing Through' and it's a just a woman whose great granny was one of the Coopers up in Surrey. And she's putting out so much stuff like baptisms and burials which I don't think should be out there. I don't know of any other ethnic minority that has all their ancestors on the web. I'm not just talking about general history but baptism, burials and marriages. I'm actually uncomfortable with that."

"But I think where there are records relating to Gypsies, if they just give out the basic information that's fine. There should be no sites aimed at any ethnic group simply because of what went on the 30s and 40s. I'm uncomfortable with the idea that my Grannies baptism might be on there".

"Particularly, as I know where my family all settled in their tents. I know that the incumbents of that particular parish between 1934 and 1942 put a small "g" next to every Gypsy. My husband said

'that's sinister given the period of time'. Since then I'm uncomfortable with it being on the web. I'm guilty of publishing things in paper form, but then I think it's got a limited audience. I had to tell this woman to take some off because she had stuff on there from the 30s and these people are still alive!"

"The Nazis used genealogy and had British [Gypsy] families as well. Which made me suspicious when I saw these pencilled in "g"s next to my family and every other Traveller family in the parish."

Aside from the quite natural suspicion, Gypsy historians like Simon Evans felt there was enormous scope within a new category of "Gypsy and Traveller history":

"I just think that if that category exists, then as material is gathered it will naturally fall into it. I mean if there was a section which said Gypsy Travellers as well as a section which said hop pickers, then certain pictures or certain books would go into the Gypsy Traveller section and not the hop-picking section. So it's that kind of awareness raising of staff and people who are looking after these collections and administering them."

"There are ways of collecting that are probably unique in terms of oral history. There is that, and I get the impression because of financial constraints most museums and archives are reactive rather than proactive in terms of their

collections. They tend to hold stuff which is given to them or things that they come across. But I do think it is beholden upon these institutions, if they feel that there is an ethnic imbalance, that they should seek to redress that.

"If you have a hitherto oral culture then oral history is a very important tool. As is visual imagery because there are an enormous amount of historical photographs of Gypsies and Traveller culture and lifestyles in the south-east and when you put them together across the ages, it's like putting together a historical jigsaw puzzle."

"For a community of people who historically haven't used the written word it means that just having books about Gypsies isn't enough really, because the written word is not accessible to a large section of the Gypsy Traveller population whereas visual information is. So yes, I think to be proactive in acquiring photographs or family history projects whereby families may be willing to share their photographs - to have them scanned together with their personal histories or oral histories."

Henry and Paula Elliott agreed:

"Well obviously one of the main ways, especially for travellers, is photographs because there are still a lot of travelling people that can't read or write so they could have a book stuck in front of them. It could tell you everything

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about their family that they won't know unless there are photos. I suppose really photographs and going round to different Travellers and Gypsies, talk to them and put down some of what they say actually in there."

But a community also has a physical heritage that needs preserving beyond its memories and personal stories. So I asked what objects in particular should be preserved. There was an interesting difference in views from those, like Simon Evans, who produced things about the culture and those from within the culture.

Simon Evans said: "Preservation is a

out one bit of it and say you need to keep that more than something else. It's a complete way of life."

6.7 Representation

Putting a culture on show, means presenting it to the outside world. I asked if there is anything that

information.”

“You can also get a book along with a tape so that a traveller could listen to the tape if they can’t read.”

Simon Evans said: “ These days the idea of what a library or museum is, extends far beyond just the notion of books and there is an awful lot of visual material, video tapes, CDs, audio tapes, CD roms and internet.”

The racing, breeding and selling of trotting horses is a modern expression of the Gypsy and Traveller culture's affinity with the horse. Photo: Simon Evans.

6.9 Power without responsibility

But, I wondered, is there any information that should only be made accessible to the community. Just because we have the means, through all kinds of digital technology to examine the culture in great detail, does that mean we should look at everything? Opinions were divided between those that had explored Gypsy and Traveller culture in their research, and members of those communities.

Simon Evans said: “I think one gets into great difficulties when you start censoring people’s access. Again historically invisibility and secrecy has been part of the ways in which Gypsies and Travellers have protected themselves from the hostility of the outside world. So things like language, and maybe certain other cultural ways of

behaving and carrying on, tend to remain within the Traveller culture.”

“Travellers tend to recognise each other in ways that the sedentary population may not quite see or understand. On the other hand I think maybe in the new sedentary world, which by and large it is, perhaps that protection is no longer necessary and that invisibility can mitigate against having a culture recognised and understood.”

“If people don’t hear a language, or see a language they can deny that language exists. Also I think a lot of young people recognise that they know a lot less of it than perhaps their grandparents or great grandparents did, and certainly within a school environment some of the young people have asked me to work on lan-

guage with them and to bring more words back into their vocabulary.”

Len Smith also didn’t think anything should be off limits: “I’ve said if you’re going to represent it, and if you want to get the message across to other people apart from just the community, then you have to represent everything.”

I asked “Even the myth that Gypsies are somehow inherently criminal, is that not an issue?”

Len replied: “That can be addressed in other ways, by pointing out that these things aren’t true and are discriminatory and stereotyping. Obviously, if you are going to represent discrimination and stereotyping, then you also have to represent the other side of the coin which is that the reasons why these things are discrimination and stereotyping is because they’re

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not true. You have to raise the myth in order to dispel it."

Many within the wider community felt very strongly that the Romani language should not be shared with gorgia people.

6.10 Segregation and inclusion

Given that until now Gypsy and Traveller heritage has largely been preserved by the community itself, I wondered if that should continue into the future. So I asked: "Do you feel that collections should be segregated (in specific Gypsy and Traveller museums, libraries and archives) or should they be included within mainstream public services?" Many felt it wasn't an issue of either being included in the mainstream, or be left to do it yourself. There was a consensus that inclusion in the mainstream and the independence of community operated institutions were of equal importance.

Simon Evans said: "There needs to be both probably - we have all sorts of museums and archives. When you've got a museum like Kent life for instance, it is very much dependent on acquiring and getting funding for acquisitions. However, if you call yourself a museum of Kent life, then I think you are beholden to represent all sections of Kent life. On the other hand, if you are a museum of transport then perhaps there should be some Gypsy wagons in there and why not?"

Frank Brazil said: "It should be part of gorgia museums . But there should be pure Gypsy museums as well. Exhibitions should be for both Gypsies and gorgias. They should be proud of who they are.

But gorgias should also know about us. I want to involve both sides, because we are British.

6.11 Exhibitions

Given that exhibitions are one of the main ways of increasing the visibility of a community at museums, libraries and archives, I explored what the content of such exhibitions could be and where they should be held. I asked: "What venues would you like to see display exhibitions about Gypsies and Travellers?"

Simon Evans said: "Anywhere - where they have a right to be - in places which are publicly funded or publicly accessible, cultural institutions of course the Romani culture, the gypsy culture should be represented in there."

"At the same time you could have exhibitions anywhere you like. I had a travelling exhibition of Travellers photos some years ago in the Kent mobile arts unit and it was very interesting because it's a converted mobile library, gallery, exhibition space in a lorry. It was on the road for about 10 days.

"I used to book pitches in Maidstone market and put it there on market day and you got a kind of

control, particularly for a community that has been so badly represented in the past. But exercising good editorial judgement requires more than just an inside knowledge of a community, it requires professional skills to have a real impact, skills which aren't that abundant within the community. So who should be in control of exhibitions about Gypsies and Travellers? I asked: "Who should curate such exhibitions, Gypsies and Travellers, or gorgias?"

Frank Smith said: "The only way you can put on an exhibition is with Gypsies, but the gorgias have

from outside the British Isles scored significantly lower. This points to the fact that while British Gypsies and Travellers recognise a historical and cultural link to continental Gypsies, they are far keener to emphasise local Gypsy culture and history. This applies to everything from “foreign Gypsy life” and “foreign Gypsy music” (such as flamenco) but does not apply to the holocaust which although it did not have a massive impact on British Gypsies and Travellers, is felt to be an important part of the community’s history.

Another significant area where there was disagreement was on the issue of sharing knowledge of the European Romani and British Romani languages or the Irish Travellers language known as Cant. Opinions were pretty evenly divided between those that felt that language was threatened and actively needed preserving (and therefore would have given it a high score), and those that were adamant that it was one element of Gypsy and Traveller heritage that should be kept for the exclusive use of the community (and would have given it a low score.) The scores for these three languages straddle the 50% approval rating. There is an ongoing enmity between some members the English Gypsy and Irish Traveller communities which prompted some English Gypsies to suggest that Irish Traveller Cant should be included, and vice versa. But there was a widespread concern that Romani, in particular, should not become public property.

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The attitude was articulated well by Frank Brazil who said: “The language belongs to us. Gypsies should keep that, they’ve got to keep something of their heritage.”

In general, it would seem wise that

only those subjects that had an approval rating of over 75% should be used in materials about Gypsy and Traveller history and culture. This level of acceptance provides a threshold over which all the subjects would not be viewed as contentious by the community.

Two other exhibition topics had notably low scores. Hare coursing received a low overall score because some felt it was cruel to animals. Plays are, at least in Britain, a relatively new way of exploring Gypsy and Traveller culture. The low score that particular subject received may reflect that unfamiliarity, and the use of drama to interpret Gypsy and Traveller culture could be explored further with the communities.

Berkshire resident and former British middleweight champion ‘Gypsy’ Johnny Frankham floors sparring partner Cassius Clay at an exhibition fight. Boxing remains a very popular sport in the Gypsy community and young Gypsy fighters are often in the English national team. Photo: courtesy of the Frankham family.

The Approval Rating of subjects to be used in Gypsy and Traveller exhibitions

History / Politics

Approval rating:

Modern Gypsy/Traveller life	79.1%
Foreign Gypsy/Traveller life	65.9%
Past Gypsy life	85.9%
The Gypsy Holocaust	82.0%
Modern persecution of Gypsies	82.4%

Music

Foreign Romani music, such as Flamenco	52.9%
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