

Gypsies on Mitcham Common in 1881. Photo: Courtesy of Bourne Hall Museum.

7. Conclusions and Recommendations

7.1 Conclusions

Gypsies and Travellers are sometimes referred to as a “hard to reach group”. Gypsies and Traveller society is also sometimes referred to as a closed or secretive society.

This research has demonstrated that by using Gypsies and Travellers researchers and their advocates, the community is not hard to reach at all, as long as it is approached in the right way and with the right motivations. The overwhelmingly positive response to this research shows that there is both a phenomenal need and desire within the community to share and preserve its history. Unfortunately, there is also a quite uniform experience of being

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ignored by museums, libraries and archives.

The long term social exclusion of Gypsies and Travellers from mainstream British society is an issue that local and central government is beginning to tackle. But this exclusion is mirrored in the work of public heritage

bodies. This has forced the community to preserve its own heritage, which it has done with incredible tenacity.

But as the community becomes more sedentary, educated and integrated, the cultural traditions are under threat and the preservation of heritage is also threatened. But if education and integration are a threat, they are also an opportunity. Now is the time for museums, libraries and archives to start exploring an exotic and hidden culture in its midst that has been a crucial part of British society for 500 years. And there is an urgency to this work.

The fieldwork required for this project has demonstrated an

urgent need to preserve the memories, photographs and artefacts of older community members. These people have experienced an extreme transition in their lives which mirrors the often traumatic changes in lifestyle that the community has experienced.

Some born into bender tents or horse drawn wagons have witnessed the forced ending of a nomadic way of life that had survived with a language and traditions that can be traced back to India a millennium ago. Now living in private and social housing or static council or private sites, they are the only ones that can make sense of their history and help their descendants adapt to a more sedentary future.

But that history and transition is not a uniquely Gypsy experience, 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 also need an opportunity to learn about and interpret this recent history. Because Gypsy history is also an important part of British history. Not just in their role as eternal outsiders, but also as integrated citizens who have operated businesses, fought in wars and represented this country in sports and the arts. At times, British Gypsy history may have been a painful and controversial story, but it is still a part of our national narrative.

It has been said that the way a society treats its minorities is a litmus test of its civilisation. Therefore a refusal to accept this history into the mainstream is also a reflection of how willing we are to face up to WHO we are and WHAT we have done. The Gypsy

contribution, through our part in the agricultural economy and the armed services also demonstrates that there have been good and positive moments.

This research has also demonstrated that the community feels its place at the heart of British heritage work is missing, and there is a desire to plug a gap. That desire represents a challenge to those involved in interpreting British history, but it is a challenge the community is quite happy to help meet. But in doing so, heritage professionals need more than just good .15 opr33 in

representation of the community.

searchers have all experienced the problem of finding materials about their culture in the archives. Yet persistence has proven that the material is there, but the systems used to categorize material do not identify, or have not been used to identify Gypsy and Traveller culture.

Museums, libraries (including school libraries) and public archives should commission a cultural audit which seeks to identify and categorise the Gypsy and Traveller material it already holds. A category of Gypsy and Traveller history should be created alongside any other ethnic minority history work. This work is also best undertaken in partnership with local Gypsies and Travellers, and family historians who will recognise material as they see it. A cultural audit should also identify gaps in collections, and develop proactive collection policies for the future.

3. A Noah's Ark

There is an urgent need to go and record and capture Gypsy and Traveller history from a generation of older Gypsies and Travellers who have experienced a dramatic change in their lifetimes. With every year that passes, more photographs rot and more memories go to the grave. Recording this information before it is too late is an important part of celebrating a forgotten history before it is lost forever.

Museums, libraries and archives should commission work that actively records this history. The people doing it must be highly mobile, and equipped with the ability to digitally record oral history and photographs, possibly with minidisc recorders and portable scanning technology. They should also look out for artefacts that can be left.

4. Travelling Exhibition

Independent and public museums, libraries and archives in the south-east of England should cooperate in producing a travelling exhibition that celebrates the history of Gypsies and Travellers in the region. It would draw on all the resources identified in the steps taken above.

Once created, it could be on permanent tour in recognition of the Gypsy and Traveller community's permanent transience in the south-east of England. Such an exhibition would have a valuable role to play in educating the wider public over current accommodation conflicts. Its materials could also be used in schools and other educational contexts to help combat prejudice against Gypsies and Travellers.

5. A Big Idea

But all of these ideas, whilst a welcome step forward, repeat a continual problem. They are short-lived and transient and do not

reflect the permanent and enduring contribution of the Gypsy and Traveller community to this country. Efforts such as these could culminate in an institution that would have a lasting effect on the way the community is perceived.

Nomadic communities leave no trace and have no institutions, but a community that is historically nomadic and increasingly settled certainly deserves one.

Gypsy and Traveller Cultural Heritage Centre

A place of our own

Gypsies and Travellers have been in Britain for over 500 years and represent the biggest ethnic minority in the south-east, but their historical and contemporary contribution is largely unrecognised and uncelebrated.

Recent tensions, particularly over Gypsy sites, have highlighted that anti-traveller feeling is still quite prevalent among the settled community. A perception that travellers contribute to rural crime, fly-tipping and anti-social behaviour is widespread. Travellers themselves also feel some hostility to the settled community.

From toleration to celebration

British policy towards Gypsies and

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Travellers has come along way in the 500 years we have been in Britain - it has moved from outright persecution and extermination to one of toleration. A Gypsy and Traveller Cultural Heritage Centre would, for the first time in British history, move the policy forward to celebration.

A Gypsy and Traveller Cultural Heritage Centre would help promote community cohesion recognising the historical and ongoing contribution of the Romani community to Britain.

Remembering the past

The centre would house a permanent and continually evolving exhibition looking at the Gypsy and Traveller contribution to British rural life, from the time of mass agricultural labour to more recent times when families have settled. More specifically it would look at Gypsy and Traveller history in the rural and urban environments. Through photography, video and audio recording of oral history the exhibition would look at the changing relationship between Gypsies and Travellers and the settled community caused by the decline of agricultural labour.

Influencing the future

But the GTCHC wouldn't just look at the past - it would recreate a common space, now sadly lacking, for the meeting of the different communities. The centre would explore present and future

opportunities for community cohesion, cooperation and economic development. It would also act as a major local and national force for the economic, social and cultural development of the Gypsy and Traveller community. By providing a place in which the Romani language, trades and best practice could be nurtured, the centre would provide local employment and stimulate development which would have a direct impact on the local community.

Unlocking potential. Creating opportunity

The GTCHC would be a community-based project with a national impact. As a base for national projects, such as a national, internet-based Gypsy and Traveller community radio station and a Scandinavian-style Gypsy and Traveller "people's high school" it would nurture Gypsy and Traveller talent from the grassroots up.

Education

8. A Final Word

Frank Brazil:

"You go from one county to another and they don't want you there. So you go back to your own county and they still don't recognise you as a local. So where do you belong? It's time to make a stand. Its time to come out and be proud of who you are and be proud of what you are. We are a separate cultural people to the rest of the people in this country. I think the gorgias could benefit from it. If they understood us, they would know how to live with us."

Len Smith:

"Museums, libraries and archives could be powerful places for us if we can make them accessible. The way to make them accessible is do something good and it will draw people in and that spreads out in a pyramid."

"You bring two people in, and they tell four people and the four people tell another four people and it can start giving Gypsies and Travellers a bit more pride - we have a private pride in our culture - we need a public pride. We need a public face to our pride."

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