

Rites of Passage

Culture and memory in Dorset's Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities



*Tiny Barney, Three Legged Cross, Dorset
photographer and date unknown*



*Betty Smith-Billington, Piddlehinton, Dorset
©Sue Deegan, 2019*

There are important moments in everyone's lives. We mark these as 'rites of passage.' Birth, marriage and death all leave a significant impact on our lives, and we want to celebrate and commemorate these events in local Gypsy, Roma and Traveller culture.

This project is being delivered by DEED and their project partners Kushti Bok and Shire Hall Museum. We are gathering and sharing stories to encourage all to understand the value of love, memories and respect within families and communities.

Many thanks to our funders the Heritage Fund for making this project possible.

Introduction

This project shares the lived experiences of people from our local Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities as well as information from the national GRT organisation, Friends, Families and Travellers that works 'to end discrimination against Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people and to protect the right to pursue a nomadic way of life.' Many of the answers to the questions here were taken from their [website](#).

These stories do not represent all lived experiences from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities, but rather a snapshot into the lives of the people we met. We thank the members of [Kushti Bok](#) and [Life Changing Choices](#) who shared their stories with us. Although their names have been changed to respect their privacy, their openness talking to us was both an honour and a privilege.

Written by DEED, 2022



Photo of Violet from Ghost Gypsy, 2018, ©Sharon Muiruri Coyne, a short film about a young Traveller girl named Violet going in search of her 'true self' guided by the ghost of her great-grandmother



Coopers Lane, Verwood, photographer and date unknown

“My father went from farm to farm.
I remember lying down on my back
watching the stars. The open air.”

Ken, in his 80's

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What is culture & memory?

Culture is a way of life that is often shared from generation to generation through stories told from living memory. This ability to remember and tell stories based on real life experience is highly valued in many cultures around the world, including those from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities.

Who are Gypsies, Roma & Travellers?

'Gypsies, Roma and Travellers' includes many different groups. For example, Irish Travellers, Scottish Gypsy/Travellers and Romani people who are recognised ethnic groups. This can include New Travellers, Showpeople and Boaters who are often included because they live a nomadic way of life.

Where do Romany Gypsies come from?

Romany Gypsies belong to the wider Romani people (including Roma, Kale, Sinti and others) who are believed to have left India in the 11th century. Over time, Romani people gained many European influences but kept a distinct ethnicity and heritage. British Romanies first arrived in Britain in the early 1500s, but Romani people can be found worldwide. The word 'Romani' represents all Romani people across the world who share the same ethnic origin, while 'Romany' tends to be used to refer to people in the UK of the same ethnic origin.

Why do Gypsies and Travellers travel?

There are many reasons to travel. From visiting loved ones, going to funerals or family occasions, to being part of their culture. People may also travel for work, and some may travel because discrimination makes it difficult to settle. This can happen because there aren't enough sites or negotiated stopping places in the area and there isn't any other place to stop. Councils have a responsibility to identify land for Travellers to live and stop in their area, but the vast majority fail to do this. If they no longer travel, this doesn't mean they are no longer a Gypsy or a Traveller, as this is a description of their ethnicity, rather than just their accommodation. Many live in permanent housing, or on permanent sites, as well as in caravans or other types of homes.

Why are stopping places so important to Gypsies and Travellers? Local councils have a responsibility under English law to identify land for Gypsies and Travellers to stop and live in their area. This is important for families to work and for children to attend school. Generally, there are not enough negotiated stopping places or sites, so some Gypsies and Travellers are forced to camp illegally. This has led to bad press, harassment, and

increasingly hostile laws to force Gypsies and Travellers to move on. The most recent, the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act, came into force on 28 June 2022 and has meant that people who live on roadside camps could face time in prison, fines, or their homes being taken away from them.

"Although nomadism and unauthorised camping are not, in themselves, illegal, the effect of the legislation has been to criminalise a way of life. In addition to this, the systematic closure of traditional stopping places through ditching, gating and boulders have resulted in Gypsies and Travellers having nowhere legal to stop. This has been devastating."

www.gypsy-traveller.org/resource/historical-laws-affecting-travellers/

Many of the people we talked to had very positive personal relations with non-Gypsies and non-Travellers, but still faced constant prejudice, harassment and racism towards them and their way of life. This has left some to leave behind the nomadic way of life and settle in permanent housing. Some reminisce about the old ways.

Nellie, in her 70s, says:

"We don't mind living here...I prefer the old-fashioned way. If it weren't for [Ken's illness] we'd be on the road, both of us would, we like getting about."

How many Gypsies and Travellers are in the UK?

There are an estimated 300,000 Gypsy and Traveller people^[1] currently living in the UK.

What is a Rite of Passage?

They are significant moments as we journey through our lives that we often remember and share with family and friends, such as birth, marriage and death. They often recognise important transitions in our lives, from childhood to adulthood is one. They are significant and can mark a change in status, or the leaving of one way of life to join another. How we celebrate or commemorate those moments is often defined by our knowledge, values and attitudes at the time, and by the culture we are part of.

[1] Friends, families & Travellers www.gypsy-traveller.org/about-us/frequently-asked-questions/

Birth

Family is very important. Older members of the community are often respected and cared for within the family and children form part of larger extended families that support and look after each other. Being born at home, or outside was mentioned in the older generations, as well as being born in a hospital.

A couple in their early 70s and 80s told us where they were born:

Ken said:

**"I was born on a farm. Well, my father was working on the farm.
My father went from farm to farm."**

Nellie said:

**"I travelled all my life. I was born in a caravan, an old-fashioned one.
All my kids were born outside, not in the hospital."**

Mark, in his 40s, said:

"I was born under a tree, then I got taken to Poole hospital."

Shannon, in her teens

**"An important event in my life was my little sister being born.
Birth's a big thing, my family spoils babies rotten."**



Gypsy Birth, Bulbarrow, Dorset, ©S Gillingham, JB Archive, date unknown

Childhood

There is a real mix of memories about childhood with the people we talked to either reminiscing on their own childhood being in their 30s or 40s, or thinking about their own children's lives. They created a picture of freedom, an almost idyllic, carefree childhood on one hand but also one with rules and boundaries keeping them apart from the Gorga (non-Gypsy and non-Traveller) lifestyle.

Marie, in her 30s, said:

"I wasn't allowed out clubbing. My brother was allowed out to do what he wanted but I wasn't. I was a bit of a rebel – drinking, clubbing, and smoking. My dad found out then he gave me rules: I had to be in at a certain time and wasn't allowed to wear what I wanted. He let me go out in the end. It was quite dangerous, and my dad was very protective of his girls because of the lifestyle people lived – getting in fights and things like that. He used to be a boxer and he didn't want his children following the life he'd had."

Marie continues:

"My daughter, who's 9, isn't allowed to hang around with boys. It was like this right from when she was little. She's allowed to play in the trailer with her brothers, but if she comes out on the site here, she's only allowed out to play if there's another girl outside."

Amy, in her 30s, said:

"Her husband is a 'Bumper' part Traveller, part Gorja. She said: 'My children are half Traveller, half Gorja. I'm bringing them up in the Traveller lifestyle. I'd rather live my life as it is now, than I would as a non-Traveller. The life I was brought up in, and the life I'm giving my children, is the best life they could ever have.'"

Jenny, in her 60s, said:

"I loved horses and would go riding as a kid. I fancied the outdoor life – always wanted a caravan."

Ken, in his 80s, said:

"I remember lying down on my back watching the stars. The open-air."

Shane, in his teens, talks about his childhood:

"Family days. We go to the cinema and stuff. Football... We get horses and we're allowed to drive them around on our own. We drive cars round and stuff... I learned when I was 6. My dad done the pedals and I steered, then when I grew up he slowly taught me how to do it."

Daisy, in her teens said:

"I have lots of animals: ducks, chickens, rabbits and dogs."



Nellie Cooper with Jimmie, Verwood, photographer and date unknown

Education

Learning takes place all the time, whether learning life skills, rules and behaviour from the family at home, or more formally at school, which can be difficult. Some experience bullying and harassment for being Gypsies and Travellers and going to school can be a very difficult period in their lives, but still much valued in order to learn how to read and write and gain the knowledge, understanding and skills needed to work.

Nellie, in her 70s, said:

"Mother used to take us out every day. She brought me up to that, she learnt me to hawk. I loved it, I loved going anywhere."

Nellie continued:

"We all worked. She'd go out with her basket with heather and pegs. We really liked it."

Jenny, in her 60s, said:

"Romany people are very close, and loyal. You know if you have a problem you can pick up the phone and someone will be down straight away. They are also spotlessly clean and old-fashioned. The boys are taught to be respectful to girls and are smart and polite, and younger people have respect for their elders. They are creative and can make something out of nothing."

Amy, in her 30s, said:

"I can't read and write properly... I don't want that for my children, that's why I've been settled for over 3 years. I wanted to be a riding instructor for disabled children, but I didn't have the qualifications."

Marie, in her 30s, talks of one of her son's being bullied:

"He was bullied on the school bus. The kids used to say to him "Go and live your horrible life, go and rip everyone off."

Kate, in her 40s, said:

"At school, I felt I didn't fit in, I felt different. Children were mean. It was difficult to fit in either way - I had some problems with Travellers so didn't fit in with them and had problems at school because the other kids didn't want to know me because I was a Gypsy."

Shane, in his teens, said about school:

"They don't really like travellers. None of them. You walk past people, and they go '... gypsies'. You get into fights and you get told off."



Demi, in her teens, talks about being different from the other girls at school:

"In my culture girls aren't allowed to go out alone. I'll go with my sister and brother to the shop. My mum's worried about other people. We won't have a boyfriend yet. On TV when it shows them having boyfriends young, that's not us. My mum says, 'When you're old enough and you've got a proper job, think about it then.' We've been brought up like that; we agree to work and then get a husband. We keep to ourselves until we've found the right one. It's sensible; you don't get hurt. Friends at school think we're strange, but I agree with my mum. I want to focus on my GCSEs and get a nice job."

Mark, in his 40s, talks about being good at sport at school:

"I ran for Dorset twice, I won every 1500 metres race in all the schools I went to. I was unbeatable really; I was a pretty good athlete."

Marriage

Arguably the most famous aspect of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller culture is marriage. With the popularity of TV shows such as *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding*, many people saw practices around marriage and courtship for the first time, and it has left a lasting impression of what 'Gypsy weddings' are supposed to be like. But when we talked to local Gypsies and Travellers, they talk about love, and some loss, often when female members of the family leave to join their partner's families. Some marry outside their community, to non-Gypsies and non-Travellers.



Demi, in her teens talks about courtship and weddings:

"What you see on TV about Gypsies is a bit misleading because they're different to us...

It's about people who go out grabbing, but we're not like that. We are like the programmes in a way - home, cleaning, and the dresses. At school, when people find out I'm Romany, some ask me if I'm like the ones on TV, and I say, 'No, I'm not like them ones.' One of my friends wouldn't come to my 13th birthday party because she thought the boys in my family would try and grab her. I tried to tell her we're not like that, but she didn't understand."

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"Another important event was my aunty's wedding. All my family were there, there were lots of big dresses and bridesmaids. I was a bridesmaid and wore a long lilac dress. After the wedding my aunty moved to a site where her partner's family live."

Amy, in her 30s, talks of the non-traditional marriage between her mum, a non-Traveller or Gorja, and her dad, a Traveller:

"My dad said, "I love that woman with all my heart and I'm going to marry her." My dad's parents were full Traveller, but my mum's family were Gorjas. In those years, marrying a Gorja was out of bounds. My dad lost his family because of it, but eventually they realised he and my mum were actually in love. They were married for fifty years.

My mum was the first woman my dad ever loved. She was his world."



Death

Arguably, the most important aspect of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller culture is death. Funeral processions with feather-plumed horses and glass framed carriages covered in flower-shaped hearts, horseshoes and wagons, followed by hundreds of mourners lining the streets, still happen to this day and often make the local press. Many Romany Gypsies are Christian and have burial sites that family and friends will travel for miles to visit to honour the deceased.

Photos of the deceased are often placed on the grave which often has an ornate headstone, and the person can be buried with some of their most valued possessions. Traditionally, all other possessions would be burnt; clothing, bedding, vehicles or trailers. This is done as a sign of respect, so that all their possessions will pass with them to the afterlife. Death is not the end.

The spirit lives on, but the grave is where you pay your respects.[1]

Roger, who was chaplain to Gypsies and Travellers in Dorset, described his first 'seeing the body in' before a Romany Gypsy funeral in 1997 when the deceased is brought home the night before the funeral, and friends and family come together to keep watch over them, remembering their lives.

Roger remembered:

"I was asked to do something I'd never heard of, to "see the body in" the night before. At the site, there were a number of mobile homes and this huge tin hut which belonged to Mr Cooper who had died. He was quite a character, he'd been off the road for 80 years. He lived in this corrugated iron structure with windows... He did most of his cooking outside and his family lived round him with the horses and dogs... There were 50 to 60 people outside this hut, which had been stripped completely. Where Mr Cooper's bedroom was they'd hung white cloths. He was laid in state with the coffin lid off."



Farewell to Mary, Queen of the Gypsies, ©Daily Echo Bournemouth, 3 February 2015

[1] Cemetery Culture and Traditions for people from the Traveller community with regards to cemeteries and burying the dead. Friends, Families and Travellers report compiled by Gemma Challenger