



## THE HISTORY OF GYPSY TRAVELLERS IN BRITAIN

### **Romany Roots**

It was in the 15th century that reports began to be written about bands of dark foreigners arriving from different parts of Europe. They travelled on horseback and in wagons, were frequently richly dressed, dark in complexion, with gold coins woven into their black hair.

Soon they gained a reputation as fortunetellers and magicians and frequently described themselves as dukes or princes of Egypt. The first written records of these 'Egyptians' in Britain are in 1505 but it is not known for how long they may already have been here.

Where they had originally come from remained a mystery until the 18th century when an academic in Hungary realised that the language spoken by his local 'Gypsies' was similar to one spoken in India, in fact a Sanskrit dialect that originated in the Indus Valley of northern India in the ninth century. It is thought that a tribe of people left there, travelled through Persia to reach eastern Europe about 1000 years ago, arriving in Britain a few hundred years later.

Today's Travellers still speak their own version of Romany or Romanes. Mixed in with the Sanskrit words are others that derive from Greek, Romanian and Slavic as well as cant, the language of the sturdy beggars of Elizabethan England, together with other local words and bits of rhyming slang.

### **Making a living**

The south east of England with its concentration of fruit and vegetable farms relied on the travellers to provide temporary seasonal labour. They were an essential part of the local agricultural workforce.

Starting in late spring with hop training, the Gypsy travellers moved throughout the summer and autumn from farm to farm as each crop needed harvesting. Places like Yalding Lees or Hothfield Common near Ashford were traditional stopping places where Gypsy families might stop for a day or two before travelling on. During the winter months they would stop near larger towns or on the urban fringes of south-east London.

In winter the travellers earned money by making wooden clothes pegs, primrose baskets or decorative wooden flowers and selling them from door to door. The men did knife grinding, woven cane chair repairs or tree pruning.

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Most villages and towns had at least one or two fair days a year to which farmers would bring their produce and where livestock was traded. As well as hawking their wares as they passed through, the Travellers would also sell them at these annual fairs.

### **Horse drawn days**

Most travellers stayed in large family groups. Parents, grandparents, children, uncles, aunts and cousins would all work and travel together. The older ones would look after the babies and toddlers while the rest of the extended family were out working.

Life was lived outside and in the evenings the whole family gathered round the fire to discuss the days events and to entertain each other with songs, music and storytelling.

The painted wooden caravan or 'varda' only came into use in the middle of the 19th century. Until then Gypsy travellers were tent dwelling people who travelled with light horse drawn carts and traps.

The traditional Gypsy 'bender tent' was made from hazel rods pushed into the ground and covered with a tarpaulin or sailcloth. It would have a central area in which a fire could be lit with a hole above to allow the smoke to escape.

The 'varda' provided a cosy living space generally with a raised double bed at one end and a cupboard beneath that could double as a bed. There was usually a small stove with a mirrored door to the airing cupboard above as well as a table and some chairs. The interior and exterior decorations were very personal, the wealthier the owner the more ostentatious they were, so the caravan was a status symbol.

### **Settling down**

Much of the traditional farm work gradually disappeared after the end of the Second World War due to the increase in mechanisation and agrochemical farming methods. As the farm work dried up so did the impetus to keep travelling and the winter stopovers gradually became large permanent settlements. By the mid 1960s all hops were gathered by machines, herbicides dispensed with hand weeding and fruit farms would employ foreign students when they needed extra labour at harvest time, rather than Travellers.

The nomadic life was further hampered by successive legislation preventing roadside stopping and caravan dwelling. With decreasing work and increased harassment many families eventually moved from their caravans and trailers on permanent sites into local houses.