Gypsies and Travellers – The Truth

By Michelle Corbett
Who are the Gypsies and Travellers of Britain?

There are several different groups of Gypsies and Travellers living in England, including Romany Gypsies, Irish Travellers and New Travellers, and Circus and Fairground families. Some cultural values and traditions are shared, including a nomadic lifestyle or heritage. Gypsies are Romany ethnic groups whose ancestors migrated from India from the 10th Century and then mixed with European and other groups. Irish Travellers are a nomadic group with a distinctive way of life who have been part of Irish society for centuries. ‘Roma’ is used to describe European Romany speaking groups who have come to England from Eastern and Central Europe, and is sometimes used to refer more generally to Gypsies and Travellers. New Travellers are people of settled background who adopted a travelling lifestyle in the more recent past, although some are now in their third or fourth generation of travelling. Circus and fairground families are another group who travel for their work.

Romany Gypsies and Irish Travellers are legally protected from discrimination as minority ethnic groups under the Race Relations Acts. Under the Race Relations (Amendment) Act all public bodies have a duty to promote equality for Gypsies and Travellers.

There is also a non-ethnic definition of a ‘Gypsy’ in planning law, which is applicable to all Travelling people. Because it refers to people of nomadic habits, this definition caused problems for Gypsies and Travellers who had stopped travelling for health reasons. So the Government introduced a new definition for planning guidance purposes:

“Persons of nomadic habit of life whatever their race or origin, including such persons who on grounds only of their own or their family’s or dependents educational or health needs or old age have ceased to travel temporarily or permanently, but excluding members of an organised group of travelling show people or circus people travelling as such…”

It is also important that individual Gypsy and Traveller families are able to decide themselves whether they self-define as ‘Gypsy’, ‘Traveller’ or some other definition. In addition to some common cultural values and traditions, the different groups of Gypsies and Travellers also share a high level of discrimination and prejudice in their daily lives, and great difficulty in maintaining their lifestyle and heritage. They are disadvantaged in many different ways including access to health care, education and secure accommodation. The British Medical Association considers the Gypsy Traveller community to be the most ‘at risk’, with the lowest life expectancy and highest child mortality rate.

How long have there been Gypsies and Travellers in Britain?

Gypsy and Traveller groups have been in Britain for at least 500 years and probably much longer. The first written record of Romany Gypsies is at the Scottish court of King James in
1505. Within 50 years of that inaugural date, three Acts were passed in England expelling and discriminating against Romany Gypsies. Irish Travellers have been migrating to Britain alongside other Irish people since the early 19th Century.

**What is Gypsy and Traveller culture?**

Many British people, including famous household names, have Gypsy or Traveller ancestry, yet few people really understand their culture. Like other minority ethnic groups, Gypsies and Travellers have their own languages, traditions and customs that guide their way of life. These are passed down through the generations, but are also adapted to new conditions. Cultural values are very strong, though like other groups, each family and individual may have their own special ways of putting them into practice.
The family is extremely important to Gypsies and Travellers and a source of great pride. Extended families support and look after one another. Older members of the community are respected and cared for within the family. Practically, for example, Gypsies and Travellers would not contemplate putting elderly relatives into homes. Children are central to the lives of Gypsy and Traveller families.

The public perception of Gypsies and Travellers can be the opposite of the real situation. For example, there are myths and rhymes about Gypsies stealing children, but in fact there are many examples in Europe of Gypsies having their own children taken away to try and stop them being Gypsies. In Switzerland, the children’s state-run Charity ‘Pro Juventute’ between 1923 and 1973 removed 619 Gypsy Children from their parents and placed them with new Swiss parents or in institutions. The project’s intention was to destroy the Romany way of life.

In a poem about her people, Irish Traveller Kit Gaffey wrote:

“Yet so often they’re talked of, as ruffians and rogues, Thieves and stealers, Child beaters and hogs. Yet they’re so close to each other, it’s hard to believe That their love exists to all their creed. They watch other children as if watching their own, with love and attention, kindness from the soul.”

The Romany language is spoken by Romany Gypsies in different forms throughout the world. Irish Travellers have their own language called Cant or Gammon. It is important for families and children to keep their language alive and for it to be valued and supported, as other languages have been.

The public perception towards Gypsies and Travellers can often be dirty where they are called names like ‘stinking Gypo’, which is very hurtful and constitutes harassment.

Gypsies and Travellers have special hygiene rules, which are in some ways stricter than those of settled people but are not well understood by people outside their community.

One comment to explain from a close friend of mine:

“We never wash in a sink. If we have a sink in the trailer it’s always got a dish inside, ’cos we have separate bowls for everything…for washing up…for washing our hands and face…and for wiping around. We never get ’em mixed up. When we are doing our laundry we won’t wash our tea towels in with all the rest of our clothes, ’cos we think that’s very unclean.”

They take great pride in cleaning their caravans daily, even when getting moved on, and have gleaming displays of china and glass.

“It’s very important to keep your trailer clean but when you’re travelling it can be very awkward…Sometimes you haven’t got enough water…And it’s getting the water, because they won’t let you have it. So you learn to use maybe one dish of water to clean your trailer – you’ll wipe all around first, and then do your floor with it. I clean my trailer every day.”
My Friend’s Trailer
Homeless Gypsies and Travellers who have to stop on unauthorised sites may have uncollected rubbish because public refuse collection does not cover these sites. If rubbish is not collected from settled residents, the press may be very supportive of their difficulties. Very often, the presence of Gypsies and Travellers on an unauthorised site is used as an excuse for fly-tipping by other people in the area, but the Travellers will get the blame.

Gypsy Funerals and Weddings.

At one time, it was commonly believed that just the body is a vehicle for the spirit on earth, the vardo is the vehicle for the body on earth. When someone died, their vardo and most of their possessions were burnt because their “vehicle for the body” was no longer needed. Funerals are a very important rite of passage for the Gypsy Traveller community. When a Gypsy dies it is usual for a vigil to be kept over the body, which is kept illuminated until after the time of the funeral. The deceased is usually buried with the owner’s intimate personal possessions. Some Gypsy funerals will attract people from all over the country to pay their respects and floral tributes are usually on a grand scale. Personal items belonging to the deceased such as clothing, bedding and china are usually burnt or destroyed after the funeral.
The traditional way of marriage v modern day marriage

Unlike other religions or communities, Gypsy weddings will be realised exclusively between two young people of the same nationality. If a man marries a Gypsy girl from another provenience, his community may eventually accept this, with the condition that the girl must accept the gypsy way of life. It is a violation of the rules as a Gypsy to marry someone of another nationality, because the woman, in their conception is the guarantee that the Gipsy population will survive.

The boy begins with courtship and if the couple agrees to marry, there will be a symbolic exchange of gifts. Traditions of Gypsies also contain the evaluation institution of the bride. This is a payment made by the groom to the bride’s family. The payment will compensate for the loss of their daughter and is the guarantor of decent behaviour and visa versa the bride.

For many Gypsies the parents, not the children are the ones who arrange the marriage. According to these tribes, it is the boy parent’s right to find the perfect, suitable bride for their son. Therefore, they will consider all young women in the group and evaluate their individual qualities.

Health, virility, manners, character and most important, the prestige in the Gipsy community, they are all characteristics that lead to making the decision. When an agreement is reached, bride’s father will drink a symbolic glass of wine. This means that the boy was accepted as a groom under the agreed conditions. A formal party will follow where the music and dances are always present. Bride’s family will let the girl go crying and the boy’s family will usually say the head of the bride is considered as too high. But everything will end well and initial understanding will be respected.

However in modern times the extravagance of bridal gowns is extreme, no expense is spared when celebrating the union of young gypsy and traveller couples - the hair is big, the dresses bigger and the whole occasion gloriously over the top. In communities where divorce is still almost unheard-of, great effort is put into the biggest day of the bride’s life.

Most girls from gypsy and traveller communities are barely on the verge of womanhood as they become the centrepieces for these grand occasions, often thrust shortly after their 16th birthdays into the role of wife and soon-to-be mothers. But despite the young age of these brides - and sometimes the grooms - these marriages are usually guaranteed to go the distance because of strong religious and traditional convictions. Young girls are virgins when they marry, as having children out of wedlock is considered taboo and divorce out of bounds.

The celebrations are visual spectacles and, despite the expense involved, some might dare say tacky. Meringue-esque dresses are the norm, with sky-high tiaras, and a wedding carriage that would make Cinderella jealous.
Another important aspect of Gypsy and Traveller culture is the ability to earn a living in many different ways. As self-employed small businesses they fill gaps in the British economy by providing a wide variety of goods and services and adapting to new economic needs. The tradition of nomadism or travelling is significant, and allows Gypsies and Travellers to travel to take up work opportunities, and to meet with family on special occasions such as christenings, weddings, illness and funerals. These ‘rites of passage’ are very important events which all family members join. Communities also meet up at Gypsy horse fairs such as at Stow on the Wold in Gloucestershire and Appleby in Cumbria.

Although opportunities for travelling are now more restricted, nomadism is as much about the possibility of travelling as about travelling itself.

"Nomadism entails a way of looking at the world, a different way of perceiving things, a different attitude to accommodation, to work and to life in general."

(Appleby in the early years)
Images from Appleby Horse Fair, Cumbria 2009.
Religion is of great importance to many Gypsies and Travellers, in terms of their daily lives and through rituals and gatherings. Irish Travellers are often devout Roman Catholics and their children attend Catholic schools. Many go on pilgrimages to Lourdes or in Ireland. Large numbers of Romany Gypsies are now Born-again Christians. They find love and solidarity in the Church and in meeting up with others from across Europe at large Christian conventions.

Do Gypsies and Travellers in housing stop being Gypsies/Travellers?

No. Gypsies and Travellers who have moved into housing do not lose their culture or their ethnic status. For many, the tradition of nomadism remains key to their cultural identity, and many still hope that they or their children or grandchildren will be able to travel in the future. Other cultural characteristics, such as strong links with extended family, are maintained wherever Gypsies or Travellers live.

How well does the general public understand the cultural traditions and experiences of Gypsies and Travellers?

Despite this strong culture, Gypsies and Travellers are amongst the most misunderstood groups. Prejudice and hatred are openly expressed and there is a long history of discrimination and hostility towards them.

Such discrimination towards Roma people is called ‘Antiziganism’ or ‘Anti-Romanyism’.

Half a million Roma were killed by the Nazis and their allies in the Gypsy Holocaust. However, this fact is not widely known. In a BBC news article of 26th May 2005 starkly entitled “Gypsies are ‘Europe's most hated’”, Dr James Smith, co-founder of the Beth Shalom Holocaust Centre in Nottinghamshire stated that:

“their plight is often forgotten and they remain ‘demonised’...Up to half a million were killed. Yet even after the Holocaust, gypsies remain perhaps the most hated minority in Europe.”

A MORI poll in 2003 found that 35% of the population admit to prejudice against Gypsies and Travellers, while 38% believe such prejudice exists. 32% cited newspapers and 42% cited television as among the most important influences.

In 2003, the former Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) launched a consultation strategy for Gypsies and Travellers. In the document, it stated that:

“Extreme levels of public hostility (are) fuelled in part by irresponsible media reporting of the kind that would be met with outrage if it was targeted at any other ethnic group.”

Later in this factsheet, some of the ways in which Gypsies and Travellers are developing contacts with the general public and working to promote understanding of their culture and reduce prejudice, will be shown.

What are Gypsies and Travellers’ experiences of discrimination, disadvantage and harassment?

There is much evidence of severe and continuing discrimination in education, health, employment and contact with the criminal justice system. This undermines Gypsies and Travellers ability to live ordinary lives and to access services equally. The former Chairman of the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE), Trevor Phillips, said in 2004 that:

“Discrimination against Gypsies and Travellers appears to be the last ‘respectable’ form of racism. It is still considered acceptable to put up ‘No Traveller’ signs in pubs and shops and to make blatantly prejudiced remarks about Gypsies and Travellers.”
In education, Gypsy and Traveller children experience many disadvantages, not least their difficulties in accessing a stable education when they are moved on. According to the Department for Education and Skills, they have been seen as the “group most at risk in the education system”. Good work has been done by some schools, Traveller Education Services and specific projects to provide an equal and inclusive education. However, children can still find that their culture is ignored, their needs are not met, there is bullying from other children, and a hostile reception in the neighbourhood. There are cases where schools have been closed or threatened with closure when Travellers were enrolled because other local parents mounted a campaign against them and withdrew their children.

A major study by the Department of Health found many health problems for Gypsies and Travellers. They have ‘significantly poorer health status and significantly more self-reported symptoms of ill-health’ than other people in the population of a similar age, gender and economic status, and according to the British Medical Association, Gypsy and Traveller communities have the lowest life expectancy and highest rate of child mortality in the UK.

Poor living conditions are known to have a negative effect on health. This is made worse because they have less access to health services. Prejudice, communication difficulties with health staff, and being moved on even when family members are ill all serve to exacerbate the general problem.

Information included on a Scottish website also mentioned that Gypsies and Travellers get turned away from doctors.

Gypsies and Travellers can experience unequal treatment from the police. They cite stories of being arrested without due cause, unfairly barred from public venues, or repeatedly stopped and questioned. The CRE in 2004 pointed out that some forces are working to improve their equality strategies and practices, but in many areas there is a long way to go.

There are still ‘No Travellers’ signs in some pubs and shops, where Gypsies and Travellers face suspicion and extra scrutiny by security guards. Evidence also points to Gypsies and Travellers being prevented from entering cinemas and facing discrimination at fast food/restaurants and other retailers. In July 2008, Travellers also alleged that they were turned away from the Royal Windsor Horse Show.

There can also be problems with getting taxis to drop off at sites. Gypsies and Travellers can and do meet outright public hostility and racism. Gypsies and Travellers are often the target of racist incidents, which can include verbal abuse, inappropriate jokes, damage to property, physical assault and even murder.

For many Gypsies and Travellers, a key area of cultural difference from the settled population is where they live. However, public policy has significantly failed to meet their accommodation needs over a long period of time. Twice-yearly government counts show consistently that a quarter of Gypsies and Travellers in caravans are on unauthorised sites, because they have nowhere else to stop. This means that they are legally homeless under the Housing Act 1996. Between 1970 and 1994 under the Caravan Sites Act 1968, local authorities had a duty to provide sites for people “of nomadic habit of life, regardless of their race or origin”, “residing in or resorting to” their areas. Many did not provide sufficient sites, or put them in unsuitable locations far from local facilities, by motorways, rubbish tips or industrial activities. In 1994, the Government repealed this duty and withdrew grant aid for sites. With fewer sites, Gypsies and Travellers were forced onto increasingly problematic stopping places or into conventional housing unsuited to their cultural needs. Government research from 2002 calculated that up to 4,500 additional pitches were needed.

Those without sites face many problems beyond their control; dangerous and polluting conditions; lack of basic services such as water, sanitation and rubbish collection; no safe play space for children; never knowing when they will be moved on; and facing harassment and vigilante attacks. Eviction can be frightening and traumatic, and families are likely to be repeatedly evicted. This means that children cannot go to school and families cannot access health care or other essential services.
A Scottish-Irish Traveller said the following in an article in *The Independent* newspaper on 21st March 2005:

“They knock you up at three in the morning and you have to wake the little ones and tell them it’s time to move on again. And on the road, there are verbal attacks all the time…They prevent you having fresh water and electricity.”

In 1994, the Government argued that Gypsies and Travellers should set up their own sites. However planning guidance actually made it much harder to obtain planning permission. Although local authorities were expected to make provision for sites in development plans, positive action was rare, and there were very restrictive criteria for site proposals. Only 10% of initial planning applications by Gypsies and Travellers succeed compared to 80% of applications from the settled population. For those who, despite these odds, have achieved a family site, the process has often been very protracted with numerous different hearings. This greatly increases the stress for families who may need a stable place to live because of serious health problems or to access education.

**Why do Gypsies and Travellers sometimes set up sites without permission?**

The lack of public sites and the great barriers they encounter in trying to set up their own have left many Gypsies and Travellers without the basic right to accommodation. If they camp on other people’s land, private owners, local authorities and the police have a range of different powers to move them on.

In order just to have somewhere to live, some Gypsies and Travellers therefore purchase their own land and apply for retrospective planning permission. This process is used regularly by members of the settled community, who may indeed attract sympathy if they have to demolish a building constructed without permission. The planning application still has to go through the due process. It accords with the policy of successive governments who have expected Gypsies and Travellers to provide their own accommodation.

The conflicts that can be generated are in nobody’s long-term interest. Sometimes public meetings are held and hostile and discriminatory statements are made about Gypsies and Travellers. There are deeply held suspicions within the Gypsy Traveller community that planning applications can be opposed for reasons other than planning criteria, reasons related to people’s preconceptions about Gypsies and Travellers and their prejudicial attitudes towards them. What is needed is to establish more public sites, to make the planning process more equitable, and to welcome Gypsies and Travellers as part of the community.

**Why do Gypsies and Travellers live in urban neighbourhoods or near other people?**

Gypsies and Travellers need to live near built-up areas for the same reasons as other people, to access economic opportunities, health care, schools and shops. Increasing development and urban expansion means that many traditional stopping places are no longer available. Gypsies and Travellers are often seen as ‘invading’ neighbourhoods, but their travel patterns reflect long historical traditions. Instead it is the Travellers who have been pushed out.

**Would conventional housing solve the problem of accommodation for Gypsies and Travellers?**

There are no accurate figures about Gypsies and Travellers living in housing. Another way they have been excluded in the past is not being counted as a separate ethnic group in official statistics such as the National Census. However, it is estimated that maybe half now live in houses.

In the past, authorities have often assumed that problems of accommodation for Gypsies and Travellers could be solved by housing. They may accept a housing offer in desperation at
having nowhere else safe and stable to raise children or for health reasons, but it may prove a difficult and stressful experience. They can feel isolated from their extended family, trapped and enclosed.

A Derbyshire Gypsy stated:

“I have lived a few years in a house. I can’t bear to be closed in. It’s OK for a while but then you can’t stand it no more. I feel the same about a house as a house-dweller would feel about living in a caravan permanently.”

Consider, in this respect, the well-publicised comments of Hull house-dwellers who, as a result of the serious flooding in 2007, have had to make alternative accommodation in caravans!

Another Gypsy said to me stated in 2006 that:

“Travellers are ordinary people that want the same rights, the same things as non-Travellers, but we live in trailers, we don’t like closed spaces, we love the openness, its sense of freedom.”

Gypsies and Travellers in housing may be exposed to increased hostility and racism.

“Once you tell your neighbours that you are a Gypsy, they are no longer friendly; they think that Gypsies cannot be trusted.”

The courts have confirmed that homeless Gypsies and Travellers should not be forced to accept conventional housing. In a High Court case in 2003 drawing on European case law, the judge stated:

“In order to meet the requirements and accord respect, something more than taking account of an applicant’s Gypsy culture is required…Respect includes the positive obligation to act so as to facilitate the Gypsy way of life.”

For other Gypsies and Travellers, housing can be a satisfactory solution either for a period or more permanently. It is important that each individual and family can decide what meets their needs, and that their culture continues to be recognised, but this is very far from being the case at present.

**What basic rights do Gypsies and Travellers have?**

Consider the following statements made by Gypsies and Travellers:

“We are human beings like everyone else.”

“We just want to be treated fairly.”

“We have lived on our own place for two years. We often greet local people but they turn their heads away and ignore us.”

Gypsies and Travellers have the same rights as other members of the community under national and international law, and are entitled to protection as minority ethnic groups. They have needs for basic accommodation, security and belonging. Rather than Gypsies and Travellers having more rights implemented then other people, they have instead experienced a lack of very basic safety, life opportunities and services that others take for granted. Even assistance such as help with heating their homes, widely available for house-dwellers, can meet with outraged headlines when requested for Gypsies and Travellers.

The answer to the question ‘Do Gypsies and Travellers have greater rights than other people?’ is unequivocally ‘No’. They have the same rights. They just want equal access to them, and to be treated fairly, in the same manner as everyone else.
Why is the Human Rights Act used in planning cases?

Gypsies and Travellers have used the Human Rights Act because they feel that the planning system has not treated them fairly and that their rights to a home and family life have been denied. The use of the Human Rights Act has therefore encouraged the planning system to take their needs into account. Its use is considered by the Government to be a fundamental and integral part of decision-making by local authorities.

Are Gypsies and Travellers living outside the laws and rules of Society?

Gypsies and Travellers are bound by the same rules as everyone else. They pay taxes, VAT on goods and services, and license fees. Their vehicles are regularly checked by the police for their roadworthiness. They meet mutual obligations in day-to-day business dealings with the general population. They engage in a range of occupations as teachers, probation officers, police officers, nursery managers, community workers, shop workers etc. This will increase as more Gypsies and Travellers are able to access education.

There are often fears that establishing a site in an area will lead to increased crime. However, research from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation in 1996 found that Gypsies and Travellers and settled neighbours have built up effective relationships once a site is established and "many have good relationships with neighbouring communities." In some areas local residents have actively supported the efforts to achieve an established site and welcomed them to the area. Even where there are considerable difficulties, the way forward is through talking and working together.

The BBC reported on the situation in a Cambridgeshire village in 2005:

"Reverend Hore said the experience of his Cambridgeshire village was both a warning and a sign of hope. Tensions arose in 2003 after a nearby caravan site expanded. Reverend Hore said there had been new dialogue between villagers and the Travellers which was improving the situation. This is what can break down barriers...If you are journeying together, at least you can create dialogue."

Like all other groups, Gypsy Traveller communities include a minority of people who engage in anti-social or criminal behaviour. The vast majority of Gypsies and Travellers are law-abiding and want criminal behaviour dealt with by the law in the usual way. The high media profile can result in all Gypsies and Travellers being labelled as blameworthy and criminal. It can be assumed that all criminal activity in a neighbourhood is due to Gypsies and Travellers, without any evidence.

Moreover, media reports may misleadingly headline police arrests but fail to report subsequently if charges are not brought against those arrested.

Because some settled people engage in criminal activity, it is not assumed that this is a characteristic of all settled people.

Do Gypsies and Travellers care about the development of Civil Society?

Again, consider the following statements made by Gypsy Travellers:

“When Gypsies and Travellers do good things, these are never mentioned.”

“We have raised a significant amount of money for children’s and hospital charities, but this is not mentioned because we are Travellers.”

Because Gypsies and Travellers have been the object of so much suspicion and hatred, it has sometimes been hard for them to engage in ordinary community, social and political activities. However, they show determination in overcoming these barriers and there are
many ways in which they make a very significant contribution to a harmonious community, and to enriching the nation’s cultural and political life.

In politics, Gypsies and Travellers serve at local and national level as councillors and on committees and have stood for election to Parliament. There are Gypsy MPs and councillors throughout Europe.

The following obituary of Charles Smith, a leading Gypsy politician, appeared in The Times on 14th November 2005:

“Charles Smith, Gypsy activist, poet and film-maker, once ran a successful antiques business. Charles Smith, who has died of cancer aged 49, was one of the leading English Romani community activists of his generation, chair of the Gypsy Council and, since April 2004, a commissioner of the Commission for Racial Equality. An activist in his own ethnic community, he was also a tough, pragmatic, local politician. Living on a residential caravan site in Essex, which included both Gypsies and non-Gypsies, he fought Castle Point borough’s claims that they had no Gypsies, and then was himself elected a Labour councillor for eight years.

“Charles Smith served as mayor in 2002-03.”

Gypsies and Travellers are engaged with MPs and Ministers in All-Party Parliamentary Groups, meetings and conferences to try and resolve the difficulties over accommodation, to promote an improved code of practice for the media, and good practice in services for Gypsies and Travellers. The Gypsy and Traveller Law Reform Coalition brings together in this endeavour many Gypsy and Traveller groups such as the Gypsy Council, the Irish Traveller Movement, the National Romani Rights Association and Friends, Families and Travellers. The Coalition won the Liberty Human Rights Award in 2004.

In a BBC News article on 6th May 2005, the Coalition spokesman, Mr Len Smith said:

“We can show the rest of society the great contribution that Gypsies and Travellers are capable of making, want to make, and are already doing.”

We will highlight some famous Gypsies and Travellers in the following section. However, those who are less famous have also made outstanding contributions and sacrifices. Many Gypsies served in the British Army in both World Wars. Two were awarded the Victoria Cross for their bravery. In today’s world, Gypsies and Travellers are active members of churches, are involved in charity work in the community and in raising money for good causes. They undertake voluntary work with services like education, police and health to provide public education through exhibitions, videos, meetings, training events and publications. Many Gypsies and Travellers from around the country have been recognised for the extent and value of their work in breaking down barriers between Gypsies and Travellers, and other communities and organisations (including schools and the police).

Gypsies and Travellers are involved in all walks of life. They are particularly concerned to promote improved knowledge and understanding. They are involved with research in universities into health and accommodation needs, and work in schools developing cultural resources for all children.

**Famous Gypsies and Travellers**

There have been many Gypsies over the years who have been famous for their remarkable contribution to society, although their Gypsy background is not always known. These include the actors Sir Charlie Chaplin, Sir Michael Caine and Bob Hoskins, Nobel Prize winner Mother Theresa, footballer Eric Cantona, and singer David Essex. Elvis Presley also had distant Romanichel origins.
Other famous Gypsies and Travellers include the following:

• Adam Ant
  The British musician is of Romanichel descent.

• Milan Baroš
  Czech international footballer who currently plays in England for Portsmouth.

• Yul Brynner
  The legendary Hollywood actor was ¼ Romany and ¼ Jewish through his mother.

• Sergiu Celibidache
  Romanian born conductor and one of the greatest of the 20th Century.

• Joaquín Cortés
  Spanish flamenco dancer, but also Ambassador of Roma in the European Union.

• Louise Doughty
  British playwright, critic and broadcaster from Rutland.

• Freddy Eastwood
  English footballer, currently playing for Coventry City.

• Tony Gatlif
  French film maker, scriptwriter, actor and producer.

• Zlatan Ibrahimović
  Swedish international footballer and a leading striker in Europe.

• Roby Lakatos
  Virtuoso Hungarian violinist, and master of many musical styles.

• Ronald Lee
  Canadian Romany activist, writer, professor and United Nations delegate.

• Juana Martín
  A leading fashion designer from Spain.

• Andrea Pirlo
  World Cup winning Italian international footballer.

• Katarzyna Polok
  Ukrainian painter/sculptor, renowned for her paintings relating to the Porrajmos.

• Billy Joe Saunders
  British boxer in Beijing Olympics.

• Henry Wharton
  British boxer. Commonwealth and European Super Middleweight Champion.

• Sir Henry Wood
  The founder of the Proms concerts belonged to a traditional Romanichel family.
Some random interesting and important facts

• There is a strong work ethic in Gypsy and Traveller communities. This is based on the simple need to survive and has meant that Gypsies and Travellers tended to work in trades that are highly mobile, e.g. agriculture, building trade, scrap metal, hawking. Traditional skills are passed down through families.

• Gypsies and Travellers often start work at a far younger age than the majority of the population. This is due to economic necessity and too many young people leaving the education system early or in some cases not having attended school at all.

• Traditionally, Gypsy and Traveller girls will stay at home to do household and child-caring duties. This often extends into adulthood, though more young women are now choosing to go to work.

• Horses are a key part of Gypsy Traveller cultural heritage. Some are still used to pull carts and wagons, though obviously this is not now as common as in previous eras. Many people keep horses, breed them and sell them at traditional fairs (e.g. Stowe, Appleby). Harness racing is also very popular activity.

• Many Gypsy Travellers marry at a relatively early age. It is extremely rare for women to marry outside the community. It is more common, though still not widespread, for men to do so.

• Gypsies and Travellers are statistically under-represented in the UK’s mainstream prison population.

• Terms such as ‘pikey’, ‘tinker’ and ‘itinerant’ are highly offensive.

• A traditional Romany funeral involves the setting alight of the deceased’s caravan. This is done to honour the deceased. It is not in any way at all an act of vandalism.

There is a strong and enduring musical and artistic tradition in Gypsy and Traveller culture.

• Language, stories, music, clothing styles, handicraft, lace, design and art forms have been passed down through the generations. The oral tradition is particularly strong.

• There is a rich Gypsy Traveller heritage of making clothes, decorations, ornaments, jewellery etc.

• Boxing is traditionally very popular amongst Gypsy Traveller boys and men. This goes back to the late 18th and early 19th century popular pastime of bare knuckle fighting.

• The British Film Director Shane Meadows made a documentary in 1995 entitled King of the Gypsies, which was about the famous bare knuckle fighter Bartley Gorman. A film based on this documentary is currently in production (as of August 2008).

• Hairdressing is a popular activity and source of income for Gypsy Traveller girls and women.

• Gypsy and Traveller girls have their hair long for traditional and cultural reasons, as a mark of respect to their parents.

• Notwithstanding traditional activities and occupations, Gypsy Travellers are involved in all sorts of activities and occupations, sometimes stretching or breaking longstanding internal cultural traditions. Their talents, enthusiasm and dedication are now being channelled into many new areas.
The Romany Language and Influence

The Romany language stems, like the Romany people, from the Indian sub-continent. Romany is part of an ancient Sanskrit language that was first spoken in the Indus Valley over 1000 years ago. Through migration and as a result of local influences, Romany in the UK has become anglicised because of familiarity of use within an English grammatical system. However, despite fears over its demise, it remains a distinctive international language in its own right and one that has had some impact on the English language itself.

Consider, for example, some of the following Romany words that have become widely used in contemporary Britain, and their distinctive Romany (as opposed to wider) meanings:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ROMANY</th>
<th>ENGLISH</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kaulo Gav</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cushti</td>
<td>Good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duvvel</td>
<td>God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zingaro</td>
<td>Gypsy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yog</td>
<td>Fire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vardo</td>
<td>Cart/caravan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kindo</td>
<td>Wet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luvvo</td>
<td>Money</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luvvo Mengo</td>
<td>Banker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angro</td>
<td>Ghost</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Petulengo</td>
<td>Blacksmith</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gry</td>
<td>Horse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hatchi Witchu</td>
<td>Hedgehog</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beno Abri</td>
<td>Born outside</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lav</td>
<td>Word</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mush</td>
<td>Man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mushi</td>
<td>Woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raklo</td>
<td>Boy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rakli</td>
<td>Young girl</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tawnie yecks</td>
<td>Grandchildren</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ava</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kek</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Misto!</td>
<td>Wondrous!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Concluding Thoughts

This document contained the following conclusion:

Gypsies and Travellers have long cultural, artistic and humanitarian traditions. They have been vilified as ‘outsiders’ but they need to be included and welcomed so that their contributions can enrich and develop society alongside all the other groups that make up our communities, without having to hide their identity for fear of harassment.

We all have a part to play in overcoming the ‘myths’ and prejudices which damage lives and which is seen as a responsibility of all sectors in society.

Finally, What Gypsies and Travellers want are:

• To be allowed to live peacefully as part of British society.
• Recognition that a nomadic or semi-nomadic lifestyle is a legitimate way of living.
• Fairer representation in the media.
• An urgent solution to current accommodation problems.
• Greater acceptance and understanding.