

THE TRAVELLERS "

ACTUALITY.

NOV. 1963.

**TRAVELLING COMMUNITIES:
VOICES FROM THE MARGINS**

Travelling Communities: Voices From The Margins

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Sources from Birmingham Archives and Heritage Collections

Secondary Reading

Written by Dr Andy Green, 2009 (with many thanks to Fiona Tait for additional references).

www.connectinghistories.org.uk/birminghamstories.asp

“Britain’s 300,000 Gypsies, Roma and Travellers have lived, worked and travelled throughout Britain for over 500 years, yet we have been almost entirely written out of British history. Go to most museums, libraries and schools and nothing about our history and culture is kept or taught. The result is a widespread ignorance about who we are, which sometimes turns to hatred, fear and mis-understanding, but always has an impact on Gypsy and Traveller lives.”

Patricia Knight, Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Month 2008



Camp on Church Road, Aston, 1960. [WK/A7/362]

Travelling Communities: Introducing the Archives

“I reckon the Lord Almighty he died to save all we in this world... I want to travel round the world to see the freedom of my life and my children.” [Charles Parker interview with Caroline Hughes: MS 4000/6/1/33/12/C].

In 2008, the launch of the “Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Month” sought to celebrate the culture of Travellers and to combat the ongoing prejudice which has been called ‘the last bastion of racism’ (Coxhead, 2007). In response, this guide offers an introduction to the historical evidence on Travellers found hidden among Birmingham’s Archive and Heritage collections. These key resources will be used to highlight themes, issues, stereotypes and further subjects for debate. Local archives hold useful starting points for learning about how the history of travelling communities is woven into Birmingham’s landscape.

Boat People

Irish Travellers

New Travellers

Roma ‘Gypsies’

Scottish Travellers

Travelling Show-people

Welsh Travellers



Report of the Seamen and Boatmen’s Friend Society, 1914. [L41.4]

Report by G. Puxon of the National Council of Civil Liberties.

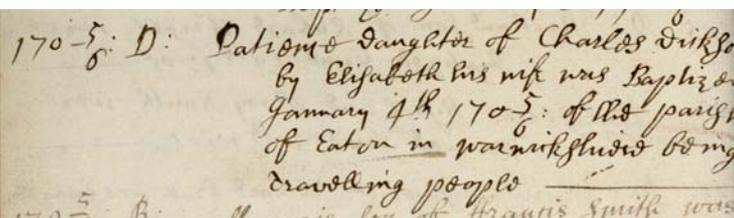


Charles Parker Archive, 1968. [MS 4000/1/8/19/1]

Key Debate:
what do the three images on this page start to tell us about traveller histories in the archive?



'Gypsies near Bromford Forge' by J. Barber, 15 October 1807. [IIR 2: 87716]



Baptism recording 'travelling people', Deritend, 1705-06. [EP 1/2/1/1]

First Records: Migration, Craft, Culture

"...Preached to a good congregation at Garrison Lane Chapel in the evening, among whom I had a number of Gipsies, they behaved well, and were very attentive; the subject was somewhat suitable to some of their practices, my subject was the dreams of Joseph"

*Carr's Lane Church Town Mission Book,
28 Jan 1838 [CC1/61]*

Glimpses of Travellers in Birmingham archives start as early as the 16th century, in the baptism records of St John's, Deritend, dated 1705 and 1706 [left]. Other early archival evidence can be seen in the sketch [top] by a Birmingham artist, Joseph Barber.

Barber's image identifies a small community sheltered by bender tents who work as 'hawkers'. Many early Travellers earned a living by mending shoes, making pegs or weaving baskets. Other itinerants took up trades in scrap metal, producing a sound that led them to be called 'tinkers'. Travellers' lives were deeply connected to struggles for jobs, land, accommodation and social rights. Whilst filling seasonal occupations and establishing their own routes and networks, Travellers also became renowned for fortune-telling, story-telling and musicianship. Many Romany people continued to speak their own language and dialects, rooted in ancient Sanskrit. But cultural difference could also make people unfairly suspicious. Travellers were often target for physical attack, or for reformers who wanted itinerants to adopt a 'proper' religion and 'settled' ways of living.

Traveller History and Social Discrimination

Romany Travellers or 'Gypsies' have been in the British Isles for 500 years and from the very start they were subjected to fierce attacks by the state. The Egyptians Act (1530) sought to expel "the outlandish people calling themselves Egyptians". An amendment to this act (1554) even imposed a death sentence on any 'Gypsies' in England. In more recent times, it is often forgotten that Himmler signed a decree in 1942 declaring all 'Gypsies' from Germany should be sent to Auschwitz. More than 250,000 were estimated to be killed.

Birmingham's early inquest records can expose the poor health and high mortality rates among Travellers: 'Martha Elizabeth Wallser, of a van, near Bracebridge street, 3 months. Died 25 May 1877, of convulsions' [CO/2/].



Photo by Dr Andy Green.

Traditional "Gypsy Peg", West Midlands, early 20th century.

Key Debate:

what impression do you think the 'Bromford Forge' illustration gives of the 'Gypsy lifestyle'?

Travellers and the Industrial Landscape

From the eighteenth century the shift from a predominantly rural nation to an industrial landscape meant previously 'open' grounds were often taken over by social redevelopment. Routes used by generations of Travellers were threatened.

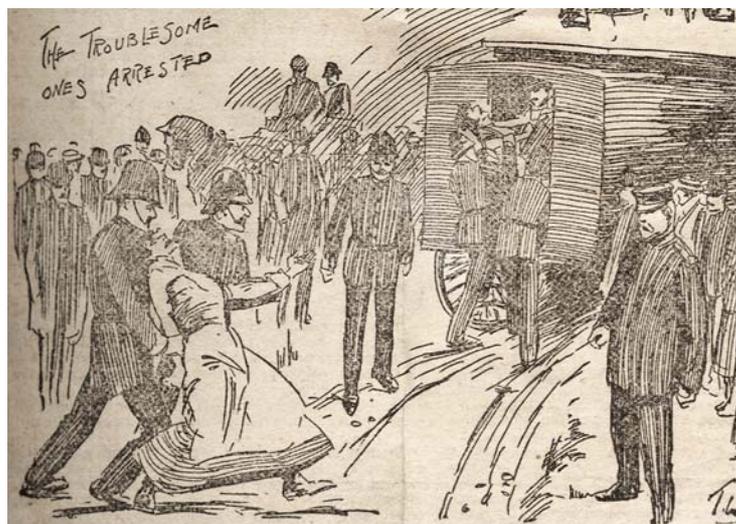
This had an especially strong impact on the West Midlands. As a centre of the Industrial Revolution, more and more land was reclaimed for cheap housing and factories. Some travellers adapted new trades, buying, selling and working amidst the new urbanised populations of Britain.

"...The first tinkers in England were exported to Birmingham, they had to send for them for the work that they wanted done, cause it was cheap at that time I suppose..."

Interview with Jim Hanrahan, "Where Do I Stand," Phillip Donnellan Archive.



The Black Patch, c1898. [WK/H5/200]



Black Patch Evictions, Birmingham Weekly Post, 29 July 1905. [Misc News Cuttings related to Birmingham/Vol 8]

CLEARING THE BLACK PATCH.

RECALCITRANT GIPSIES BOUND OVER.

The heroes and heroines of the defence of the Black Patch appeared at the Handsworth Police Court yesterday. They had exchanged their war paint for the garb of respectability, but their demeanour was as bold and uncompromising as ever. There were five of them: charged with committing a breach of the peace. Ada Lovelidge (30) and Leonard Lovelidge (16) displayed none of the romantic and picturesque signs of gipsy blood, but Ellen Lovelidge (22) presented a very smart appearance. Her curly black hair was crowned with a becoming hat, and when she smiled, as she did frequently, she displayed a fine set of teeth, and her eyes flashed in true Romany fashion. Edward Badger (35) had donned a brown velvet jacket in honour of the occasion, and Elizabeth Badger (36), was also arrayed in her brightest and best raiment.

Addressing the gipsies collectively, Mr. W. Shakespeare (clerk to the magistrates) said: You know you are all charged with committing a breach of the peace. Are you staying near the ground from which you were evicted?

The defendants intimated that they were.

Are you willing to behave yourselves and keep perfectly quiet?

Yes.

And go away from the place?

No. They have smashed up all our things. We have got nothing to go away with.

Supposing the police ask the magistrates to adjourn this case for a fortnight to see how you behave, are you willing to clear out within the fortnight?

No, sir.

You had better consider it. If not the case will go on.

We have nowhere to go to, and we have nothing to go with.

Birmingham Daily Post, 29 July 1905.

Handsworth's 'Black Patch' Gypsies

The story of the 'Black Patch Gypsies' shows the difficulties Travellers faced at the turn of the 20th Century. At this time, 300 Romany people were estimated to be settled on the land near Handsworth, living in tents and caravans under the leadership of 'King' Esau Smith. The name of 'Black Patch' may have derived from a number of possible associations. Did the term refer to the 'Gypsy' camp fires? Or did it refer to the industrial wasteland they were forced to occupy near the site of the famous 'Soho Foundry', once owned by the Boulton family? Despite their claim of a right to be on the land, the families on the patch faced constant harassments to leave the area and to make way for new owners. Ted Rudge, author of 'Brumroamin', suggests that 26th July 1905 was when the first members of the Black Patch were made homeless without compensation.

Key Debate:
how can you discover what eventually happened to the lands of the 'Black Patch'?



Birmingham Traveller site. Photo by Paul Hill. [MS 2294]

“How far does it come into your mind before you say, “I have done everything I possibly can that I can think of, and I will help the broad mass of these people, but there are some that I can do nothing with whatever.” Then doesn’t the time arise in one’s mind when one has to say “All right, one has to exterminate the impossibles.”
1963. [MS 4000/2/97/1/2/1]

‘On the Crossroads’: Travellers and Social Rights

Birmingham’s Archive and Heritage collections hold a rich variety of materials on Traveller communities in the 1960s and 1970s, when many itinerant Irish people bore the brunt of political and public hostility.

With its overtones of an ‘ethnic cleansing’ policy, the statement quoted [top right] was made by a local Birmingham alderman during an interview by Charles Parker, producer of a BBC ‘Radio Ballad’ called ‘The Travelling People’ (1963). General public feeling toward Travellers has often focused around perceptions that nomadic communities create “mess” in local areas. But when ‘Travelling People’ was recorded, poor institutional relationships with Travellers showed that problems on the ground level were linked to higher levels of anti-Traveller feeling. The West Midlands saw many heavily policed evictions of Travellers from ‘unauthorised’ spaces; but at the same time, the political establishment showed an ongoing unwillingness to provide an adequate number of new sites to support legitimate Traveller needs.

Many councils, including Birmingham, now actively employ a ‘Travellers Team’ to support the community. However, the legacy of earlier issues means many families are still confronted by a wide range of problems including lack of sites, educational support and low levels of physical wellbeing.

"I was expecting one of my children, one of my babies, and my son ran for the midwife. In the time he was going after the midwife, the policeman come along. "Come on," he says, "Get a move on. Don't want you here on my beat." So my husband says, "Look sir, let me stay, my wife is going to have a baby." "No, it don't matter about that," he says, "You get off." 1963. [MS 4000/2/97/1/2/2]

Key Debate:
compare the photograph above with the same place shown on the next page [bottom left]

1959
Highways Act
'If a hawker or other itinerant trader or Gypsy pitches a Booth, stall or stand on the highway, without lawful excuse, he shall be guilty of an offence'

1960
Caravan Sites Development Act

1968
Caravan Sites Act
...required county council and Boroughs to provide legal Traveller sites, but only 'so far as necessary'

1994
Criminal Justice Public Order Act

2002
Traveller Law Reform Bill

Confronting Traveller Images and Stereotypes

The images and headlines on this page can be used to reflect on stereotypes affecting travelling communities.



Photo by Benjamin Stone, 1906. [Stone/Box 244/5]

'A Typical Gypsy. Blackpool Gypsy Encampment.'

Stone's photograph allows us to reflect on how 19th century British culture was obsessed with scrutinising the image of the 'Gypsy'. The title for Stone's image also reminds us that the real identity of the woman in question was lost beneath what Stone considered to be merely 'typical'.



Birmingham Mail, 28 April 1975.

'Princess Ellen Joins the Travelling People'

This image shows a local performance of 'The Gypsy Baron' at the Repertory Theatre. Representations of Travellers as 'exotic' or 'romantic', suggests their lives are part of the past, not present, and obscures the realities of their way of life.



Two caravans have moved on to waste land at Balsall Heath—flattening mounds of earth put up by Birmingham Corporation to stop them getting back on to the site. Last year the corporation had them turned off. And now the corporation promises similar treatment to the latest "invaders."

Birmingham Post, 16 May 1969.

'Tinkers Sweep over the Barriers'

Many media images of Travellers tend to emphasise and magnify the presence of 'rubbish', but ignore the human issues concerning the acute lack of legal sites. The full article here calls travellers "invaders", thereby linking stereotypes of 'dirtiness' with the idea of 'criminality'.



Birmingham Post, 5 October 1967.

'Tinker's day of Triumph Marred by Explosion'

This is an image of an attempted eviction at Brown-hills. Any resistance made by Travellers to being unfairly evicted has often been used to portray them as 'violent outsiders', rather than individuals and families with social rights.

Key Debate:
how do you think archives can contribute towards understanding travelling communities?

"The gypsy is a victim of the total planning which now dominates all our lives, except that the gypsy is planned off the face of the earth. His, and our, rights to common land have been sacrificed to serve not the community, but the property developer and the land shark"

[Charles Parker, Liaison Group, Birmingham Post, 16 April 1973]

Summary of Key Themes

'Population':

some reports suggest there are an estimated 300,000 travelling people in the UK. This figure includes 50,000 Traveller children.

'WWII':

thousands of Gypsy, Roma and Travellers fought and died for Britain in the World War.

'New Travellers':

or 'New Age Travellers' are members of the settled community who adopted nomadic lifestyles in Britain since the 1960s.

'Irish Travellers':

have long origins as a nomadic group. Increased numbers of the community also came to Britain after the 1960s.

'Racist Terms':

phrases such as 'gypo' and 'pikey' are extremely offensive to Traveller communities.

'Legal Status':

'Romany Gypsies' and 'Irish Travellers' are legally recognised ethnic groups, protected from discrimination by the Race Relations Act.

'Housing':

although many Travellers are forced to live in houses, these communities continue to share cultural lifestyles linked to long traditions of travelling and ongoing struggles for social rights.

'Gypsies':

Romany Travellers or 'Gypsies' have been in the British Isles for 500 years. They are thought to have origins in northern India rather than in Egypt - from which the term 'Gypsy' was mistakenly derived.

'Health and Safety':

many Travellers are still reported to have no safe legal and secure stopping place, leaving them without access to water, refuse disposal and other essential services.



Romany Portrait by Jaroslav Balvin. [MS 2445]

'Composite view of site at Robert Road', 31 August 1954. Public Health Department - Housing. [BCC/Environmental & Health Photos/Box 16]



Travelling Communities: Voices From The Margins

Sources from Birmingham Archives and Heritage Collections

Archives:

Records of St John's, Deritend [EP 1]

Watercolours by Joseph Barber or J.V. Barber, 1807 [IIR 2: 87716]

Photographs by Paul Hill, 1960s-1970s [MS 2294]

Jaroslav Balvin, 4 colour images for the exhibition 'Romany Portrait', 2002 [MS 2445]

Papers of the Sparkbrook Association (includes materials on Travellers) [MS 1914]

Survey of a caravan site at Ward End listing tenants in caravans etc. 1958 [Acc. 1991/82]

Carr's Lane Church Town Mission Book, 1838 [CC1/61]

Photo of Travellers by Rob Moore, 1979 [MS 2478/A/10/24]

Stone Photographic Collection

Photographs of 'Gypsy Families on the Black Patch' [Warwickshire Photographic Society]

Charles Parker Archive and Travellers [MS 4000]:

i. Oral Histories, Audio Recordings ('actualities'), Music and Performance

MS 4000/6/1/33: 'The Travelling People', the eighth Radio Ballad, 1963.

MS 4000/5/1/18: Travellers and West Midlands Gypsy Liaison Group (WMGLG). Includes: field recordings around West Midlands; interviews with Thomas Acton; actuality of live performances, c1969-1970.

MS 4000/6/1/6: 'Darkie Hunt, Traveller', 1958.

MS 4000/6/1/3: 'Stallion Eternity', a tribute to the horse by Juanita Berlin, a Traveller.

MS 4000/6/1/42: 'The Crack', or 'The Irishmen', 1965.

Includes: some recordings of Irish migrant workers in the 1960s.

MS 4000/5/3: Musical Folk Revival performance material. Includes materials connecting with Travellers.

MS 4000/5/3/6: The Grey Cock Folk Club. Includes materials connecting with on Travellers.

ii. Paper/File materials

'The Travelling People', a BBC Radio Ballad [MS 4000/2/97]

'West Midlands Gypsy Liaison Group', of which Parker was founder [MS 4000/1/8/19]

'Stallion Eternity', a tribute by Traveller Juanita Berlin, 1956 [MS 4000/2/47]

Radio programme 'People Today', a conversation with Darkie Hunt a Traveller whom Parker had met in Wisbech in 1958 [MS 4000/2/63]

iii. The Charles Parker Archive Library

K. Bercovici, *The Story of the Gypsies*, 1930 [MS 4000/4/126]

F.H. Groome, *In Gypsy Tents* (1880: reprinted 1973) [MS 4000/4/669]

A. McCormick, *The Tinkler Gypsies* (1907: reprinted 1973) [MS 4000/4/1072]

K. Palamas, *The Twelve Lays of the Gypsy*, 1967 [MS 4000/4/1180]

Primary Printed Sources:

Journal of The Gypsy Lore Society [B397.06]

Report on the Health of the Borough of Birmingham, 1887 [L45.11]

Reports on the 'Black Patch Gypsies' in The Birmingham Gazette

Newspaper Cuttings From The Handsworth Herald, 1907-1923

Travellers: Birmingham Newspaper Cuttings, 1963-1969 and 1979-1999

Travelling Communities: Voices From The Margins

General Sources

Secondary Reading:

T. Rudge, *Brumroamin* (2003) Birmingham and Midland Romany Gypsy and Traveller Culture.
Ian D. Whyte, *Migration and Society in Britain, 1550-1830* (2000)
Colin G. Pooley & J. Turnbull, *Migration and Mobility in Britain since the Eighteenth Century* (1998)
D. Kenrick & S. Bakewell, *On the Verge: The Gypsies of England* (1990)
Pat Niner, *Local Authority Gypsy/ Traveller Sites in England*
Brian Belton, *Gypsy and Traveller Ethnicity*
Michael Stewart, *The Time of The Gypsies*
John Coxhead, *The Last Bastion of Racism? Gypsies, Travellers and Policing* (2007)
F.W. Hackwood, *Some Records of Smethwick* (2001)
D. Kenrick, *In the Shadow of the Swastika: The Gypsies During The Second World War* (1999)

DVD; *Travellers Remember* by Rural Media Society (2006)

Websites - Museums - Libraries - Institutions:

www.travellerstimes.org.uk - news, pictures, opinion and resources from Travellers Times Online

www.grtleeds.co.uk - Gypsy Roma Traveller Leeds

www.gypsy-traveller.org - Friends, families and Travellers

www.gypsy-traveller.org/cyberpilots/index.htm - Traveller materials for young people

www.itmtrav.com - Irish Traveller Movement

www.grthm.co.uk - Gypsy Roman Traveller History Month

www.ruralmedia.co.uk - links to Travellers Times, etc

www.digitalhandsworth.org.uk - includes images of Gypsies on the Black Patch

www.travellerslaw.org.uk - The Traveller Law Reform Project

www.travellersaidtrust.org - Travellers Aid Trust

www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/news/article952861.ece

'Gypsy hell for minister Tessa': Sun article on Travellers and Tessa Jowell. Published: 24 Mar 2008

www.guardian.co.uk/society/2008/mar/26/communities.regeneration1

'Gypsies set up camp on doorstep of Jowell's husband'. Alternative view by the Guardian online of the same story above.

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www.birmingham.gov.uk/travellers - work of the Birmingham City Council 'Travellers Team'

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