

Brief history and background to Traveller communities.

'Traveller' is an umbrella term covering many distinct communities, including Fairground or Showmen, Gypsies/Romany, Roma, Circus families, Irish Travellers, New (Age) Travellers and Bargee Travellers, those living on the waterways. Gypsies are defined as an ethnic minority group by the Race Relations Act (1976) as their home lifestyle is significantly different to that of the majority settled community. More recently, Irish Travellers have also been determined as being covered by that Act. The term 'Traveller' is generally acceptable to most of these groups, although the term 'Gypsy' is acceptable to only some communities, as they are concerned that the settled community can perceive it as having negative connotations.

Most Travellers live on private or local authority site and pay rent as other members of society. Some Travellers live in housing and some live on unauthorised site, which may or may not be 'tolerated'. However, with the advent of the Criminal Justice Act, 'toleration' is much less common, and this results in these families being more highly mobile. This situation increasingly affects young families who are unable to find a legal stopping place on site, as they are already full. Traveller families are as varied as other groups in society, some living in comfortable well equipped trailers, while others endure difficult conditions.

Gypsy/Romany of English, Scottish, Welsh origin

Evidence suggests that Gypsy people originally descend from tribes in India who migrated in the Middle Ages, arriving in Britain in the 15th Century. The term Gypsy was given to them at that time and came from the mistaken idea that they had originated from Egypt. Indigenous travelling people already existed in most of Europe and in Britain they worked at a variety of trades, along with being important bringers of news and information.

Gypsies today may identify themselves as English/Scottish/Welsh/Romany and/or Travellers. Many will maintain aspects of their Romani language, which itself has roots in Indian languages. They have a very strong sense of culture, religion and traditions and strive to follow them whenever possible.

Irish Traveller

Although the movement of Travellers from Ireland to England began several centuries ago, the first reliable report of the presence of Irish Travellers dated from 1850. They found work as skilled ironmongers and general metal workers. After the Second World War, many came over here to work on the development of English motorways and later as labourers for local councils, as well as scrap metal dealers. Their way of life, experiences and expectations are similar to those of Gypsies.

European Roma

The Roma populations across European countries are descendants of the tribes that migrated from India, and as such share a heritage with some members of travelling communities in the UK. Roma is the general term used to indicate Romany people from European countries, although there may be different terms that they ascribe themselves, for e.g. in Germany they are known as 'Sinti'. Members of these European communities have in recent years come to the United Kingdom, seeking asylum from persecution in their home countries. The situation for Roma in each country varies, although it is likely that all Roma seeking asylum will have suffered great discrimination and prejudice, including direct discriminatory legislation from local and national governments. Some will have suffered physical attack – there are alarming numbers of well-documented cases of this.

Fairground Traveller (Showmen)

Fairs have been held since the earliest of times and traditionally brought together the important elements of trade and festival. In the Middle Ages, royal charters gave the fairs legal status and this developed their economic importance. Between 1200 and 1400, over 4860 charters were granted as it was realised that these events had become of significant economic importance. Traders came long distances to sell their goods and so too did the travelling musicians and entertainers who did good business keeping the traders and their customers amused. By the early 18th century the trading aspect of these charter fairs had diminished and the fairs consisted almost entirely of amusements. With the advent of technology, these amusements have slowly evolved into the modern day travelling fairs that we know today.

The men, women and children who live and work at travelling fairs today are known as Showmen. Their lifestyle changes throughout the year, as about half their time is spent travelling with the fair, and the rest is spent at home in winter quarters. All owners of travelling fairground rides and booths must be members of the Showmen's Guild and its rules cover safety, environmental health and facilities for the families.

Circus Travellers

The first modern circus is thought to have been presented in London in 1768. Circuses were then introduced throughout Europe so that by the beginning of the 19th century there were permanent circuses as well as travelling ones. The travelling shows would have included musicians, jugglers and acrobats performing in open spaces. This developed into performances for which admission was charged, with tents being introduced around 1820. Performances then evolved to include clowns, wild animals, equestrian acts and acrobatics. Equestrian performances become included along with clowns, wild animals and more elaborate acrobatics. Today fewer circuses include acts with animals preferring to concentrate on acrobatic skills and novelty performances.

Circus families have a seasonal pattern of travelling and generally spend the winter season at their home site, having toured around the UK and possibly

Europe. Children who travel with the circus may either be performers themselves, or children of performers. Performers may come from many different countries and their first language may not be English.

New Traveller

These are the newest of the Traveller communities many having taken to the road in the last 30 years and their history and culture are still very much evolving. Their roots lie in the majority settled community although in recent years many children have been born into a travelling way of life and know no other lifestyle. Reasons for taking to the road have been varied. Initially many travelled as a rejection of the increasingly materialistic and fragmented society they found themselves in. Others took to the road as result of recession, high unemployment, lack of housing, or for ecological, environmental or political reasons.

Bargee Traveller

This community traditionally worked on the canal system throughout the UK and today is the smallest of the travelling communities. In European countries that still have a waterways system that is used as a means of industrial transportation, the Bargee population is much greater. In the UK there is a known small population of families living on sea-going coastal boats that travel between small harbours and ports on the south coast during the summer months.