Today's History

The popularity of the Channel 4 television series *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding* will do little to counter the longstanding prejudice against Britain's Gypsy Travellers, warns **Becky Taylor**.

A People on the Outside

A Gypsy family camped in the New Forest, Hampshire in the 1890s.

A wet cold December day at Dale Farm Traveller site in Essex is yet another day spent waiting for a 28-day notice to evict the long established settlement. Less high profile than President Sarkozy's recent expulsion of Roma from France, the determination of Basildon district council to evict around 300 residents from their own land at a cost of £15 million is no less an indication of Travellers' marginalised and reviled position in today's society. With no place to go after the eviction, the families will be forced on to the road and face being moved from one place to the next by the authorities, repeating a pattern which has become familiar to Gypsies across the centuries. Two months later and Channel 4's *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding* is generating waves on television. While sympathetic and giving a voice to Gypsy Travellers, it nevertheless presents an exoticised image of their lives: the horse-drawn wagons, extravagant dresses and flamboyant wedding arrangements seem to encapsulate how they remain the 'other' of British society. As the opening voiceover put it: 'For hundreds of years the Gypsy way of life was one of ancient traditions and simple tastes. Then their world collided with the 21st century. With unprecedented access to the UK's most secretive community … this series will take you to the very heart of Gypsy life.' If contemporary images of Gypsy Travellers seem to be polarised between vilification and the exotic, can the same be said for historical depictions of one of Britain's oldest minority groups?

While the details remain contested, it is now broadly agreed that Europe's Roma and Gypsy populations can trace their origins back to an Indian diaspora in the tenth century, with 'Egyptians' arriving in Britain by the early 16th century. Despite persecution,

Gypsies established themselves, finding niches in both town and countryside, sometimes being protected by landowners who found them useful as a supply of casual labour, for entertainment and sometimes simply by the inconsistent application of the law. Their treatment reflected majority society's deep ambivalence about the presence of Gypsies and a nomadic way of life. On the one hand it symbolised freedom from the responsibilities and duties associated with settled lifestyles – typified in folk songs such as 'The Raggle-taggle Gypsy'; on the other it provoked an almost visceral hatred, a suspicion that Gypsies could evade the law and the codes of behaviour that bound settled society to a place and a parish.

Rather than being polar opposites, however, we might understand these stereotypes as two sides of a coin – as the product of a tendency to view Gypsy lives through the lens of the preoccupations and assumptions of mainstream society – rather than being grounded in reality. Whether articulated positively or negatively these stereotypes stem from the assumption that Gypsies were irredeemably separate from the rest of the population.

Yet, contrary to these stereotypes, Gypsies and Travellers traded with, worked and lived alongside the rest of the population: an analysis of the traditional songs sung by Gypsies and Travellers, for example, shows significant overlap with those current in wider society, suggesting a high degree of interaction between the communities, particularly in casual agricultural and seasonal labour. Arthur Harding's classic account of the East End underworld at the beginning of the 20th century, compiled by the historian Raphael Samuel, revealed in passing how Gypsy Travellers were part of the everyday fabric of poor urban life. David Mayall's work on the 19th century, my own on the 20th and that of the Dutch scholars Lucassen, Willems and Cottars for the European context all confirm the ways in which the lives of Gypsy Travellers and settled populations were intimately interconnected and often how the lines between them were in fact blurred. Gypsies lived in peri-urban encampments or even cheap lodging in cities over winter alongside working-class populations, making and selling goods, moving in regular circuits across the countryside in the spring and summer, picking up seasonal work, hawking and attending fairs. Far from being 'a separate people', their economic survival in fact depended on close engagement with the wider population.

The stereotypes became increasingly entrenched over the course of the 19th century as Britain's population became increasingly urbanised and the countryside became the repository for the working out of anxieties related to the rapidly changing social and physical landscape. Alongside phenomena like the folk song revival, the cult of the 'outdoors' and the early caravanning movements there emerged a movement of amateur 'gentlemen scholars', self-styled 'gypsiologists', who developed an interest in recording the origins, language and customs of Britain's Gypsy Travellers. Focused around the activities of the Gypsy Lore Society (GLS), established in 1889, they became preoccupied with the foreign ancestry of British Gypsies and with developing theories about their 'pure bred' nature, which often tied blood lines to Romany language use and 'proper' nomadic living. The Gypsy caravan, which had only made its appearance in the 1830s as a result of the improving road system, became central to settled society's image of 'the Gypsy', in part through paintings, such as those of the prominent GLS member Augustus John. Fed by an outpouring of writings on the subject from the 1880s, popular imagination saw Gypsies as a people who turned up out of the blue, camped on commons or byways in their bow-topped caravan, grazed horses, sold pegs, perhaps 'tinkering', 'here today and gone tomorrow'. Just as the producers of *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding* promised 'unprecedented access', so too did numerous gypsiologists spend a summer living with a group of Gypsy Travellers gaining an insight into 'the secret people' before writing a book about their experiences. Crucially, such Gypsies were always portrayed as 'pure blooded' or 'true' Romanies, largely untouched by modern, industrialised Britain. As one gypsiologist, Arthur Symons, wrote in the early 20th century:

Stereotypes stem from the assumption that Gypsies were irredeemably separate from the rest of the population

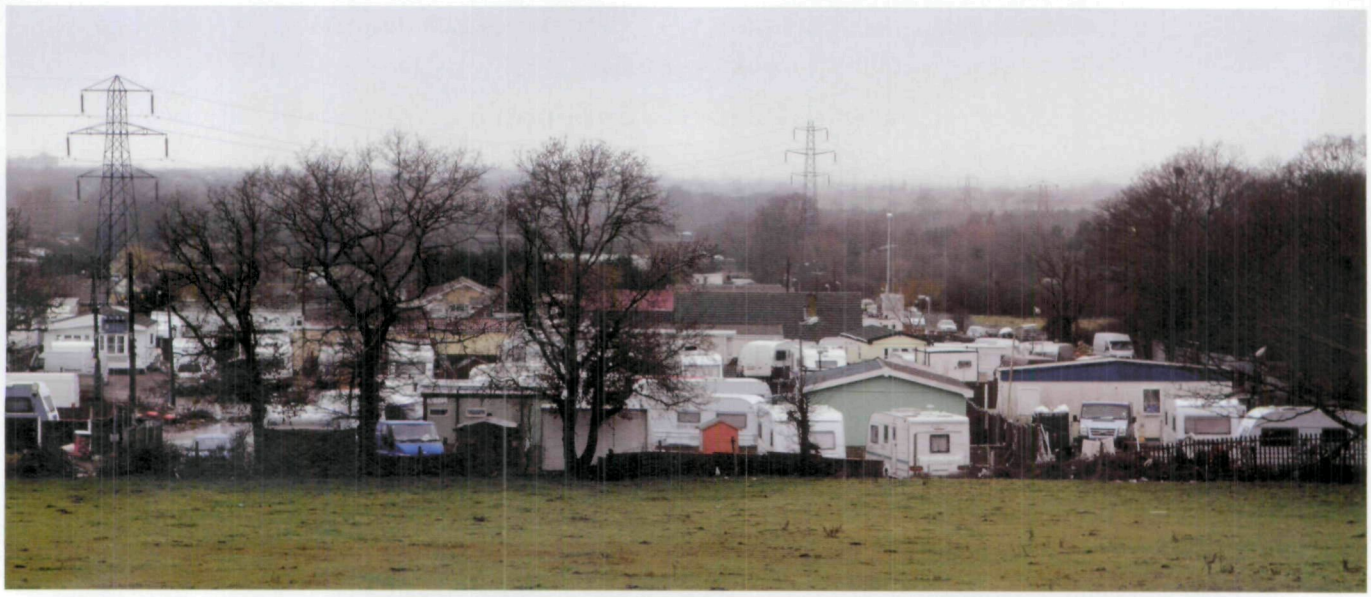
Why ... are we setting ourselves the impossible task of spoiling the Gypsies? ... they stand for the will of freedom, for friendship with nature, for the open air, for change and the sight of many lands; for all of us that are in protest against progress ... The Gypsies represent nature before civilisation ... the last romance left in the world.

Crucially, for these stereotypes to find resonance in modern Britain, gypsiologists constructed a theory around the decline in the racial purity of Gypsies as they increasingly mixed and married with 'degenerate' members of the settled population. They developed a racial hierarchy which placed 'pure-blooded' Gypsies, who were believed to speak the best Romany, at the top; followed by 'didikais', half-breeds, or 'pikies' – groups with varying proportions of Gypsy blood depending on which source one reads; and 'mumpers', who were vagrants with no Romany ancestry, at the bottom. As David Mayall observed:

To confuse the 'true' Gypsy with those of diluted blood was presented as a grave error that led to much injustice being directed towards the clean-living Romany. The latter, declining in numbers as the century progressed, were superior in manners, morals and occupations to their degenerate and impoverished 'mumply-brothers'. These half-breeds were said to have inherited all the vices of the Romany and the Gaujo [non-Gypsy] *but none of their virtues.*

For gypsiologists anxious to discover a Golden Age and a pure Gypsy culture this outlook allowed them to pursue their pet theories, with any contradictory findings dismissed as the result of cultural pollution and miscegenation. This enabled gypsiologists to distance themselves from the squalid, urban Traveller encampments that existed around all Britain's major cities and any other elements that impinged on romantic notions of a rural Gypsy idyll.

Just as the impetus to romanticise Gypsies gained ground in the later 19th century, so too did negative



Dale Farm Traveller site in Essex, January 2009.

stereotypes, as a growing body of opinion saw Travellers as being out of step with modern society. Along with longstanding beliefs about the lazy and lawless nature of Gypsies came newer concerns about their unsanitary habits, which were seen as anachronistic in a nation that increasingly set store by its housing and sanitary legislation. Added to this were commonly expressed sentiments that they were escaping from paying taxes and consequently evaded the responsibilities that came with modern living. Such views gained ground particularly in times of social difficulty. During the Second World War Gypsies were a common scapegoat for the press, which depicted them as shirkers and deserters, able to escape conscription through their nomadism and evading rationing through poaching and foraging. As the *South Wales Evening Post* put it: 'Many people wonder how Gypsies get off with food rationing. It is understood, however, that hedgehogs are not rationed.'

Lacking a political voice or a representative body Gypsy Travellers responded to this entrenchment of stereotypes not by challenging them but by working within their parameters. Thomas Acton first pointed to the practice of claiming to have 'pure Gypsy blood' as a means of asserting an individual's right to travel, while scapegoating other travelling communities: 'I'm a real Gypsy/Traveller/Romani, and we don't do that, only the (ethnic category name with pejorative overtones)'. He observed that the effect of this 'transference of blame' was to divert the hostility of the accuser away from that particular individual to an absent outsider group which both parties could agree was fundamentally incapable of maintaining a nomadic lifestyle. While in the short run this was 'an attractive strategy for the individual Traveller', it was not without its shortcomings, as it served to confirm racialised definitions of Travellers, equating a right to travel with spurious definitions of blood purity.

It was not until the 1960s and the formation of the Gypsy Council that Gypsy Travellers as a community found a collective voice, one which tried to assert that all had a right to travel and that nomadism did have a place in modern Britain. While it scored some early successes, notably in the 1968 Caravan Sites Act, its influence both within and outside the travelling community has declined over recent years and has failed to dislodge the enduring stereotypes surrounding Gypsies.

Travellers have modernised alongside the rest of society and are not a 'secret people' living in the manner of their great grandparents. Crucially this change in their lifestyle has removed what settled society understands as the markers of 'true' Gypsies: bow-topped caravans, horses and so on. These images of Gypsies have become the rod with which their back is consistently beaten: failing to conform to romantic expectations, the stereotypes most often deployed in the popular press and by politicians are the negative ones relating to anti-social behaviour and an inability to adapt to the standards of 'normal' society.

This leads us back to the people of Dale Farm and the stars of *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding*. We may wonder at the dresses and tut over wedding venues cancelling bookings when they find they are to host a Traveller wedding, but this translates into neither an understanding of the place of Gypsy Travellers in British society nor positive political action. Living in an ex-scrapyard by the side of a busy dual carriageway, the Dale Farm homes are immaculate trailers from which furniture-selling businesses are run. Vulnerable through their lack of romantic visual appeal and unable to attract political representation, Travellers are facing the active prejudice not just of Basildon Council but of councils across the country, which decide not only that Travellers may not stay on their own land, but are also determined that there is no place for a Traveller community within its district. It is surely time for us to move beyond the stereotypes which have served Gypsy Travellers, settled society and historical analysis so ill for centuries and instead have the strength to embrace the diversity and richness represented by Britain's nomadic communities. Seeing 80 families being put onto the highway will be Britain's shame as much as Sarkozy's expulsion of Roma from France.

Becky Taylor is author of *A Minority and the State: Travellers in Britain in the 20th Century* (Manchester University Press, 2008). For more articles on this subject visit **www.historytoday.com/gypsies**