



**National Ambulance
BME Forum**

Gypsy Roma & Traveller History Month

A Tale of Romany Gypsies

Working to improve the experience of
Black and Minority Ethnic Staff and
communities

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June 2020

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Background

June marks Gypsy, Roma and Traveler (GRT) History month. Britain's 300,000 Gypsies, Roma and Travellers have lived, worked and travelled throughout Britain for over 500 years.

The GRT community adds to the vibrancy of life in the UK. Whilst this is an opportunity to recognise the different contributions that they have and continue to make, it's also a chance to share the history, culture and language of GRT community, as well as other Travelling communities whilst offsetting negative stereotyping and prejudice.

GRT groups include a diverse range of communities including English Romany Gypsies, Irish, Scottish and Welsh travellers, Bargees and travelling show people. More recently they have also included new age travellers who chose to live a nomadic and travelling lifestyle.

Romany Gypsies and Irish Travellers are legally recognised as an ethnic groups and protected from discrimination by the Equality Act 2010 and the Race Relations Act (1976, amended 2000), the Human Rights Act (1998) before them.

With global events focusing on the importance of being anti-racist we wanted to take the opportunity to raise awareness of another form of prevalent racism in today's society. A report by The Traveller Movement in September 2017 described the behaviours experienced by the community as **“the last acceptable form of racism”**.



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The **Romani flag** is the international flag of the **Romani people** and was approved in 1971. The flag consists of a background of blue and green, representing the heavens and earth, respectively. The 16-spoke red *chakra* or cartwheel in the centre stands for the tradition of the Travellers and is also an homage to the flag of India.



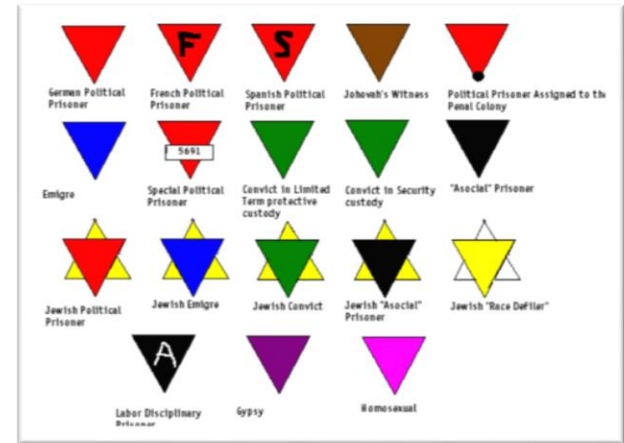
Historical persecution

The word Gypsy is believed to have originated from Egypt, and the word Egyptians was changed to Gyphtians This was later changed again to Gypsies. However, some members of the GRT community believe the term Gypsy was used as a derogatory term used by the Romans to describe the royal court of Cleopatra during the annexation of Egypt under Julius Caesar.

GRT people have historically been persecuted across Europe, with every modern EU state having had anti-Gypsy laws at some point in history. In the sixteenth century a law was passed in England that allowed the state to imprison, execute or banish anyone that was perceived to be a Gypsy.

During the Second World War, approximately one quarter (250,000) of the Roma population of Europe was exterminated by the Nazis in an act known as the 'Porrajmos'—the Gypsy Holocaust. This history is felt keenly by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people and contributes to the lack of trust the Communities have in the state and state bodies.

The Black inverted triangle was used to identify “asocials” in Nazi concentration camps. Asocials included including Roma, nonconformists, vagrants, and other groups



In the book *White Privilege*, Kalwant Bhopal describes how society often sees acceptable and unacceptable forms of whiteness and suggest that the GRT community is one of the form of whiteness that does not get the same privileges people with acceptable forms of whiteness (people who are seen to be paying taxes which they describe equates to being a law abiding citizen) get.



Widespread inequalities

Gypsies, Roma and Travellers are a small but significant group who continue to suffer from poor health and lower life expectancy than other groups.

The educational achievement levels of the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities are below other BME communities and the gap is widening.

Traditionally many Gypsies, Roma and Travellers were self-employed in trades linked to their culture but are now employed in a variety of roles and sectors, including within the ambulance sector.

Studies consistently show that the life expectancy of those from GRT communities **is more than 10 per cent lower than the general population**. A recent study suggested that on average the general population is now living up to 50 per cent longer than people from the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities. **Health starts to deteriorate** markedly for individuals from the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller community when they are **aged 50 and over**.

Contributing factors include Issues such as high infant mortality rates, high maternal mortality rates, low child immunisation levels, and a prevalence of mental health issues, substance misuse issues and diabetes.

The Children's Society report that nearly **9 out of every 10 children and young people** from a Gypsy, Roma and Traveller background have suffered racial abuse and nearly two thirds have been **bullied or physically attacked**.

Barriers to health care can include the reluctance of GPs to register Gypsies, Roma or Travellers, or to visit sites. There can be practical problems of access whilst travelling, a mismatch of expectations between the community and health staff and attitudinal barriers. A lack of cultural awareness among health professionals can also be an issue.



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A Tale of Romany Gypsies; early memories

John Lee, Paramedic East of England



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This is just a brief story of me and my family typical at the time and a bit of Romany history.

I'm John Lee, a Paramedic with the East of England Ambulance Service. I have never led the life of a Romany Gypsy or claimed as such. I was born under the Bow Bells in Hackney and I have Romany blood Posh Rat (half-blood) and come from a Romany family on my dad's side known as the East London Lees.

When I was around three years old, we moved to East London near the docks into a "two-up, two-down" terraced house. My dad was a "Docker" with his dad and my uncles.

We had an old Geezer (Ascot hot water boiler) in the kitchen that blew your eyebrows off every time it was turned on; an outside toilet and our bathroom was a tin bath hanging up outside.

My family moved into Keriko tans (brick house) shortly after the war, when the council forced them into houses

My Dad recalls when he used to play in Gran's wooden Varda, a bow top a cravan, sited on the debris. My Grandad was probably born in that Varda.



A **vardo** is a traditional horse-drawn wagon. The bow tops were lighter and less likely to turn over in the wind.

My earliest recollections of my Gypsy Family was as a young chav (in the GRT community a chav means child). I used to go fruit picking in Yalding, Kent with my Nan. We'd mainly pick strawberries to earn pocket money and generally have a good time.



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Whilst there, we slept in a tin hut, the two of us head to toe in a cabin bed and a thin straw mattress (I hate to think what was crawling in that) with communal toilets.

There was a kitchen or rather we called it a cook house where my nan and aunts would cook the food with only an open fire in their floral pinnies and head scarf knotted at the front. In reality it was just another tin hut full of fire smoke!

The men always seemed to wear a suit and trilby and be around the caravans they lived and travelled in. I could always be found around the fire and wood pile.

Many of my Uncles were renowned boxers, known at the time of the fighting Lees. My Uncle Danch's gravestone reads Tatchi Romany Rye, meaning here lies a true Gypsy gentleman.

I was too young back then to realise what I had and was part of in terms of a community. Luckily, my Uncle Rodney and his son Terence did, and they compiled the family tree and wrote about the family to help us preserve our history.



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A Gypsy meeting

“Can you rokra Romany?

Can you play the Bosh?

*Can you jal adrey the
stirlepen?*

Can you chin the cosh?”

*“Can you speak the Romany
tongue?*

Can you play the fiddle?

Can you eat the prison loaf?

Can you cut and whittle? “



A Tale of Romany Gypsies; family

John Lee, Paramedic East of England

We're not sure where we (I use we as a term of endearment and of my ancestry) originated from or when we started to travel. My Uncle Dr Donald Kenrick could speak 6 Gypsy languages, was an expert in Palmistry and language, he wrote many books about Gypsies and he spent years researching our history.

We believe we left India around 224- 241 AD. I've heard many tales of why we started to roam. The best of these is that we were commissioned to make a Golden nail for the crucifixion of Jesus, but someone "chord it" (stole it) so we had to scarper!

It appeared that whatever the reason, there was a mass leaving, and we split into three groups with one group headed for Britain. We arrived in Britain around the 1500 years before we first appeared on a census and experienced racism with comments of being black, deformed and hideous. In some counties across the UK if the locals hung a Gypsy, they would be rewarded by the landowner!



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Gypsies are known entertainers and craftsmen. My Grandad's father was Thomas William Lee and his Father Jimmy Toodly Lee were known for building Vardas.



My great, great
grandfather building a
vardo.

My aunt Urania Lee, is also widely known as Gypsy Rose Lee the fortune teller, today she would be known as a spiritualist. Born in 1851, at one point she was the only person allowed to Rokker with the Gorgios (pronounced gorga, tell fortunes to non Gypsies) . She famously read the fortunes for King Edward V. On her death as per tradition her varda was burnt.

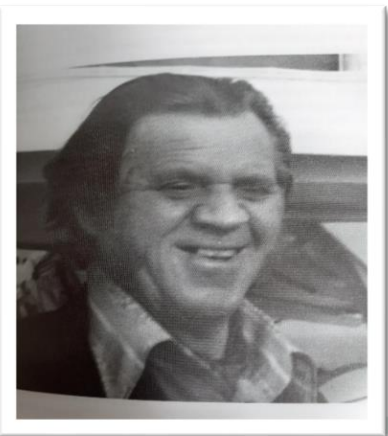
A Tale of Romany Gypsies; family

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Many members of the Gypsy and Traveller community supported the war effort. My Uncle Tom Lee, was wounded landing on D-Day. He was known as Ginger Tom because there were so many Toms.

Uncle Tom, also fought for Gypsy rights and formed the Gypsy Council. In November 1970 he pulled up outside number 10 Downing Street to see the Prime Minister Ted Heath. You could still do that at the time

He was moved to a street around the corner then they tried to get rid of him, this was reported in the Evening Standard.



Extract from The Evening Standard:

Mr Lee parked in an urban cul-de-sac. The local authority disapproved but rather than evict him they fenced Mr Lee in. They erected a large iron bar across the road, Mr Lee drove his lorry into it and crumpled it



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Our own language

Historically our language is descended from Sanskrit but the Romany word also know as that Gypsy Jib actually has about 500 words. When there isn't a word for something very often one would be made up i.e. Gypsy groups were clans, the Lee's were the Purin clan , because Lee is close to a Leek (onion) and the word for an onion is Purin .

Gypsies say that "for everything there's a word in Romany, so when they come across new things or technology they would make a word on their new discovery. An example of this is the television, which would be dinnilos dikkamuktar meaning a fools looking box; a telescope known as dur dicki mengri (far seeing thing); or a tollgate would be pandlomengri meaning shut or locked up.

Other words may be more recognisable such as **Wongar**, money, to a Romany this was an exchange of goods, or **Cushti** meaning good.

Misconceptions

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Gypsies traditionally would only engage with Gorgios (non-Gypsy folk) when they were telling fortunes, hawking or working for example, hop or fruit picking. Similarly because of their reputation with horses, as great horse doctors they would be called on by a Gorgio for assistance. However, outside of this there was very little engagement with the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller community, and they were and often still are perceived to be dirty, and untrustworthy, and often referred to by highly offensive language.

However, to the contrary most Romany's, albeit ,and not all are saints, are reasonable decent people. In the GRT community, wagons and homes are kept scrupulously clean and families are incredibly house proud. The community has a greater mistrust of outsiders as outsiders do of them, they keep themselves to themselves and deal with things in their own way and are very independent people. This mistrust is perpetuated by discrimination from non-Gypsy folk, and a lack of understanding about GRT culture and values.



My great grandfather with his wife and some of their children.

Gypsy Saying

*If folky kekjins bute,
Ma sal at Lende
For sore mush jins chomany
That tute kek jins.*

**Whatever ignorance men may show,
From non-disdainful turn
For everyone doth something know
Which you have yet to learn.**



Life as a Paramedic

John Lee, Paramedic East of England



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Through my own experiences I noted that the GRT community seem to only call for an ambulance if a child is sick and that the women would be the ones to make the call. This could be down the traditional roles that are still held in the community were a woman looks after the children.

Once on scene in general, the men would appear and check things out to ensure all was ok, but often tend not to engage in conversation. Sometimes they would gather outside the caravan or somewhere else nearby.

I've never felt intimidated or experienced rudeness. Yes, all the kids will turn up to see what's going on and bombard you with questions. Yes, the gathering of concerned onlookers may seem large and loud, but a recognition of the way in which a different cultures express their concerns is always important. Family and the sense of community is very strong for members of the GRT community.

There is a general mistrust of authority however, the ambulance service is usually welcomed as we will have been called for help.

Recently, on the way to a traveller site I noted my crew mates unease on hearing where we were going. The experience was a positive one, we were asked into the caravan, offered tea and made to feel very welcome. The young patient was fine and had mum, grandmother and brother there on scene. After a little chat I told them about my family and it turned out our two families knew each other very well. However there was still much hesitation on the side of the patient family in engaging.



Past & futures

John Lee, Paramedic East of England



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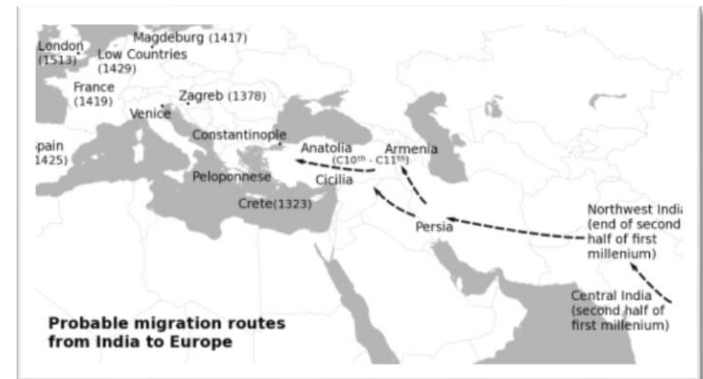
Many of the old ways of the GRT community have gone. With fewer legal campsites the roaming life is difficult, although some of my family do still wander with the fair grounds. They have largely left behind a very romantic, idealistic and nomadic way of living. My family only ever spoke of the good times.

There are many genuine Gorgio (non-Gypsy) people that fight for Gypsy rights. However, the fear of prejudice prevents many from celebrating their GRT heritage and Culture.

Whilst we speed along in our modern cars, doing journeys in hours that once took the GRT a whole day or more. I like to think their spirits still quietly roam the roads in the ways of the old.



Jalling the Drom (travelling the road)



Seldom heard or seldom engaged?



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We often hear minority groups described as “hard to reach”. However, it’s important that as health care professionals we consider what have we done to engage with communities especially those with such significant health inequalities such as the GRT community.

Gypsies, Roma and Travellers often face traumatic experiences of prejudice and discrimination. Negative experiences early in life create a lasting level of distrust of authority and low levels of engagement via traditional engagement routes.

The result of this is a perpetuation of existing health inequalities due to a lack of awareness of how to access services and healthcare services.

A 2016 report from HealthWatch Southwark on Gypsy and Traveller Community Engagement found that Traveller community wants to be informed of changes upcoming up in health services. However consideration needs to be given to how this is undertaken.



Members of SECAmb Gypsy and Traveller community team at Epsom Derby for GRT engagement event.

