

The Gypsy Impression

By Beverley Lester-Card

Having seen the 'Ragged Victorians – The Great Unwashed' in action at 'The Festival of Christmas' at the Portsmouth Historical Dockyard, my husband Ian and I both knew this was the group to join. We were given the group's guidelines and before we knew it, and with very little knowledge of the Victorian era, c1850, we started our journey!

Helped by the members of the group, we both went through various impressions, in an attempt to find our true "Character". After a while it was suggested I do a Gypsy impression, because I teach Tarot and have a genuine interest in Gypsy culture. It's always good to base an impression on something you have a genuine curiosity about, as it will motivate you and help you to connect better with the past. Ian also decided on the Gypsy impression - he is interested in martial arts and one of the things that we found out on beginning our research, was that Gypsies enjoyed fighting!

Our research was quite challenging, as gypsies were not accepted as equals in society of that time, and they didn't tend to write about themselves, so there is little written evidence about their life.

There are many theories as to where the gypsies came from.

Donald Kenrick, a scholar of Gypsy culture, makes the hypothesis that gypsies formed outside India between the seventh and tenth centuries AD.

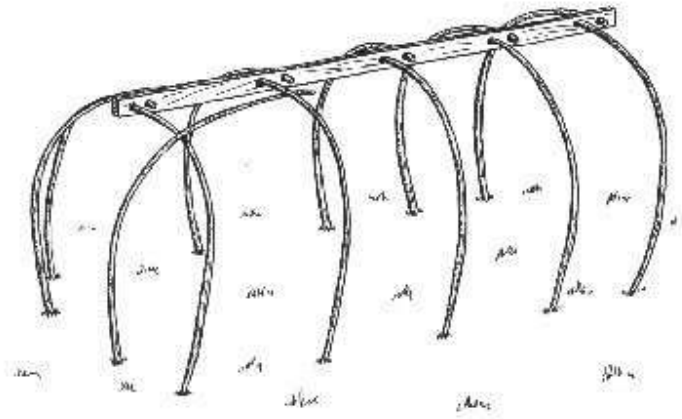
He suggests that Indian immigrants from various tribes intermarried and intermixed in Persia, with a large number of them moving to Europe. He also suggests that in the 14th century gypsies were recorded as originating from a place called "Little Egypt", this is in fact an area in Greece, and is confused with the country Egypt.

Philologists in 1780 connected Romani (gypsy language) and North Indian languages. This was in a period when Britain ruled India, thus enabling native traders to move more freely to Europe.

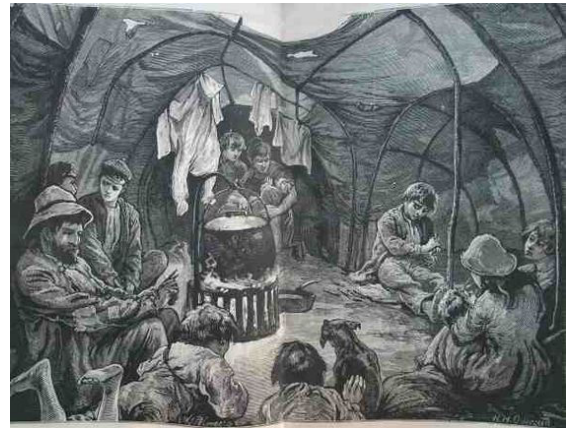
Gypsies are believed to have reached Scotland in the early 16th century, arriving in family groups, and by the 18th century were known to have settled in and around the London area, especially during the winter months, when the typical sources of income were not available.

During the 19th century communities became more established, living in tents, called bender tents. The bender tent is made from hazel rods, bent over and tied together to make a ribcage-like structure, which blankets and cloth are laid over. The bender tent was universally used by gypsies, as they are easy to move around, erect and maintain. By the mid 19th century, rudimental caravans were beginning to be adopted by those who could afford them. These caravans would eventually replace the bender tents, though not entirely.

Bender tent frame



Inside a bender tent



One area in which the Gypsy has traditionally excelled, is that of metalwork and they have been known as metalworkers from the beginning of their history. Mainly remembered as tinkers (tinsmiths), many men were in fact, experts in all forms of metalwork, including copper, silver and gold. They would also make nails, tools, and cooking equipment, plate objects with tin, and emboss and engrave jewelry.

John Leighton - 1851 'Cries of London'



The main sources of income for a gypsy, were dependant on the season. In the Spring and early summer, the women would make small, medium and large clothes pegs and would sell them door to door whilst travelling from village to village. Men would offer their metal work skills, repairing pots and pans.

Summer would bring village fetes and fairs, where many of the gypsy men would involve themselves in prize fighting and the gypsy women would read Tarot cards, tell fortunes and were also suspected of picking pockets!

As Summer progressed and crops started to ripen, gypsies took part in the harvest. Moving from farm to farm as the various fruit and vegetables needed picking. Starting with fruit, and working their way through peas, beans and other vegetables, they would eventually end the season picking apples and pears, or hop picking in Kent.

Once September was over, many would make their way into the cities, to catch-up with friends and family and wait out the winter.

'Gypsy's striking camp' by Edmund Bristow



The gypsy diet consisted of seasonal fruits and vegetables, shell- fish and whatever small mammals or birds they could catch. Flavoured with garlic, these would either be spit roasted or boiled into a thick vegetable stew.

Music featured heavily in a gypsies everyday life and many played musical instruments and sang. Sounding similar to folk music and using a simple folk song as a base, they would embellish the original melody so much so, that the original folk song would be hardly recognizable.

'Life in the back woods' by John Richie



All Gypsy tribes have customs and rituals regarding death. They believed that spirits surround us all of the time, and that these spirits must be carefully guarded against, or combated by the use of spells and/or charms. For the Gypsy, death is a senseless, unnatural occurrence that should anger those who die.

According to custom, a Gypsy must not die in his or her habitual place, home or dwelling. The deathbed would be moved to the front of the tent or caravan, usually under an improvised canopy. Until the time of burial there were no work activities, no washing or shaving and combing of hair. No food was prepared and mirrors were covered. Following the funeral most belongings of the deceased were burned.

When a Gypsy moved into a community and established contact with the local Gypsy population, he was first questioned about his family background. In fact such a newcomer upon first meeting was asked not '**sar san**' (how are you?) but '**kasko san**' (whose are you?) and '**kas zhanes**' (who do you know?). Members of the community would then send messengers around the country to verify the identity of the new person, and to ascertain that he/she was not in trouble, or being excluded (**marhime**).

Gypsy Camp by Moonlight, near Knutsford, Cheshire S Priestley



Fortune telling or **Dukkering** was one of the many traditions of Gypsy women and for many, it formed a part of their daily working life. They would practice fortune telling only for the benefit of *gadje*, (non-traveller), and as a source of livelihood, but not among themselves. The fortune teller was always a woman, called a *drabardi*.

'The Fortune Teller' & "Gipsy Girl with Tambourine " by Octavious Oakley (1840-67)



Our Gypsy impression

Our traveller clothes reflect our lifestyle and whilst wearing bright colours, they would not have been rags. The tradition with gypsies is that they never washed their clothes in a bowl but in fresh streams.

Gypsy B (Bev) and Samson (Ian)



Photography by Ron Lines

Whilst re-living history I sell pegs or heather and read people's fortunes, though in everyday life I would also have to cook, gather food and sometimes, when work was available, I would be toiling on a farm with my family.

Our gypsy camp



Photography by Ron Lines

Bender tent



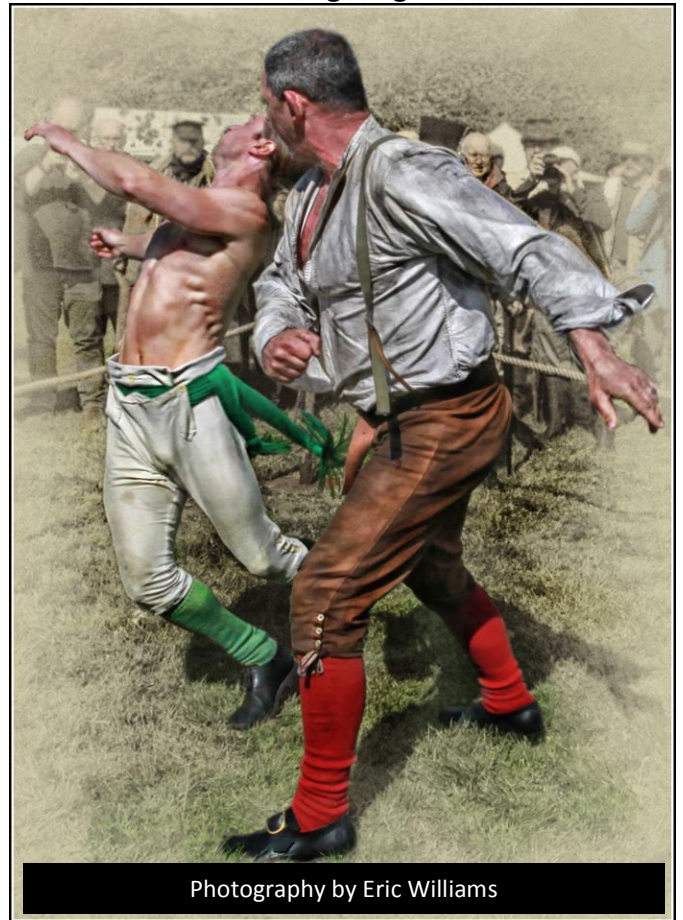
Photography by Ron Lines

Ian's impression of daily life would consist of peddling wares, tinkering and the odd prize fight! He would also try and obtain work from local farms and trade horses.

Samson



Prize fighting



Summary of some of our research.

Henry Mayhew mentions in 'London Labour and London Poor', that one of the most popular songs of Victorian time was 'I Dreamt That I Dwelt in Marble Halls' This was from an opera composed by Michael Balfe.

The story is set in Germany and tells of Arline, who is in love with Thaddeus, a Polish nobleman and political exile. Unbeknownst to her, she is the beloved daughter of the wealthy Count Arnheim. However, as a child she had been kidnapped from her home by gypsies and was raised by them, so she had only the vaguest recollection of her former life (hence, her "dream"). Accused of stealing a jewel in the city of Pressburg (Bratislava, now part of Slovakia), she is arrested, but then is recognized by her father, who is the governor of the city.

Overjoyed at finding his long-lost daughter, he gives her in marriage to Thaddeus.

It was first performed at Drury Lane Theatre in London on November 27, 1843, with Elizabeth Rainforth and William Harrison in the main roles, and ran for over 100 nights.

From The Bohemian Girl

The Gipsy Girl's Dream

Song Lyrics

I dreamt that I dwelt in marble halls,
With vassals and serfs at my side,
And of all who assembled within those walls,
That I was the hope and the pride.

I had riches too great to count, could boast
Of a high ancestral name;
But I also dreamt, which pleased me most,
That you lov'd me still the same...

*That you lov'd me, you lov'd me still the same,
That you lov'd me, you lov'd me still the same.*

I dreamt that suitors sought my hand;
That knights upon bended knee,
And with vows no maiden heart could withstand,
They pledg'd their faith to me;

And I dreamt that one of that noble host
Came forth my hand to claim.
But I also dreamt, which charmed me most,
That you lov'd me still the same...

*That you lov'd me, you lov'd me still the same,
That you lov'd me, you lov'd me still the same.*

Members of both the Boswell and Lovell families can be found living on Buggins Lane, Wednesfield on the 1861 census:

Map 10

The undermentioned names are shown within the boundaries of the

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1. Sampson, Sarah, Alfred and Ingram Boswell.
2. Celly and Speedwelly Lovell
3. Enoch, Emma, Keomi and Cashmere Lovell
4. Struddveras, Cinderella and Mochas Lovell
5. Alfred, Selina and John Boswell
6. McKenzie, Sarah, Zealand, Kenzilea Boswell
7. Rudolphus, Tranetta, Caroline, Orlando, Zuby, John and Rebecca Boswell

Boswell, Lovell, Buckland, Faa, Hearn, Heron, Gray, Lee, Smith, Wood and Young were the most notable Romany families of the period.

Census Lincolnshire

The following census is included to show a typical gypsy family:

1881 census

Gipsies Tent (Off Abbey Rd), Stoke Upon Trent, Stafford

Sampson	Lee	head	67	(widow)	basket maker	Gloucester
Kiandre	"	son	40	(married)	" "	Bewdley, Worcester
Charles	"	son	24	(unmarried)	" "	" "
Ellarada	"	daughter	23	(unmarried)		Swansea, Gloucester
Seth	"	son	20	(unmarried)		Monmouth, England
Mary	Lee	daughter In Law	33	(mar)		Welshpool
Alice	Smith	head	50	(widow)	clothes peg maker	Huntingdon (Oth 21/3)
Madona	Smith	daughter	24	(unmarried)	" "	Northampton (Oth 21/3)
Perrin	Lee	head	27		basket maker	Bewdley, Worcester
Christmas	Lee	wife	24			Shropshire, England
Melvena	"	daughter	7			Under Valley, Monmouth
Selesia	"	daughter	5			Pontypool, Monmouth
Ernest	"	son	2			Bury, Lancashire
Rudolphus	Lee	son	10 days			Hanley, Stafford
Jeannette	"	daughter	10 days			Hanley, Stafford



Timeline of British Romany Gypsy History

(Taken from: Gypsy Roma Traveller History Month <http://www.grthmlondon.org.uk/information/gypsy-timeline/>)

1514 England – First mention of a Gypsy in the country

1530 England and Wales – Expulsion of Gypsies ordered. Henry VIII forbids the transportation of Gypsies into England

1540 Scotland – Gypsies allowed to live under their own laws

1544 England – Gypsies deported to Norway

1554 England – The death penalty is imposed for any Gypsy not leaving the country within a month

1562 England – Provision of previous Acts widened to include people who live and travel like Gypsies

1573 Scotland – Gypsies either to settle down or leave country

1579 Wales – First record of Gypsies

1611 Scotland – Three Gypsies hanged (under 1554 law)

1660 – 1800 The identity of the English Gypsy Romanichal group is formed.

1714 Scotland – British planters and merchants apply to the Privy Council for Gypsies to be shipped to the Caribbean

1715 Scotland – Ten Gypsies deported to Virginia in the Americas

1816 - John Hoyland, a Quaker, writes the first serious book calling for better treatment for Gypsies in England. Several charitable projects follow; but many Gypsies are transported as criminals to Australia.

1822 United Kingdom – Turnpike Act introduced: Gypsies camping on the roadside to be fined

1835 United Kingdom – Highways Act strengthens the provisions of the 1822 Turnpike Act

1885 – 95 England – Unsuccessful attempts to introduce the Moveable Dwellings Bills in Parliament to regulate Gypsy life

1889 England – The Showmen's Guild formed to oppose the Moveable Dwellings Bills. Showmen begin to become a distinct group from other Travellers or Gypsies.

1908 England – The Children's Act makes education compulsory for travelling Gypsy children, but only for half a year.

1927 Britain – RL Turner proves that the phonetics of the Romani language had earlier been linked with the central group of Hindi languages in India

1944 England – Education Act Gypsy children need only attend half a year. Many Gypsy children have no schooling

1945 – 60 England – Gypsies begin to use motor drawn trailers, and buy land for their own stopping places

1960 England and Wales – Caravan Sites Act reduces provision of caravan sites

1966 Britain – Gypsy Council set up

1967 England – First Gypsy Council summer school, in Essex

1968 England and Wales – Caravan Sites Act. Councils to build sites

1970 England – National Gypsy Education Council established

1971 England – First World Romani Congress held near London

1972 England – Romani Guild founded

1977 England and Wales – Cripps report on Gypsies published

1985 England – Bradford's attempts to make it illegal for nomadic Gypsies to come within city limits overthrown by the Courts

1985 England – Swann Report published – first major report on 'The Educational Needs of Travellers' Children – Chapter 16

1993 Scotland – Scottish Gypsy Traveller Association set up

1994 Britain – Criminal Justice Act. Nomadism criminalised

1997 England – Romani Refugees from the Slovak Republic arrive in Dover seeking asylum and receive mainly negative reactions and scepticism from local residents and the national news media.

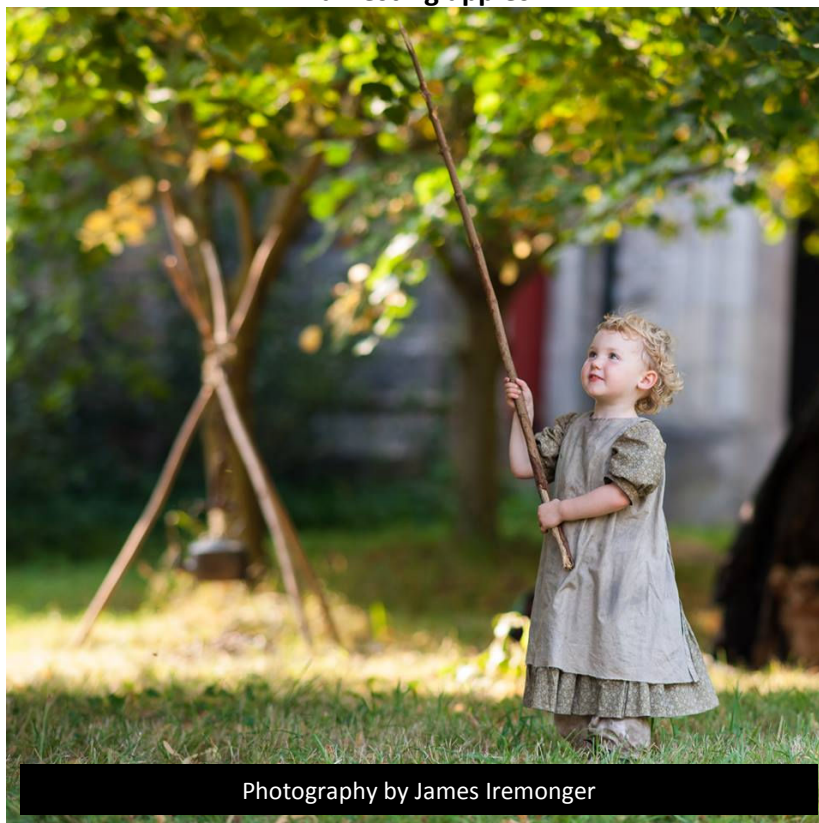
1998 Human Rights Act

2000 England – Irish Travellers recognised as an Ethnic Minority under Race Relations Act

And just like the real thing, history is repeating and our small community is starting to grow!



Harvesting apples



Research References:

Donald Kenrick 1929-2015, born a Polish Jew. Leaving school in Cambridge 1947, he gained a place at the London University School of Oriental and African studies. Being called up for compulsory military service with the British Army he went to Egypt in 1948. Donald Kenrick published his first academic paper in the Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society 1967.

Published works by Donald Kenrick:

- The Destiny of Europe's Gypsies 1973
- Sinti and Roma 1981
- Gypsies under the Swastika 1995
- On the Verge: Gypsies of England 1995
- Historical Dictionary of the Gypsies 1998
- Moving on: The Gypsies and Travellers of Britain 1998
- Gypsies in the Ottoman Empire 2001
- Gypsies: From the Ganges to the Thames 2004
- The Romani World: A Historical Dictionary of the Gypsies 2004
- The Gypsies During the Second World War 2006

John Leighton's 'London Cries & Public Edifices' was published in 1851 under his pseudonym of 'Luke Limner'. Leighton is primarily remembered for his book binding designs - "The featured picture of the Tinker, shows him swinging his fire pot to make it burn, having placed his soldering iron in it, he is preparing to find some corner to mend his saucepan".

Dukker, this word is a modification of a Wallaco-Sclavonian word meaning something spiritual or ghostly.

Gadge: This is a disparaging term for one who is NOT Romani. According to the Urban Dictionary Gadge is also a Scottish highland slang word used to insult and belittle some-one.

Michael William Balfe was an Irish composer born 1808. He is best remembered for his Opera The Bohemian Girl. 'I dreamt I dwelt in Marble Halls' was one of his compositions.

Gypsy portrait collection by Octavious Oakley (1840-67)

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