



## Private Past, Public Future

Encouraging greater access to the South East's museums, libraries and archives for Gypsies and Travellers

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# About the Author

Jake Bowers is one of Britain's few Romani journalists, and director of the Gypsy Media Company. He is a regular contributor to the Guardian, Independent BBC Radio and Television, the Big Issue, Travellers Times and the Ecologist on environmental and minority rights issues. He trained as a staff journalist with one of Britain's biggest regional publishers Johnson Publishing.

He combines a journalists respect for the truth, with a Gypsy's insight into his own community, to conduct research and cultural awareness training for central and local government, statutory agencies, voluntary groups and the media. He is in the process of starting Britain's first Romani radio station.

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# Foreword

I would like to begin by thanking everyone who has so far participated in 'Roads to Your Past' - especially members of the steering group. It has been a real pleasure.

At the beginning (which is far too many years ago), was a desire to explore the potential of museums, galleries, archives and libraries to meet the needs of Travellers. This report is based on the principles of Action Research: not simply to ask, but to develop a research framework in partnership. This report does not - and did not attempt to - record the very many projects, exhibitions and permanent collections of Gypsies' and Travellers' culture. The actions which are called for in this report will be taken forward that much more quickly, more effectively, and

with greater impact because of those earlier initiatives and existing resources.

It is very easy to fall into speaking of 'us' and 'them': 'us' being, in my case, the staff of cultural institutions, and 'them' being Travellers. The us/them divide is not a good thing for two reasons. First, it suggests antagonism and hostility, where there should be only mutual understanding and acceptance, and secondly, it suggests homogeneity. Gypsies, museums, Showmen, archives and other institutions and groups are complex, dynamic, and diverse.

But as this research revealed, there is another 'us' (perhaps without a 'them'): the 'us' who are concerned to preserve,

understand, commemorate, record, account for and celebrate our human past. What we are inheriting from Travellers is of different significance for each of us, but it is an important part of our patrimony.

While being firmly rooted in the needs and concerns of Travellers, many of the themes and concerns identified by the Travellers who took part in the research echo the concerns current in cultural institutions. These range from the ethical questions of ownership, and rights to interpret and be present, to the practical questions of preservation methodologies, and classification terminology.

**Pat Reynolds**  
Surrey Museums Development Officer  
Surrey Museums Consultative Committee



*Maurice Barr and Fiance Barr (nee Orchard), grandparents of one of the 100 Gypsies and Travellers who contributed to this research.*

## Summary

This research has demonstrated that by using Gypsies and Travellers researchers and their advocates, the community is not, as sometimes described, “hard to reach”. The overwhelmingly positive response to this research shows that there is both a phenomenal need and a desire within the community to share and preserve its history. Unfortunately, there is also a quite uniform experience of being ignored by museums, libraries and archives.

The settled population, who can make very little link between the romantic images of the past and the deprived and excluded images of the present, are also denied opportunities to learn about and interpret this recent history. At times, British Gypsy history may have been a painful and controversial story, but it is still a part of our national narrative.

The report concludes with a series of key recommendations:

- **Remember Gypsies and Travellers in everything you do**
- **Work in partnership, including financially valuing Gypsies and Travellers as equals**
- **Produce materials that accommodate the communication needs of Gypsies and Travellers**

Concrete actions recommended for the Roads to Your Past Project, and other initiatives:

- **Cultural Awareness Training**
- **Cultural Audits (audits to identify and categorize Gypsy and Traveller material already held. A cultural audit should also identify gaps in collections, and develop proactive collection policies for the future).**
- **Active / Contemporary Collecting**
- **A Travelling Exhibition**
- **Gypsy and Traveller Cultural Heritage Centre**





*Lucky heather. Photo: Courtesy of Bourne Hall Museum.*

# 1. Introduction

From Oxford's Gipsy Hill and Windsor's Tinkers Lane to Worthing's Romany Road, the historical contribution of Britain's 300,000 Gypsies and Travellers is hinted at in place names across the south-east of England. Yet despite being here for at least 500 years, the history and culture of Britain's travelling peoples has rarely been visible within public museums, libraries and archives in the region. But Roads to Your Past, an innovative new project, based at Surrey History Centre is set to change all that.

Funded by the European Union

and the South East Museum Library and Archive Council, and seeking funds for continuation from other bodies, the Traveller Project is designed to encourage greater access to the region's museums, libraries and archives for the region's large Gypsy and Traveller population. The project is the British contribution to a 3-year pan-European effort to remove barriers in accessing cultural heritage.

The first phase began in December 2004, when Romani journalist Jake Bowers was employed as the project's researcher. His work

until April 2005 began with identifying collections currently held within the region's museums, libraries and archives. He went on to consult members from all of the region's travelling communities: English Romanies, Romani refugees, Irish Travellers, New Travellers, Showmen and Circus People, about how best to preserve and celebrate the unique heritage of travelling people. His research, published in this report, will inform the future work of museums, libraries and archives in the area.

At a time when anti-Traveller hostility is on the rise, it is extremely important to recognise the long history of travelling people in the south-east of England. This project is not only designed to celebrate that history but to make it more accessible and visible in a way that is informed by the community itself. By doing so we hope to develop some innovative pilot projects that will encourage more Gypsies and Travellers to explore their history and create some understanding in the wider community about all of Britain's nomadic cultures.