**The Decline of Nomadism: Enforced Settlement and Urban Gypsy/Traveller Camps in London and its Environs**

**Dr David M Smith, Principal Lecturer in Sociology University of Greenwich, London, UK**

**Email:** [**sd50@gre.ac.uk**](mailto:sd50@gre.ac.uk)

**Tel: 0208 331 8000 extension 2471**

**Dr Margaret Greenfields, Reader in Social Policy Buckinghamshire New University, High Wycombe, UK**

**Email:** [**Margaret.Greenfields@bucks.ac.uk**](mailto:Margaret.Greenfields@bucks.ac.uk)

**Tel: 01494 522 141 extension 5770**

1. **Introduction**

In recent years in the UK the issue of illegal Gypsy camps has received considerable attention most notably with the protracted legal battle to evict the Dale Farm site in Basildon Essex, which at its height had housed over 1000 Irish Travellers (Okely & Houtman, 2011) , the largest site in the country. The eventual removal of the final 86 families in October 2011 attracted global media publicity and high profile visits from celebrity supporters and the UN among others (Barkham, 2012). More recently media focus has turned to the increasing presence of European Roma and other migrants sleeping rough in tents or in makeshift shacks in parks and sports grounds. The sight of around 50 Roma migrants living in ‘shanty’ accommodation inPark Lane Mayfair, one of London’s most exclusive streets, has received particular attention in recent months (Mendick and Duffin, 2013) reflecting fears over large scale immigration from Romania and Bulgaria and contributing to the rising popularity of the anti-EU political group the UK Independence Party (Daily Express, December 31st 2012). However, public concerns over the visibility of urban camps formed of a ‘floating population’ of Gypsies, itinerants and vagrants in and around London and other major conurbations have a long history that far predates EU membership or recent waves of migration. In this paper we set out to explore the historical and contemporary manifestations of this phenomenon from three different angles.

Firstly the authors will outline the legislative and socioeconomic pressures that resulted in unofficial camps becoming a prominent feature of urban and suburban landscapes from the mid 19th until the mid 20th century. Secondly, the paper will examine the official response to the urban encampments which themselves emerged partly as a consequence of efforts to spatially cleanse rural areas by eradicating the Gypsy and vagrant presence from the countryside (Sibley, 1995). Finally, the enduring influence of those camps in local folklore, collective representations of place and the socio-cultural fabric of local working class cultures in and around London will be discussed, with our thematic analysis based upon a series of studies conducted by the authors in various parts of London and South East England.

1. **Gypsies, vagrants and Modernity.**

Historically, Gypsies formed but one element of a much larger mobile population that on one hand long troubled the authorities due to the perceived threat to the social order they posed, whilst on the other hand, by supplying casual seasonal labour, played a vital element in Britain’s economic and industrial development.. From the beginning of the industrial revolution until the middle of the 20th Century, synchronization in demand for a seasonal workforce moving between industrial and agricultural sectors and city and rural settings required a mobile labour force, with inevitable large scale movements of the workforce between town and country as part of an annual cycle. For Britain’s ‘wandering tribes’ the warmer months were spent travelling in suburban and rural areas for seasonal work in market gardens and farms, or to attend the annual country fairs and markets which offered employment and trading opportunities. The winter months were often spent in towns, lodging in areas of cheap housing or else camping in yards or on scraps of waste land while taking advantage of the economic opportunities that urban areas provided. Thompson and Smith contemporaneously noted that many Gypsies and Travellers found an urban environment economically favourable, and moved into salvage, hawking goods and market trading ‘buying cheap, selling dear and gambling fiercely’ (Thompson and Smith, 1877, p. 2).

The visibility of Gypsies amongst this mobile (and potentially threatening in the eyes of the authorities) population, was something which had long been the subject of official notice. A series of ‘Egyptians Acts’ dealing specifically with the movement of Gypsies had initially been passed in England between 1531 and 1554, and Beier (1974, p. 15) noted that Gypsies and ‘vagrants’ – both groups who rejected permanent residence and regular employment - were often conflated both in legislation and in the collective imagination. As such they were all subjected to a range of punishments aimed at enforcing sedentarism, with penalities including whipping, imprisonment, deportation and hanging for those who refused to comply. Concerns that the ‘settled’ population would adopt an itinerant lifestyle were prominent as Behlmer (1985, p. 231) notes

‘Habitual vagrants called no one master and could afford to ignore the work-discipline of industrial capitalism. A common assumption of the governing classes was that every worker harbored latent impulses toward wandering, and thus any contact between intractable vagrants and respectable workers posed the danger that these impulses might be activated.’

Despite a plethora of legislation to incarcerate or remove vagrants back to their place of origin through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the problem – fuelled by poverty and destitution - proved intractable (Durston, 2012). Changing working patterns during this time-period including a steep decline in demand for the goods and services that Gypsies and itinerants had previously provided to rural communities, the socio-economic impacts of a series of expensive wars, and the burgeoning economic opportunities in towns and cities all fuelled the drift towards more heavily populated areas (Smith and Greenfields, 2013). At the same time, newly imposed legislation was making camping on traditional ‘aitchin tans’ (stopping places) increasingly difficult for anyone without a fixed abode. The Enclosure Acts closed off approximately 20 per cent of England’s surface area between 1760 and 1914, effectively placing control of what had traditionally been ‘common land’ into private hands (Wordie, 1983). Local authorities were simultaneously granted increasing powers to regulate use of their remaining common land and to prohibit camping, further reducing the availability of traditional halting places. In addition a determined effort by a better organized rural police force to drive all Gypsy tents off public land pushed Gypsies and itinerants towards the cities from the mid 19th century onwards. Thus from the 1830s onwards urban camps and shanty towns became a familiar feature of London’s landscape (Mayall, 1998). Their inhabitants originated not only from the Gypsy and Traveller community but increasingly comprised elements of the ‘residuum’ of London’s poor who were unwilling or unable to access conventional housing, particularly as the encroaching great railway termini swept away areas of densely packed working class dwellings in the metropolis and at a stroke enhanced overcrowding whilst increasing rental costs (Ackroyd, 2001). Thus in addition to the traditional seasonal movement between town and country, legislative and socio-economic factors combined with the inability of labour and housing markets to generate sufficient employment and accommodation for the urban poor rapidly increasing the visibility, size and permanence of urban camps throughout the 19th century.

Inevitably the camps attracted considerable press attention and demands that the authorities ‘clean up’ open spaces and deal with the Gypsy presence. The sight of ‘unclean’ and ‘verminous’ people camping and sleeping on commons, greens and parks in the capital received extensive press coverage in a manner similar to present day media coverage (see above), forcing the London County Council (LCC) to pass a by-law in 1892 prohibiting ‘gypsies, hawkers…beggars and vagabonds’ from the municipal parks (Reeder, 2006, p. 51). In 1879, *The Echo* noted that the enclosure acts and tighter regulation of land use was succeeding where the penal laws of the Middle Ages had failed and concluded regretfully that

‘Hence the gipsie is haunting the vicinity of towns, losing his characteristic habits and though not decreasing in number is to some degree getting merged among the drifting population that hang on the outskirts of civilization’ (21 February 1879)

Consequently, romantic stereotypes which associated Gypsies with picturesque rural landscapes and brightly painted caravans were replaced with discourse associating them with cultural decline, squalor and degeneration. Sibley (2005) indeed notes that the strength of negative and positive stereotypes is contingent on location as ‘Gypsies in the city are likely to appear out of place and to be represented in negative and malign terms’ (2005p102). These notions of rightful place were strengthened further through a mutual (both urban poor/Gypsy and State initiated) process of boundary maintenance, necessitating recourse to areas of slum housing and to marginal and derelict tracts of land thus reinforcing still further public association of Gypsies and Travellers with dirt and disorder. Mayall (1988, p. 35) observes that

‘The Gypsies pitched their tents and halted their vans in areas of transition, on brickfields and on waste ground, on sites of intended buildings and where buildings had been pulled down. They encamped in the midst of chaos and filth, and many of their camps were in such depressed areas that they were said to be satisfied to put up their tents ‘where a Londoner would only accommodate his pig or his dog.’

Nevertheless, spatial expulsion to the marginal wastelands was not entirely a one way process. The history of relations between Gypsies and the State starkly illustrates Hollander and Einwhoner’s (2004) observation that domination and resistance have a cyclical nature. Increasing bureaucratic control and spatial management restrict the choices of Gypsies and Travellers to forced movement or, in urban contexts, forced settlement in poor quality, squalid environments. Such spaces however, also provide locations of resistance and survival outside the surveillance and control of officials and authorities (Bancroft, 2005). For Gypsies and other marginal groups, urban camps provided spaces of autonomy and in the face of a determined effort by policy makers, officials and evangelists to ‘civilize’ and assimilate Britain’s nomads these sites of resistance allowed for the maintenance of social and spatial boundaries along with the continuation of traditional community and family structures and working practices, albeit adapted to an urban environment (Trudeau and McMorran, 2011).

In explaining why Gypsies and Travellers form an increasingly visible outsider group in modern society, Sibley (1981) focuses on symbolic forms of social control and the spatial order, arguing that the nature of the urban environment should be the starting point for analysis. He notes that the social geography of urban areas in the 19th Century and the preponderance of enclaves that were effectively beyond the control of the authorities made them well suited as urban camping grounds. Many of the ‘ancient haunts’ of the travelling community identified by Samuel (1973) in St Giles, Tothill Fields, The Mint, Deptford and Southwark were swept away during the massive redevelopment and growth of the city during the Victorian era. Nevertheless, as Mayall’s (1988) quotation above indicates, a by-product of these modernization processes was the creation of abundant derelict land and peripheral spaces within the city. Rob Shields argues that such places bear a close relationship to a moral periphery, that is, they have been located on the edge of cultural systems of space and ‘all carry the image, and stigma, of their marginality, which becomes indistinguishable from any basic empirical identity they might once have had’ (1991, p. 3). It was in such marginal spaces that many urban camping grounds were found with increasing regularity throughout the 19th century, often acting as a precursor to a more established and permanent Romany presence in those locales. Kornblum (1975) notes that in urban environments Gypsies, (unlike most other minority groups), tend to remain in low income neighbourhoods over several generations, arguing that they represent an example of a group whose historical association with scarcity has allowed them to survive, and even thrive, in relatively deprived neighbourhoods.

Acton (1974, p. 19) suggests that the increasing urban presence of Romanies – predominantly in relatively poor and low income areas – along with intermarriage, means that a significant degree of cultural exchange has occurred between their community and the urban working classes, increasing the population falling within the Gypsies cultural spread. Bhopal and Myers (2008, p.192 ) concur, arguing that ‘unravelling the flows of influence [between Gypsies and working class groups] and the respective impacts between these associations…are problems perhaps akin to the age-old conundrum of the chicken and the egg.’ Despite the intermixing and cross-fertilization that has evolved over time, the relationship between Gypsies and the urban working classes has received scant academic and popular attention in spite of the not insignificant influence the former have played in the cultural and social make up of working class London. Watts (2008) for example, highlights how the location of camps on the fringes of south London at places like St Mary Cray and the Thameside marshes in Dartford, Erith, Belvedere and Greenwich facilitated such exchanges as ‘the travellers would go into London forming cultural, commercial and personal connections with the vibrant close-knit communities of the East End…the Romany input has thus long been an essential component of the working class culture in North Kent and the East End’ (2008, p. 6). Following Sibley’s observations concerning the importance of the urban environment to social identity, in the following section of this paper we trace this relationship between Gypsies, itinerants and the urban working classes and the legacy of metropolitan and peri-urban Gypsy sites on the socio-cultural fabric of local working class cultures in various areas of London.

1. **Urban enclaves and the ‘Metropolitan Gypsyries’**

In 1864 George Borrow who was responsible for popularizing the ‘romantic’ and exotic image of Gypsies visited three of London’s main ‘Metropolitan Gypsyries’ the largest of which was found on the borders of Battersea and Wandsworth in south west London. Gypsy settlements were already established in Battersea by the mid 19th Century on fields close to the Thames, on the site of what is now Battersea Park. It appears that economic opportunities originally attracted nomadic peopleto the area: since Elizabethan times the fields were a popular and notorious place of entertainment, being the site of the infamous Red House tavern and other attractions that included seasonal fairs, donkey rides, roundabouts, fortune tellers, conjurers and horse racing reportedly and attracting the ‘riff raff’ of London (Weinreb et al, 2010. p. 48). Borrow described the inhabitants of the camp at Battersea, their mode of life and their accommodation which consisted of an assortment of tents and caravans. The caravans (now so associated with Romany Gypsies), which were a recent development in Borrow’s time were far outnumbered by bender tents and were described by the author as ‘dirty, squalid places, quite as much or perhaps more than the tents which seem to be the proper and congenial home of the Gypsies’ (2006, p. 245). In addition to the Romany inhabitants of the Wandsworth camp, Borrow describes other ‘strange, wild guests…who, without being Gypsies have much of Gypsyism in their habits and who far exceed the Gypsies in number’ (2006, p. 249). Borrow classified these groups hierarchically, setting the tone for much of the later writings on Gypsies and other nomadic groups much in the manner of the later Gypsy Lore Society (GLS) an organisation formed in 1888 and which in its early days, was much influenced by his work. Despite their similarities in lifestyle the non-Romany travellers, itinerant salesmen and vagrant Irish residents who camped with the Gypsies were described by Borrow and his followers as of ‘low Saxon’ origin, ‘detestable’, ‘brutal’ and ‘repulsive’. Cultural decline was attributed to increasing interaction with half breed ‘diddikais’, beggars and other pretenders to Gypsyhood. Indeed the notion that ‘true’ Gypsies were on the verge of extinction due to urbanization and cultural decline has informed depictions of this group ever since (Arnold, 1970; Charlemagne, 1984).

In the period when Borrow visited Battersea, south London was growing at a rapid pace, with its population quadrupling from 500,000 to nearly 2 million between 1841 and 1901 (Draper, 2004). The expansion of the southern part of the city drew in many Gypsies and rural poor from the agricultural counties of Surrey, Sussex and Kent who would have a discernible influence on the formative social and cultural make-up of working class South London. Samuel (1973) reports that by 1870 the Wandsworth Gypsies were well entrenched in the area: having been evicted from the Common by the Metropolitan Board of Works an entrepreneurial member of the Penfold family of Romanies had purchased property and land in the area and two decades later the colony was thriving living ‘3 families to a house’. By 1911 colonies of housed Gypsies were residing in Fairfield Street, Wandsworth, while Booth identified Gypsies living in Wardley Street and Lydden Grove the poorest neighbourhoods of Wandsworth where he described a yard full of caravans with the wheels removed and each inhabited by a family (Booth, 1902 cited by Sibley, 1981, p. 80). That entire part of south west London contained a number of such yards. One in Clapham Junction was reported as occupied by over a dozen caravans and had been there ‘for as long as locals could remember’ (Birmingham Post, 9th September 1919). Others still were located in the Sheepcote Lane and York Road areas of Battersea. Besant (1912, p. 165) observed that ‘in York Road among busy shops is a large music hall and behind it a winter encampment of Gipsies with their caravans parked closely together in a large yard all living in their vans as if they were on the road.’

Many Travellers also entered the city en route to annual events such as the Epsom Derby or to participate in the annual fairs and traditional horse fairs which ringed the city in peri-urban locales such as Barnet, Southall, Croydon and Mitcham. The latter, on the borders of south London and Surrey became closely associated with its Gypsy encampment on Mitcham Common where Travellers regularly stopped en route to the Epsom Derby and to attend Mitcham Fair, which was a huge event attracting tens of thousands of Londoners and a core event on the Travellers’ calendar, mirroring the Gypsy horse fair held in the North of the Capital at Barnet Common. Such fairs provided ample opportunities for trading, horse dealing and working the stalls whilst in South London Croydon and Mitcham also contained an abundance of market gardens which provided regular seasonal work. Despite the Mitcham Common Act of 1891 prohibiting camping on the common such legislation failed to dislodge the Gypsy presence and by the early 20th century Gypsies formed an established community in the area not unlike the densely embedded Gypsy and Traveller populations of Croydon and Southall. In Mitcham many Gypsies settled more or less permanently in the area’s several caravan yards or the terraced houses of what became known as ‘Redskin Village’. By the late 19th century Surrey (containing many of the South London sites referred to above) was noted as having one of the highest populations of Gypsies and vagrants in the country, with an estimated (though probably exaggerated) 10,000 in the county alone (Mayall, 1988, p. 158) with Mitcham noted as the main centre from which the Surrey Gypsies emanated. The Nuffield College Reconstruction Survey reports that by the early-mid 20th century the town contained the highest proportion of Gypsy schoolchildren in Surrey, many reputedly of ‘low mentality’ (Michison, 1941). Montague (2006) notes that by the 1930s the area around Redskin Village had become one of the most notorious in the district due to the reputation of its inhabitants; dilapidated, slum housing; piecemeal industrial development, and excessive pollution from the ‘dirty industries’ that had established themselves in the area. He records that in the immediate post World War Two era

‘Caravans were everywhere either in licensed yards, where a semblance of order was maintained, or on patches of waste ground, around them played hordes of grubby faced urchins. Odd corners and vacant sites were used by totters as scrap metal dumps or for sorting rags, activities which added to the general atmosphere of sordid dereliction. Fights, more often than not over winnings at ‘pitch and toss’ or other illegal street betting activities, were common. The police, it is said, patrolled only in pairs after dark.’ (Montague, 2006, p. 119).

Rather earlier in time, Borrow also detailed visits to two further camps, which would become associated with a more permanent metropolitan Gypsy presence : one located at ‘The Potteries’ in Notting Dale in west London and the other at the Mount in London’s East End. The Gypsy influence in the areas visited by Borrow extended well beyond the camps themselves and was already entrenched by the time of his visit. During his trip to Notting Dale (now Notting Hill) in west London Borrow classed the entire area as a Gypsy region ‘where Gypsies or gentry whose habits very much resemble those of Gypsies, may at any time be found’ (2006, p. 250). According to Hancock (2010, p. 19) the area was originally settled by Gypsies around 1800. By the mid 19th century it was reported that between 40 and 50 Gypsy families regularly camped between the Kennington Potteries and Wormwood Scrubs on ground described at the time as a ‘slough of despond in the winter all puddle, swamp and quagmire and in a moral aspect not more inviting (Missing Link Magazine, 1856, p. 125). The area was home to brick kilns and pig dealers and had one of the highest mortality rates in London. It lacked organization, was neglected by the authorities and was inhabited by a poor and transient population making it ideal for settlement by Gypsies and other itinerants (McLeod, 2004, p. 48). Despite the aspirations of its developers, redevelopment of the area failed to dislodge the Gypsies and migrant Irish, with many moving into the newly built dwellings and the stigma attached to the area remaining until the gentrification of the area in the early 1970s (White, 2007, p. 88). Booth (1902, pp. 151-152) in his study of London’s working class districts reported that in the slum area of Notting Hill ‘gypsy blood is very evident among the children in the schools and noticeable in the streets.’ During his visit to the Mount in East London – a Gypsy camp in the area of Shoreditch - Borrow noted a colony of housed Gypsies in one of the area’s streets ‘who are in the habit of receiving and lodging their brethren passing through London to and from Essex and other counties east of the metropolis’ (2006, p. 252). Camps were still present in the East End in the 1930s with many yards sandwiched between the slums of Aldgate, Limehouse and off the East India Dock Road (The Spectator, 29th March 1935) while many in the notorious Nichol Street area of Bethnal Green could claim Gypsy origins (White, 2007, p. 148). In north-east London the main Gypsy settlement was at Hackney Wick on the marsh meadows by the River Lea with other settlements at Tottenham, Finsbury Park and Stratford (Samuel, 1973, p. 130). By the 1880s the inhabitants of Hackney Marshes – like many of the Gypsies at Battersea and other parts of London - were semi-permanently settled, rarely straying far from London and making a living hawking goods in the winter and spending the summer in Epping Forest producing baskets and caning chairs orfruity and hop-picking in Kent, Surrey and Sussex (Little Folks, 1888).

These ‘Metropolitan Gypsyries’ were an important ingredient in shaping local class cultures and what Griffin (2008, p.xix) terms the ‘historical and geo-spatial contexts’ through which people identify with certain localities. Despite this, they have been neglected by social and urban historians amidst increasing recognition of the role of minority groups in the making of modern Britain (Pooley and White, 1991). The history of Gypsies and Travellers in urban locations thus largely remains a ‘hidden history’ of how these communities have resisted official state sponsored planning and control, defining and creating their own spaces of resistance in urban locations (Thompson, 1963). Even after regulations and by-laws managed to dislodge the camps many of their inhabitants tenaciously remained, settling locally in more conventional accommodation where, by residing in close proximity and maintaining communal structures and economic practices, they were able to resist assimilation and reformulate traditional lifestyles within housing and at least in part engaging with post-modern structures (Greenfields and Smith, 2010).

1. **Between nomadism and settlement: the interwar ‘van towns’**

The huge social upheavals caused by the two World Wars and the extension of state powers that War entailed, impacted on the structure of peripatetic communities as well as on the size and location of their camping grounds. Wartime legislation such as The Defence of the Realm Act (originally introduced in 1914) and later acts including the Emergency Powers (Defence) Act 1939 gave the government wide ranging powers, one of which concerned the prohibition of camping in certain areas. An unforeseen outcome of such control of space drove Gypsies and Travellers (frequently women, children and the elderly as young men were away fighting) closer to urban areas. At the same time, intense development, population growth and suburbanization which continued apace throughout the early decades of the 20th century, altered the location of urban settlements as many of the earlier inner city enclaves were erased. It was thus on the margins of the city where police supervision was lighter and there was still space to graze horses that many of the ‘van towns’ that peppered the outer ring of London and other urban conurbations in the early to mid 20th century were ultimately located. The presence of these large, sprawling, semi-permanent camps need be seen against the backdrop of serious housing shortages post-1918 and again after World War Two (Burnett, 1986). The sale of abandoned agricultural land in the interwar period resulted in a growth of ‘plotland’ developments of self build housing which, as largely working class settlements, were criticized as abhorrent eye-sores that blighted the home-counties (Sibley, 1995). Shortages of affordable housing also resulted in a proliferation of makeshift ‘shanty towns’ developed by homeless urban dwellers leading to increasing co-existence and intermarriage between these destitute and marginalized elements of the urban working class and Gypsies and Travellers, who possessed the skills to subsist in temporary and makeshift accommodation. A further surge in improvised accommodation occurred after World War Two when returning servicemen and their families – frustrated at the slow pace of new housing provision – occupied decommissioned military camps, with more than 45,000 people involved in the squatting of the empty camps (Webber, 2012). Although these occupations elicited considerable sympathy among the public and in the press they were quickly quashed by the Town and Country Planning Act of 1948 which granted local authorities the power to control ‘disorderly development’ thus leading to the exclusion of working class people from rural middle class spaces and the control of how and where homeless people could (and should) live (Shoard, 1987).

Despite official opposition to self-provision such developments formed an important stop-gap measure in meeting housing shortages, and governmental policy moved towards tacit encouragement of regulated residential caravan sites and (separate) Gypsy site provision in part because of public disquiet over the presence of large unlicensed camps which were often in close proximity to residential areas. The increased regulation of *all* public space and a desire to ‘plan’ accommodation and zoning for industrial user, led ultimately to a series of Caravan Sites Acts in the mid 20th century. These pieces of legislation sought firstly to regulate and license the growth of ad-hoc camps and after that approach failed, to formalize them by making local authorities responsible for site provision while simultaneously providing authorities with additional powers to deal with unauthorized camps. The 1960 Caravan Sites and Control of Development Act 1960 did not refer explicitly to Gypsies but was aimed at regulating the estimated 183,000 homeless and bombed out city dwellers living in caravans on unlicensed sites which were often lacking in basic amenities. The 1960 Act prohibited the setting up of unauthorized sites and granted local authorities additional powers to evict those camping on common land. The longer term objective was to bring the inhabitants of camps into the norms of the housing market and to suppress alternative modes of living by controlling the supply of caravan sites and keeping caravan dwelling to a minimum by harassing the minority who refused to enter housing once housing stock became available (Belton, 2005). The 1960 Act had two immediate outcomes which were to impact profoundly on public and media perceptions towards Gypsies and other caravan dwellers. Firstly many caravan dwellers living on sites were unable to obtain a license without planning consent and were evicted onto the roadside. Secondly, the increase in ‘roadsiders’ displaced through the rise in evictions combined with the closing off of common land, led to temporary camps being set up closer to house dwellers. This once again increased the visibility of such camps, raised awareness of the ‘Gypsy problem’ among the media and politicians and ultimately increased demands that the government deal with the imminent crisis in Gypsy accommodation (Taylor, 2008).

Whilst for many homeless city dwellers and returning servicemen and their families living on ‘squatter camps’ or on disused military camps represented a short term solution to an insufficient housing supply (Ward, 2002), many Gypsies and Travellers were unwilling to move into the new build housing estates that were springing up. Having been pushed out of the cities and increasingly excluded from the countryside through zoning and the designation of land for either residential or agricultural purposes, the low lying (and as yet undeveloped) marshlands bordering Essex, Kent and London along the Thames Estuary provided a convenient base for many of the ‘van towns’ that grew through the early-mid 20th century. Other camps such as Corkes Meadow and Ruxley Pit in St Mary Cray near Orpington, Kent, were established in areas that had long attracted Gypsies, Cockney ‘hoppers’ (O’Neill, 1990) and seasonal workers undertaking hop and fruit picking. As demand for farm work declined, minimising the opportunity for Gypsies to move onto other locations following the harvest, combined with the increasing difficulty of finding stopping places, the van towns grew in size and permanence throughout the mid 20th century, swollen as ‘road-siders’ were evicted and sought to move onto relatively tolerated sites. In 1951 it was estimated that around 250 people lived constantly on Corkes Meadow camp with numbers increasing in the winter. Despite repeated attempts to evict the residents, numbers rose to 600 by 1957 before the local council served notices to quit and offered the residents accommodation in nearby prefabricated (prefabs) housing. This action thus represented one of the first officially sponsored attempts at large scale settlement of Gypsies and other van dwellers (Evans, 2004, pp.67-69).

The largest peri-urban camp in England was on Belvedere Marshes near Erith on the borders of south-east London and Kent, located on land which had been occupied by Travellers since the late 19th century. The camp grew through the early decades of the 20th century until it accommodated approximately 2000 people living in approximately 400 caravans, sheds, old buses and huts (Stanley, 2002). Erith Borough Council instigated a long and protracted battle to evict the ‘marsh people’ though eventually it was the North Sea floods of 1953 that engulfed the camp and dislodged many inhabitants, with the remaining 700 people finally being evicted in 1956. The forced clearance of the van towns along with other large scale evictions such as the 300 Gypsies evicted from Darenth Woods, Dartford in 1962 marked an important stage in the transition to large scale and permanent settlement in the surrounding areas. Many of those displaced from the sites at Corkes Pit eventually entered housing after moving into the prefabs or moved onto authorized sites in the area and today the Borough of Bromley has the largest settled community of Gypsies and Travellers in the country. Similarly, many of those evicted from Belvedere Marshes remained in the vicinity, moving into the new post-war estates at Belvedere, Thamesmead and Erith all of which still have a significant, though largely sedentarised, Gypsy population. Others moved onto local caravan sites including that at Jenningtree Way Bexley, which accommodated those originally displaced during the 1953 floods and the huge Thistlebrook site in nearby Abbey Wood, Greenwich which is still one of the largest permanent Gypsy/Traveller sites in the country.

The aftermath of the 1960 Caravan Act and the shameful sight of mass evictions of families (similar in format to that at Dale Farm in 2011) which followed, convinced many politicians and socially minded observers that a different strategy was required. In 1965 the first national census of Gypsies and Travellers was undertaken by the Ministry of Housing, and the publicity afforded to the findings, and that of the 1967 Plowden Report on education which found that Gypsy children subject to regular eviction were experiencing severe educational hardship added weight to the argument that light- touch persuasion of local authorities to provide caravan sites issued in 1962 had failed (Clark & Greenfields, 2006). Accordingly a general consensus existed that tackling the seemingly intractable and growing problem of large, squalid camps on urban and peri-urban wastelands required a national and coordinated approach (Acton, 1974). It was in this context that the 1968 Caravan Sites Act (steered through Parliament by Lord Eric Avebury the veteran campaigner still active in Gypsy politics today) was passed, which in effect formalized the provision of caravan sites by placing a statutory obligation on local authorities to provide sites for Gypsies and Travellers residing in, or passing through, their localities. This legislation thus allowed authorities to spatially control their Gypsy populations through settlement on one hand whilst creating a mechanism to expel recalcitrant elements of the travelling population on the other, since the Act also allowed authorities to apply for ‘designation’ status once a minimum quota of site provision had been made. Local councils were thus provided with a means of executing speedier eviction of those camping in unauthorised locations by enacting harsh penalties on those who refused to comply. The London Boroughs were afforded a particular exemption allowing them to achieve designation if they provided up to 15 pitches each, effectively excluding most Gypsies from residing or resorting to the capital and increasing the pressure on them to move into houses, orbit in caravans around the edges of the city or risk stopping on unauthorized camps on waste land or in semi-industrial peri-urban areas. Despite the well meaning intentions of supporters of the 1968 Act who had intended it as a first step towards the social inclusion of Gypsies and Travellers, when it came to implementation most local authorities who complied, built sites in isolated areas ensuring minimum contact with the settled population. Many sites were located far from the surrounding community, poorly serviced and situated close to rubbish dumps, sewerage plants, next to railway lines and motorways (Clark & Greenfields, 2006; Cemlyn et. al., 2009) further reinforcing stereotypes associating Gypsies with dirt, crime and disorder. Belton (2005, p.119) observes that

‘Sites were rarely anything more than poorly serviced, often vandalized and the focus of local prejudice, discrimination and police surveillance. In effect many sites could be likened to small Bantustans sometimes surrounded with deep ditches, corrugated iron and/or barbed wire’

Sibley (1981, 1995) argues that physical separation allows for social control of ‘outsider’ groups by the majority and it can be seen that this desire for segregation paradoxically undermines the desire to integrate and assimilate non-conformists, the motivation behind policies to eradicate nomadic lifestyles and communal forms of self provision, of which the camp sites which emerged in London and its environs between the mid 19th and mid 20th centuries are a prime example. Indeed, the complexities and paradoxes of sedentarised society’s relationship with ‘comers and goers’ (Samuel, 1973) such as Gypsies and other migrants, remains even today (see further below) as unresolved and troublesome as in previous decades or centuries past.

1. **Conclusion**

The large urban and peri-urban camp sites discussed above represented a response to the legislative and socio-economic terrain occupied by Gypsies and other Travellers – as well as providing accommodation for a substantial element of the urban impoverished working classes for considerable periods of late modernity. Such ethnically and communally mixed accommodation pertained until the 1960s when the issue of Gypsy camps became entangled with wider social problems relating to the national housing shortage and a desire to ‘tidy’ away unregulated dwelling. Whilst in 1945 there were 2.1 million more potential households than available housing and the sheer scale of squatting and self-provision by returning military personnel and bombed out city dwellers led to an urgent need for people to settle wherever they could, by the time that the 1968 Caravan Act was introduced and site provision was made largely the responsibility of the state there was a general hunger for good quality housing amongst the majority of the (non-Gypsy) public and caravan or shack dwelling was regarded with disdain and out of place in the aspirational new world. As such the ‘Gypsy problem’ was seen as something outside of the realm of standard housing duties and indicative of a troublesome minority who would not accept the benefits of rising living standards in the post-war decades. However, by the early 1990s it was clear that the 1968 Act had also failed, in the main due to vociferous local opposition to site provision and a lack of political will (Clark & Greenfields, 2006) to purchase land and provide decent quality accommodation for caravan dwelling Gypsies and Travellers. By 1983 only 42 per cent of the Gypsy and Traveller population were accommodated on local authority sites (although some families had obtained permission for private self-owned sites) and the problem of unauthorized camps, which the 1968 Act aimed to eradicate through the provision of public sites, remained significant (Hawes and Perez, 1995).

In more recent decades despite a substantial emphasis on policy development relating to site provision and social inclusion of Gypsies and Travellers by the 1997-2010 Labour Administration, publicly delivered site provision has remained slow, and completely inadequate to meet the needs of a population growing at an estimated 4% per annum as a result of a high birth rate and unceasing desire to remain living in caravans (Cemlyn et al., 2009). Perusal of both policy approaches and scrutiny of the Government mandated bi-annual caravan count (Cemlyn et al, 2009) reveals a significant shift in the manner in which site provision has occurred over the past 35 years, indicative of a complete failure of the 1968 Act to deliver public sites akin to state sponsored housing. Since 1968 whilst the number of caravans on unauthorized camps (i.e. those households without permission to dwell at a particular location) has fallen from 4176 caravans (half of the total) to 2693 caravans in 2013 – representing just 14.4 per cent of all Gypsies in caravans few of these sites have been provided by public bodies. On the contrary residence on authorized (self-provided, family owned) sites has grown substantially, despite the impact of the 1994 Criminal Justice and Public Order Act, which withdrew the duty on local authorities to provide sites, made unauthorized camping a criminal rather than a civil offence and removed the right of caravan dwellers to stop anywhere except on an official site. Notwithstanding substantial legal and financial difficulties entailed in gaining planning permission for Gypsy sites - with an initial refusal rate for planning applications far higher than that of applications by the general public to build houses – recent decades have witnessed a notable shift away from local authority sites and towards private provision as families despair of ever reaching the top of lengthy waiting lists for publicly owned sites and purchase land to develop their own sites in a subtle turn on the post-war squatter camps.

By January 2013 16036 caravans or over 85 per cent of the total counted, were stationed on authorized sites either provided by local authorities or privately owned (DCLG, 2013). Of those caravan dwelling households stopping on authorized sites in 1979, 71 per cent (2988 caravans) were resident on local authority sites compared to 29% (1194 caravans) on private sites. By 2013, (despite a significant growth in the absolute number of Gypsy/ Traveller caravans in the time period (from 8354 caravans in 1979 to 18729 in 2013), of those on authorized sites just 43 per cent (6934 caravans) are now resident on local authority/socially rented sites compared to 57 per cent (9102 caravans) resident on private sites (DCLG, 2013). Thus as Belton (2005, p. 20) argues post war legislation to tackle the issue of unauthorized camps functioned as a ‘tool of far reaching discipline’ by enforcing housing market norms on those unwilling or unable to enter conventional housing. Despite the shift towards the market economy of site provision, it is noteworthy that Gypsies and Travellers have tended to develop communally (family) owned sites, finding these both more affordable for individuals on fluctuating incomes, and congenial to their preferred social organisation patterns (Greenfields and Smith 2010; Smith and Greenfields, 2013).

Despite the way in which site provision plays out in practice, these disciplinary and governance aims which underpin site planning regulation also mirror wider ideological aims and policies in relation to mainstream housing provision. Post 1968 (overwhelmingly since the era of mass privatisation under Margaret Thatcher) successive governments have stressed low-scale local authority housing provision reflecting the dominant role of privately (or not-for-profit housing association) provided housing in this period. The demise of the post war consensus and advent of neo-liberal ideology through the 1980s and 1990s marked a radical shift in government policy towards housing and a corresponding approach towards the accommodation of Gypsies and Travellers through promotion of a pro-market approach in relation to the housing market and increasing intolerance towards certain ‘alternative’ lifestyles (Gilbert, 1999; Manjikian, 2013).[[1]](#footnote-1) Indeed since the Coalition Government came to power in 2010 a plethora of legislation has been passed which has impeded the situation of caravan dwelling Gypsies and Travellers through a reduction in targeted specialist services and roll-back of powers which existed to enforce the compliance of local authorities to provide public sites or grant planning permission for family-owned, privately-developed Gypsy accommodation (Ryder et al, 2012). The combination of this relatively recent policy approach of ‘mainstreaming’ and refusing to grant ‘special status’ to Gypsies, has thus impacted not only on individual families who have seen the likelihood of obtaining permission to legally reside in a caravan become substantially more difficult to attain as central government powers have been ceded to locally elected politicians, but alarmingly, evidence exists that inter-community relations between Gypsies and Travellers are in sharp reversal as increasingly media and government driven narratives and discourse of ‘difference’, ‘otherness’ and rejection of mainstream norms are once again foregrounded as in centuries past (Quarmby, 2013; Erfani-Ghettani, 2012) .

At the time of writing (August 2013) the latest twist on Governmental approaches to control of the ‘problem’ caused by unauthorised Gypsy/Traveller sites has just become apparent, with the Government minister in charge of the department which regulates planning and considers appeals pertaining to the refusal of planning permission for Gypsy caravan sites, announcing on the 9th August 2013 that ‘unauthorised sites a "blight" on communities’[[2]](#footnote-2) issuing guidance to local authorities which outlines a stringent series of ‘enforcement’ regulations which can be used against Gypsies and Travellers stopping at unauthorised locations and suggesting that the current administration is the first to provide easier access to sites, education and financial opportunities to members of the Gypsy and Traveller populations. For members of the communities and policy practitioners reviewing the significant and rapid change in approach, not least the removal of equality and diversity in planning guidance which encouraged awareness of Gypsy and Traveller accommodation needs the answer does not appear so simple, as has been evidenced across centuries, enforcement without alternative provision of accommodation merely demonises populations with nowhere else to go whilst failing to solve the ‘Gypsy (and vagrant) problem’.

This paper has explored the lasting legacy on the working class social fabric of the continuing presence of Gypsies and Travellers within London communities. Griffin’s (2008) in his study of the enduring influence of the community in the vicinity of Notting Hill since at least 1800 drew on James Clifford’s (1992) critique of community as temporally and spatially bounded emphasising the hybrid cosmopolitan experiences that emerge through inter-cultural contact, which shapes the aesthetic aspects of certain neighbourhoods. Whilst Clifford (and Griffin in his study of the Westway Traveller site under the A40 flyover) applaud the impact of diverse ethnic communities blurring and merging whilst retaining their distinctiveness, intermarrying and influencing local life as part of a vibrant whole, for once the resilience of working class life may be in decline, if 21st Century policy enforcement finally succeeds (as politicians appear to desire) in destroying the messy lived reality of entwined Gypsy and *gorjer* lives, and in so doing remove the dangerous potential for movement, resistance and alternative modes of defending the ‘homespace’ however, and wherever it is constituted (Fox, 2006; Greenfields and Home, 2007).

**References**

Ackroyd, P (2001) *London: the biography* London: Vintage Books

Acton, T. (1974) *Gypsy Politics and Social Change,* London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Arnold, H. A. (1970) ‘On the assimilation of Gypsy population and speech in Central Europe’, *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society,* series 3, part 2, pp. 61-64.

Bancroft, A. (2005) *Roma and Gypsy-Travellers in Europe: modernity, race, space and exclusion,* Gateshead: Athenaeum Press.

Barkham, P. (2012) *Dale Farm Travellers hope UN official's visit will end their plight* The Guardian Newspaper news report 23/2/12 available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2012/feb/23/dale-farm-travellers-un-visit> accessed 6/8/13

Behlmer, G. K. (1985) ‘The Gypsy Problem in Victorian England’, *Victorian Studies,* Vol. 2, Winter, pp. 231-253.

Beier, A. L. (1974) ‘Vagrants and the Social Order in Elizabethan England’, *Past and Present,* No. 64, August, pp. 3-29.

Belton, B. (2005) *Gypsy and Traveller Ethnicity: the social generation of an ethnic phenomenon,* London, Routledge.

Burnett, J. (1986) *A Social History of Housing 1815-1985* (2nd edn), London: Metheun.

Besant, W. B. (1912) *London: South of the Thames (The survey of London),* London: The Macmillan Co.

Bhopal, K. And Myers, M. (2008) *Insiders, outsiders and others: Gypsies and Identity* Hatfield, University of Herfordshire Press

Birmingham Post (1919) ‘The Clapham Gipsies’ 9th September.

Booth, C. (1902) *Life and labour of the people in London Volume III,* Booth Manuscripts held at the London School of Economics.

Borrow, G. (2006) *Romano Lavo-Lil: Word book of the Romany; Or English Gypsy Language,* Teddington, Middlesex: The Echo Library.

Cemlyn, S., Greenfields, M., Burnett, S, Whitwell, C & Matthews, Z. (2009), *Inequalities experienced by Gypsy and Traveller Communities: A Review,* London: Equality and Human Rights Commission.

Charlemagne, J. (1984) ‘Bridging the cultural gap’, *Unesco Courier,* October, pp. 15-17.

Clark, C & Greenfields M (2006) *Here to Stay: The Gypsies and Travellers of Britain* Hatfield: UHP

Clifford, J. (1992) ‘Travelling Cultures’ in Grossberg, L. Nelson, C. and Treichler, P. A. (eds.) *Cultural Studies,* London: Routledge.

Daily Express (2012) ‘Support for UKIP rockets’ 31st December. [http://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/367882/Support-for-Ukip-rockets (accessed 28/06/13](http://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/367882/Support-for-Ukip-rockets%20(accessed%2028/06/13))

Department of Communities and Local Government (2013) *Gypsy and Traveller caravan count January 2013,* <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/gypsy-and-traveller-caravan-count-january-2013> (accessed 01/08/2013)

Draper, N. (2004) ‘Across the Bridges: representations of Victorian South London’, *The London Journal,* vol. 29, no. 1, pp. 25-43.

Durston, J. G. (2012) *Whores and Highwaymen: Crime and Justice in the Eighteenth-Century Metropolis,* Hampshire: Waterside Press Ltd.

Echo, The (1879) ‘Gypsies in the Metropolis’21st February.

Erfani-Ghettani, R (2012*) Localism, Populism and the fight against sites* (Institute of Race Relations online newsarticle) available at: <http://www.irr.org.uk/news/localism-populism-and-the-fight-against-sites/> accessed 31/7/13

Evans, S. (2004) *Stopping Places: a Gypsy history of South London and Kent,* Hertford: University of Hertfordshire Press.

Fox, L. (2006) *Conceptualising Home: Theories, Laws and Policies* Oxford: Hart Publishing

Gilbert, J. (1999) *Discographies: Dance Music, Culture and the Politics of Sound,* London: Routledge.

Gmelch, G. (1977) *The Irish tinkers: the urbanization of an itinerant people,* California: Cummins Publishing Ltd.

Greenfields, M & Home, R. (2007) *Women Travellers and the Paradox of the Settled Nomad* in ‘Feminist Perspectives on Land Law’, pp135-154 ed. Lim, H. and Bottomley, A. London: Routledge-Cavendish.

Greenfields, M. and Smith, D. (2010) ‘Housed Gypsy Travellers, social segregation and the reconstruction of communities, *Housing Studies,* vol. 25, no. 3, pp. 397-412.

Griffin, C. (2008) *Nomads under the Westway: Irish Travellers, Gypsies and other traders in west London,* Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press.

Hancock, I. (2007) ‘The ‘Gypsy’ stereotype and the sexualisation of Romani women’ in Glajar, V. (ed.) *Gypsies in literature and culture,* Basingstoke: Palgrave-Macmillan.

Hancock, I. (2010) *Danger Educated Gypsy: Selected Essays,* Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press.

Hawes, D. and Perez, B. (1995) *The Gypsy and the State: the ethnic cleansing of British Society,* Bristol: SAUS publishing.

Hollander, J. A and Einwhoner, R. L. (2004) ‘Conceptualising resistance’, *Sociological Forum,* vol. 19, no. 4, pp. 533-554.

Kornblum, W. (1975) ‘Boyash Gypsies: shantytown ethnicity’ in Rehfisch, F. (ed.) *Gypsies tinkers and other travellers,* London: Academic Press.

Little Folks (1888) ‘Little toilers of the night’, 1st November.

McLeod, J. (2004) *Postcolonial London: Rewriting the metropolis,* London: Routledge.

Manjikian, M (2013) [*Securitization of Property Squatting in Europe*](http://www.routledge.com/books/details/9780415625777/)London: Routledge

Missing Link Magazine (1856) *Bible work at home and abroad,* London: Butler and Tanner.

Mayall, D. (1988) *Gypsy-travellers in nineteenth century society,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Mendick, R & Duffin, C (2013)

‘The Truth about the Romanian Beggars of Park Lane’ *The Telegraph Newspaper 23-7-13* available at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/immigration/10206553/Truth-about-the-Romanian-beggars-of-Park-Lane.html> accessed 7/8/13

Michison, G. R. (1941) *Reports on the London Boroughs: Mitcham,* Oxford: Nuffield College Reconstruction Survey.

Montague, E. N. (2006) *Mitcham Histories 8: Phipps Bridge,* Wimbledon: Merton Historical Society.

O’Neill, G (1990) *‘Pull No More Bines’: hop picking – memories of a vanished way of life* London: the Women’s Press Ltd.

Okely, J. & Houtman, G. (2011), The Dale farm eviction: Interview with Judith Okely on Gypsies and Travellers *Anthropology Today, 27: 24-27*

Pooley, C.G. and Whyte, I. D. (eds.) (1991) *Migrants, Emigrants and Immigrants: A Social History of Migration,* London: Routledge.

Quarmby, K (2013) *No Place to Call Home* London: OneWorld Publishers

Reeder, D. A. (2006) ‘The social construction of green space in London prior to the second world war’, in Clark, P. (ed.) *The European City and Green Space: London, Stockholm, Helsinki and St Petersburg 1850-2000,* Aldershot: Ashgate.

Ryder, Cemlyn S, Greenfields, M, Richardson, J, Van Cleemput, P (2012) *A Critique of UK Coalition Government Policy on Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Communities* London: EDF available at: <http://www.edf.org.uk/blog/?p=19051> accessed 6/8/13

Samuel, R. (1973) ‘Comers and goers’ in Dyos, H. G and Wolff, M. (eds.) *The Victorian City: images and realities* Vol. 1, London: Routledge.

Shelter (2013) *Social Housing Factsheet,* [*http://england.shelter.org.uk/\_\_data/assets/pdf\_file/0016/212038/Factsheet\_Social\_Housing.pdf*](http://england.shelter.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0016/212038/Factsheet_Social_Housing.pdf)(accessed 01/08/2013)

Shields, R. (1991) *Places on the Margin: Alternative geographies of modernity,* London: Routledge.

Shoard, M. (1987) *This land is our land: the struggle for Britain’s countryside,* London: Paladin.

Sibley, D. (1981) *Outsiders in Urban Societies,* New York: St Martin’s Press.

Sibley, D. (1995) *Geographies of exclusion: society and difference in the West,* London: Routledge.

Smith, D. and Greenfields, M. (2013) *Gypsies and Travellers in Housing: the decline of nomadism,* Bristol: Policy Press.

Spectator, The (1935) ‘The Slum Gypsies’, 29th March.

Stanley, B. (2002) *Memories of the marsh: a Traveller life in Kent,* South Chailey: R&THFS.

Taylor, B. (2008) *A minority and the state: Travellers in Britain in the twentieth century,* Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Thompson, J. and Smith, A. (1877) *Street life in London,* London: Sampson Low, Searle and Rivington.

Trudeau, D. and McMorran, C. (2011) ‘The Geographies of Marginalization’, in Del Casino, V. J; Thomas, M. E; Cloke, P. and Panelli, R. (eds.) *A Companion to Social Geography,* Oxford: Wiley Blackwell.

Thompson, E P, (1963), *The Making of the English Working Class* London: Victor GollanczWard, C. (2002) *Cotters and squatters: housing’s hidden history,* Nottingham: Five Leaves Publishing.

Watts, D. (2008) *Country Boy: A Biography of Albert Lee,* London: McFarland.

Webber, H. (2012) ‘A Domestic Rebellion: The Squatter’s Movement of 1946’, *Ex Historia,* 4, pp. 125-146.

Weinreb, B; Hibbert, C; Keay, J. and Keay, J. (2010) *The London Encyclopedia: Third Edition,* London: Macmillan.

White, J. (2007) *London in the Nineteenth Century: ‘a human awful wonder of God’* London: Jonathon Cape.

Wordie, J. R. (1983) ‘The chronology of English inclosure’, *The Economic History Review,* vol. 36, no. 4, pp. 483-505.

1. Between 1980 and 2008 local authority/social housing declined from just over 30 per cent of households to under 20 per cent while owner occupation increased from 57 per cent to 70 per cent of households in the same period (Shelter, 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Statement by Eric Pickles Secretary of State for the Department of Communities and Local Government issued along with statutory guidance and a press release on local authorities powers 09/08/13 available at: <http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2013/08/09/travellers-anger-at-pickles_n_3730243.html> accessed 11/3/13 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)