

## The History and Culture of Gypsy Travellers

### Philip Godliman – 10 April 2013

Philip Godliman set a cracking pace in telling the story of gypsies and other travelling people over the last 1,000 years, and liberally illustrated his talk with



Philip Godliman

old photographs and a sprinkling of humour. Though he is a “gorjer” (non-gypsy), through his work with travelling families for the Kent Education Authority, he has a great insight into their lives and ways.

For those of us whose knowledge and understanding was largely influenced by hostile stories in the press or exaggerated fly-on-the wall programmes on TV, here was an opportunity to have the stereotypes

peeled back to reveal something of the real truth about gypsies and their traditions.

Leaving India about 1,000 years ago (for reasons as yet unknown), the Roma people moved across Western Europe and North Africa, and have been on the move ever since. They arrived in these islands about 500 years ago, but despite the passage of time they have become neither established nor fully accepted here or elsewhere. Only recently, with the trend towards settling down in houses rather than living in their caravans (trailers), have the children been able to receive a full education – but they are still brought up by the elders in the old traditions.

One senses that the gypsies are still not comfortable with a fixed home and would really prefer the open road if that were practical. Their houses are decorated inside and out in the style of a trailer with colourful fabrics, porcelain (Crown Derby by preference), cut glass and gold, and the ethos of immaculate cleanliness is rigorously maintained.

Though the men are macho and manly, this is a matriarchal society, and the oldest granny holds sway. The old members live within the family group and the children are brought up to follow traditional customs and a strict moral code. The girls are taught about managing the domestic side of life and bringing up children, and are expected to marry young and have a big family (hopefully with plenty of boys). The boys (chavvies) learn the family business (which may still include horses which are part of the culture), and are naturally protective towards the younger members of the family.

The old men are keen to ensure that the traditions, customs and culture of the Roma people are preserved and will teach these to the children – and for this reason it is likely that even though the actual travelling tradition may well pass

into history as the gypsies become assimilated into wider society, the spirit of the gypsy travellers will continue well into the future.

Mike Goolden