

THE TRAVELLING PEOPLE 50 YEARS ON

WHAT'S CHANGED IN THE FIVE DECADES SINCE GYPSIES AND TRAVELLERS SPOKE OUT - AND SANG - ABOUT THE UPS AND DOWNS OF THEIR LIVES ON THE BBC?

In 1964, a radio programme called *The Travelling People* went out on the BBC. It was one of the first ever programmes to let Gypsies and Travellers speak out about their own lives in the media.

Called a 'radio ballad', it featured songs - now well known among Travellers - like the *Move Along Song* and *Freeborn Man of the Travelling People* by folk singers Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger, and people on both sides of the argument voicing their opinions.

Before this time, actors were hired to play the people who were being talked about, but in *The Travelling People* it was the Travellers themselves who did the talking.

Gypsy and Traveller people living all over England, Wales and Scotland spoke out about their lives - including Sylvester Gordon Boswell, Minty Smith, Belle Stewart, and Cornelius Lee. Alec MacGregor played the spoons and Caroline Hughes was among the singers.

Made before the 1968 Caravan Sites Act was brought in, at a time when very few Gypsies and Travellers had a lawful place to stop, the radio ballad captured some unforgettable lines from a world that was changing fast.

"There's nothing beats the lovely heather and the moors and the birds whistling and the clear burn," says one voice. But there was also the dreaded winter, the "Terror Time".

Sylvester Gordon Boswell spoke about the story of how the Gypsies descended from the children of Abraham and his maidservant, while Minty Smith described the time she and her husband were moved on while waiting for the midwife to come to deliver their baby. "The horse was in harness and we were travelling along the road and the policeman was following behind, drumming us off, and the child was born. Born on the crossroads," she said.

"Well, it ain't a bad life in the summer, but I think about the winter, not the summer - I think about the winter. That's the 'Terror Time'."

"I was expecting one of my children, you know, one of my babies. And my husband, he's sent for the midwife and, in the time that he's gone after the midwife, the policeman come along. 'Come on', he says, 'Get a move on. Shift on,' he says. 'Don't want you on here, on my beat.'"

MINTY SMITH IN *THE TRAVELLING PEOPLE*



The programme caused a huge stir when it went out on air, in part because of the shocking way it ended. Alderman Harry Watton, who was known as 'the Little Caesar of Birmingham', said there might come a time when the government should "exterminate the impossibles". The show's producer Charles Parker asked if he really meant "exterminate", to which Watton replied, "Why not?"

50 years on and there are around 5,000 pitches for Travellers on local authority sites in England and Wales. Romany Gypsies and Irish Travellers are recognized ethnic minorities under the Race Relations Act, and Scottish Travellers won ethnic recognition in Scotland in 2008.

Yet even today there are only a few hundred transit pitches - sites where Travellers can stay temporarily while they look for work - and the current government is considering making 'gypsy' status apply to fewer people in the planning system. Many non-Travellers, and much of the press, are as hostile as ever. So, in 50 years of British history, what's really changed for the Travelling People?

Damian Le Bas

"They seem to come almost from nowhere overnight. They're a bit like the starlings here in Birmingham: they're here, and they're making a mess".

**ALDERMAN HARRY WATTON IN
*THE TRAVELLING PEOPLE***