



Irish Traveller History

Irish Travellers are a largely nomadic group from Ireland. "Irish Travellers' distinctive way of life, values, culture and traditions manifest themselves in Traveller 'nomadism, the centrality of the extended family, their own language or 'secret patois', and the entrepreneurial nature of their economy" (Power 'Room to Roam', 2004, 5). Irish Travellers were recognised as an ethnic group in the UK in 2000 following the High Court case *Kiely and others v. Allied Domecq and others* and are thus protected under race relations legislation.

Irish Travellers sometimes are referred to as 'Minceir' or 'Pavees in their own language known as Cant/Gammon, the survival of this language is a testament to the resilience of this minority group in the face of numerous pressures and threats.

Martin Collins, Irish Traveller and Assistant Director of Pavee Point, has said

"Research demonstrates that we are a people with a unique and turbulent history and underlines how resilient we have had to be to survive"

(Independent on Sunday, 27/5/2005).

Origins

It is difficult to identify the exact origins of Irish Travellers. Some claim they are the descendants of the dispossessed from the war with Cromwell in the seventeenth century or the 'Great Famine' in Ireland in the mid nineteenth century. However there are some who contest such claims and propose much earlier origins. O'Riain claims there is evidence which points to the existence of nomadic groups in Ireland as early as the fifth century AD and by the twelfth century the name Tynkler or Tynker is said to have been given to a group of nomads who had maintained a separate identity, social organisation and dialect (O'Riain, *Solidarity with Travellers*, 2000, 8).

Robbie McVeigh has stated

*Irish Travellers have their roots in a Celtic (and possibly pre Celtic) nomadic population in Ireland. They are very definitely not Roma (or Gypsies), neither are Travellers the product of 'An Gorta Mor' (the Great Hunger) of 1843 - 50. While the original Irish nomadic population may have been supplemented at various times in Irish history by dispossessed labourers and other marginalised people, there was clearly a distinct Traveller population before the famine" (McVeigh, *Third World on Our Doorstep*, 1997)*

Like many poor and excluded groups in Ireland Irish Travellers have emigrated in order to secure better material conditions. One of the first reports of Irish Travellers in Britain appeared in 1850 (Kenrick and Bakewell, *On the Verge: The Gypsies of England*, 1990, 10).

After the Second World War there was a further wave of Irish Traveller migration as men came over from Ireland to build motorways and work as labourers (Kenrick and Clark, *Moving On: The Gypsies and Travellers of Britain*, 1995, 20). Many settled in large urban areas like London, Manchester, Liverpool, Leeds and Birmingham but later they moved to other parts of the UK including both urban and rural locations. Economic migration has also produced Irish Traveller communities in other countries such as America and Germany.

In 1995 it was claimed that there were 19,000 Irish Travellers living in Britain (Kenrick and Clark, *Moving On: The Gypsies and Travellers of Britain*, 1995, 20) but as they are not included as a census category it is difficult to reach an accurate figure.

Today

Irish Travellers in Britain and Ireland remain a highly marginalised group with a poor health profile and access to services. They are also suffering as a result of the national shortage of sites as many do not have secure or authorised places to live. They are also highly discriminated against (see problems Irish Travellers' have at the following link:

<http://www.irishtraveller.org.uk/find-out-about-irish-travellers/problems>

The campaign for Travellers' rights is a key battleground for human rights and equalities in Britain and has produced some notable campaigners such as Tommy Docherty (1937 – 2003). Tommy did much to promote Travellers and seek justice and equal treatment both in site provision as well as in education. Tommy campaigned for a site in Leeds back in the sixties and insisted that schools made provision for Travellers' children as they had been refused schooling in Leeds as elsewhere in those early days. He was a founder member of the Gypsy Council and travelled the country supporting Travellers, helping them to organise and fight their cause (See [Travellers' Lives PDF](#) on this website for more information on Traveller campaigners).

The history of Irish Travellers in Britain remains a largely untold story the Irish Traveller Movement in Britain hopes in the coming years to initiate and promote research in this important area. Gypsy Roma and Traveller History Month which has been initiated by the Department for Children, Schools and Families is an important landmark which we hope will lead to greater recognition and value of Irish Traveller history and culture in Britain.