

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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The Welcome Mat

69 Ram Gorse
Harlow, Essex
England
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Mr. R. H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
366 Madison Avenue
New York 10017

Dear Mr. Nolte,

Gypsies in England are social dynamite. The most sophisticated and ostensibly tolerant people one knows are just as likely to start sputtering when the subject comes up as fans of the demonic Alf Garnett the anti-hero of BBC television who has successfully been everyman's bigot for several seasons. The British government now thinks there are about 15,000 gypsies in a population of fifty two million. A gypsy site has been proposed for Harlow. The force of local opposition might give you the impression at least half the nation's wayfarers were going to descend on the new town. A frightened community feeds on its own vivid imagination.

Traditional gypsies, those exotic fortune tellers, mysterious horse traders, woodcarvers and romantic wayfarers travelling in gaily painted horse drawn caravans have almost disappeared in England. In their stead pathetic modern nomads move from place to place in auto drawn trailers, camping illegally and in squalor by the side of the road, surrounded by ugly unromantic scrap metal and auto debris. The social implications of this new "image" are almost obscured by the obvious because what is obvious is also offensive. The litter and smoldering auto graveyards are so visible and so aggravating to the general public in a self consciously tidy country they camouflage the plight of a minority group whose way of life in a technological society is not only obsolescent but caught in a self defeating cycle of exclusion.

Surprisingly little has been known about the modern gypsies until very recently. Historians believe that the originals were descendants of wandering Indian tribes who, beginning in about the 10th century A.D. moved west towards Europe and North Africa. Their language, Romani, is closely related to the dialects of North India and has Sanskrit roots. They passed through Europe and were first mentioned in England in 1505 when they called themselves Egyptians. Their mysterious past and traditional occupations, like horse trading and fortune telling, which scholars point out were comparable to lower caste occupations in India, were suspect. Although caste and class are not interchangeable notions, repressive legislation in England, dating back to 1530 has reinforced the separation of gypsies from the rest of the population. As late as the Highways Act of 1959, gypsies were singled out as a recognizable group liable to commit the offense of camping by the side of public roads.

Just who are the gypsies in modern Britain? The High Court decided last year that the term refers to people following a way of life, not to a particular racial group. Thus the operative word in the dictionary definition "a member of a wandering race of Indian origin," has shifted from "race" to "wandering" and "a person who leads a nomadic life dwelling in tents or other shelters, or caravans, or other vehicles" is a "gypsy." Of course that isn't strictly accurate either. Over the centuries blood lines have blurred and true gypsies, wanderers who are also full blooded Romanis, are very rare. There are subgroups: "mumpers" - people with no Romany blood who follow the road by choice; "post rats" - half-mumper, half Romany; "didicois" - those of mixed blood but less than half Romany, and also the famous (or infamous) Irish tinkers. Many of them feel, and rightly it seems, that gypsy has derogatory overtones, and they prefer to be collectively known as "travellers." The government has politely acceded to their preference in most official documents.

Even before they had a group label the Ministry of Housing and Local Government recognized travellers as a problem in post war Britain. Although repressive legislation goes back centuries, it is the modern statutes, particularly those affecting open space, camp sites and scrap dealing, which have effectively outlawed the travelling way of life. The Ministry decided the only way to stop people shifting around from one unauthorized site to another was to provide decent hard standings somewhere. So, in 1962, a Circular was sent to all the County Councils suggesting that they assess their local situations and make appropriate provisions for travellers. There was negligible response. In order to break the cycle of buckpassing as well as formulate policy to halt the movement of travellers the Ministry set out to measure the simple who, what, where and why of the problem. With the cooperation of the County and borough governments, using police, public health inspectors, surveyors, social workers and other local officials, the Ministry sponsored a special one day census on 22 March 1965.

A Ministry Circular of June 1966 summarized the census findings, emphasizing the newly found hard facts. Of the 3,400 gypsy families (15,000 people) 60% moved from place to place during the year. While many travelled to find work, as many others were forced to move on because of "site difficulties." Even though the census was made in March which counts as the winter resting season, only 19% were camping on licensed sites. Only 33% of the camp sites had access to water mains; 16% had toilet facilities. The majority had no sanitary facilities whatsoever. Two of every three families had children under the age of 16 who received no regular schooling and were growing up illiterate. The Circular put the case as plainly as possible: "Only the local authorities - including County and County boroughs- are in a position to act. They have the necessary powers as well as responsibility for the planning, health, welfare, education and housing problems which arise. ... The Minister now asks all authorities to consider the need for action in their areas as a matter of urgency."

An examination of the gypsy issue in Harlow offers insights into the social character and political behavior of the new town. Responding to an order from on high with all good intentions, the local government, in my opinion, acted clumsily and kindled the wrong, if predictable, kind of reaction too soon. There has subsequently been some fire fighting and temporarily things are quiet although the issue is not resolved. The problem, as I see it, is how principled local government goes about effecting change in social attitudes towards a minority group. As a nation Britain is tasting the bitter milk of prejudice and racism in new ways right now. Gypsies in Harlow reflect one tangential aspect of the larger mood of hostility to "outsiders." I am convinced that if the Council had acted more thoughtfully this incident would never have taken on such angry proportions.

The Minister's request was reported to the Harlow Urban District Council which accepted the spirit of the task without fanfare and commissioned a study of possible sites in the town. The HUDC took the initiative and deserves full credit for that. At the time, two years ago, the County Council decided that at least nine sites were needed in Essex and it would help finance them. Only in the last two months has the County Council made a particular effort to find sites.

In August 1967 the Engineer and Surveyor's office of the HUDC submitted an annotated survey of eleven possible locations. In November 1967 the HUDC Planning Committee moved the "recommendation" of one, the planting area in Tany's Dell district, Mark Hall North. (map, ERL-12)

Before considering the events which followed the Council's action it is important to clarify its limited nature. There are three government agencies involved. The HUDC is, in this case, the most political but the weakest of the three. The Essex County Council will build and administer a gypsy site in Harlow if it is deemed suitable by all the appropriate planning authorities, and if it is available. But the land in question belongs to the Harlow Development Corporation. As an agency responsible to the Ministry of Housing and Local Government the Development Corporation must, in principle, support the selection of a gypsy site in Harlow. In fact, it has reservations about the Tany's Dell site. Although the Development Corporation has issued no public statement there is at least one other site on the short list the HUDC showed the Corporation that is equally if not better suited to the purpose strictly from the planning point of view; i.e. sheltered, close to schools and shops. The Board of the Corporation has not agreed to sell the Tany's Dell land to the Council to turn over to the County Authorities.

In passing its powerless "recommendation" the HUDC was trying to force the issue at the administrative level. The HUDC is effectively synonymous with the local Labor Party. In a Council of 37 members there is a Conservative minority of 4. The Liberals, who were once the effective minority have faded away in recent elections. The local Labor party leadership is a coalition of traditional trade unionists and young intellectuals, mostly scientists and teachers. They are high principled and hard working socialists. They fancy themselves to be politically astute. But in moving administratively because they were agreed that a gypsy site was a good idea they neglected a Golden Rule for political action. They did not take into account general

public opinion. There was no organized support for their recommendation outside the Council Chamber. Indeed, there was a critical time lag before the Council even realized the intensity of local opposition to the very idea of a gypsy site, let alone one in Tany's Dell.

Probably the Council's biggest mistake was the method of announcement. The recommendation moved smoothly through party machinery onto the Council floor and into the official minutes. The Harlow Citizen reported exactly what happened at the meeting in a three paragraph story buried deep in the classified ads. It said, in effect: the Council wants to build a gypsy site in Tany's Dell. No forewarning, no details. It was the kind of story which encourages imagination and indignation to combine, producing volatile public reaction.

Tany's Dell is not completely typical of Harlow for the very reason I find it interesting. It is one of the oldest residential areas. A few families have lived there for 18 years, many for between 12 and 15 years. The area has a look of permanence that is more than the simple absence of construction. The lavish landscaping around the terraced three bedroom houses and the low apartment blocks has taken hold and emphasizes the look of stability. There are more older children than in other parts of town. The second generation has begun to marry and settle in other parts of Harlow where the infants are the third generation.

The senior residents are almost all from run down districts of North East London and they still have vivid memories of life in areas like Hackney. They are particularly house proud and defensive about their neighborhood.

In other respects Tany's Dell is characteristic of Harlow. Most of the men are hourly paid workers in the local factories. Many of the women do part time work to bring in extra money to make ends meet. Although comfortable, life in Harlow is expensive for a working class family and encourages many new material desires that are just out of reach.

As in the rest of the new town, ballot box support for the Labor Party is overwhelming. I think, however, it reflects tradition and Pavlovian response rather than systematic consideration of the issues or the position of the local party. The MP, who lives in Old Harlow and whose positions do reflect those of the local party, is far to the left of the Government. It is highly unlikely that his constituency, if given the opportunity, would have instructed him to abstain on the Government cuts (for which he was suspended from the Parliamentary Party) or, to vote against the recent Immigration Bill.

The majority of Tany's Dell residents are what one observer calls "four wall" people. Their lives are entirely filled by house, garden and family cares. They are not part of the crowd of "same faces", the more-or-less middle class contingent that goes to every concert, lecture and meeting. They are good solid citizens who just want to be left alone in their nice neighborhood.

The thought of gypsies in their midst set off a classic Us versus Them reaction. The "threat" was portrayed in gloriously horrible, generally inaccurate detail all around the town but especially in Tany's Dell. Now, it happens that the second result of the Ministry census is an unusually readable government report called Gypsies and Other Travellers. Although it was released last year, in plenty of time for some of the information it contained to be passed along to the citizens of Harlow, no one knew about it.

In addition to useful statistics the government report rebuts many of the bogey man myths about gypsies that are so widespread. Most of them are familiar. You know, children should "never play with gypsies in the wood," "The gypsy rover came over the hill...and he stole the heart of the lady," and so on. So many rhymes, so many songs. It turns out that travellers generally move in family groups of two or three caravans. Within the tight family units mother-daughter ties are particularly strong; commonly a man travels with his wife's people. Travellers respect and care for their elderly and adore their many children. They are not kidnappers. They commit petty thievery, but so does the house dwelling population, at approximately the same rate, although gypsies get proportionally more blame. Socially removed from the house dwelling population, travellers intermarry; they marry young and seemingly for life. There is minute evidence of divorce or desertion. The young generation of travellers make a point of marrying legally, usually in Register Offices. There is not much dalliance among the townswomen. The Gypsy Queen seems to be a myth; real decisions about travel and purchases are left to the male head of the family. Given the fact that the majority camp without sanitary facilities, their abandoned sites are often filthy and fetid but they are not a major risk to public health, just public sensibility. If travellers were to contact and then carry communicable disease then that popular complaint would be more serious.

"Before the war it was a gentleman's life, you could pick your jobs, there was no trouble finding sites and no traffic difficulties," according to one traveller. But, to put Bob Dylan's words into the past tense, the times, they have already changed. Twenty years ago few travellers expressed regret that they could neither read nor write. Today almost all of them wish their children could. Only 1% of the modern travellers earn their living through the traditional gypsy crafts - wood working, knife sharpening, basket weaving. Some, around 15%, are migrant agricultural workers moving with the crops. The majority are dealers. While the term includes the horse trading of yore, it really means dealing in scrap metal, and although scrap dealing is useful in society, it is hardly a "gentleman's life." It is further complicated by a recent law which requires local licensing of scrap dealers. Thus far the law has proved unenforceable, but combined with the illegal camp sites, it keeps the travellers moving.

The famous Plowden Report on education said that gypsy children are "probably the most severely deprived in the whole country." Even if they have a chance to go to school, gypsy children are at a great cultural disadvantage compared with house dwelling children of literate parents. Evidence shows, however, that once the shy children get used to the idea of school, they learn quickly.

In the absense of this kind of information, door knocking and coffee klatches in Tany's Dell quickly produced the following petition which was submitted to the HUDC with a request for a public meeting. It is clumsily phrased. Ordinary citizens don't write or think in legalese. Like many petitions and some laws, notably the British Government's Immigration Bill against the Kenya Asians, it is written around the real (social) objections. Nevertheless its meaning, especially the implications of point D., is clear.

The enclosed petition is against the proposed Gypsy Site in the planting area of Tany's Dell, Mark Hall North - the reasons are as follows:

- A. It is a fully developed residential area and would result in overcrowding.
- B. As rate payers of these planted areas we disagree that any of these trees should be uprooted to make an area for a foundation base for a suitable Gypsy Site whilst we still have to maintain the surrounding planted area in our rates.
- C. It is an area greatly used by the General Public to and from Temple Fields Industrial Estate, this being realized by the laying of a public footpath alongside the proposed area.
- D. The proposed site is adjacent to the rear entrances of Tany's Dell houses.

The citizens of Tany's Dell were on the offensive although they did not know the details of the Council's proposal. In addition to the petition with one hundred fifty signatures there were letters to the local papers and endless private meetings and conversations. The task of explaining what the fuss was all about fell, initially, to a local minister who lives at the edge of Tany's Dell and who, in the first volley of letters laid himself open to ferocious attack by saying he would welcome gypsy parishioners. In a second letter to the weekly Citizen, the minister, (not a member of the Council) insisted a gypsy site would not condemn Tany's Dell to slumdom. The site, he said would have hard standings, water supplies, sanitary facilities and drainage. Rent would be charged and a resident warden would supervise the twelve (yes, just 12) families.

Reverend Stuchbery's words had a calming effect. The mood of anger shifted to grudging fatalism which in the English working class is almost always expressed interrogatively. "That's the way it's going to be, isn't it?" Subsequently the headmaster of a primary school chaired a meeting of Tany's Dell parents at which a Council representative argued the case for the site in detail. (There has been no Council sponsored meeting and won't be until after the Corporation makes a move.) Although no resolution was passed, it was the sense of the meeting at its conclusion, that Tany's Dell had better make the best of it. But. Isn't there always a but? Answering a final question the Council representative said that if, within a year of arrival, a

gypsy family requested housing it could go on the Council's housing list. This policy point is, in fact, unclear; nevertheless it is a lingering gnawing irritant to Tany's Dell. As I mentioned, many of the Tany's Dell families have grown children. The only way they can get Harlow housing is to work here. (It is the principle of a self-contained new town; in order to get a house you must have a job. Once you are settled you can keep the house even if you change jobs and work outside.) Thus far it has not been a particular problem for sons. But for daughters, and as in Wilmott and Young's East London the mother-daughter ties are very strong, it is another story. If a daughter marries someone who works, for example, in London, even if he is willing to commute, he cannot apply for regular Harlow housing.

In the early years new town families were, and were encouraged to be, extremely self-conscious about their privileged status. They had in addition to jobs, nice new houses, amenities, new schools for their children, clean air and gardens. New arrivals were welcomed because they too, were making the break with squalor and slums. But as time goes on and a new town becomes a real town the element of luck is gradually forgotten; community pride becomes less expansive and generous. Finally it becomes defensive. Luck changes to prerogative and then it is asserted as a right. Why, they ask in Tany's Dell, should THEY be allowed in here, especially when our children are not automatically eligible? The gypsy question has just been one manifestation of this attitude, but it should have been treated by the local leadership through a sustained program of public education.

In the past month two articles have appeared defending the gypsy site. One, in the Harlow Citizen, was written by a member of the Council. Touchingly, Mrs. Morris ended her case for the proposal with the thought "Surely this is not too much to ask for them, especially in Human Rights Year of 1968?" The second appeared in the quarterly Council freebe, the Harlow News. It was written in the style of the British popular press and illustrated with two of the portrait photos from the government report. A woman in Tany's Dell asked me if I'd seen it. I had. "Well," she said "y'know the chap who wrote it lives next door to my daughter and son-in-law in an apartment building on the other side of town. It's fine for him, he's a real gypsy-lover that one, they aren't going to live behind his garden." The same woman reminded me of the Rogers and Hammerstein song "You've got to be Taught." Her neighbor's 10 year old came home and reported, or so she said approvingly, "Johnny's mum says when the gypsies come we can't play with them."

This has been Harlow's first real brush with prejudice. As a London overspill town it is pretty nearly lily white. Between 50 and 60 Hungarian families were offered housing in 1956. There are about the same number of Chinese in a population of 76,000. One of the Chinese wrote a chiding letter to the paper remarking that not all the Harlow Chinese work in the two restaurants. There is at least one Kenya Asian family in the town, and a small number of West Indian nurses live and work at the hospital.

Right now things are quiet. The HUDC played its card and would prefer the next administrative round to be behind closed doors in the

Corporation and County Council offices. Local elections are coming up in May and there is a real possibility of a back lash vote on the gypsies although neither of the opposition parties have picked it up as an issue yet. The local Conservatives are cloth cap Tories, their leadership is outside the town. The Liberals won't touch it because it isn't their style.

But while this has been Harlow new town's first experience with hostile public opinion and prejudice it happened here before. When Rev. Stuchbery explained the HUDC proposal he reminded the town "I do not believe that people are filthy, slummish or vandalous just because they are gypsies. The same fears were voiced 18 years ago, incidentally, when it was Londoners who were charged in this way!"

Sincerely,

Eden Ross Ripson

Received in New York March 25, 1968.