

# RESEARCHING TRAVELLER HISTORY & HERITAGE

**IT'S OFTEN ASSUMED THAT GYPSIES AND TRAVELLERS DON'T HAVE WRITTEN RECORDS, THAT ANY HISTORY THEY HAVE IS ONLY PASSED ON THROUGH WORD OF MOUTH.**

But this isn't correct. It's true that the oral tradition - the passing on of stories, language and songs down the generations - is very important to Travellers. But there is also a wealth of physical documents relating to their history, if you know where to look. These aren't limited to books and articles: there are large numbers of CDs, digital recordings and other material. While there is far too much to reference here, even cursorily, we hope the following might give you a taste of just how much is out there.

There are so many reasons for looking into Gypsy and Traveller history and heritage. You may want to do this because you are a Traveller, or have Traveller ancestry; you might be doing a project at school or college; or perhaps you are simply interested to find out more about this undervalued aspect of the heritage of the British Isles, which is ultimately part of all our shared history.

Whoever we are, we can bet that at some point, whether recently or far in the past, there is a nomad - or even lots of them - in the family tree. Whatever your motivation, we wish you luck and hope these beginners tips help get you started on your own search for the Travelling People.



## CENSUS RECORDS

**GYPSIES AND TRAVELLERS AREN'T ALWAYS REFERRED TO AS SUCH IN CENSUSES AND OFFICIAL DOCUMENTS.**

They might be listed as 'travelling tinkers', persons of 'no fixed abode' or as 'tent-dwellers' or 'living under canvas', which referred to the tents or canvas-covered wagons in which many of them lived.

Certain jobs have a close historical association with Gypsies and Travellers. Some of the more stereotypical occupations, such as fortune telling and peg-making, were often not as common as you might think; other traditional trades had a link with Travellers that was just as close or even closer. These include farm-worker, horse-trader, agricultural labourer, general dealer, scrap dealer, tinsmith, charcoal burner, pedlar, besom-maker, chair-bottomer, basket-weaver, carpet seller, blacksmith or metalworker, and drover. Many Travellers were also soldiers, boxers, fairground workers and managers, and road builders or 'navvies', and, of course, many struck out into new jobs and fresh pastures that weren't traditional to their families.

The Romany and Traveller Family History Society ([rtfhs.org.uk](http://rtfhs.org.uk)) has enormous expertise in tracing Gypsy and Traveller family lineages and generally helping members who are researching this area. Alongside companies that generally specialise in genealogical research, they can be a powerful ally to anyone who wants to look into the past.

## ORAL HISTORY

**THE CHARLES PARKER ARCHIVE AT BIRMINGHAM LIBRARY ([LIBRARYOFBIRMINGHAM.COM/CHARLESPARKER](http://libraryofbirmingham.com/charlesparker)) CONTAINS ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT ARCHIVES OF GYPSIES AND TRAVELLERS TALKING, SINGING AND DESCRIBING THEIR EXPERIENCES.**

The recordings were made by Charles Parker, Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger during the making of the classic 'radio ballad' *The Travelling People* in 1963-64. They travelled all over Britain to capture these voices when many people thought this was a waste of time and didn't value the opinions of Travellers. There are dozens of hours of material and it is well worth a visit - you can arrange this by emailing [archives.appointments@birmingham.gov.uk](mailto:archives.appointments@birmingham.gov.uk). If you're not able to make it to Birmingham, a CD of the ballad itself is available to buy or download online.

Between 2008 and 2010, the Romany Theatre Company carried out a number of recordings of Travellers from eastern and southern England. These are available to listen to online, free of charge, at [www.atchingtan.com/interviews](http://www.atchingtan.com/interviews).

The British Library also has a number of recordings of Gypsies and Travellers digitally available in their archives.



## MUSIC AND SONGS

**PARKER, MACCOLL AND SEEGER COLLECTED A HUGE NUMBER OF TRADITIONAL TRAVELLER SONGS, MANY OF WHICH ARE IMPORTANT BRITISH AND IRISH BALLADS IN THEIR OWN RIGHT, AND SOME OF WHICH ONLY SURVIVED BECAUSE TRAVELLERS HUNG ONTO THEM LIKE 'PRECIOUS JEWELS'.**

A large selection of CDs made of these and other recordings of Traveller songs is available to buy at [www.MTRecords.co.uk](http://www.MTRecords.co.uk). The recordings are grouped together into 'albums' by some of the famed Gypsy and Traveller traditional singers of the past, including the Brazil family, Caroline Hughes and the Willett family.

Thomas McCarthy's albums *Herself and Myself* and *Round Top Wagon* are available to buy from his website, [thomasmccarthyfolk.com](http://thomasmccarthyfolk.com).

Albums by the famous west country Gypsy singers, including the Orchard family, the Legg family and the Renals family, have been produced by Veteran Records and are available from [veteran.co.uk](http://veteran.co.uk).

## BOOKS

**PEOPLE OFTEN THINK THERE AREN'T MANY BOOKS ABOUT GYPSIES AND TRAVELLERS, BUT A QUICK INTERNET SEARCH PROVES THAT THE OPPOSITE IS TRUE.**

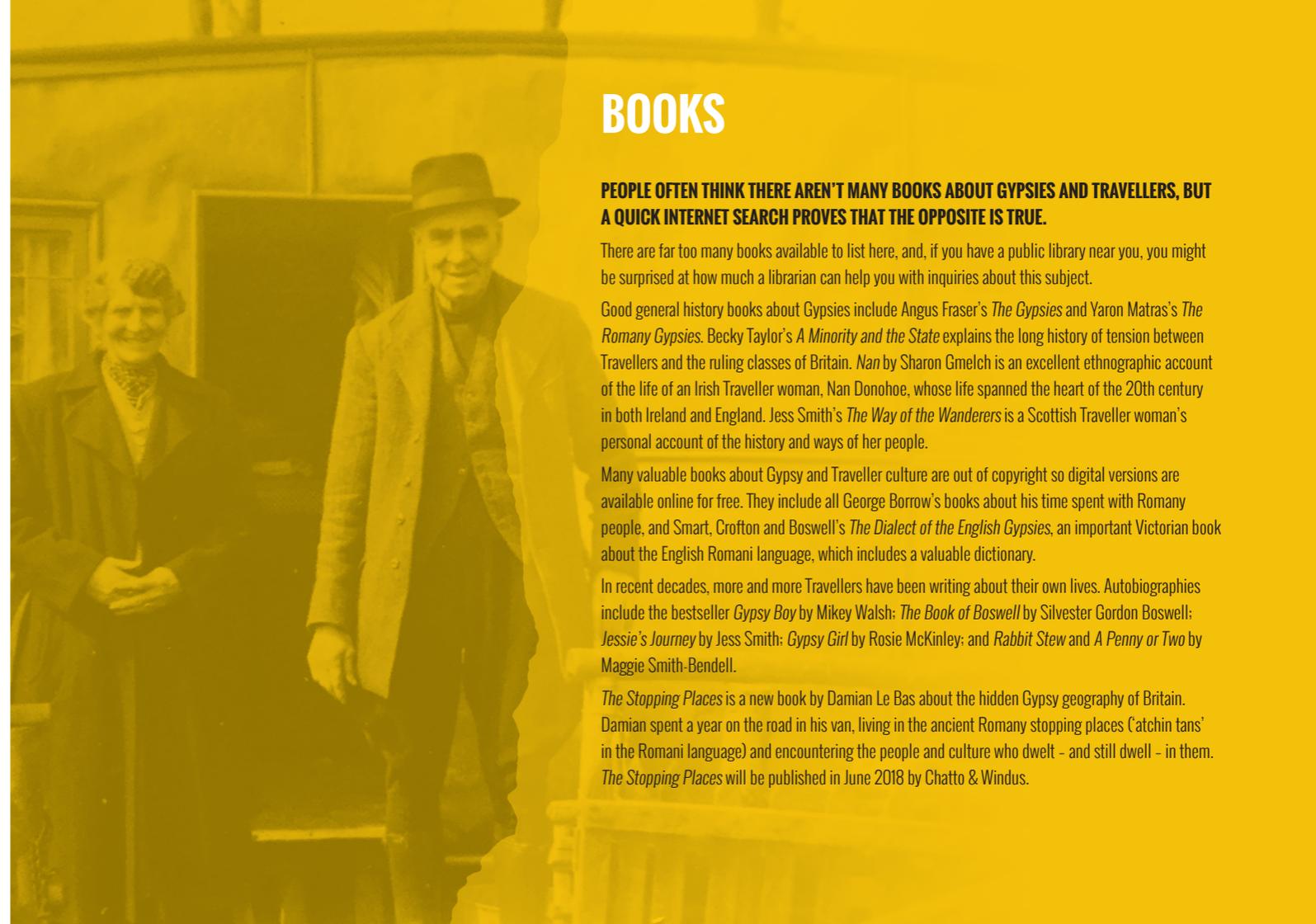
There are far too many books available to list here, and, if you have a public library near you, you might be surprised at how much a librarian can help you with inquiries about this subject.

Good general history books about Gypsies include Angus Fraser's *The Gypsies* and Yaron Matras's *The Romany Gypsies*. Becky Taylor's *A Minority and the State* explains the long history of tension between Travellers and the ruling classes of Britain. *Nan* by Sharon Gmelch is an excellent ethnographic account of the life of an Irish Traveller woman, Nan Donohoe, whose life spanned the heart of the 20th century in both Ireland and England. Jess Smith's *The Way of the Wanderers* is a Scottish Traveller woman's personal account of the history and ways of her people.

Many valuable books about Gypsy and Traveller culture are out of copyright so digital versions are available online for free. They include all George Borrow's books about his time spent with Romany people, and Smart, Crofton and Boswell's *The Dialect of the English Gypsies*, an important Victorian book about the English Romani language, which includes a valuable dictionary.

In recent decades, more and more Travellers have been writing about their own lives. Autobiographies include the bestseller *Gypsy Boy* by Mikey Walsh; *The Book of Boswell* by Silvester Gordon Boswell; *Jessie's Journey* by Jess Smith; *Gypsy Girl* by Rosie McKinley; and *Rabbit Stew and A Penny or Two* by Maggie Smith-Bendell.

*The Stopping Places* is a new book by Damian Le Bas about the hidden Gypsy geography of Britain. Damian spent a year on the road in his van, living in the ancient Romany stopping places ('catchin tans' in the Romani language) and encountering the people and culture who dwell - and still dwell - in them. *The Stopping Places* will be published in June 2018 by Chatto & Windus.



## OTHER MATERIAL

### **THERE IS AN ABUNDANCE OF HISTORICAL MATERIAL RELEVANT TO GYPSIES AND TRAVELLERS OUT THERE.**

For example, there are important archives of Romany and Traveller historical photographs at Leeds and Liverpool Universities; the Pitt Rivers museum in Oxford contains archaeological items related to Travellers; and the Gordon Boswell Romany Museum in Spalding, Lincolnshire, contains perhaps the finest collection of Romany living wagons of all eras anywhere in the world.

The good news is that the Internet has made it easier than ever before to explore these avenues for discovering information, historical and current, about Gypsies and Travellers. There is a wealth of knowledge and inspiration out there for those who want it, so we wish you well in your quest!

