

Compound Disinterest

In the light of the present Government's attempts to impose more draconian powers against Traveller communities, we reprint extracts from BRIAN VESEY FITZGERALD's account of how gypsies in the New Forest were rounded up and interned in compounds.

The Forest is changing. The climate had begun to alter at the end of the first World War, with the coming of the *nouveau riche*, wholly urban or suburban in outlook. But it was in 1926 that the change first became manifest. Up to that time the Gypsies had been free to camp wherever they wished on the open Forest, provided that they moved on every forty-eight hours. They had been doing this for nearly four hundred years. In 1926 they were rounded up and herded into compounds. The action was a direct contravention of the New Forest Act of 1877. But the Gypsies had no organisation and there were few to speak on their behalf: too few to carry weight. Into the compounds they went. Why was it considered necessary to interfere with an age-old custom, with a traditional way of life? Nobody seems to know.

It is generally believed that there was a spontaneous outcry by the residents in the Forest against the Gypsies and their habits; against their litter and their thieving ways. But many books have been written about them in the days when they were free to wander where they wished, and in not one of them have I found any mention of hostility on the part of the residents. I can remember no hostility myself — which is not to say that the Gypsies were loved — and I do not recall that they left behind them much litter. Of course, there were losses. Of course holly was taken at Christmas time and daffodils; of course the occasional chicken disappeared, and it was always the Gypsies who were blamed, never the fox. But these things were accepted as amongst the normal hazards of Forest life.

There was certainly no hostility to Gypsies as such — no pub would refuse to serve a Gypsy, and certainly there was no outcry against them before the first World War. But after that war there was a fresh influx of newly-wealthy townsfolk, people jealous of their status, and with their coming one began to hear complaints of this and that, about thieving and particularly about insanitary conditions in the Forest wherever Gypsies had camped. For the first time there was a complete lack of understanding or sympathy with the Gypsy way of life.

Not among the Commoners: they had lived with Gypsies on their doorsteps for generations, knew them and knew how to deal with them, accepted them as part of the Forest way of life. But that men and women, nomads with no visible means of support, should be able to camp freely in the Forest was an affront to those who, newly come to wealth, had paid hard cash for the privilege of doing so. To these people the Gypsies somehow let the “tone” of the place down. Money in Britain talks pretty loudly. Into the compounds went the Gypsies.



An authorised holiday caravan site in the New Forest, whose assembled vehicles are not in any danger from the Government's proposed legislation. It's only if you have no other home that you need worry.



Wandering free: a Gypsy family with benders in the New Forest c. 1900.

The New Forest Committee 1947, which was appointed “to investigate the state and condition of the New Forest and, having due regard to existing rights and interests, to recommend measures ... for adjusting the Forest to modern requirements” had this to say of the Gypsies:

“While the standard of living throughout the country is steadily being raised, a group is allowed to live in the Forest which has hardly reached the standard of the Stone Age. The Gypsies, it is true, have not been heard in their own defence, but we have visited their camps and we should hesitate to describe them in detail. Even the picturesque element which appeals to their defenders is entirely lacking.”

That appeared in a British Government White Paper. These are usually monuments to the thoroughness and impartiality of those appointed to investigate. You will notice that it is the Gypsies who, by implication, are blamed for these conditions by the Committee. There is no mention of the fact that they were herded into these compounds: nor that the compounds either had no water at all, or in most inadequate supply: nor that no sanitary arrangements whatsoever were provided. Of course the conditions were appalling; but the blame for this rests squarely on the shoulders of those who, to “protect” this or that interest, forced them into the compounds, and then did nothing for them.

There was never any suggestion that the compounds should be abolished, nor that the Gypsies should be allowed to resume their ancient custom of camping where they wished on the open Forest. The solitary camp of a Gypsy family, moved every forty-eight hours, constituted no danger, was more sanitary, and infinitely more healthy than the compound. There was no realisation that it was the compound system itself that was at fault. But the Gypsies were not represented, were not articulate, were not organised. They were, therefore, unimportant.

Editors' note: Thorney Hill compound was the largest of the seven compounds in the New Forest in 1930 with up to four hundred inhabitants at a time. During the 1930s mains water was brought to the compound but there was only one tap to serve many families. Most of the children attended Thorney Hill School. In 1947 there were five compounds, containing 411 people. Around 1960 Hampshire County Council decided to take all the Gypsies/Travellers off the forest and erected 22 second hand prefabricated houses on the site of the compound. This was called “The Thorney Hill Close”. Water and electric was provided and also a Warden and a Social Worker to help the families settle. Tents and caravans were no longer allowed.

**Taken from *Portrait of the New Forest*
by Brian Vesey-Fitzgerald, Robert Hale, 1966.**

OTHER SOURCES

B. Taylor, *A Minority and The State*, Manchester University Press 2008; and these two websites: www.newforestcommoner.co.uk; newforestmanygypsytaveller.co.uk