

Siobhan Spencer
The Heritage Keeper
Gordon Boswells Romany Museum

My Grandfather's favourite saying was "*You don't know what you have got until it's gone*" and when I was asked to write about the Gordon Boswell's Romany museum in Spalding in Lincolnshire I jumped at the chance as it brought back fond memories.

The museum opened on 25th February 1995 – This was an important date, as it would have been the 100th birthday of Gordon's father, Sylvester Gordon Boswell, after whom Gordon is named. Gordon has developed the museum and added to his very fine collection over the last 20 years

One such memory was when I had gone along with the members of Derbyshire Gypsy Liaison Group to undertake a book launch at the museum one summer. All members of the Gypsy community love to visit the museum, Gordon had also arranged a pig roast and we all stepped back in time that day. It struck me that I have not been for ten years and strangely as I started to write this piece he rang me. Although I personally had not been over the last year the National Federation of Gypsy Liaison Group had a film made of Gordon to record his work and we named it the Heritage Keepers Tale.

I spoke to Gordon at length and unlike many collections and museums in the UK Gordon still does not receive any national assistance, I am worried about this for the future it would be a disaster if this fine collection, an impressive time line through British Gypsy history should be broken up and or lost.

The Museum takes you through "a roller coaster" of scenes. The time when donkeys and bender tents were the norm alongside the pot carts and accommodation, (a basic cart which could be adapted and used as living accommodation by the adding of hoops over the top and a canvas. From those far gone days there are further scenes the open lot varda (lighter living waggon with no solid front, made for travelling over the hills) to the more exotic Burton wagons that needed more than one horse to pull them.

Victorian scenes, Edwardian scenes, which include the hand barrows, knife and scissor grinding tackle to kipsies and jodakais (baskets and pinafores) As Romany ladies would hawk their wares such as ribbons lace and charms dukkering (fortune telling). as they went .

The fashion of living waggons from the older horse drawn ones are complemented by the modern "tin can" ones a beautiful fairground caravan from the 1930's, to the encrusted stainless steel Westmoreland Stars of the 1970's soon dispensed with due to the cost of pulling them. I was married in 1975 and these were all the age that year, Appleby in the 1970s could blind you in the midday sun!

Would others miss this treasure set in the heart of Lincolnshire, well the answer is yes, for interest I reviewed the internet for comments about this English jewel and this is what I found from trip advisor.

“The Romany museum is frankly a hidden treasure. Having lived in the area for over 30 years I had no idea what a fantastic museum was on my doorstep. Firstly, there is an incredible amount to see. A number of Romany wagons, salvaged and restored to a very high standard and arranged so that they can be seen 'up close'. The various other things on display manage to bring a very different way of life into sharp and personal focus, not least because Gordon Boswell greets his visitors and talks about the history of both his family and his heritage with great knowledge, enthusiasm and charm. The museum is easily accessible and shows off its contents without cabinets and barriers. Gordon's talk about his journey to the Appleby horse fair in a wagon, pulled by horses, is interesting and brings the Romany way of life alive to his audience. I recommend the museum and will be visiting again.”

What really jumps out at you from the reviews is the importance of Gordon interpreting the exhibition, obviously a very positive experience for members of the public. They had learnt something by their visit, including Romany language another example.

“The large display of caravans (vardos in Romany) is impressive in that all have been lovingly restored and fitted out with the appropriate kit. We shall be taking our grandchildren to see the museum in due course.”

Gypsy history is essentially an oral one, not set down in books and the non Gypsy community (gaje) have their own idea of Gypsy people often imagined and portrayed through art, poetry, literature and a plethora of Gypsy research studies of people from outside. Here we have a Gypsy person who has felt that it is important to record his own history, not just family history but the wider community history, but for Gordon this is also a family tradition. Gordon's father Sylvester Gordon Boswell wrote *The Book of Boswell: Autobiography of a Gypsy*,

I think Gordon has inherited his family's love of learning, apart from his father, there was also his Great Great grandfather Tyso Westrus, known as the scholar Gypsy or Dictionary' Boswell, he worked to produce a Romany Gypsy dictionary in the 1860's. It is also said that he travelled with an extra waggon to cart all his books.

Over the last few years I have felt it more and more important to encourage groups to apply to the heritage lottery grant fund to record any aspect of culture that they felt important. Three weeks after recording the stories of elder community members in the south of the county two passed away and it came home to many that it was and is important to carry on. Gordon has created this museum without any grants or national support, all the more credit to him.

I think it is important to support this museum and I would encourage all to visit it. Romany Gypsy people learn aspects of their history they may have forgotten or like to be reminded of and to quote trip finder again

“you will come away enriched.”