Traveller Routes

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Gypsies and Travellers in Scotland

Gypsies and Travellers are a significant although often hidden part of the Scottish population. They have played an important role in our history, at one time supplying invaluable services and goods to farms and households across Scotland. In the past itinerant people were valued not only for their craft skills, but for the news, stories and songs that they brought into communities. These stories, songs and news from other communities would have been repeated in households long after Travellers had departed. As lifestyles have changed, as news and stories have become delivered through radio, television and the internet and as literacy has eroded oral traditions these stories and songs, once part of our collective culture, were generally lost. Travellers continue to play a significant part, connecting us to this shared past in their role as tradition bearers; keeping alive traditional stories and songs that were once heard in every household.

The origins of Gypsies and Travellers

No one knows for sure where Gypsies and Travellers in Scotland originate from, as their place here predates written history. A number of theories are commonly put forward. One is that there are at least two groups with distinct origins: firstly indigenous Travellers descended from Iron Age cairds (Gaelic *ceardan*), who were itinerant craft workers to the Celtic peoples, with skills in horse training and metal work, and a later, second group of Gypsies of Romany origin who appear in early written records from around 1470 introducing themselves to King James IV as the Earls of Little Egypt. In contrast Jess Smith, in her book *The Way of the Wanderers*, outlines a theory that the reference to “Little Egypt” is not as cryptic as it has been taken to be and that all Travellers have common descent from Egypt. Wherever Travellers came from, a number of skills and attributes seem to have been of particular importance. These include skills with horses and in metalworking (from which the name Tinker or Tinkler derived as metalworkers carrying all their wares made a tinkling sound as they walked), a distinct language (whether Parlyee, Cant or the Beurla Reagaird), storytelling, music and song as well as a nomadic lifestyle. Gypsies and Travellers made a lot of sacrifices for the freedom of the road; often suffering persecution and needing to live by their wits. Without the security of a permanent home or occupation Travellers have made a living from the land, but have also enjoyed the freedom of the land and taken great

joy in the natural world.

The summer walkers

On foot, pushing handcarts or with a horse and cart, Gypsies and Travellers traversed the length and breadth of Scotland for hundreds of years. Shifting from place to place they have spent the summer, from when the broom flowered through to when the last tattie had been howked in October, wandering, earning them the name the summer walkers. In winter they would settle in a house or in a tent, usually in a place to which they would regularly return. Children were schooled over the winter, but in the summer, they would travel from place to place, pick berries, howk tatties, buy and sell around villages and towns. Many made wares to sell from door to door, including horn spoons, tinware, clothes pegs and baskets.

Timothy Neat, in his book *The Summer Walkers* devotes a small section to the routes taken by Gypsies and Travellers and describes them as follows: “These traditional routes follow ancient tracks through gaps in the mountains which are historically much older than the roads laid out by military builders like General Wade, and the drove roads along which Highland cattle were moved to the Lowland markets. The Travellers had to get to where people were – in doing this they followed prime routes, first developed in the Neolithic period.”

Traveller routes took them from one campsite and from one settlement to the next. Many families had a few set routes that they travelled each year, while others had a far larger range of routes. Many of these routes are of a great length and would have been travelled over a number of months, with regular stops for work at farms or in communities along the way. Although there are still many Gypsies and Travellers within the Scottish population today, restrictions made to stopping places and the loss of traditional camping grounds mean that for many their lifestyles have changed. Few Travellers still tramp these old routes, but you can hopefully get a feel of the freedom that was so cherished by Travellers as you follow in their footsteps.

Where and when these routes are from

To some extent all the routes described here come from a fairly short window of time. Traveller paths have been, of course, little recorded and Traveller routes are not specifically featured on maps. Timothy Neat may suggest a Neolithic date to these routes but there’s no evidence for that, evidence for many of these routes comes primarily from place names where the Tinker’s Road is almost as common as the Old Drove Road. There are also some memoirs and dedicated collectors of memories from the 20th century who have captured stories of Travellers on the road if not necessarily the exact route that they took. These together bring to light a hugely significant element of a culture of travelling and Traveller culture in Scotland.