



THE BIG FAT GYPSY

ELISABETH BLANCHET



Mary, 14, an Irish Traveller, with one of her nephews. Opposite page: Roma gypsy Sarah, aged 16, in the dress she'll wear to marry her 17-year-old fiancé, George.

MYTH

With its tacky frocks, tasteless customs and kooky characters, *Big Fat Gypsy Weddings* has had TV viewers transfixed. But, asks Clover Stroud, how close is it to reality?



Clockwise from left: at 12 years old, Vivienne (on right, with her cousin Shannon, 13) wants to “look like a Barbie doll”; Roma gypsy Sarah surrounded by her “fairy bridesmaids” and her nephew; Rosie Biddle in the wagon she calls home; Irene, 18, dressed in fake Chanel.

It's fair day in Stow-on-the-Wold, a well-heeled, genteel town in south-west England. On this summer's afternoon – the sort of day that might see Shane Warne and Elizabeth Hurley slipping into a local pub, or Kate Winslet browsing an antiques market – thousands of gypsies and Irish Travellers have converged. It's a colourful occasion, with black and white horses and big white trailers, barrel-top wagons and painted flat carts dotting the field on the edge of the village. The men are here to trade (a horsedrawn wagon fetches anything from \$1500–\$50,000, depending on who's asking), and everything from horses to harnesses, dogs to caravans, chickens to trucks has a price.

The women are there to shop and socialise. Horse fairs like Stow are social glue for the scattered communities, and they're one of the few occasions British gypsies and Irish Travellers gather together to celebrate their way of life. There are stalls selling fake Chanel mugs and Versace bedspreads, as well as lacy girls' clothes, bejewelled booties, diamanté-encrusted feeding bottles, and more traditional suits and riding boots for boys. The older women swan around in sumptuous furs, but for the younger generation, it's a chance to really dress up.

Girls as young as 12 totter and make their way through the mud in high heels and cropped tops, flaunting fake nails, lashings of make-up and mahogany tans. “I want to look like a Barbie doll,”



says gypsy Vivienne Smith, 12, dressed in hot pants and vertiginous heels, her nails painted in Burberry colours. She and her cousin, Shannon, 13, spent hours getting ready. “My mum likes the way I look. She helped me,” adds Vivienne, as passers-by perform a double-take to take in every orange-glowed inch of her.

And if not for the wildly popular television show *Big Fat Gypsy Weddings*, the colourful life and bizarre traditions of Vivienne and her family would be witnessed by few beyond wide-eyed visitors to the Stow fair. Described as “car-crash television” by some critics, the controversial series, which ran in Australia on Foxtel's Lifestyle YOU channel, prised open the caravan doors of the gypsy and Traveller communities. It exposed a close-knit but hard-living group of persecuted urban nomads with social mores at odds with the tacky fashion choices of some of its women, and an apparent taste for violence and blindly over-the-top weddings.



In particular it explored the penchant of young Traveller brides – they usually marry at 17 – for overblown wedding dresses decorated with luminous butterflies; fairytale horsedrawn carriages; and a slavish dedication to hair, make-up and fake tans. Highly sexualised outfits for little girls, a disregard for education, the oppression of women who are consigned to life in their caravans, and a tradition of young men “grabbing” girls – manhandling them to force them to kiss – were some of the less savoury elements. Traditionally a conservative and private people, the Travellers unwittingly found themselves at the centre of a media firestorm. And many are not happy about it.

According to Jake Bowers, a Roma gypsy and former editor of the *Travellers' Times* website, the series was “a complete misrepresentation to the point of being fiction. It's affected us badly, creating even more negative stereotypes about us.”

He claims that the difference between the gypsy and Irish Traveller communities wasn't distinguished with enough clarity. “The show portrayed

some grain of truth about the Traveller community,” he says, “but it was damaging to the Romani gypsy community.”

In 2004, the Commission for Racial Equality estimated there were 200,000–300,000 gypsies and Travellers in the UK. Although the two intermarry, they are recognised as separate ethnic groups under British law, as they fulfil certain conditions, including distinct traditions, language, history and religion. While it is often hard to tell them apart, the myths and cultural stereotypes surrounding each group are as diverse as the people themselves.

For girls like Vivienne, the television show was the exact opposite of misrepresentation: she loved every minute of it. Though most girls at the fair are similarly dressed to her – their look artificial and highly sexualised – they blush to the roots when asked if they'd share a bed with a boyfriend before marriage. They want to look “dressy”, as they describe it, but it's a look at odds with their conservative mentality, which generally frowns on sex before marriage and places women in traditional roles. “I don't go to school much,” admits Vivienne, “because I prefer to be at home in my trailer, helping my mum with chores.”

Despite the concerns about negative portrayals, it's clear in Stow that many gypsies and Travellers love dressing up. “Some gypsies are more conservative than others and some love to get dressed up really flashy, because we're all different,” says Mary Doherty, a gypsy who married an Irish Traveller, Simon, at 19. She has four children and lives on a permanent caravan site. Dressed in black fur, with a dazzle of diamanté jewellery, she pushes a pram through the mud as she talks.

“But even if we don't travel no more, horses are a part of our culture we don't

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Last October, Travellers were forced to vacate this site at Dale Farm in Essex, England. Above left: Margaret McCarthy was evicted from her home of 10 years days after this photo was taken. Above right: a young boy outside his family's caravan beside a motorway in London.

want to lose. Bringing the children to a fair teaches them about the lives of our men. We bring them up independent, as there's no way a gypsy boy will get a job in a place like a settled person. And weddings are a way for us to see our family ... and enjoy the fact that we're gypsies.”

Traditionally, both groups have done itinerant work, such as seasonal fruit picking, horse dealing and gardening. Now largely settled, the men

[*Big Fat Gypsy Weddings* has] created even more negative stereotypes about us” Roma gypsy Jake Bowers

usually work in building jobs and scrap metal dealing. It is relatively unusual for a Traveller woman to hold a full-time job, although fairs like Stow are full of women running burger stalls or selling children's clothes.

Critics often accuse Travellers of tax evasion, but those who are settled on sites pay the same income and council taxes as the “settled” community. Bowers points out that the flashy caravans and trucks many Travellers drive are the only visible signs of their wealth due to the fact that few are homeowners, and so they put their money into their vehicles. Not all Travellers can afford the weddings paraded on the TV show,

as these cost upwards of \$15,000. Travellers and gypsies take huge pride in their children, so paying for these huge events is something those who can afford it are more than happy to do. “We give our children big fancy weddings because we love them so much,” reasons Theresa Cash, an Irish Traveller visiting Stow with her daughter, Irene.

Married at 17 and a mother of one, Irene, now 18, is dressed in a fake pink Chanel tweed jacket and 15cm heels, frosty lipstick accentuating her deep fake tan. “Marriage is important to us as family; it is the single thing that matters most,” insists Irene. “And I'm proud to say my husband is the boss in our home because he's my rock to lean on. He doesn't tell me what to do, but I know my place.” She laughs at the suggestion she might want to get a job: “Why would I want one of those when I have my husband to provide? Anyway,

I have enough to do cooking and cleaning and looking after my family.”

Some feminists have expressed concern that Traveller women are oppressed, condemned to a life inside a caravan. In fact, most enjoy raising children and looking after the home. “Gypsy women were portrayed in the show as oppressed and controlled, but in my experience they are strong and independent and have embraced their role as highly politicised mediators,” says anthropologist Professor Judith Okely, author of *The Traveller-Gypsies* (Cambridge University Press, \$67.99).

Professor Okely isn't the only one with misgivings. ►



Left: Sid Biddle rests in front of the wagon and caravan he lives in with his wife at the Stow-on-the-Wold horse fair last October. Right: Irish Travellers play at their home under a London motorway.



Standing in front of her white caravan, nothing more than a fleece vest protecting her against a biting wind, Margaret McCarthy crosses her arms tightly. Though a jumble of toys surrounds the van, McCarthy's three-year-old son, Daniel, plays with broken bricks in a puddle at his mother's feet. McCarthy shrugs. "There's lots of lies told about us Travellers. People, they hate us," she says. "God love the little children," she adds, almost to herself. "What sort of life are they growing up with?"

Like many Travellers, McCarthy's parents left Ireland more than 60 years ago in horsedrawn wagons, but switched to cars and caravans when McCarthy was a child. She grew up camping with her family on verges and common land, while her parents worked as fruit pickers, scrap merchants and horse dealers.

Their lives changed dramatically in 1960, when local councils were given the power to close stopping places. The Travellers fought back, claiming the measure was racist, and in 1968 councils were obliged by law to provide sites for them. But in 1994, a law was passed preventing convoys of vehicles moving about England and relieving councils of their obligation to provide sites. The result was devastating for Travellers and gypsies, making their traditional existence in caravans harder to maintain. (Last October, amid blazing caravans and taser guns, riot police moved in and cleared Dale Farm in Essex, McCarthy's home for the past decade.)

Since *Big Fat Gypsy Weddings* "there's been half-truths flying around about who we are", complains McCarthy. "The danger of a half-truth is that it's half a lie, too."

Bowers says the production company, Firecracker Films, exploited the Travellers. He claims it paid for some of the more outlandish outfits, encouraging the Travellers to greater heights of excess, and therefore it was not an authentic representation of their lives.

Others dismissed the idea of "grabbing" as either something they'd never heard of, or a form of flirtation in which both boys and girls are complicit. "The production company did not fund any weddings or dresses," says a Firecracker spokesperson. "We refute any claim that aspects of *Big Fat Gypsy Weddings* were set up for television purposes."

The home of Traveller Martin Ward, who has lived on a site under a motorway in London for 20 years, is a million miles from the glamorous excess celebrated in the show. It's here that he and his wife, Winifred, raised their 10 children; here that his son was shot dead, 19 years ago, by a Traveller gang from another site; and here that his daughter, Martina, was

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beaten by a gang of female Travellers. The police, says Ward, refuse to enter the site as it's too violent.

"The way we've been treated is extraordinary," he asserts. "We're not allowed to travel, but councils make no new sites for us. What future do we have? I'm used to living here, and I have no other choice anyway. If we pull a caravan beside the road, we're arrested, so what can we do? Don't you think it's time the authorities realised they can't get rid of us?"

Back in Stow, Sid Biddle hangs a cast-iron kettle over a fire and squints

as smoke swirls around him. Behind him, two horses rub against his father's magnificent green and gold wagon, as ornate as a Fabergé egg.

"We'd prefer to travel, but modern life is killing our traditions," points out Biddle, who lives in a caravan with wife Rosie, five daughters and one son. "In the past, people were happy to share their spare vegetables or eggs with us and let us use an outside tap. Now people would rather throw things away than give them to a gypsy. We're treated like criminals, but if you treat someone like a criminal ... they end up behaving like criminals, too."

Many people believe Travellers and gypsies earn their poor reputation. "Of course there are dishonest Travellers and gypsies who ruin our reputation," concedes Biddle, "but which group of people doesn't have a criminal element in it? The majority of Travellers and gypsies are quiet people who want to lead a quiet and honest life. Sadly, a few ignorant types ruin it for us."

As dusk settles over Stow, children ride their ponies through the grass and men trot carts along the road. It's a romantic scene, as valid a depiction of gypsy life as the gaudy weddings,

violent evictions and motorway slums. Before he leaves the warmth of his fire to join his daughters to pray, Biddle pauses to reflect on the colourful and often chaotic life he was born into: "I'm proud to call myself a gypsy."

McCarthy concurs. "Living in a caravan is our culture. I'd die in a house. I like knowing I can walk through the grass, and being on the land. Bricks and mortar are prison to us. We'll be settled, if we must, but let us live in our caravans, with our children and old people around us, because that's the Traveller's way, even if it's not your way." ■