Romani mothers and children on the Epsom Downs. Photo: Courtesy of Bourne Hall Museum.

5. Case Studies

The following case studies illustrate two of the pioneering partnerships that have been undertaken to preserve the heritage of Gypsies and Travellers in the south-east of England.

5.1 St. Barbe Museum and Art Gallery

In 2003, the St Barbe Museum and Art Gallery in Lymington, Hampshire, organised an exhibition entitled "Sven Berlin – paintings from Shave Green" which featured many paintings by the colourful, bohemian artist Sven Berlin on the fiftieth anniversary of his journey from St. Ives to the New Forest in a Gypsy wagon.

Curator Steve Marshall describes the exhibition. "Disenchanted with life in Cornwall, Berlin and his wife Juanita went in search of the Forest Gypsies with whom they were to develop a remarkable close relationship. The Gypsies had been barred from camping in the open forest in the 1920s and were given the choice of living in one of six compounds or in council housing. Conditions at the camps could be atrocious, most have no running water and the inhabitants were banned from building any kind of permanent structure and lived in caravans or tents.

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Yet amongst such sadness Berlin was to find inspiration for one of the most creative periods of his career. His pictures represent an honest and at times heart-rending record of a people trying to retain their dignity in the face of overwhelming odds. Few people have ever been as accepted by the Romani people in quite the same way as Sven Berlin, and it is a tribute to his integrity as a man and an artist that he was allowed such freedom to record the Gypsies last days among the trees of the New Forest.

5.2 Bourne Hall Museum Exhibition

In 1999, Jeremy Harte, Curator of the Epsom and Ewell museum created an exhibition about Gypsy history in cooperation with residents at the local Cox Lane Gypsy site in Epsom. The exhibition was shown for 4 months to wide acclaim from people within the community and continues to be remembered as an example of good practice by Gypsies and Travellers in Surrey. Among other things, it drew on the experience of local Gypsies and explored not just the community's general history and culture but also its deep and ongoing connection with a very specific event and place in Surrey. The exhibition revealed a hidden history that many did not know about it. It stated:

Every year, Gypsy families meet at the Derby. The painted vans may have been replaced by stunning chrome-covered trailers, but for many families the get-together is as important as it was two hundred years ago. A certain amount of horse trading still goes on, but dealing now centres on cars, vans and other commodities. The Gypsy community and the Derby have developed together. Until the 1820s, the race was of little interest to the general public. Epsom Downs was a sheep pasture, and Gypsies stopped here as they would on any other open land. Seven families were camping out on census night, 1861: they were making a living by making mats and baskets, sharpening knives and selling from door to door. Ten years later there were eleven Gypsy households.

By 1891 there were forty Gypsy households. This was a time when Gypsies were arriving from all over southern England for the race meeting. Derby Day mania reached its height in Victorian times. Along with the crowds came the travelling people – Gypsy fiddlers, flowersellers and palmists, of whom the 1829 *Times* said they were 'capable of telling everybody's fortune but their own'. Spielers shouting the attractions of the booths or sideshows were there, as were the wandering pedlars, entertainers, acrobats, stiltwalkers, and the men with their three-card or thimble-rigging tricks.

Epsom's response to this influx of outsiders was mixed. Some local people campaigned in their support, like Thomas Hersey the bicycle dealer of South Street. Others suspected that they were bringing in trouble. In 1895 there was a scare that they were bringing infectious disease with them – something unlikely, as Gypsies rarely stay in one place long enough to pick up an infection.

Derby Day, with its colour and excitement, has long been a magnet for artists – and the Gypsies are part of its attraction. After the drab years of World War I, the race seemed to be a celebration of everything that was alive. Sir Alfred Munnings wrote: 'Never have I quite felt the alluring, infectious joy of the races, the tradition of Epsom, as I did in that first year after the war, 1919'. Munnings was a professional painter of horses and their jockeys, but he had an eye for the Gypsies, too – they struck him as a picturesque, swarthy crowd, especially the women, with black ringlets and heavy ear-rings visible under their large black ostrich-plumed hats.

In the 1930s, when Gypsies were faced with attempts to remove them from the Downs, they found an unexpected champion in Lady Sybil Grant. She was the daughter of the fifth Earl of Rosebery, who had had been Prime Minister in Queen Victoria's days. She was herself fond of caravanning and also held a hawker's licence so that she could sell from door to door for charity.

There was conflict between the Gypsies and the Downs administrators at this time, and Lady Sybil hoped to defuse it by

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letting them camp on her land at The Bushes. In 1932 she issued a public statement, saying 'I am hoping to organise the van dwellers into a humble little guild which will have the advantage of protecting the working gypsies and getting rid of those undesirable members who are to be found in every community'.

In 1936, an Act of Parliament created the Epsom and Walton Downs Conservators, and gave them authority to run the Downs for the benefit of the public. One of their first decisions was to ban Gypsies. Lady Sybil considered this was against the Gypsies' rightful heritage, not to be able to camp where they had done for hundreds of years. She immediately gave them the use of a field, called The Sanctuary, in Downs Road. It was near the Downs, and ideal for horses as it was thick with grass.

The ban on camping carried on through the 1930s. Gypsies offered to pay to stop on the Downs at a £1 a wagon. It was decided to refuse them, in the belief that it would cost far more to remove rubbish after they left. Relations between the two groups had turned into a running battle, which came to a head in 1967, when summonses for illegal camping were served on 40 families. In 1969 the Downs Conservators handed the job over to a security company which provided 24 hour patrols to warn off campers. The Gypsies said that if they were prevented from parking they would stop the race. At the beginning of Derby week, two hundred trailers arrived and parked up as usual and the next day another hundred settled down on Derby Day. 160 summonses were issued but the race was not stopped, since as the Gypsies' leader said, 'we are on the Downs so we have won'. Only 29 summonses had been served, each carrying a fine of £3 for trespass and three guineas costs. Disputes like this continued until 1984, when a new Act was passed for the regulation of the Downs. Under this Act, Gypsies have a right to stay on the approved site on the Downs.

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Gypsies camped at Epsom at the time of the Derby. Photo: Courtest of Bourne Hall Museum.