

Traditions and Customs

passing places

Traveller rituals and beliefs are as diverse as Traveller culture, but there are many shared traditions and beliefs. These are passed on through the generations by word of mouth.



Funeral of a young Traveller 1915
Image: Ben Smith



Myma Parker and Chris Butler's wedding
Image: Diane Allen



Young Traveller washes himself in a separate bowl
Image: Hertfordshire Traveller Education Project



Left - right: Sweley Howell, Sweley Hastler, Ashton Howell and Christie Summers. Traditional prams are popular with many Travellers
Image: Jane Hestler



Traveller funerals are often large affairs
Image: Ben Smith

Travellers commonly live, work and travel in extended family groups, that provides a network of mutual support and companionship. The continuation of the family line is very important. Marrying young is quite common and when children reach their teens, they are considered an adult. Marriages can be large affairs steeped in tradition and money. The birth of a baby into a Traveller family is also a highly celebrated affair, as it signifies the growth of the family line.

Traveller standards of hygiene are high and cleanliness is an important issue in Traveller culture. The Romany term 'mokkadi' refers to a code of cleanliness, with rules for washing clothes, self and food preparation.

There are many different superstitions and rituals concerning death in many Traveller communities. The Patrin Journal (please see information file) describes in great detail the many Romany rituals and traditions surrounding illness and death for example, moving the death bed out of the caravan, covering of mirrors and the grieving process.

Funerals, like weddings, are large affairs, with sometimes hundreds of people paying their respects. Traditionally, all the belongings of the dead person are burned including their wagon and sometimes any animals (except horses) that they owned. Nowadays, the burning of items brings financial stress to the family, and many items are sold to non-gypsies rather than burned.

Travellers celebrate many religions, some none at all. It is generally accepted that they adopt the religion of the country that they are in. The Evangelical Gypsy Church has a large following and has its roots in the 19th century.

Good luck charms, amulets and talismans are common among Travellers, particularly Roma. They are usually carried or worn to prevent misfortune or heal sickness. Some Roma carry bread in their pockets as protection against bad luck, or ghosts, known as mulo.

Fortune telling or Dukkering is one of the many traditions of Travellers, and for many, it forms a part of their daily working life. In the past this profession was shunned by the Church as they considered it to be superstitious. It remains part of the British seaside and fairground culture and history.

Gypsy women healers are known as Drabhani (drab is the word for medicine) and prescribe traditional healing rituals and cures. She was often thought of as a witch.

Other than traditional medicine, access to healthcare has improved somewhat for Travellers, however, it is by no means the same standard received by house-dwellers. This can be down to a number of reasons, such as unwillingness to share medical problems with a non-gypsy doctor, or for those Travellers who are on the road regularly, (particularly New Travellers) the lack of records for their 'no fixed abode'. Life expectancy for an average male is 48 years compare to 75 years for non-Travellers and infant mortality is alarmingly high.