

working places

All the Traveller communities are characterised by a strong commitment to the family as a tight knit, working unit. Most Travellers are self employed. So, whether they are living on a council site and running a family building firm, or travelling with a fair and running a mobile snack bar, most Travellers work with or for their immediate family. Similarly, there is a strong sense of adaptability. The family will not necessarily rely on one source of income and work. So work becomes the means by which Travellers can remain independent, therefore over the centuries there have been changing patterns of employment.



Knife-grinding machine, on Northchurch Common made by Levi Parker
Image: Diane Allen



Making clothes-pegs. Bakers "mumpers" near Barnet, Herts 1919
Image: University of Liverpool



Making clothes-pegs and drying ornamental grasses near Totbendge, Herts 1922
Image: University of Liverpool



Artwork for sale made by New Traveller

Traditionally, many Travellers found work in rural areas where there was a high demand for many hands for fruit, potato or flower picking. Other employment was found in selling handmade goods such as pegs, baskets, wooden flowers or tin goods (hence the term 'tinkers'). The door to door 'hawking' of these goods used to be common. There has always been some limited employment in palm reading and fortune telling. Other old forms of income were from scrap metal collection. At one time, foundries consumed large amounts of scrap metal and Travellers (sometimes characterised as 'rag and bone men') were a crucial element in this efficient form of recycling.

The later decades of the twentieth century saw massive changes in the country's manufacturing and agricultural base. There was no longer a demand for scrap metal from the now small steel making industry; most agricultural production was mechanised. Therefore Traveller work patterns have changed and diversified. Today an extended family might find itself engaged in a variety of trades such as Tarmac-ing, building or paving. However the close link, and dependence, upon servicing the settled community continues as many Travellers work in landscaping, garden maintenance or tree lopping. Travellers have also found waged work in amongst the settled communities.

Although now diminished in number, travelling circuses and fairs still provide regular, seasonal employment for these branches of the Traveller communities.

Whatever their work patterns are, Travellers will continue to adapt their skills and thereby always change to meet the needs of the settled communities, just as Travellers have done for centuries.



Mr Parker making wooden flowers
Image: Norbert McCabe



Collecting scrap. Billy Lee's pony and trolley
Image: Norbert McCabe