

TRAVELLERS AND SQUATTERS

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We are the last links with independence and self sufficiency in an over organised country... We elude to a great extent the tentacles of officialdom which seek to enclose everyone within their grasp, plotting their lives by standards, times and dates. Freedom we are told is everyman's heritage-yet how few achieve it and how few exploit it.¹

Dominic Reeve, a chronicler of the traveller existence, wrote those words in 1958, at a time when the UK's population of travellers – of various ethnicities – were abandoning a horse-drawn existence in favour of motorised vehicles. The change was a big one, but not as big as the changes that were then looming in this country's legislation. These changes enshrined in law that by not owning the land on which they lived, travellers were fundamentally incompatible with the way the country should be organised in the eyes of its legislators. A long-accepted situation of tolerance and mutual aid (for example, the mobility of traveller horse traders benefitted the stock of horses all over the country) was replaced by one of intolerance and hostility in which travellers had to be 'normalised' in order to exist. The grey area in which they had lived became, almost overnight, a thin black line.

As I write this, the High Court has ruled that Basildon Council can proceed with its intention to remove travellers from their own land on Dale Farm in Essex. This is an event that has received a good deal of media coverage over the past few weeks, though it has been brewing for much longer, and, over the coming days, looks likely to become front page news. The build up has brought condemnation of the proposed eviction from the UN and Amnesty International, and Stephen Cottrell, Bishop of Chelmsford, has said of the situation: 'If evicting children is the answer then we must be asking the wrong question.'

The question that has been asked, of course, is a question of planning law. The travellers have, to the best of their abilities, made a stab at housing themselves in difficult financial and legal circumstances. On anything but paper, they have changed a site from junkyard to community, but in planning terms it has changed from pastoral green belt to "illegal encampment." What might be forgotten in the heat of the now inevitable battle is that this situation is the direct consequence of a decision taken in the late 1960's that forever closed a grey area of tolerance in which people had existed for generations – in the name of private

property rights. In the long run, the prioritising of property law has left a community, who ironically now own their own land, stuck between what they have already achieved and an inflexible planning system.

By putting in place laws which prioritise private ownership over all other rights and regardless of the impacts of that ownership, we do a fundamental disservice to human decency and to the limited system of our planet. This is what connects the struggle of traveller groups with the struggle to oppose the criminalisation of squatting. Both groups not only have their human rights and their place in a humane and fair society to think of, but should also see what they do, and what they have done in the past, as offering a form of peaceful resistance to a relentlessly normalising system. What is at stake in both battles is the right to live over the right to own.

Notes

¹Reeve, Dominic. *Smoke in the Lanes*. London: Constable and Co., 1958.

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