

Irish Traveller Lives

Patrick McCarthy 'The Gaffer'



The image shows Patrick McCarthy as a young boy, being taught the alphabet by his cousin on a piece of slate.

The Early Years

Patrick was born in County Cork 71 years ago, his family were part of the Irish Traveller community and he was born in a barrel top wagon. His father was a 'guinea hunter', a guinea was a gold coin and his father got one for setting up horse deals between buyers and sellers at the many local fairs scattered across Ireland. In those days horse dealing was a big business as most people did not have cars but instead used horses. When his father was not setting up horse deals he was 'hawking' that means he was going from door to door selling things like lino for kitchen floors, others made and sold tin ware.

Life was not easy, there was not much money around and there was a lot of prejudice towards Travellers, often Travellers could not stop near to towns or villages because of this. Patrick didn't go to school, in those days the children would work with their parents, also there was a lot of prejudice towards Travellers in schools. Patrick started working when he was 7, like his father he sold lino and eventually even set up horse deals. Patrick's cousin though taught him the alphabet using an old lead roof slate and nail and he could write his name.

Coming to England

In 1959 Patrick decided to head off for England, it was hard to make a living in Ireland. He would be out in the rain sometimes all day selling lino and travelling large distances and only have 50p in his pocket at the end of it all. He heard that things were much better in England. Patrick was to be disappointed at first. Patrick booked his ticket from Ireland to Birmingham for one pound fifty pence. Patrick planned to get a good job and save up and buy a brand new van for 180 pounds and return to Ireland and set up a good business.

However, things were tough. Patrick hoped to get a job on the building sites but notices were often displayed saying 'Blacks and Irish need not apply'. In the end Patrick got a job as a builder but he had to work 6 days a week and long and hard hours. Patrick was paid 8 pounds a week but after paying rent for his room and sending money home to support his parents, he had no money, his plans of buying a van seemed to be getting nowhere.

Patrick was able to get a better job with British Rail helping to construct and repair the track and tunnels. On one job the foreman was unable to work because he was sick, the engineers knew Patrick was a good worker and asked him to stand in for the foreman. The engineers gave Patrick some plans for building a platform and because he could barely read he could not understand the plans at first but he quickly learnt to understand such plans and did more of such work, this helped him to improve his reading and writing.

Patrick missed travelling and bought a van, not the new one he had hoped to buy but an old one, he also bought a caravan and went travelling with his

family and took up 'hawking' but like in Ireland things were tough, it was difficult to find a stopping place and there was not much money to be made in selling lino. It was only ten years after coming to the UK that Patrick was able to buy the new van he had dreamed about on his arrival to England.

The big new van that Patrick bought was purchased on HP that meant he had to pay money back every week. Patrick wanted to set himself up as a dealer in old furniture but he had little luck and struggled to make the repayments on the van. Things were getting very bad and one day Patrick said a prayer to ask for help and that very day he was able to fill up his van with furniture and sell it and make a fair profit, after that things were easier and his dream of having a van and a good business were finally achieved.

The Gaffer

As the years went by it seemed to be getting harder to find stopping places, many Travellers had to stop on the side of the road, and councils were reluctant to give them water, toilets or skips for rubbish. Patrick became a spokesman for many Travellers, who would speak with councils to negotiate longer stays and try and persuade them to help the Travellers, he even managed to persuade some councils to set up permanent sites. Travellers called him the 'Gaffer', this is a Traveller word for someone who is respected in the community.

Cottenham

In 2003 Patrick came to a village called Cottenham, there was still a national shortage of sites and Patrick hoped he could develop a site for his family. The problem was the Government had scrapped the obligation councils were under to set up sites and councils were ignoring planning advice asking them to help Travellers find land that could be developed as a site. Patrick bought his land, moved onto it and then submitted a planning application. This upset some local people because they said Patrick did not have planning permission.

Patrick was worried about community relations as were some people from the settled community. As a result meetings between Patrick and other Travellers and members of the settled community were held. A special meeting was even held in the House of Commons at which the Travellers and settled people issued a statement saying that it had been wrong to end the obligation on councils to set up sites and that a new obligation was needed to create sites and that more sites would help Travellers access services and reduce the inconvenience caused to the settled community by unauthorised encampments. The statement also called for greater respect and understanding between the settled and Traveller communities. The statement was praised by many people and the Anglican Bishop of Ely and Catholic Bishop of East Anglia held a special church service in Cottenham attended by Travellers and the settled community to celebrate this new phase of dialogue.

Getting Married

Patrick got married when he was 21, he was able to choose who he wanted to marry as was his wife, but in earlier times families had decided who their children married. Patrick thinks this was stopped because there were some unhappy marriages where the wrong people were matched up. Patrick has 8 children and 26 grandchildren and is expecting his first great grandchild.

Education

Patrick never went to school but over the years he was able to learn to read and write and this was a great help to him in his life. Patrick thinks that it is important for Travellers to go to school and get an education he says

“Traveller children cannot go out and work with their parents and learn a trade like they used to, they need school to pick up new skills, especially computer skills”.

What Makes A Traveller?

Patrick remembers when he was young how many Travellers spoke Cant the Traveller language and lived in barrel top wagons, but this is not common now and things have changed. However, Patrick feels some things have stayed the same. Patrick thinks being a Traveller can be summed up as having a sense of freedom in life, being prepared to live in new places and trying new things. Patrick says “This was the essence of being a Traveller in the past and is in the present”. That is why Travellers like travelling, living in different countries and starting up new types of business. Patrick thinks another important thing about being a Traveller is having a close family. Patrick says

“Being a Traveller can be tough, it can be tough to find a place to live and it can be tough with all the discrimination directed at us, that is why we need close ties with our families, it gets us through the tough times”.

Traveller History

Patrick says

“There have been Travellers in Ireland for many, many centuries but it was Oliver Cromwell and his war with the Irish in the 17th century and the potato famine in the 19th century that made them even more nomadic as times were hard and people had to travel even further than before and look for work. Travellers though are versatile and they survived those hard times and that is why they will survive and overcome what is being thrown at them today”.

Bridget McCarthy



Image shows how Bridget McCarthy as a young girl, proudly holding the book that was given to her by a kind lady, who taught her to read a few words, which encouraged her to learn more.

The Early Years

Bridget is an Irish Traveller who was born in Cork. Bridget was two when she came to live in England in the 1960s. She lived with her family in a single room in Birmingham and would collect scrap metal in the winter but take to the road in their caravan during the travelling season. There were no laws against 'calling' in those days and knocking at peoples' doors asking for scrap

or trying to sell things. Bridget's father would go out and collect scrap often taking his children to help. Bridget would often help her father cleaning scrap metal and sorting the different metals out into different categories. Life in Birmingham was difficult though. They had no fridge in their room and had to leave milk and butter out on their window sill and living in one room was very cramped.

Education

Bridget was able to go to school for short periods but would stop while her family was travelling. In those days Traveller Education Services did not exist and there were no travelling/distance learning programmes for Travellers on the road. Bridget remembers going out hawking as a child and a well spoken lady came to the door. The lady gave Bridget some books to read and when Bridget told the lady she could not read the lady taught her how to read some words, this sparked an interest in reading. Bridget stopped going to school when she was 11 and feels that it would have been better if she had had more education. Bridget ensured that both her son and daughter went to school.

Life on the Road

Bridget remembers travelling being full of hardship, there was a great shortage of transit and residential sites, this was before the 1968 Caravan Sites' Act and councils were not obliged to find sites. The family found it difficult to find a decent place to stay and often they would end up on the side of the road or in parks and would be constantly moved on. They had no running water or electricity at the places they stopped at, food was cooked over an open fire and they would ask people for water or fill milk churns up at petrol stations. Bridget remembers that first her father had only a lorry and that the family would sleep in 'bender' tents made out of canvass and branches. Later the family had a big silver chrome caravan and Bridget had to polish the chrome so that it was gleaming. Bridget remembers pulling up in the caravan in the centre of Portsmouth, there being no where else for them to stop at. Crowds of people gathered around the trailers and stared and the local newspaper took their pictures and wrote articles about them. Bridget felt awkward with this attention as people stared at them as if they were aliens.

In 1967 Bridget and her family managed to find a decent stopping place in West Drayton with running water and hard standing to put the caravan on. Sadly they were forced off this stopping place and found themselves on the side of a busy road. One day Bridget walked out into the road and was nearly killed when she was hit by a car. Bridget was unconscious for six weeks and a priest even anointed her as they feared she would die. Fortunately Bridget survived but feels this incident demonstrates the importance of developing decent sites with good facilities in good locations. Bridget is now a campaigner for more Traveller sites and initiatives to raise the social inclusion and well being of Travellers.

Bridget says

“Travellers need to come forward and fight for their rights. Black and Asian people have done this and deservedly improved the lives of people in their community. Travellers need to do the same and campaign and challenge racism”.

Tommy Collins



The image shows Tommy Collins as a young boy caring for the horse that would draw their barrel top wagon.

The Early Years

Tommy was born in Ireland sixty two years ago. He is a member of the Irish Traveller community and was born in a barrel top wagon, the traditional horse

drawn transport that Travellers used in those days. His father used to buy and sell horses, Tommy remembers that his father was quite old but his father did not know his age as like with many Travellers in those days he was not registered at birth. Tommy didn't go to school as schools did not like to open their doors to Travellers. Tommy remembers that on those days many people called the Travellers 'tinkers'. As a child Tommy learnt to look after horses and harness them and he would go around the houses looking for scrap metal or horse hair that was used to make things.

Coming to England

Life in Ireland was tough then especially for Travellers and many went over to England where they were told life was easier. Tommy first went to Britain in 1958. He was 13 and he and his brother were recruited to pick potatoes in Scotland. The work was hard and the pay was low, the cost of their fare from Ireland and cost of accommodation was calculated at a high rate and deducted from their low wages. The accommodation was terrible they slept in old army huts. At the end they had little money and decided to go to London to find their sisters who were living there. Tommy and his brother arrived at Kings Cross station and did not have a clue about how they could find their sisters, they were tired and hungry and their clothing was ragged. They were picked up by the police and sent back to Ireland, they got off the boat in Dublin and had to walk home spending nights sleeping in barns and begging for scraps of food along the way.

Tommy and his brother arrived home but things were still tough in Ireland and their father decided to go to England himself and try his luck, the family remained in Ireland. The months flew by and they heard little of their father but one day he suddenly arrived and announced that the whole family were to come to England with him, within a matter of hours he had sold the family's barrel top wagons and horses and the family were on the road to Dublin to catch the ferry.

In London it was difficult to find accommodation. Landlords often did not want children to stay in their accommodation and to make things harder for Tommy's family many landlords put up signs saying 'No Irish, No Jews, No Blacks, No animals'. The family were separated up in different rented rooms around London and Tommy's mother and younger brothers and sisters even had to stay in a homeless hostel at first.

Starting Work

Tommy got work on building sites, the work was very tough and the money was not that good. Later Tommy worked for British Rail and one of his jobs was loading and unloading mailbags, sometimes it was difficult because he could not read and write but he found ways around. Many of the new immigrants to Britain from Africa and India worked on the railways and Tommy made friends with them but was upset to see they were often treated as badly as Travellers. For example, in the canteen Tommy was one of the few white workers who would sit with them. Tommy became more interested

in campaigns for equality, he heard Martin Luther King the famous American Black rights campaigner speak on the radio and was greatly inspired by him. Tommy joined a trade union and became active in union issues and then got a job as a school caretaker. Through his work as an activist and caretaker Tommy met many people such as teachers and other campaigners who over the years helped him to learn to read.

Campaigning for Travellers' Rights

In 1996 Tommy went to live in Leeds there he met the great Traveller campaigner Tommy Docherty who set up the first Traveller group in the UK and he was a great inspiration to Tommy. Tommy got involved with the local Race Equality Committee that worked to help ethnic minorities across Leeds and set up Leeds Justice for Travellers. Travellers have lived in Leeds for hundreds of years but they still have big problems today, some people are still prejudiced towards them and there are not enough Traveller sites. Tommy does his best to help other Travellers.

Tommy on Education

Tommy says

“Travellers will only have a future if we get more education, the worst thing in my life was not having an education, education and understanding the arguments and putting forward good ones is even more powerful than marches and protests”.

Tommy on How Things Can Improve

Tommy says

“What Travellers need are more and better sites, if they have a place to live then the kids can go to school. Travellers have something to offer there are already teachers and policemen who are Travellers. The problem is Travellers are too scared to tell people because of all the prejudice. Making more sites and cutting out all the prejudice will allow people to really see what Travellers are and what they can do”.