

The Last Journey



**The Funeral Rites and Cultural Needs
of Gypsies and Travellers**

Pauline Lane, Johanna Price and Siobhan Spencer

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About the study

Although death is a biological process, it is the rites, observances, and memorials that often help us to cope with the passing of loved ones, and these processes are shaped by cultural, religious, and family traditions (Collins and Doolittle, 2006). The aim of this study was to learn more about death rites of Gypsy and Traveller families and to identify any significant concerns in order to help funeral directors, and churches, to respond to their cultural needs. We are really grateful to the participants who kindly took part in the study, especially as talking about the death of a loved one is such a sensitive topic.

Gypsies and Travellers in the UK

It has been estimated that there are over 300,000 Gypsies and Travellers in the UK (University of Salford, 2013). English Gypsies and Irish Travellers are legally recognised as two distinct ethnic minority groups, and as such groups, they should be afforded protection under UK equality legislation (i.e., the Equality Act 2010). However, despite equality legislation, they have been identified as being amongst the most disadvantaged ethnic minority groups in British society, and many community members continue to face extreme discrimination and racial prejudice (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2018; Cabinet Office Race Disparity Audit, 2018; United Nations Special Rapporteur, 2018). Moreover, the health status of Gypsies and Travellers is much poorer than that of the general population; for example, they experience higher than average maternal death rates and one in five Gypsy and Traveller mothers will experience the death of a child (compared to one in a hundred in the non-Traveller community). Moreover, research suggests that the life expectancy of Gypsies and Travellers is ten to twelve years less than the general population (Leeds Gate, 2020; Women and Equalities Select Committee Enquiry, 2019; House of Commons, 2019a).

Traditionally, most Gypsies and Travellers were nomadic, and for centuries they were permitted

to use 'common land' as lawful stopping places to rest their horses, find local employment, and meet up with family and friends. Nomadic people have made a significant contribution to British life and culture (Taylor, 2014), traditionally filling labour gaps in the economy, such as agricultural work. However, with rapid technological and social changes, there are fewer opportunities for Gypsies and Travellers to use their traditional skills (Greenfield et al, 2012), although many families have adapted their trades to continue to support their traditional nomadic life. However, due to the policies of successive governments, the biggest barrier to contemporary nomadism is the lack of 'authorised' stopping places and permanent sites (Cottle et al, 2019; Richardson, 2020). Consequently, many nomads have been forced into stopping on unsafe and unsuitable locations (such as rubbish dumps and car parks), and families are constantly at risk of eviction; this often places them under considerable mental and physical stress (Lau and Ridge, 2011; Lane and Spencer, 2019). In relation to this study, as you will read below, it is apparent that governmental policies have also impacted on traditional death rites, as evidenced by Mary-Ann, a Romany Gypsy, who described how the family were forced to conduct the traditional observance of 'sitting up' (to honour the dead) in a car park.

The research processes

Researching issues related to death can be challenging due to the sensitivity of the topic, and as researchers we were aware that we might be considered as intruders into the worlds of the bereaved. However, there is a strong body of evidence that suggests that many people find that talking about bereavement can be useful (Dyregov, 2004; Koffman et al, 2012; Eilegard et al, 2013), and indeed, many of our participants freely stated at the end of their interviews that it was good to talk about their loved ones, and their memories of the funeral. Prior to starting the research, the team applied for ethical approval to conduct the study from Anglia

Ruskin University, and this was granted in 2021 (reference number: ESC-SREP-19-233). We recruited ten Romany Gypsies (Robert, Clara, Betsy, Sophie, Martha, Mary-Ann, Pat, Jan, Carolyn, and Sabrina) and three Irish Travellers (Shona, Janie, and Maureen). They were all aged over 21 and living/moving across five geographical regions (the East and West Midlands, Yorkshire, and the South East and North East of England). The community researchers from the Derbyshire Gypsy Liaison Group recruited the participants and conducted the interviews, although this was particularly challenging as we were collecting data during the second year of the Covid-19 pandemic. We only approached people who had been bereaved in the previous two to five years (i.e. not during the pandemic). This time period was chosen because research suggests that following bereavement, grief usually becomes less intense over time (Barrera et al, 2009) and the majority of people are usually able to emotionally adjust to bereavement after the first year (Kuo et al, 2017). However, it is recognised that grief can vary according to a range of different factors, such as the context of the death (such as a sudden and violent loss, or a premature loss of a person, i.e., the death of a baby or child), the quality of the pre-existing relationship with the deceased, and the nature of the supporting social networks surrounding the bereaved (Field et al, 2013; Rando, 1998) and we were careful not to recruit anyone to the study who had lost a child.

The interviews

The community researchers from the Derbyshire Gypsy Liaison Group (DGLG) made the initial approach to potential participants by telephone. We were sensitive to the fact that many Gypsies and Travellers are not literate, and it is recognised that oral consent can be substituted for written consent, when people are unable to sign a document (the World Health Organization, 2002). The community researcher verbally explained the study and then read out the formal 'participant information sheet'. People who expressed an interest in the study were contacted again a week later, to give them

time to decide if they wanted to take part or not. Verbal consent was given by the participants to conduct and record the interviews, and permission was also given to use the resulting anonymised material in written reports and papers.

All of the semi-structured interviews were conducted by telephone and although we would have liked to have carried them out face to face but this was not possible due to the pandemic. However, Gypsies and Travellers are usually confident in using mobile phones to keep in touch with family members across the country. Moreover, because the researchers came from Gypsy and Traveller communities, they were more likely to be considered as trustworthy by participants. All of the participants were assured that they could stop the interviews at any time, without giving a reason, and were free to skip questions and/or pause the questioning.

Managing distress

A few of the participants did become upset when talking about their family members who had died, and the researchers gave them the option to end or pause the interviews; however, only one interview was not completed due to distress. The DGLG already offers support and advice to bereaved families and the culturally appropriate support was offered to all of the participants following the interviews. In addition, participants were informed of other bereavement services (i.e., Samaritans and other support from local Gypsy and Traveller community groups).

Transcription

Once the interviews had been recorded, the researchers transcribed them (verbatim) into written text, ready for the data analysis. During this process, all of the names and location details of the participants were changed. While we have changed the names of most of the participants and their families in order to protect their identity, one participant, Margaret Boswell, was adamant that we should use her real name (and we have). All of the audio recordings were transcribed and destroyed within four weeks of collecting the interviews, in order to protect the

identity of the participants. All data was stored in accordance with GDPR (Data Protection Act 2018).

Thematic analysis

To analyse the data, we drew on Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach to thematic analysis, as this is an effective method to use when seeking to understand a range of experiences, thoughts, or behaviours across a data set (Braun and Clarke, 2012). Moreover, this method is useful for highlighting new and unanticipated insights.

Limitations of the study

We recognise that this study has limitations due to the fact that we only interviewed a small number of Gypsy (ten) and Traveller (three) participants within the defined geographical areas. We are also very aware that everyone is unique and other Gypsies and Travellers may have death rites that they observe that are different from the participants represented in this report.

Funding

Anglia Ruskin University kindly funded this research, with additional financial support from Moving for Change.

What did we learn from Gypsy and Traveller families who have been bereaved?

Funerals are an integral part of society and funeral rites are commonly used to honour the dead and support the bereaved. Because most funerals are public events; they also act to reveal social and cultural values about death and belonging. Our research describes a range of common death rituals and customs that are followed by many Gypsy and Traveller families across England, and it also highlights some of the challenges that families face when their cultural practices are not understood by the wider community and areas where service providers need to enhance the quality of their services (in particular, issues related to the timing

of the funeral cortege, the committal, and headstones).

Historically, nomadic Gypsy and Traveller families had 'wayside burials' (known as *dre the puv*, or in-the-field burials), and some of the earliest records of this practice date from 1641. The latest documentation of this practice can be seen in records from the Chatsworth Estate (in Derbyshire), which recorded a wayside burial in 1920 on unconsecrated ground (Dawson, 2000). However, nowadays, it is important for Gypsy and Traveller families to have a Christian burial on consecrated ground, regardless of the family being nomadic or living in permanent accommodation. The majority of Gypsies and Travellers are Christians (ONS, 2011) and, therefore, many of the death rites and funeral practices are informed by their religious *and* cultural beliefs and most families will usually choose a burial and it is rare for them to opt for a cremation, although it is important to recognise that beliefs and practices may vary within families.

Most people have an idea of what might be considered to be a 'good funeral' (O'Rourke et al, 2011) and key features of a good funeral for the Gypsies and Travellers is that time is taken for



Wayside burial Chatsworth Estate Circa 1920.
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the process (i.e., people don't feel rushed), that dignity is maintained for both the deceased and their family, and that the families' cultural needs are taken into account. Indeed, most funerals are very formal, and Clara, a Romany Gypsy, suggested:

"Gypsy and Traveller funerals might be considered to be the last of the Victorians, as we like the traditional ways of doing things."

Research suggests that Victorian funerals were associated with particular customs and dress, and they were designed to show respect for the deceased by proving to be 'decent' and dignified affairs (Walvin, 1982), and the 'Victorian way of death' continues to be important for many Gypsies and Travellers in England today. However, Shona (an Irish Traveller) told us that while many families like funerals to be conducted "in the old way", it is also common for the deceased to be returned to Ireland to be buried, with the Catholic faith and Traveller traditions informing the rites for funeral. However, the Irish Travellers we interviewed for this study had decided to have their loved ones buried in England.

Gypsy and Traveller experiences of funeral directors¹

Similar to most other families in the UK, Gypsies and Travellers will usually commission funeral directors (undertakers) to manage and conduct funeral arrangements, and they will usually remove the deceased to the funeral home and prepare the body for burial. They are also responsible for conveying the body to the place of worship and internment, as well as liaising with cemeteries and dealing with legal requirements (see Appendix A for Rigg and Parsons's (2018) list of the responsibilities of funeral directors).

Most of the Gypsy and Traveller families told us that they prefer to use a funeral director who is already known to the family. For example, Robert (a Romany Gypsy) told us about the funeral director that his family used when planning the funeral for his uncle:

"Well, it was somebody that the family knew that buried 'cos on that site [trailer/ caravan site] where he lived, it was quite a big site and quite a few people on there had passed away beforehand and he knew how the Traveller community did the thing ... like I say, he had done Travellers and that before and we had a horse-drawn hearse and because Arthur like the big horses, he did as well as expected ..."

It was also interesting to hear about Betsy's sister, Margaret, who had already decided on her own funeral arrangements before she passed away. Betsy (a Romany Gypsy) recalled:

"She always said that she had a black book, and that she put everything in a little black book, she used to say, when she was upset or she was tormenting us, 'It's all going in the little black book!', but we never believed there was a black book and we always thought that she might have told the pastor, because she was very close to Peter, that's her pastor. But when she passed away, he didn't know nothing, and all we did, we found the black book on her shelf in the bedroom, where we could all see it and everything she wanted done and not done was in that black book ..."

While Margaret kept her own record of her wishes on her demise, the writing of a will is not common in most Gypsy and Traveller families and this is due to a range of factors, including a lack of trust of people outside of the community and literacy issues although more recently, some Gypsy and Traveller people have now started to write wills.

Saving up and paying for funerals

Funerals are culturally significant events and, in most Gypsy and Traveller families, there is a strong cultural expectation that the dead should be given a 'good send-off'. This usually involves a large funeral cortege often involving hundreds of mourners and potentially incurring considerable expense. However, it is notable that many Gypsy and Traveller families will want to pay for the funeral in cash, as many do not have a bank account and may not have access to bank loans or credit cards (House of Commons 2019b; Shelter Scotland, 2015). In part, a lack of bank accounts is related to issues concerning low levels of literacy within the community, as

well as concerns about a lack of trust of the 'gorger' people (i.e., the non-Gypsy community) and given the communities experiences of discrimination (Friends, Families and Travellers et al, 2022), this is not surprising.

In common with the wider community, most Gypsy and Traveller families consider financial issues to be private, and therefore it is helpful for the funeral director to agree a time to discuss this (and then family members can decide who should be involved in this discussion). Moreover, it is important for the funeral director to explain the expenses to the family, and they should be given an itemised invoice (as this can be verified with other family members who are literate). However, it should be noted that while there is a cultural expectation of a large funeral, the majority of Gypsy and Traveller families live in extreme poverty (Millan and Smith, 2019; House of Commons, 2019a), and the cost of a funeral may place families under extreme financial pressure for many years after the event. Clara explained that issues related to money and funerals were not always understood by families and this could make it difficult if they wanted to contest an item on the invoice. She explained:

"I have heard of families being charged by funeral directors to move the deceased across all the county boundaries! That is not right. ... One Gypsy man I know was very unhappy with the funeral – she told me 'I did want to discuss the bill with the [funeral] director but the rest of the family didn't want to as they said it made us look like we did not care and that we did not want to pay the bill'."

The significance of silence

Silence is often linked to respect for the bereaved and the dead, and most funeral directors are familiar with the value of it. However, sometimes, during the planning of a funeral, Gypsy and Traveller families may deflect, or close down, conversations about sensitive topics or use silence in response to a question. This may be because the funeral director has asked something insensitive, or they may have breached what might be considered as culturally appropriate to discuss in front of strangers. For example, traditional gender roles are common in many Gypsy and Traveller families, and issues

relating to men's and women's bodies are not usually discussed in front of people from the opposite gender. Conversely, a funeral director may use terminology about funeral processes that is not familiar to the family, and so family members may use silence so that they do not commit themselves to something that they are not clear about. Therefore, it is important for funeral directors to take time with the family and repeat important information to them but also to be sensitive to issues that people may not want to discuss.

Telling others about the passing of a loved one

Family and friends will usually be informed about the death of a family member or friend, either face to face or by mobile phone. Condolence cards are not commonly sent in Gypsy and Traveller families due to issues of literacy, and public obituaries in newspapers are also uncommon. Although, in more recent years, obituaries have been written for prominent Gypsies and Travellers and these are often published in the *Travellers' Times* magazine.²

Preparing the body and choosing the coffin

Usually, the body of the deceased is washed and prepared for the funeral by the undertakers, although occasionally, family members may want to do this. Most Gypsy and Traveller families do not seem to have a cultural aversion to embalming, although this may depend on family beliefs.

Once the body has been prepared, someone who is close to the deceased will usually choose the clothing for them. Sometimes, the family will buy new clothes but often they will choose a favourite piece of clothing, or something related to their working lives; for example, some older women might be buried with their pinny (i.e., their apron), symbolising their love of home and family life, and pocket, symbolising the time they kept their family by 'knocking' or hawking from house to house with a basket. Other objects that were meaningful to the deceased may also be

placed in the coffin, such as cigarettes, a sling, lace, etc., and these are often placed in their hand. The family may choose to place photographs in the coffin, depicting a favourite place, or a picture of the family. As Clara reflected:

"Often, families will place photographs in the coffin, although before digital cameras and mobile phones, this meant that families often lost some of the visual history of their family. Many now will put copies in rather than lose the original."

Families will often also choose to place shoes on the feet of the deceased or lay them in the coffin, so that symbolically, they can continue their life journey. Money may also be placed in the hands of those who were dealers or gamblers, or just as a gift for the final road.

The choice of coffins and caskets

Gypsy and Traveller families will have different preferences about the decoration on the coffin. Some people will choose a plain wooden or painted coffin, although many families like it to be carved or painted with religious images or culturally important depictions (such as a roll-top wagon, a horse, a cooking pot, boxing gloves, a horseshoe, etc.). Some families may want to include painted images that reflect the interests and lives of their loved ones. For example, Sophie explained how they chose a coffin for her Aunt Bethan:

"I was there when my uncle Freddy made me come in with him and choose the coffin – that was very emotional, but he insisted that I went in. I've never been in like a funeral parlour before and it was a bit surreal, to be like be choosing something like that, but I did choose, and it had all rose patterns in, cos she loved flowers."

Some families will choose a lead-lined casket rather than a wooden coffin, and this is often chosen so that the earth does not touch the body (although a casket always incurs an additional cost). However, caskets are heavier and wider than coffins, and consequently, funeral directors need to plan ahead, (our research shows that some (inexperienced) ones

had failed to plan for this and, therefore, great distress was caused to the family at the graveside – for details, see the section on the funeral service and burial below). Historically, lead coffins were associated with high status and wealth in Britain and were often used for intramural burials (i.e., in the walls or floors of the church) due to fear of disease (King and Sayer, 2011), although archaeological evidence suggests that lead-lined coffins have been used since Roman Britain (Taylor et al, 1993).

Some families may also choose for the grave to be lined with bricks, for the same reason of keeping soil and insects away from the body. Burial in brick-lined vaults was often found in England in the 18th and early-19th centuries, and they were frequently used in municipal cemeteries during the Industrial Revolution (Mahoney-Swales and Willmott, in Riordan and Mitchell, 2011). However, they fell out of favour in the late-19th century (King and Sayer, 2011), and today they are not common but remain important to some Gypsy and Traveller families.

Rites and customs before the funeral

Once the date for the funeral has been agreed, most Gypsies and Travellers prefer the deceased to be returned to the family for the 'sitting up' or 'wake'. This event occurs prior to the funeral and family and friends come together to pay their last respects to the deceased and to support the immediate family. Sophie, a Romany Gypsy who had lost her aunt and talked about her experience of sitting up, said:

"I know it is overwhelming, 'cos a lot of people come down when somebody dies and it goes on for weeks sometimes and it's like they are taking over, but that's how we show our respect in coming down to say sorry and sit with the people that we love, and probably if gorgery people [non-Gypsy] knew about these traditions, they'd be a bit more thoughtful of them, when it happens."

As Sophie suggests, sometimes this may involve hundreds of people, who will often have travelled very long distances to attend the sitting up / wake and the funeral. For nomadic families,

this might involve having to liaise with the local authority in order to be 'allowed' to stay in the area (due to a lack of authorised stopping places), and then they will move off after the funeral.

Preparing the space for the sitting up/wake

Before the body is returned to the family, many Gypsies and Travellers prepare the space to receive the deceased. Gypsies usually hang the walls of the trailer/room in white sheets in order to receive the body. Often, these sheets are decorated with wildflowers or crucifixes made of ribbon, and these are kept especially for the sitting up and not for domestic use. Some funeral directors who are familiar with this custom will lend the family white sheets and often candlesticks as well, as candles are usually kept alight during the sitting up period. Clara, a Romany Gypsy, explained the cultural meaning of these rites:

"The sheets are used to create a special place ... a kind of cleansing ... it is respectful and creates a special space that is cleansed of the everyday objects to honour the dead, and candles light the way to heaven, I was told."

Martha, a Romany Gypsy, also reflected on some of the other customs that Gypsies often follow:

"When someone has passed away in our family, we don't eat meat until after the funeral, and we like to bring them to their own home, so that they leave in the casket from their own home. The caravan is made like a church inside, it'd be all white cloths and sheets up everywhere, and we have burning candles till morning ... Oh yes, the person shouldn't be in the darkness and the soul needs to see where it's going when it has to go. We lined everything out in the white [inside the caravan]."

However, not all Gypsy families follow this tradition; for example, Betsy's sister Margaret had already decided on her own funeral arrangements before she passed away, as Betsy stated:

"We followed everything she wanted in the book ... Where really, we do believe in white sheets and crosses, she didn't want that. She wanted us to clean up around the place, to make sure everything was clean to make sure we showed love to everybody, and nobody was turned away. She wanted all fresh flowers,



Early 1900's funeral tent of the Lee family. © Johanna Price

no sheets, and crosses, for us all to be kind to one another and love one another. She wanted Peter, her pastor, to take her in own church and do the service in her church and we sat up the night before, we had the wake with her, she wanted the wake, we sat up the night before, made all her friends welcome that she wanted and the family said them all and whatever she had everything that she wanted."

Covering mirrors

For both the Irish Travellers and the Romany Gypsies that we interviewed, the covering of mirrors was discussed and considered important; some people suggested that it was important to do this so that the soul could not catch sight of itself and want to stay in the family home. Therefore, it is important to help the soul depart by covering windows, opening windows, unlocking locks, etc. For example, Janie, an Irish Traveller, talked about some of the traditions that her family followed when their aunt died:

"She was in a chalet at the time, we opened the window and followed all our beliefs."

Janie explained a little about opening the window at the point of death; she stated:

"Yes, well you have to aid the soul not to be tied here if it wants to go – we covered up the mirrors and that. We visited the grave on the 28th day for the prayer, you know."

It is notable that the rites of lighting candles and the covering (or breaking) of mirrors after a death in the family are traditions that are followed in many cultures (Bukiet, 2005); the latter is often linked to the belief that mirrors contain another world and by covering or breaking them, the soul of the deceased can be prevented from remaining in the 'mirror's interior world' (Grummond, 2005). The insights from Janie seem to indicate a similar belief.

Sitting up/holding a wake

The sitting up, for Romany Gypsies, or wake, for Irish Travellers, involves family and friends coming together to pay their respects to the immediate family and honour the dead. These

events usually take place the night before the funeral, although traditionally, this process would have taken many days and nights (often four nights or more), and some Gypsy families still observe a longer sitting-up period. If the deceased had been living in housing, the funeral director will usually return their body to their home, although some families who are born-again Christians may choose to have the sitting up, or wake, in a church or in the funeral parlour; and many Irish Catholic Traveller families also choose to have the deceased stay in the funeral parlour the night before the funeral. However, if the deceased and their family are nomadic, the funeral director will usually return the body in a coffin or casket to the family at an agreed place; this could be in a field, at the side of the road, or in a permanent trailer park. Shona highlighted the significance of coming together for the wake:

"It is very important to allow everyone to pay their respects, that is the big thing, the big thing with the Travellers."

Mary-Ann talked about her family's experiences when planning for her uncle's funeral, and how, as nomads, they needed to find a space for the sitting up. She explained:

"He passed away in a place where we didn't know well, and we didn't know the undertaker. So, we had to explain some things. Well, he [the funeral director] seemed surprised we wanted him [her deceased uncle] back the night before, for sitting. But that's what we have always done – I think it was because we were at the side of the road, a car park actually. The council was alright about it all – they never bothered us although someone rung up about the fire, you know all the men was round the fire and then I think someone rang fire engine after the funeral when we burnt the trailer [caravan]."

Although Mary-Ann spoke in a matter-of-fact manner about holding the sitting up in a car park, this would not have been the family's choice. Travelling is a part of Gypsy and Traveller identity and culture, and yet they are frequently forced into unsuitable stopping areas (such as car parks) due to the chronic shortage of

authorised stopping places for nomadic people (Friends, Family, Travellers, 2021; Lane et al, 2019).³

Once the deceased has been returned to the family, the coffin/casket is usually placed on a side bunk of a trailer (caravan) or into a tent at a house. Although traditionally, in Gypsy culture, the deceased is placed in a dedicated area, as Clara explained:

"At one time, people used to like to be placed outside before they passed away. Not so much now. But some families will still put a tent up or get an old tourer [caravan] and sit with people with that, and that will be got rid of after [i.e., it will be burnt straight after the funeral]."

Family and friends will come to where the deceased is resting and sit for a period of time. Here, people mourn, chat with others, and reminisce about times shared with the deceased, so sometimes there will be laughter, as well as many tears.

It is customary for Gypsy and Traveller families to request an open coffin/casket (i.e., one with an open lid) for the sitting up/wake, unless this is inappropriate due to the cause of death (for example, in the case of an accident). Clara reflected on this cultural practice:

"It makes people sad if you can't have an open casket ... I mean, you know, it's just not fitting to not have an open casket ... people will be a bit upset if they can't do that."

All of the participants who took part in the study described how important it was to share food during the sitting up/wake, although many families also highlighted that they observed a range of abstinences. For example, Martha described her family approach:

"We don't leave that person alone; we sit with them all night taking turns. Then the next morning the casket will be closed and then she would go to the funeral. The men sit outside with the fires and the women sits in the caravans. We don't have any drink [alcohol] going on there, and nobody is eating meat. We have a lot of people there, there could be

60 people, 50 people outside, and it's the women's job to make tea and feed everyone all night, and this goes on till morning."

Pat, a Romany Gypsy, also talked about her family's experiences, stating:

"At home, we always believe that you don't eat meat when somebody's died, somebody that is close to us, we believe that you don't eat meat. We always, if its close, we always like sit up all night, the night before they get buried. ... We probably make a fire and then it would go from about 7 or 8 o'clock, till whatever time they get buried and then like afterwards we'd come back, we'd have a wash and then we would go to bed ..."

Jan, also a Romany Gypsy, talked about sitting up with her nephew who had passed away; she reflected:

"Well, he came home, for the night before [the funeral] and we sat up. A farmer let us burn the tourer in his field – it's hard for some these days; some just get it took away but we do what we've always done and it gets burnt ... I had a nice set of candlesticks from the funeral director lent for the sitting up. All the women was doing the food and, and we had the fire."

Irish Traveller families will usually hold a wake, and most will also request an open coffin. However, Maureen, an Irish Traveller, told us that before her mother had died, she had told them that she wanted something different:

"She didn't want to be brought home for to have it open [the coffin] – if she had died in the house she wanted to go to the chapel of rest and also have a week at the funeral directors with an open coffin. ... We had the wake at the funeral place, it was something that I struggles with – for me I didn't want people coming in – she said Maureen, I want you to do it. It is ignorant not to let people in to see the body, its disrespectful, it's not nice to do that – you have people coming from Ireland, Scotland, Wales, all over the country, so that is what I did, I let everybody in. I think with Travellers, Irish, English, Welsh, it's a big generation ... all different type but we are like the one."

Funeral tent 2014. © S. Spencer



Beliefs about death

As suggested above, most Gypsies and Travellers are Christians, and therefore, their beliefs and funeral practices are usually informed by their religious *and* cultural beliefs. Because all of the people we spoke to follow a Christian belief, predominantly they indicated that a person's spirit/soul would journey into heaven (or an unspecified place) after they died, and many of the rites used by the families were related to the 'last journey' and 'seeing someone off well'. For example, Pat, a Romany Gypsy, talked about her beliefs:

"As a family, I believe what the Bible says, so like after the last breath, like the soul goes to the other life."

Sophie, also a Romany Gypsy, talked about her aunt's beliefs before she died:

"My Aunt Bethna was a very strong Christian; she loved the Lord – all she was interested in was going home to be with the Lord as and when it come; the after bit didn't really bother her."

Betsy, a Romany Gypsy, talked about her family's changing beliefs:

"We did used to believe years ago that we come out on the third night while the soul leaves the body, but she didn't believe in that, and I don't believe in that. Because we are Christians, and we believe that as soon as you take your last breath you are with the Lord. Anyway, she always was a winner, whatever happened to her, whether she died or she lived, she be with the Lord."

However, as an Irish Traveller, Maureen felt that people could only 'rest' once they were buried:

"We believe that the person does not get laid properly to rest until the burial, when they are laid to rest in that place."

As Clara reflected, people's relationships with the land is often complex, and while graveyards are not feared, sometimes Gypsy families may fear certain areas of land when someone has died, as she explained:

"Many [families] will not return back to a place where a close family member has passed away and also there is suspicion of ghosts. Although, as my great gran used to say, there is more to be feared from the living than the dead [laughter]."

However, today, these beliefs are less commonly held by younger Gypsies and most born-again Christians do not follow them.

Burning the trailer/other objects

Traditionally, Gypsy families will burn the trailer (caravan) and personal belongings of the person who has died. This burning of objects is linked to purifying and as a transformative practice, it also liberates the world of the belongings of the person who has passed away. Although often, older people will bequeath objects to family members while they are still alive or talk about who will inherit specific objects (such as jewellery, china, etc.).

Robert talked about his experience when he attended another family funeral:

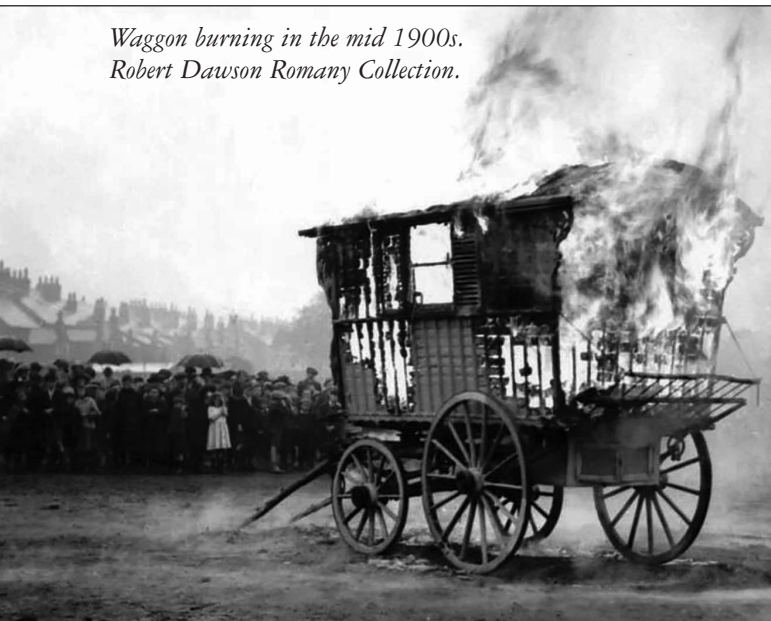
"We went to a funeral a while back – one of the other family died. And when we had the fire outside, they phoned the fire brigade to come down and put the fire out and when the fire brigade come down, we told him what was happening, and they just let it carry on."

Because I think it's a way of life that we've done, and we've done it for hundreds and hundreds of years. We always make a fire outside and stand up outside all night with the deceased, and it's a thing that we always do, and I think they should let us do it."

However, Shona, an Irish Traveller, reflected on her experiences, stating:

"This custom of burning is not as common in Irish Traveller families – most will sell the caravan because it brings back too many painful memories."

*Waggon burning in the mid 1900s.
Robert Dawson Romany Collection.*



*The Irish Flag colours are often used in livery or flowers.
© Rooney family.*



The funeral cortege

Death rites are important in most cultures and the funeral cortege (procession) and burial acts as a focus to honour the deceased and offer comfort to the bereaved. Moreover, as Gamino et al (2011) suggest, it can also reinforce family and friendship ties, and highlight community belonging. However, it has been suggested that the extent to which the mourners might consider the process to be a 'good funeral' will depend on their expectations before the event and how these are met during the funeral (O'Rourke et al, 2011).

As suggested above, Gypsy and Traveller funerals are usually very large events and there is a very public, cultural expression of solidarity in grief, and a 'good funeral' is usually marked by being well attended by family and friends, and the whole process being dignified and not feeling rushed. For example, Sophie reflected on how she and her family found comfort in the funeral:

"It was a very sad, very emotional funeral, because like I said before, he never had no children, even though he classed us all the same, but we knew he was going to be on his own afterwards, but there was a lot of people there for him, the funeral was very big, and it went very smoothly, and we was very happy with how it went."

Pat also described her experience of the funeral procession, which was facilitated by the local police because so many people attended:

"The authorities, they was like very supportive. They come and watched the funeral, with the motorbikes to guide us through, so like everything didn't get broke up."

The funeral cortege will usually involve hundreds of mourners in numerous vans, flatbeds, cars, wagons, etc., as well as the hearse and limousines. Horses are an integral part of Gypsy and Traveller culture and livelihoods and, therefore, it is not surprising that many families choose a traditional horse-drawn hearse for the last journey of a loved one. These usually consist of a glass-windowed carriage and between two and six horses, often adorned with plumes. Many families will choose black plumes for the headdress of the horse, or they may pick a livery colour to match the hearse. For the funeral of a child, a white hearse and livery is often chosen, although some families may also choose this colour for adults. Martha, a Romany Gypsy, described how horses were part of the funeral cortege for her aunt's funeral:

"The funeral director has buried a few people in the family, so we don't have to tell him what we want now; he already knows we like to walk a little bit after the coffin before it goes into the church. So even if we only walk like down the street or to the end of the road, we always like to walk, and the funeral directors know about that. We do like to have some horses there, even if we don't have a horse-drawn hearse, we do like to have some horses there."

Nomadism is an integral part of Gypsy and Traveller culture and for most of the families we spoke to, the journey to the church and graveyard was an essential part of the funeral. On the way to the church, often families wanted the cortege to stop at places that were meaningful to the person who had died. This process might involve just a few stops at a few places or visiting many places, and sometimes this means that the cortege will move across large areas. Jan spoke about the significance of passing the landmarks that were important to her nephew on the way to the church service:

"Yes, we went past the boxing club and had a few minutes there and then went down to

that bit of land that his auntie lived on, you remember we lived with her a long while when me mam was ill. Then we went up passed the old works, everyone stopped on there didn't they, can't believe how that had all changed – it's all built on now."

Mary-Ann also described how important it was for the funeral cortege to honour her uncle by visiting his favourite stopping places:

"Years ago, when they was kids, they used to travel a lot in that neck of the woods and there was about four places in particular, so we had all the cars the cortege you know go from one to the other until we hit the main road to get to the cemetery ..."

Maureen, an Irish Traveller, described her mum's funeral:

"We wanted it big, special, and full of love. ... It had to be you feel it in your culture. The bigger it is, the more you put into it, you want to do more for respect like. ... I wanted to take Mammie a drive around everywhere we went to, you know that meant something to Mammie, me or my brother or sisters. I didn't want just the church and then the grave – that to me would be disrespectful. You've got to have that drive to go to all them places that you used to go so the priest and funeral director were really understanding of that. But there is always a 'but' when you're a Traveller [laughs], there is always a 'but' coming, there is always someone who don't understand or agree with what you are doing ..."

Maureen explained how culturally important it was to travel around to honour her deceased mother, but this process was not understood by the staff in the cemetery:

"I wanted my mother to go into the cemetery about half past 3, because I wanted a good couple of hours driving and going to different churches, where we used to go, stopping, and singing, having the music. The problem was, when we went to the cemetery and I asked the manager in charge I said, 'I am a Traveller, please don't judge me – try and respect my culture to respect my mother'. Mass was at 11 am and I couldn't go straight to the cemetery. It's not our way with us. It's wrong, I'd be disrespecting my mother ... [voice emphasising emotional distress]."



Plumed Horses and carriage in colour coordinated livery
© Siobhan Spencer

[I asked] 'please can I have three hours?'; she wouldn't hear talk of it! She said she got to be in by 12 or 1 pm. ... I begged her to understand, but she wouldn't hear tell of it, I TOLD HER I'M not the same, it cripples you not following tradition [sounding very emotional] ... breaks your heart if you can't give full respect, it's who you are. ... It's what you do and it's not respected, that was a big thing. ... The funeral director couldn't believe it – he understands and has worked for the Travellers up and down the country."

This lack of cultural understanding by the staff in the cemetery was clearly upsetting for the family

and also unnecessary, and it might be suggested that the cemetery in question was also failing in their Public Sector Equality Duty.⁴

Mourning dress

In common with others in the wider community, traditionally, Gypsy and Traveller people wear formal black mourning dress to funerals (including the children), with women often wearing a black dress and a traditional black veil. A veil is now less common at many funerals, but it symbolises loss and can offer a little privacy at a time of great grief. Men and boys usually wear a formal black suit and tie and a white shirt. However, recently, some Gypsy and Traveller families have moved away from wearing black mourning dress and have started to wear brighter colours to funerals.

Nonetheless, close family members of the deceased will often continue to wear the colour black for a mourning period; this may range from three months to a year (depending on the relationship with the person who has died and personal choice). Robert explained his family's approach:



A horse drive is traditional now at many funerals.

© Smith family, New Forest.



Heaven's gates is a very popular floral tribute.
© The Graves End Florist.

"The women wear black for 12 months and the men wear armbands within the close family, you know. Everybody don't wear it, just the close family after the bereavement. ... We have a 12-month, you know, bereavement; we don't go to parties; we don't go to weddings, and we don't go drinking.

The significance of flowers

Flowers are often used at funerals, and they are valued not only for their beauty but also for their fragility and transience (Camporesi, 1994). Most coffins are decorated with flowers, although some Irish Travellers like the coffin to be covered in the Irish tricolours, or a flag.



© Sherrie Smith

Most Gypsy and Traveller families prefer to use a florist who is known to them, who has experience of making the kinds of floral tributes that families like to commission. For example, wreaths often highlight the relationships of the living with the deceased (for example, displaying the words mother, son, grandfather, daughter, etc.) and often illuminate the legacy of a person's life and interests (such as images of a whittling knife, boxing gloves, handbags, cars, bingo, darts, etc.). Similarly, many wreaths draw on cultural symbols and traditions (such as the Gypsy wheel, a trailer, or a horse), as well as religious symbols (such as 'heaven's gate' or a crucifix). In addition, families will often commission very large, formal floral arrangements and wreaths to be mounted on cars, vans, and wagons for the cortege and to be left at the graveside. Mary-Ann talked about the flowers at her uncle's funeral:

"Oh, you know him, he loved his horses, he had the horseshoe, heaven's gate, lorry ... you know, the works [laugh] – a lot of people showed their respect."

In addition, some Irish Traveller families may also choose floral displays that are linked to Ireland, such as the flag, shamrock, or the colours of Ireland, as Shona describes:

"It's important, isn't it, you know, to have those things that makes you remember the person, the heaven's gate, I know now, some



© Sherrie Smith

families have the funeral all colour coordinated like green, white, and gold. It's important to show respect through the flowers, especially to have the long arrangement on the top of the coffin."

Because of the size of Gypsy and Traveller funerals and large floral arrangements, they are usually highly visible to the wider community, and often reported on in the local media. Predominantly, this coverage is respectful, although it is notable that this reporting is often in stark contrast to other journalist outputs in the national and local media concerning Gypsy and Traveller issues, as this often verges on blatant racism (Leeds Gypsy and Traveller Exchange et al, 2022; Ricardson, 2014).⁵

The funeral service and committal

Traditionally, the men in the family will act as pallbearers to carry the coffin into and out of the church, although sometimes women will also take this role. Because most Gypsies and Travellers are Christian, funeral services usually



© Siobhan Spencer



Flowers often reflect a liking for something in life, outside cooking or someone's daily work. © The Floral Art Studio.

follow a traditional 'order of service', informed by their faith and the approach of the pastor/vicar/priest. However, as the majority of the mourners will not be literate (or will have limited literacy), many families will not use prayer books or hymn sheets during the service, and it is common for them to book a choir to sing at a funeral service for the same reason. Although, in some Irish Traveller funerals, the family will book an Irish piper to play in the church and at the graveside for the committal. Many Irish Traveller families will also sing traditional lamenting songs at the coffin side (such as 'Help Me Turn the Wine Back into Water' and '21 Years'), and although many of these songs are not religious, they often link the community to the past; many of the lyrics mention their experiences of oppression, poverty, imprisonment, and the vision of freedom. Each Traveller that has passed will have a favourite song that is sung. Maureen told us:

"When she went into the hole, we all sang her favourite song. I sang until I had no more energy to do it, but it made me feel good."

In addition to the funeral service, many Irish Traveller families also observe a 'month's mind' mass (a Roman Catholic church service) that takes place after the first month. As Shona explained:

"A 'month's mind' is a requiem mass celebrated about one month after a person's



Fire is an important part of daily life.

death, in memory of the deceased. Having masses said for the dead is a very special and important thing for Travellers."

At the end of a funeral service, many Gypsy and Traveller families like to use 'trotters' (i.e. small ponies and traps or flat carts) to parade at speed

around or in front of the church. This can also involve the road going back to the trailer site (where the deceased used to live), or it can take a route going past the favourite places of the deceased.

The committal and distress caused at the graveside

Two of the Gypsies we interviewed shared very distressing experiences, where the grave had not been dug wide enough to take the casket, and this was not detected until the family were gathered by the graveside. Pat described her experiences during the burial of her grandmother:

"I found the director very poor, I found the director very like hard, hard to talk to – it was a woman who was dealing with it, she kept going to, like all complicated things, she didn't make things very clear, then we ordered this here casket from America and she knowed it was coming. The hole wasn't dug for a casket, it was dug for a coffin. When we got there the casket was too big for the hole – we had to take the things what holds the dirt back, we had to take one out, and then we put her down the hole, it wouldn't fit, so we had to take her back out. Then we had to take the other side out and then we tried to like put the casket back down then we had to take her back out, then we had to take the other press thing out and then the casket just barely was touching the corners going down – it was very unprofessional."



© Andrew James.



© The Floral Art Studio.

Unfortunately, this traumatic experience was not unique; Carolyn and Sabrina also experienced the same thing with the loss of their mother and grandmother. Carolyn described her experience:

"We was furious. Me mam was old-fashioned – the one thing she wanted was the old lead-lined casket, you know they bigger, the big ones. Well, we buried her next to me dad and his younger sister, you know the one that never married – well that was lined out with the brick, and it hadn't been checked – it was terrible. [At the burial] I could see one of the men looking concerned and he suddenly got some men together 'cos they could see that this casket was not going down the hole; there was no way it was going to fit. "We was mortified – that should have been checked that it had been dug deep enough to take the casket – that is part of the job of the undertaker, isn't it? My Mark went mad at them after the funeral – he didn't make a fuss then, everyone was digging away and pulling bricks out so they could get the coffin in – that was bad. ... It was all tidied up, but it didn't run smooth like you would like it to run do, you know what I mean? That's what I wanted to tell you because I tell you what I think some of these younger funeral directors don't understand that we have old-fashioned things, we have old-fashioned vaults and they've never learned about them, so they never think of checking it all out. It will aggravate me till my dying day to be honest but that's what I wanted to tell you ..."

Sabrina also asked to be interviewed so that she could talk about this traumatic experience. She

described how the family talked about not paying the funeral director the full amount of money for the distress they had caused, but then she detailed how the process of contesting the invoice would be perceived by the community; she explained:

"I think it should be wider known that you can complain about funerals. I think a lot of us Travellers don't complain because we just want to do the funeral and do a good send-off but when that happened with me gran that wasn't a good send-off and the funeral director didn't seem bothered by it. "Some of the family said we shouldn't pay but you know that looks bad, there should be a place you can complain to. To be honest I didn't want my son going into the director's [undertaker's] office. The bill was paid, me brother paid it and that was that. But I don't think these things should happen. It looks lading [i.e., shameful] if you say you not paying, it looks like you trying to get out of paying for the funeral and that's what trashed us [made us afraid] to complain. You know what some Travellers are like – they'd say 'look at them – can't pay for their own mam's funeral, disgrace'."

As suggested above, brick-lined graves are traditional but less common today (Riordan and Mitchell, 2011); nonetheless, this was clearly a serious omission in planning and coordination by the funeral directors and in each case this lack of planning had a significant and enduring impact on the families. Significantly, this distress could have been avoided, as the caskets and burials were all commissioned through the funeral directors and they should have planned correctly for the size of the caskets, taking into consideration the brick-lined grave. Moreover, as suggested above, an essential element of a good Gypsy and Traveller funeral is that adequate time is allowed for the mourners, and this is seen as an important part of being respectful to the deceased.

Choosing the final resting place

Most Gypsies and Travellers are Christian, and therefore, most families will choose to have the deceased buried on consecrated ground in a

churchyard, rather than a municipal (council-owned/private) graveyard. Our research found that the choice of the final resting place was often informed by family traditions and many families chose a churchyard where other family members are already buried. However, for some Irish Travellers, the choice of the place of burial is more complex because the family often have to think about the country the person might want to be buried in. For example, Janie talked about her aunt's funeral:

"We don't believe in cremation, don't believe it. We like a grave to give respect and pray. To show that they are not forgotten. Right from being little we knew what she wanted, what come ahead of, she wanted to be buried in England and not in Ireland as well, but that upset some of the relatives, but it's her wishes, isn't it? She made it clear, if anything happens, she wanted to be buried."

Traditionally, Gypsy and Traveller families used to be able to purchase burial plots in advance, in specific churchyards, so that family members could be laid to rest together. This idea of a collective burial place is often important, as it denotes a sense of belonging to a family and a community. In our study, several of the Romany Gypsies described how their family members were buried in the same plot with other family members. For example, Martha described how her Aunt Celia was buried:

"Well, she's gone where the rest of the family is. I know where she wanted to be buried at, because there was three maids [unmarried women] of them, and two of them had already passed away. She was the last one, so we already knew where she wanted to go, and she'd already visited the grave and she'd seen the headstone and everything and she was happy with it."

Sophie also described the resting place of her aunt:

"There was already members of the family in the cemetery – it's very small and very quiet, out in the country – as I said before, she loved the countryside and that's where I think he just choosed to bury her ..."

Robert talked about choosing a resting place for his uncle:

"Well, his mam was buried in the same cemetery and his brother, and his sister, and his father and his uncles, so there was quite a few of his family already in the cemetery, and that's where he went in the end."

Pat described how the family chose a place for her grandmother; she reflected:

"The final resting place was [chosen] because we had other family who was already in the cemetery. There was other family there. There's her brothers and sisters and like she wouldn't be on her own."

This was also the same for some Irish Traveller families who had built up a burial tradition in some cemeteries in England. It was important to be buried with family; for example, Maureen described her family's approach:

"All the family come together – we bought the 19 full plots."

However, today, the purchase of burial plots is less common, especially with the overcrowding in many graveyards and cemeteries, and urbanisation has increased the burden upon graveyard space as well as the increased death rate caused by the pandemic (HM Government, 2021b). Consequently, Gypsies' and Travellers' choice of a burial place is now often limited, and it has become unusual to be able to pre-purchase a family burial plot, even though, culturally, there is still a demand for this.

Headstones

Headstones are often considered to be an essential part of funerary practices and have important meanings for most families, although in Britain, prior to the 19th century, typically, only the graves of the wealthy had permanent markers or monuments (Trapeznik et al, 2015). Churchyards are characterised as sacred burial places through religious association (Rugg et al, 2000) and in England, they are regulated by the church⁶ and this has implications for the headstones that are deemed 'acceptable' by the individual church, although it needs to be recognised that the size of headstone is also subject to specific health and safety regulations, as well as wider legislation.

The design and size of the headstone

In common with other communities in the UK, Gypsy and Traveller families usually commission a personalised memorial from a stonemason. These are often large and engraved with significant religious images (such as a crucifix) and culturally important depictions (such as a horse and wagon, hawking baskets, lorries, etc.), as well as quotes that relate to religious beliefs and Gypsy and Traveller life. Gypsy and Traveller headstones have much in common with others in a graveyard, but some families choose to differentiate their family memorials to make them distinct from the others. For example, Robert described his uncle's headstone:

"Well, it was a headstone and he had some finches on it 'cos he used to like the coloured birds and he used to like dogs, and he had some dogs on it and it says on the back of it 'Romany Rye' which means in English 'a Gentleman Gypsy', so that's the way he was ... obviously we have flowers on it, and he's got a miniature wagon on it with a Hiab [lifting gear] on it, that was his lorry he used to go round collecting scrap in. His family got that, and they put that on the grave and they go there visiting. ... Sometimes you do, I know quite a few folks that has come into problems about putting headstones on the graves, 'cos some likes the big ones, some likes the fancy decorations on it, that's just the way we are, but it can be a bit of a problem sometimes, not all the time, just sometimes."

Pat and her family faced some challenges with the church accepting their choice of colour and design of the headstone that they wanted:

"The headstone was made of granite, and I'll tell you a bit about it. It took a bit of time to get 'cos, and because it was somebody close to family, so we wanted it right and we done the best, of what we thought. It's got three plant pots; it's a big stone, so it stands above the rest of it. It stands one different to the ones around it. There's the colouring, like it's not like a normal rock stone, we wanted like a colour, she always liked nice colours. We did have a few hiccups with the stone over the design of it, but like everybody was like, it wasn't like forceful, we all sat down and sorted it all out."

However, several of the Gypsies and Travellers talked to us about some of the problems they faced in getting permission for the headstone that they wanted. Margaret Boswell, a Romany Gypsy, described some of her experiences when they chose a headstone for her father-in-law (who she calls Uncle as a sign of respect):

"Actually, it was the vicar that was the problem. The church council were OK with it, it was the vicar. He didn't like the type of stone and he didn't like the idea of the carving, he said it had to be an 'acceptable gravestone' but Uncle [another relative] is also in that churchyard and his was the same but old stone carved. The vicar wanted us to use another stone mason, [he was] recommending us to move, but I told him I have my own stonemason."

"I was really upset that the grave plot was unmarked for so long and I told him this when we met him in the churchyard – the vicar told me that he is 'up there with the Lord' and that a 'headstone is a privilege'. We etched his stone rather than carved. We have an etching in the middle from when we went to Appleby [horse fair] in the wagon, from a photo. But it seemed that the horseshoe was a problem. We have big horseshoes but that was a problem with the vicar – he said it was a symbol of good luck – we said no, it's not a symbol of good luck, it is a symbol of our culture. Many a man or woman has a stick pin [brooch] with a horseshoe."

"Well, Uncle Gordon's had a horseshoe traditional with atching tan [i.e., a camping or stopping place] scene in the middle, and I couldn't understand as ours was not that much different [from other Gypsy headstones]. Well, a friend researched the horseshoe and why we use it – he sent it in with his letter, and yours for our appeal [talking to Gypsy researcher], there's about four pages of it. He [the vicar] also said to me because Gordon was a celebrity [he was well known for recording Gypsy heritage], he shouldn't get special rules, and everyone should be treated the same."

Reflecting on the impact of these experiences, Margaret stated:

"It's not nice – you feel that you haven't done things right and it's not completed."



A Horse shoe is a traditional symbol of Gypsy culture.
© Siobhan Spencer

The consequences of the delay caused by the vicar's decision about what he considered to be an 'appropriate' headstone caused great distress to the family, not only because they were not allowed to choose culturally appropriate symbolism to honour their uncle, but also, because of the dispute, they had to wait two years before they could raise the headstone.

Moreover, as Clara reflected:

"It's this country, it loves its rules and regulations, and you can't get away from them even when you're dead! [laughs]."

Janie, an Irish Traveller, also described her experience of choosing the headstone for her aunt and the distress it caused her when she was not allowed to have the headstone she wanted; she explained:

"I did want a better stone, but we wasn't really allowed to have what we wanted, we had to come down a foot and a half but the stone is engraved beautiful so that made up for that."

She was very well known and everybody not just the family had her in high regard and we wanted to show that, so to be honest I did go a bit depressed about that ... why is there so much rules and the regulations about the cemetery and the graveyards? Could there be something sent to all the councils about our culture and how we do things. You can't close the chapter on someone's life until the stone is up, and up and down the country families do have problems over the stone that they want – there is some cemeteries OK, but I can't understand why they are not all the same and have the same rules across the country ..."

Jan also faced problems with the design of the headstone and care of the surrounding area; she described to us:

"You can't pre-buy plots now in that cemetery and they wouldn't let us have the kerb stones – they were funny about the height of stone to start with as well, but they agreed to that in the end, but we couldn't get the kerbs that we wanted. I don't know why it was a problem, they were on about keeping the place tidy and cutting grass and apparently kerbs are a problem, but we told them we would cut the grass and keep it down, but they wouldn't agree. Anyway, we got the stone up for the year anniversary so was pleased about that."

Maureen also faced some issues about the size of the headstone:

"Yes, we wanted a stone higher than the four foot, we wanted it to be bigger for it being Mammie, but when I went to the stonemason, he showed me what it said, we can't put one up above four feet!"

As part of this study, we thought it would be useful to also speak to Steve, a stonemason in the north of England, who has created many headstones for Gypsies and Travellers. He told us about some of the problems relating to the regulation of headstones:

"I think they have come over time. As you travel about you can see some pretty big monuments going into decay; unfortunately, if that big monument should fall the cemetery or church would be responsible and they could kill someone. I mean, over the years people move more, and they are not [living] near the grave plot – some people go to live abroad"

can't get back to visit, so general maintenance doesn't get done. So, it can be a problem. I think the stone thing is what is traditional in an area of heritage, so some village churchyards may only allow the natural stones such as, in certain churchyards within the Peak District National Park, sandstone only is permitted in sandstone areas, and limestone only in limestone areas. You can get the regulations from the internet – if you have a look you'll find varying rules; heritage areas are strict."

He also reflected on his experience of ordering large headstones (often favoured by Gypsy and Traveller families):

"It's best to negotiate to be honest because I do explain, we can't go on and break the regulations. I'd be frightened of being sued if we put one on, and then it had to be taken off again. It may be best discussed with the funeral director at the very beginning, who can remind the families to think about regulations at the beginning. But the problem is, people don't always take it in then – I think highlight it then, because after the funeral a year soon goes, you have to let the ground settle before you put the stone on. Then it can be a problem, but there are alternatives that can be done for commemoration – things are changing but I know with the Gypsies and Travellers they are traditional, they still like the vaults, more Victorian way of going on and bigger monuments, especially the Irish Travellers, they do like huge stones – I believe if a person was well known, then the stone has to reflect this."

Joint burial plots

Two of the Gypsy families talked about their experiences of a joint burial plot and Martha described how her Aunt Celia was placed in the grave, and how the headstone marked the passing of the different sisters; she reflected:

"Well, the headstone was already there, it's terracotta granite and there's three pots on the grave to match it – there's a lot of wording on it, because obviously there is three people in the grave. So, there's wording about the eldest sister who went first, then the middle sister, and then she was the last one in. There was five sisters of them, but there's only three what's in that grave, because two of them got married. One of them was my mother and one was my auntie who had a big family. ... We

never had no problems, because like I said, the headstone was already there and, in that cemetery, they are used to the Gypsies being there and know that we like big headstones."

In contrast, Mary-Ann described some of the challenges that the family faced with damage to a pre-existing joint headstone:

"Well, when his wife died, he bought a double plot so he [the uncle] went into that. We always go back one year to the day if possible, to put the headstone on – we are alright in that cemetery and there is a marble stone which just needed the updating and that, we all went. ... We did have a problem with the headstone people because they weren't careful enough and they broke two kerb stones and cracked it – me mam and dad were really upset about it."

The researcher recording the interview stated:

"I remember that; was it put right in the end?"

Mary-Ann replied:

"Yes, thanks to you. I didn't even know there was a, what do you call em, ombudsman⁷ for such things – I thought they wasn't going to do anything about it! But it did get sorted – I wouldn't dream of leaving a grave damaged like that – they must have known that were wrong. We think a lot about our graves – we like to look after them and clean them and keep em upkept."

Betsy reflected on what influenced the choice of the place of burial for her sister:

"Yeah, my mum bought the grave next to my sister Violet that had passed away six years before. So, for her to go in, and my other sister and Margaret picked the grave right next to my sister, so she had a grave. The headstone, me and my sister went to Wigan and ordered the headstone for her."

Understanding the cultural significance of headstones

Technically, headstones can only be raised after a set period of time after the burial (usually six months to a year); this is due to the fact that time is needed to allow the ground to settle after the coffin/casket has been laid to rest. For most Gypsy and Traveller families, the first



The horseshoe symbol on the very much respected Gordon Boswell's Grave seemed to cause controversy

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anniversary of a death is important and the setting of the headstone usually marks this event. Shona explained the importance of the timing of the headstones in her Irish Traveller family:

"The blessing of the cross or headstone is very important as well. This is done one year after the person has died. The headstone will have been put up and now it needs to be blessed by the priest. All come, no matter where they are, for this, the end of the first year."

Sophia and her family experienced delays in raising her aunt's headstone:

"The headstone over the Covid never went on until a few months ago. In my immediate family, like my mam's side, it's on a year to the day, and we all go down there. But over with Covid this year, we have never went down. I haven't seen the headstone yet."

While headstones mark the place of burial, they also have other functions and for most Gypsy and Traveller families, the size of the headstone reflects the significance (status) of the deceased

to the family and wider community. Moreover, the inscriptions and etchings on the stone also communicate aspects of belonging such as ethnicity and kinship, and they are often used to celebrate the achievements, occupation, and interests of the deceased over their lifetime, as well as representing religious beliefs.

Historically, there has been a wide variation in the size and style of headstones across the United Kingdom. However, there was a marked change in burial traditions in the second half of the 19th century, moving away from mainly religious burials in church graveyards towards the establishment of large-scale cemeteries. These were under the control of local authorities, resulting in the homogenisation of memorials and consequently the 'different ways for people to express identity had been removed in favour of a "one size fits all" cemetery solution' (King and Sayer, 2011: 208). Moreover, it has been suggested that the new controls of memorials 'not only drew together a wide range of social groups within a single setting but also established to serve the interests of one

particular group' (Buckham, 2003: 116). Indeed, it has been suggested that graveyards have always illuminated the dynamics of class, status, and power of the living at a given time (Nash, 2000), and as Rugg (2006) reminds us, what is considered as 'good cemetery aesthetics' (i.e., what is considered as 'good taste') is culturally constructed.

These historical and theoretical insights are useful for our own study. Our research has highlighted that Gypsy and Traveller families often have distinctive cultural needs and aesthetics related to the significance of the size, colour, and cultural symbols inscribed on headstones. This research study has highlighted how families often found themselves in dispute with the church authorities and, in many cases, the religious minister, who often acted as the sole arbiter of what the authorities considered to be an 'appropriate' headstone.

Indeed, the research indicates that headstones can become 'sites of contestation' and two key factors seem to impact on the perceived 'acceptability' of Gypsy and Traveller headstones by church authorities. These are:

- i) The size of the stone. As suggested above, the size of a headstone is usually controlled by church/council regulations and these normally relate to issues of safety and need to conform to British standards (see House of Commons, 2019b). It would appear that many Gypsies and Travellers are not aware of these regulations, and it would be helpful if funeral directors and stone-masons could make them aware of the size limitations early in the funeral-planning process to avoid distress at a later date.
- ii) The design and colour of the headstone. Several of the participants in this study highlighted that they wanted a specific colour for the stone of the memorial, but some churches limit the choice of stone colour allowed. In addition, some of the Gypsy and Traveller families were not allowed to have culturally meaningful inscriptions placed on the headstones of their loved ones.

Notably, these two areas of contestation are usually debated by church authorities in 'practical' terms, i.e., health and safety, 'fitting in' to the dominant landscape, design, etc.

However, while the health and safety argument is acceptable (due to the risk to lives), issues relating to the colour of the stone, and the images on it, are culturally mediated and there appears to be little reflection by church authorities on the ethnocentrism of decisions relating to headstones.

Certainly, our review of the literature indicates that there is little discussion about the absence of culturally diverse images that are permitted in church graveyards, and our research suggests that Gypsies and Travellers who may hold different aesthetic values to church authorities might find themselves as unwelcome strangers, in a time of considerable emotional and spiritual distress.

Yet, as the Black Lives Matter movement has reminded us, memorials are never politically neutral, and those who stand in the position of being 'arbiters of taste' in relation to memorial headstones can be seen to only represent the views of a specific section of society. Surely this approach to the arbitration of headstones is not fit for purpose in the modern world; indeed as Leyh (2020: 245) argues, 'a human rights approach to memorialization requires transparent processes and inclusive civil society participation and collaboration'.

It is also interesting to note that past research on the graves of Gypsies and Travellers suggests that their ethnicity is not visible in graveyards (see, for example, research by Okely, 1983, 2003; Parker Pearson, 1982; Sanderson, 1969). Insightfully, Clara, reflecting on these views, stated:

"Death does not change your ethnic status; it seems that you can't get away from people denying you exist, even when you're six feet under! Gypsy graves are very obvious."

Certainly, the findings from our study concur with research by Parker and McVeigh (2013), who suggest that most Gypsy and Traveller memorials could be considered as overt expressions of ethnic and cultural identity due to the symbols and designs of headstones.

Customs relating to the grave

Visiting the grave of a loved one is usually taken as a serious responsibility in most Gypsy and

Traveller families. For many Gypsy and Traveller families, the graveside of a loved one not only acts as a place of memorial but also as a conduit between this world and another, and Gypsy people will often visit the grave of a loved one to talk to the person they lost. For example, Clara told us that:

"a couple may take a new baby to the grave to be seen by the person who has died, and newly married couples will sometimes visit the grave of a family member who has passed, so that the deceased can be shown the wedding dress and hear about the planned wedding."

While families will usually visit graves throughout the year, they usually make a special effort to visit the graves of loved ones during significant Christian events, such as Christmas and Easter, as well as birthdays and the anniversary of the death. Although some people visit graves more frequently than others, the maintenance of a grave is usually considered to be a collective/shared responsibility. For example, if a family member is unable to tend a grave because they are on the road, or sick, then they would usually ring around to other family members, or friends, to take responsibility for looking after the grave until they return. Betsy, a Romany Gypsy, reflected on the importance of visiting graves:

"Oh yes, we visit the grave. When it was her birthday, we put chocolates and flowers on, when it's Christmas. My sister goes down every week because I don't live there, I live 100 miles away, but sister Susan goes there every Sunday, takes Margaret's little dog with her to see his mam, and put flowers on, and also my sister Violet the same time."

Clara talked a little more about Gypsy customs:

"At Christmas time, many families choose to deliver wreaths to place on the graves of different families' members, although families and friends will often commemorate their love and loss with other items being placed on the grave at different times. It used to be my job to go with my aunt to tend the graves – she instilled in me never ever walk on anyone's grave, especially the head, including gorgor [non-Gypsy] people's graves, as it's considered very disrespectful ..."

Sophie also talked about the grave of her aunt:

"It's always full of flowers whenever we go down there. I think some of the children put on little animals and things, pretty much, just whatever anybody feels like they wanna do, within reason. Like the kids can put on little things, what they want, you know, just decorated however they feel it to be."

Martha described visiting the grave of her Aunt Celia, who is buried in the same plot as her sisters:

"We do still visit the grave and a lot of the younger grandchildren that didn't even know her, they go up to the grave and they put flowers on there. We still visit the grave."

However, Betsy, a Romany Gypsy and a born-again Christian, suggests that the grave and headstone were not so important to her family because of their religious beliefs; she reflected:

"My sister picked that [the headstone] 'cos she didn't really believe she was in the grave anyway; we don't believe that – we believe that they are with Jesus. So, it wouldn't make any difference to us. Well, everything was alright at that end as well – we got the stone, a bit delayed over the lockdown, but we did get it finally up."

Maureen suggested that the visiting and maintenance of graves is extremely important to Irish Travellers, and it is often considered sinful not to visit, clean, or maintain the grave. She told us:

"I was always brought up to be respectful in the cemeteries and clean up our graves – if I saw sticks and dirt on other graves, I would fetch it up and move it not just my own, you know, if you seen something that fallen over from a grave I pick it up and put it back."

For many Gypsies and Travellers, graves are considered as places to honour the dead and maintain emotional links/relationships with people who have passed. Indeed, they are also social places, where families across different generations can spend time together and reminisce and maintaining the grave of a family member is often considered as a collective responsibility. However, the findings from our

research on visiting graves contrasts with specific research findings of Parker and McVeigh (2013), who suggest that the tending of graves concerns maintaining the boundaries between the Gypsy and non-Gypsy community. Yet our findings indicate that tending graves seems to reinforce family and cultural belonging and does not focus on excluding or marking the boundaries between different ethnic groups. Moreover, other authors have suggested that the reason that Gypsies tend the graves of family members is due to the fear of the malevolent ghosts of the dead who need to be pacified (see, for example, Okely, 1983: 226–227). However, our findings contradict this perspective, and our research indicates that tending graves is a cultural form of ritual observance where the dead are not constructed as ghosts, but held within their ordinary (past) roles, as brothers, sisters, mothers and fathers, grandparents, etc. Moreover, by frequently placing objects, flowers, and food on graves, this maintains connections, memories, and emotional links between the living and the dead. Indeed, the very fact that children are actively encouraged to be both part of the funeral process and to contribute towards memorialising the grave (by leaving memorial objects) highlights that graves are not usually considered as places of fear.

Talking about the dead

As we move into the conclusion of our report, it may be worth reflecting that within most Gypsy and Traveller communities, it is not generally thought to be respectful to bring up the name of a person who has passed away (for example, Aunt Beth, Albert) *unless the family refer to them by name first*, and this approach is also common with Gypsies in other countries such as the Manuš Gypsies of central France (see Williams, 2003). Consequently, in general conversation, it would be more common to refer to people who have died by their relationships with the living (i.e., your mum, dad, daughter, son, grandma, cousin, etc.).

Yet, as Desjarlais (2016) suggests, the death of a family member also denotes a change in the social roles of the living. For example, people often become defined in terms of their new

status of loss and may be described as a widower/widow/orphan. Yet, it is notable that some forms of loss (such as losing a child, a cousin, a friend) do not have a recognised change in social roles/names, although clearly the loss is significant. It is therefore important not to press anyone to talk about relatives unless the conversation is brought up by a family member in the first instance.

Reflection on the research findings

A number of theorists have suggested that death rites and rituals play an important role in helping people to adjust to bereavement and navigate grief (Doka 2002; Castle et al, 2011; Rando, 1984). Understanding the diversity of death rights and rituals not only helps us to promote cultural competence in funeral and cemetery



The memorial stone for many families is important like these.
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practices but also to reflect on our own beliefs about appropriate 'ways of death' (Hoy, 2008). Our research findings highlighted that:

- We need to recognise the cultural needs of Gypsies and Travellers but also respect individual differences (for example, born-again Christians may not follow the traditional beliefs and practices of other Gypsies and Travellers).
- Many Gypsies and Travellers are not literate and therefore additional time should be taken to talk about their cultural/personal needs and concerns at the planning stage. However, as some family members may be literate, service providers should also offer printed information, particularly relating to the detailed costing of the funeral.
- The 'sitting up' or 'the wake' is significant and this needs to be discussed in the early planning for the funeral, as usually the deceased will need to be returned to the family at this time. However, this may not be appropriate for all Gypsy or Traveller families and this cultural rite needs to be discussed at the planning stage.
- Funeral directors have an important role in coordinating relationships with other agencies – our research highlighted the distress that can be caused when there is a failure to pay attention to significant details, such as the size of the casket and planning the size of the grave. Our study clearly demonstrates that a lack of precision in planning can cause great distress to bereaved families.
- The journey to the church and final resting place is deeply significant to most Gypsies and Travellers who are rooted in nomadism. Therefore, careful planning of the route, and the time allocated, should be clarified so that families do not feel rushed.
- Most Gypsy and Traveller funerals are very large events potentially involving hundreds of mourners; therefore, the funeral director may need to negotiate

access to roads with the local police prior to the event.

- There is a need for continuing professional development for funeral directors in order to understand the rites and cultural needs of Gypsy and Traveller cultures in order to improve cultural competency in service delivery.

Recommendations for church/cemetery authorities

- Our research showed that there continues to be a cultural need for *joint family graves*, and we would recommend that church authorities change cemetery regulations so that they can continue to be available to families from different cultural backgrounds.
- While it is recognised that the height of a headstone relates to health and safety, issues related to the designs of headstones are culturally relative. As the Black Lives Matter movement has reminded us, memorials are never politically neutral, and those who stand in the position of being 'arbiters of taste' in relation to memorial headstones can be seen to only represent the views of a specific section of society. Our findings support the view of Leyh (2020: 245), who argues that 'a human rights approach to memorialization requires transparent processes and inclusive civil society participation and collaboration'. We strongly recommend that church/cemetery authorities start a discussion and develop new policies about ethnicity and inclusion in headstones and memorialisation, in order to recognise the needs of diverse cultures and become more inclusive.
- There is a need for continuing professional development for church staff/authorities to understand the rites and cultural needs of Gypsies and Travellers in order to improve cultural competency and create a more inclusive environment for the bereaved.

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Appendix A: Table with permission from Rugg and Parson (2018). Usual Tasks Carried Out by the Funeral Director

Care of the body

- ❖ Arranging for the removal of the body, at any time of the day or night.
- ❖ Preparing the body, which might include embalming, dressing in clothes provided by the client or a shroud (back-less gown to cover the deceased), and
- ❖ giving access to the chapel of rest.

Planning the funeral

- ❖ Receiving instructions for a burial or cremation from a client, either at the funeral director's office (funeral home) or the client's home.
- ❖ Organising the date and time for the funeral, including liaising with cemeteries, crematoria, place of worship, officiants, etc., and
- ❖ providing a written estimate of funeral costs.

Furnishing the funeral

- ❖ Offering a range of coffins and possibly caskets.
- ❖ Offering a range of caskets and urns for cremated remains.
- ❖ Offering a range of vehicles to convey the coffin and mourners.
- ❖ Preparing and inserting announcements about the dead and the funeral in the local newspaper and on any memorial page associated with their business.
- ❖ Discussing and arranging for the purchase and delivery of floral tributes.
- ❖ Discussing the funeral itself, including arranging music for the funeral and any particular requests from the client, and participation from family or friends, and
- ❖ preparing and arranging for the printing of the order of service.

Necessary legal administration

- ❖ Giving advice to the client about registration of the death and/or the coroner's procedure.
- ❖ Arranging for the completion of statutory certificates for cremation or completing and forwarding all documentation required by the cemetery.

On the day of the funeral

- ❖ Supervising the funeral, and provide bearers to carry the coffin.

After the funeral

- ❖ Providing post-funeral contact with regard to donations, cremated remains, or enquiries.
- ❖ Providing an invoice for the service.
- ❖ Receiving and administering charitable donations.
- ❖ Arranging for the collection of cremated remains and also hold them pending collection.
- ❖ Arranging for the burial or scattering of cremated remains, and
- ❖ arranging for the removal and replacement of a memorial covering the grave.

Financial services

- ❖ Arranging for the redemption of any pre-payment funeral plan.
- ❖ Giving advice on state benefits including the Funeral Expenses Payment, and
- ❖ pay all third-party individuals including the cemetery or crematorium, the officiant and the florist; distribute any gratuities.

Occasional Tasks Carried Out by a Funeral Director

- ❖ The transportation of human bodies and cremated remains throughout the UK and worldwide.
- ❖ Receiving human bodies and cremated remains repatriated to the UK and arranging burial or cremation.
- ❖ Arranging double and multiple funerals and children's funerals, including non-viable foetuses.
- ❖ Arranging the burial and cremation of body parts.
- ❖ Arranging for a body or cremated remains to be buried at sea.
- ❖ Transporting bodies bequeathed to medical schools and arranging for the burial or cremation of bodies no longer required by medical schools.
- ❖ Arranging the exhumation of human and cremated remains.
- ❖ The provision of pre-need funeral plans.
- ❖ Advice and provision of monumental masonry.
- ❖ Arranging for the removal of a body from the place of death to a mortuary on behalf of the coroner.
- ❖ Arranging for the removal of a body from the place of death on behalf of third-party organisations, such as Railtrack.
- ❖ Arranging funerals under contract from a local authority or health authority and providing a 'direct cremation' service.

Appendix B:

The Church of England

has diocese-based regulations (i.e. they vary from area to area)¹. The power to authorise gravestones is delegated to parish priests (rectors, vicars, priests in charge, team rectors and team vicars) by the 'Chancellor of the Diocese'. They have authority at their discretion to allow memorials into churchyards in a manner that is consistent with the 'Diocesan Churchyard Regulations' in the different areas of England. These regulations specify the size, materials, and inscriptions on a headstone. While memorial objects (for example, photographs, toys, etc.) are often not permitted, this will depend on the diocese's regulations. Where memorials are in dispute, the 'Chancellor of the Diocese' will decide on the outcome on a case-by-case basis (in other words, this is not an independent appeal process).

The Church in Wales

(Yr Eglwys yng Nghymru) has centralised churchyard regulations,² and this defines the size, with some limitations on the materials that are allowed to be used, although the responsibility of the interpretation of these regulations depends on the minister of the individual church. Any appeal procedures are complex³ and again, there is not an independent appeals process. However, many

people are unaware that they can make a complaint to the Local Government Ombudsman if they have a complaint against a municipal cemetery.⁴

The Church of Scotland. In March 2016, the Scots Kirk and the Scottish Parliament passed the Burial and Cremation (Scotland) Act 2016. Since 1921, all churchyards in Scotland have been in the care of the local authority and it is they who determine the rules about headstones, etc. and the local Kirk Session and minister have had no involvement in these decisions since this date. This is markedly different to the situation with the CofE.

The Church of Ireland

(Eaglais na hÉireann/Kirk o Airlann) is organised on an all-Ireland basis. The Representative Church Body (RCB) exists to serve and support the church, principally by holding property on trust on behalf of the Church of Ireland. The RCB is the legal owner of the majority of Church of Ireland churches and graveyards: www.ireland.anglican.org/cmsfiles/pdf/Resources/ParishResources/LandBuildings/ChurchGraveyardMaintenanceGuidelines.pdf.

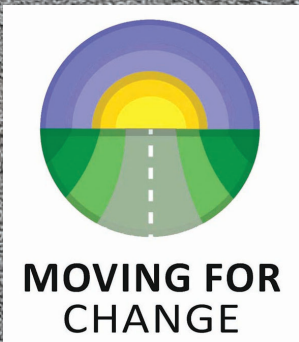
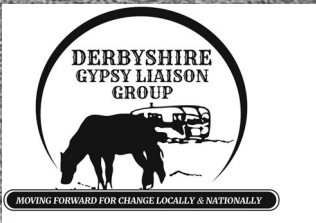
Citizens' Advice has information on how to make a complaint about a funeral service.⁵

Footnotes

- ¹ Each Diocesan area will have guidance related to the Church of England – you can find the areas here: www.churchofengland.org/resources/churchcare/church-buildings-council/how-we-manage-our-buildings/diocesan-advisory.
- ² The Administration of Churchyards vested in the representative body of the church in Wales. With effect from 1 January 2020: https://churcheinwales.contentfiles.net/media/documents/Churchyard_Regulations_2020.pdf.
- ³ The Diocesan Court of the Church of Wales determines all applications for faculties in the diocese: www.law.cardiff.ac.uk/clr/networks/Church%20in%20Wales.pdf.
- ⁴ Public Services Ombudsman for Wales <https://www.ombudsman.wales>. Local Government Ombudsmen (2006) Special Report: Memorial Safety in Local Authority Cemeteries (Wales): www.ombudsman.wales/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Memorial-Safety-in-Local-Authority-Cemeteries-E-I.pdf.
- ⁵ www.citizensadvice.org.uk/family/death-and-wills/complaining-about-a-funeral.

Footnotes

- ¹ According to Rigg and Parsons (2018), while traditionally, funeral services were delivered by family-owned companies, there has been a growth in national companies offering these services. It is notable that people offering funeral services do not have to be licensed, qualified, or registered. However, the industry does have two important trade associations, namely the National Association of Funeral Directors and the British Undertakers Association. They offer information, training, and support to members and have codes of practice to guide the ethical behaviour and standards of members. There are also legal and statutory codes that funeral directors have to follow.
- ² www.travellerstimes.org.uk/about.
- ³ At the time of writing this report, the 'Police, Crime Sentencing and Courts Bill' has been debated by Government and has now received Royal assent to be implemented 28th June; this will essentially create a new criminal offence of trespass – (previously a civil matter) and will represent a direct attack on the nomadic way of life of Gypsy and Traveller communities.
- ⁴ The Public Sector Equality Duty (Section 149 of the Equality Act) requires public bodies to have due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, advance equality of opportunity, and foster good relations between different people carrying out their activities.
- ⁵ Moreover, the Equality and Human Rights Commission (2016) highlighted that Gypsies and Travellers are the most discriminated against ethnic groups in England, Scotland, and Wales: www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/publication-download/healing-divided-britain-need-comprehensive-race-equality-strategy.
- ⁶ See Appendix B for information relating to the devolved nations.
- ⁷ The Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman can investigate complaints about 'maladministration' and 'service failure', and may refer to the 'Ministry of Justice' good practice guidance (2009, 2014), entitled: 'Managing the Safety of Burial Ground Memorials'.



September
2022