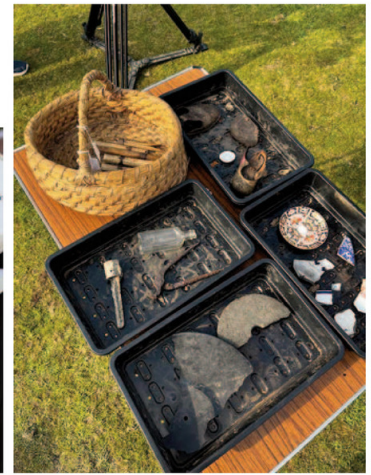


The Romani Community Archaeology Project



ESZTER HALASZ [CENTRE PIC]; ROMANI COMMUNITY ARCHAEOLOGY [2]

Excavating the Thorney Hill Gypsy Rehabilitation Centre

John-Henry Phillips, Kye Preston and Dr Stuart Eve – Romani Community Archaeology – share insights from recent excavations in the New Forest which uncovered the remnants of Thorney Hill compound, and the shocking discovery of a ‘Gypsy Rehabilitation Centre’. It aimed to force the Romani community to live only in designated camps built in the 1960s as a means to coerce, marginalise, and discriminate.

Notes on nomenclature: The language used to describe the Romani is complicated and is dependent on which part of which communities you are coming from or describing. Throughout this article we use the term Romani to denote the worldwide ethnic group; Romany Gypsies is used to specifically denote the British Romani people (also known as Romanichal). We also use the historic terms Gypsy and Gypsies when discussing historical sources.

This article has been co-authored by members of Romani Community Archaeology: John-Henry Phillips, an archaeologist from a Romani background, gives his personal perspective on what it means to be Romani and working in archaeology today, Kye Preston, an undergraduate history student at Southampton University and direct descendant of one of the families housed at Thorney Hill, presents the history and evolution of the Gypsy compounds in the New Forest.

Dr Stu Eve, a professional archaeologist, and CEO of Wessex Archaeology, provides the archaeological context and initial results from fieldwork undertaken in September 2024. Many thanks are due to the National Lottery Heritage Fund, Angus Harley of New Forest Heritage Centre, and all the many volunteers and community participants that have made this project possible.

Being a Romani archaeologist: John-Henry Phillips

A few years ago, I read an academic article which stated that there had been

Opposite, l-r: Vinyl record, side D of Cream's Wheels of Fire album; an Ordnance Survey map showing the Gypsy Rehabilitation Centre; a selection of artefacts laid out for filming Digging For Britain



Below: Test-pit locations overlaid on Google Earth image showing the patch marks of the Rehabilitation Centre, and (above) the study site location

no archaeology undertaken of Romani culture because there were no archaeologists from a Romani background.

This statement, knowingly or not, was touching upon the long list of devastating statistics that permeate Romani communities across the globe: low educational attainment, low life expectancy, high suicide rates, high

economic exclusion, and shocking levels of verbal and physical racist attacks, to name but a few.

With just 1% of people from a Romani background reaching university-level education, it is little surprise that were, as the article stated, no archaeologists from a Romani background – or at least none who were open about it; many Romani people working in all sorts of





Above: The prefabricated buildings at Thorney Hill

careers hide their ethnicity to try to minimise their experiences of what is commonly known as the “last acceptable form of racism”.

But I am an archaeologist, and I am from a Romani background – something that I have never hidden and have always been extremely proud of, even during my years as a commercial archaeologist on building sites, forced to listen to a near daily barrage of anti-Gypsy racism on site.

I had, though, never brought my background into my career. It never seemed relevant to the work that I did. Then, in 2020, I was living in the Rocky Mountains in Canada, writing my first book about an expedition I ran to find

a lost Second World War shipwreck. I had met many people out there, from vastly different walks of life, who expressed racist views towards First Nations people.

The statements, jokes, and victim-blaming attitude all rang so familiarly with what I, and anyone else from a similar background, had learned to accept as the norm when said about Romany Gypsies back home in the United Kingdom.

The government-instigated cultural genocide of the First Nations was, likewise, eye-opening, a similar experience to that of Romany Gypsies over the last five centuries. It was these realisations, along with a cultural shift

towards discussions on racism in the aftermath of Black Lives Matter, and a final incident before boarding the plane back to the UK in which a British man who had emigrated to Canada told me that he had left Britain because there were ‘too many Pikeys’ – a racist slur as awful, offensive, and as traumatic as any other, that the idea to talk about my background in the context of my career was born.

I first approached the topic of Romani culture from a human rights perspective, even going as far as to earn a Master’s degree in Human Rights, before working for various organisations, and addressing select committees in Parliament.

I wanted to do what I could to change what was possible. I soon found, however, that there are so many anti-Romani laws and endemic institutional and societal racism towards Romany Gypsies, further stoked by a vicious and exploitative media, that challenging any of it feels like running into a brick wall.

Every bit of traction you get in raising the issue of the lack of local authority Traveller sites, is instantly undone by a politician stating publicly with pride that he personally moves boulders in front of fields, or Jimmy Carr saying in a Netflix special to the cheers of a live audience that: ‘When people talk about the Holocaust, they talk about the tragedy and horror of six million Jewish lives being lost to the Nazi war machine. But they never mention the thousands of Gypsies that were killed by the Nazis. No one ever wants to talk about that, because no one ever wants to talk about the positives.’

In contrast, I found that when I spoke about the beautiful culture of Romany Gypsies and contextualised the difficulties communities face today within the long history of our persecution in Britain, people seemed to listen.

Being an archaeologist, talking about history and culture is what we do day in, day out, and it soon became apparent that these two topics were one of the stronger tools in the human rights toolkit that we held.

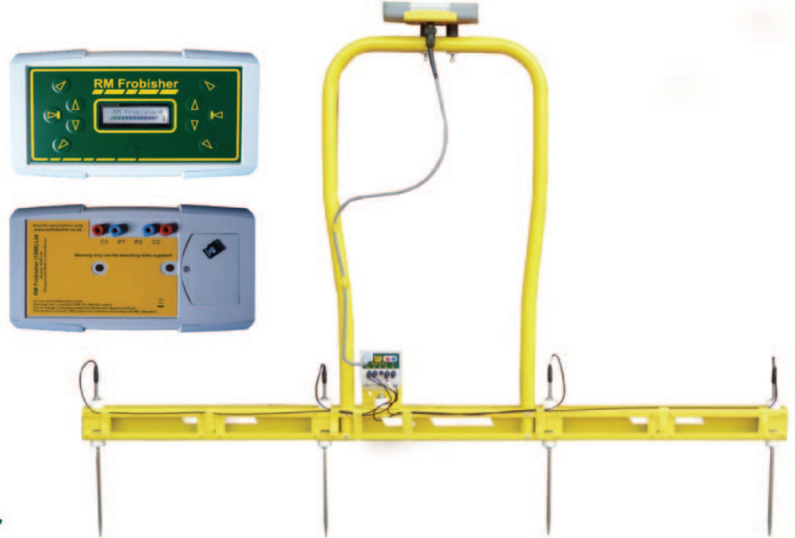
The idea for Romani Community Archaeology came from that concept, and from the inspiring benefits to mental and physical health, skills building, and new opportunities in the heritage sector that co-founder Dr Stu Eve and I had both witnessed through our work on various military veteran-based projects.

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Romani Community Archaeology was created to excavate historic Romani sites, alongside present-day Romani people.

For too long the story and narrative of the Romani people has been dominated by those outside of the community, and the project aims to change that. Although several Romani excavations had taken place in Europe, the aim for the project was for it to be the first of its kind in the United Kingdom.

The Romani

It is thought that Romani people began their migration from Northern India around 1500 years ago, travelling across the world, before arriving in the United Kingdom 500 years ago. Almost as soon as they arrived, Romani communities were targeted by the authorities and the public.

The *Egyptians Acts* of 1530 and 1554 (named after the incorrect assumption that, owing to their dark complexion, Romani people had arrived from Egypt) were not repealed until 1856, and were created to rid the realm of Romany Gypsies by forcing Romani people to abandon their 'naughty, idle and ungodly life and company'.

This was to be done by settling down and abandoning nomadism or leaving the country. Not doing so could be punishable by execution. Many Romany people were executed up until the 1660s, by which time Oliver Cromwell's government had begun to send Romany Gypsies to North America to be enslaved on plantations.

A regular roll-out of anti-Romany laws took place from then on, gradually stripping away the rights of Romany people in an attempt to wipe the culture from the country.

These laws never did see the United Kingdom rid itself of what it deemed the 'Gypsy Problem.' Romany communities, instead, existed on the peripherals of society, clawing back autonomy and a form of nomadic economy through traditional cultural traits such as fortune telling and tea reading, horse trading, and the selling of crafts such as wooden pegs, flowers, and lace.

The laws did, however, make life for Romany Gypsies increasingly difficult, while setting in place the seeds of systemic issues, the results of which still impact Romani people born today.

By the twentieth century, brief periods of general acceptance of the nomadic economy of Romany Gypsies occurred in

the aftermath of the world wars, when hands were desperately needed to rebuild the country.

By the end of the 1950s, as post-war Britain was finding its feet, the centuries-old way of life was no longer seen as viable to those in charge.

The *Caravan Sites and Control of Development Act 1960*, stripped away the majority of remaining rights to nomadism and closed traditional stopping places in use for centuries, and while the *Caravan Sites Act 1960* saw the Government building a number of permanent Traveller sites, this obligation was soon repealed, creating a chronic shortage of places for Romany Gypsies which remains one of the biggest issues still facing the community today.

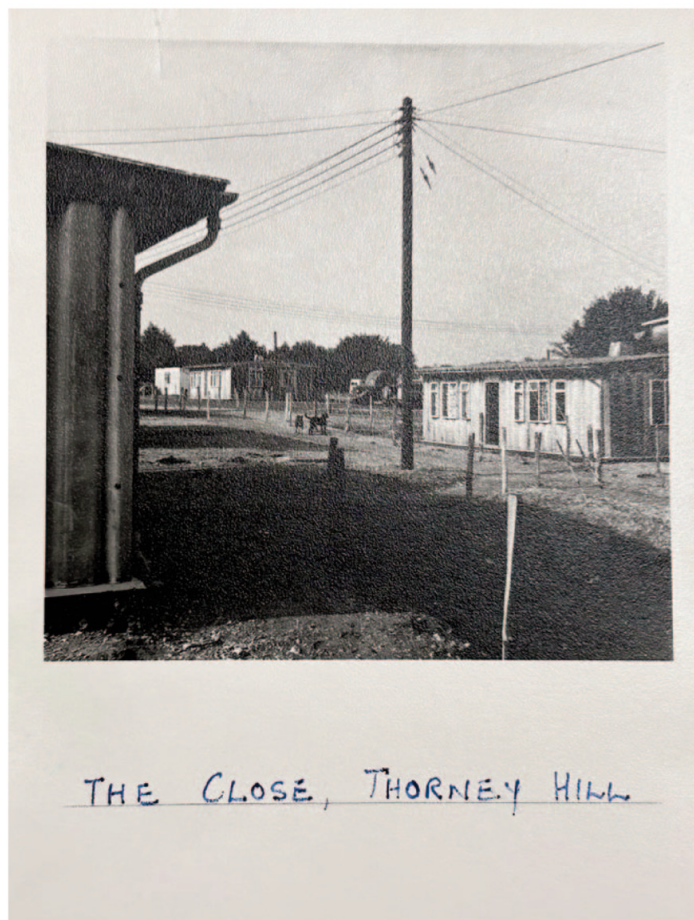
It is within this history of targeted legislation that the site that Romani Community Archaeology planned to excavate sits: one of the former Romany Gypsy compounds built within the New Forest, at Thorney Hill, close to the village of Bransgore.

The Thorney Hill 'Gypsy Rehabilitation Centre' Kye Preston

The New Forest has long been a place of great beauty and mystique, attracting visitors in droves, but the twentieth century brought considerable change to the area. A rapid increase in tourism, urbanisation and easy access from London by train meant that the forest Gypsies - inhabitants and in many ways, keepers of the land for over 500 years - were the targets of a new "problem" for local authorities.

It was no longer deemed appropriate for Romany Gypsies to travel throughout the forest, living and working off the land, camping together in small temporary camps that left little trace. Instead, they would need to be dealt with.

The answer, initially, was to force Romany Gypsies living in the forest into seven compounds from 1926 onwards. These compounds, in which permanent structures, floors, or windows were not allowed, were now the only places



Right: Another view of the prefabricated buildings at Thorney Hill

HAMPSHIRE RECORD OFFICE



Gypsy Compound at Thorney Hill.

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This friendly gypsy is breaking up firewood. The rest of the family took cover in the tent immediately the photographer appeared.

Romany Gypsies were allowed to exist within the forest and while originally residents of the compounds were allowed to move between the sites, each compound was eventually locked down and families no longer allowed to travel.

Stripping away the nomadic element of Romani culture and rounding people into compounds meant that their nomadic economy and seasonal work ceased, poverty increased, and the situation for those within the compounds rapidly deteriorated.

By 1947, the compounds were becoming an issue that could no longer be ignored by the authorities who had created them, and the Forestry Commission decided it had to modernise the forest. A committee was established, whose findings, colloquially known as the *Baker Report*, made recommendations for the adjustment of the region.

As part of this, local officials visited the compound at Thorney Hill. Their visit prompted an entire section of the report to debase Romany culture as equivalent to the 'Stone Age'. The justification for this was that the Gypsies lived in unfavourable conditions, with little access to clean water or proper sanitation facilities; at

Above: Thorney Hill 1946: A postcard showing the Gypsy Compound at Thorney Hill

one point a single water tap was shared between 400 people.

There was no mention of the fact that the compound system was a device implemented by the Council in the first place, and that everything they perceived as wrong with the area was in fact a result of an initial lack of governmental assistance 20 years previously.

The report made suggestions for how to deal with what they saw as a 'stain on the welfare state', including the removal of the Gypsies, 'to some place at least five miles distant from the perambulations of the forest'.

If this wasn't practical, then the Council would construct hatted accommodation on the site of the compound. This residential area would be staffed by a warden, who would live in a 'superior type of hut'.

The 'experiment' that the committee agreed on would 'reclaim these people and grade them up to a normal mode of life'. The way they would do this was to provide a site which would educate them in 'ordinary' living standards, with the intention that they then 'graduate to council houses' and 'become tenants in the ordinary way'.

Immediately following the *Baker Report*, the council worked to force this transition without the need for their 'experimental camp' to take shape by building houses and offering them to the local Gypsies. By this time, several Gypsy families were also living adjacent to Thorney Hill at nearby Holmsley, using the former RAF accommodation, or Nissen huts, as shelter.

Very quickly, Thorney Hill went from a small, isolated village with little housing or amenities to a substantially populated village equipped with its own shop and working men's club. The urban expansion facilitated the movement of the Gypsies by giving them an alternative to the wartime shelters and compound, which were becoming increasingly hard to live in.

In 1959, a separate committee group, the Association of Parish Councilsiii, proposed that the solution to the 'Gypsy problem' lay in aligning them with the 'established principles of our progressive civilisation'.

This built on the *Baker Report* by emphasising the need to educate the Gypsy community in what they considered to be 'normal standards' of living. They hoped that having

understood that the 'Gypsy way of life was closing in', parents would voluntarily offer their children to education services and begin a process of assimilation by their own means.

The report itself specifically stated the desire for the 'gradual assimilation of the adult population' into dominant visions of lifestyle and living arrangements.

This committee meeting drew the same conclusions as the *Baker Report*, stressing the potential need for a specially designed camp in which the Gypsies could be taught how to live. Plans for a rehabilitation centre were taking shape between 1947-1959, but nothing was put forward formally at this time other than the reports of the two committees.

The recommendation of the parish committee put forward a vision for 'simplified type housing' that would provide a 'step' between compound and permanent housing. The simplified housing would act as the mediator between the two, educating the gypsies in conventional living and therefore giving them a better chance of adapting to living in permanent council accommodation.

In November 1962, the *Southern Evening Echo* ran the title '£15,000 camp to be built for Gypsies'. It reported on the plans for 'intermediate sites' in which 'rehabilitation' could take place. The Gypsies who would be moved onto this camp would be supervised by resident wardens and a social worker.

The paper observed how the current compound site was 'a cross between a car breaker's yard and a municipal rubbish dump.' The county alderman said in the same extract that it was 'deplorable that there should be 79 children whose parents are denying them the great privilege of education'. However, the Gypsies were 'breeding quicker than they're being housed so the problem is not diminishing'.

In the same year, a Forestry Commission memo claimed that the movement of Gypsy families between forest, rehabilitation centre and council house would act as a 'purge' of younger Gypsies. Its specific target was those who were 'commencing to raise families, which they do so with frightening rapidity.'

The rehousing (which was originally written on the memo as 'elimination') of younger Gypsy families aimed to disrupt hereditary principles by ensuring that



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Above: Archaeologist Dr Stu Eve and archaeology student Katie Whitcher uncover a sewage pipe, from which soil samples were taken to try to confirm stories of parasitic disease within the Gypsy Rehabilitation Centre

Far right: A child's shoe found while fieldwalking

Right: The knife sharpening stone from a traditional Romany Gypsy knife sharpening cart, found while fieldwalking



ROMANI COMMUNITY ARCHAEOLOGY (2)

newly born Gypsy children were raised in a bricks and mortar environment, thus preventing the continuity of nomadism, essential to Gypsy identity.

There was a great deal of interest in what Hampshire were planning. They attracted the attention of most British counties, who all made inquiries into how they were attempting to solve their problem. Among those seeking an insight were civil liberty groups and the United Nations Association of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, who wrote directly to Hampshire County Council for a progress report.

The construction of the site itself gained public traction – in December 1963, a Quaker work camp wrote to the county welfare officer in the hope that the site building could be run as part of their voluntary international work camp

placements. Sourcing the design elements for the site dominated 1963, as the council spent most of the year inspecting various temporary accommodation sites in the Southampton area.

Eventually, they settled on using type 3 universal prefabs, a design dating back to the war, because of how easily they could be assembled and disassembled. The Thorney Hill site cost £19,206, substantially more than the £15,000 the *Southern Evening Echo* had speculated, which covered the foundation work, electrics, ground levelling, and the supply and erection of the prefabs.

The site opened in the summer of 1964, with the first family moving in on 26 July. The site consisted of 15 prefabricated homes, 12 of which were to be given to families living in the nearby

Gypsy compound to slowly introduce them to settled housing.

The purpose of the site was to educate Gypsy families on the qualities of stable, orthodox work, cleanliness, and living standards to prepare them for bricks and mortar living. The site was the first of its kind in England, the blueprint for multiple more sites of the same design in Hampshire at Headley Down, Yateley, and Rownhams, which were built in the following years. The other 11 residents followed in August of the same year. There were two wardens that looked after the 12 families, with a social worker also involved to aid the families in their transition.

In these early months, great emphasis was placed on the furnishing of these properties. The wardens started a scheme in which the Gypsies built their own fences around their prefab for their gardens, and any monies collected from the purchasing of household items such as curtains, floor coverings, or bedding would be put into a community fund, to be regenerated back into the site.

There was also a weekly rent, £1. 10s. od., which contributed to site maintenance. Each family was provided with basic services, including regular refuse collection and delivery services from the local milkman, butcher, and newsagent. The warden's primary role was to grade the Gypsies against a set of criteria which would deem them 'suitable for council accommodation':

1. Regular employment maintained by the head of the household
2. Satisfactory domestic standards in the home
3. Satisfactory personal standards – dress, cleanliness, manner
4. Regularity of children's school attendance
5. Good neighbourliness
6. Regular payment of rent.

Only once families reached these criteria would they be permitted a council house. Partners were encouraged to marry in the conventional way, and the men were guided towards stable jobs by the warden.

A community hall was added onto the site as an extension in the summer of 1965. This space was to be used for a youth club and a Sunday school to further the goal of community education. Progress over the next few years was slight. There was constant monitoring of the families, with a June 1968 progress report claiming that 'the gap is narrowing

Right: A fragment of Imari porcelain imported from Japan in the later 1800s/early 1900s. Royal Crown Derby now manufacture the 'Old Imari' line for the Romany Gypsy market



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Below: An empty bottle of Sloan's Liniment, used for massaging horses



Right: A silver bat or tie pin excavated from a sealed context



and there is no backsliding'. They considered there to have been 'tremendous progression' in relation to the 'shacks and dilapidated caravans that existed there before'.

However, a welfare report of 1970 stated that the rehabilitation process was not easy, and the Gypsies had not responded to the 'expert help, advice and guidance prior to their promotion into the community by way of council housing' in the way the council would have liked them to.

Only half of the original 12 families had been rehoused within those first four years, and even then, two of those had been admitted back into the centre for further 'training' after a period in council houses, making the net total of rehabilitated families four out of a possible 12.

By the end of the 1970s, the rehabilitation centre had closed, and by 1979 no structures remained. It remains unclear just how the scheme ended, but it is undeniable that the council were successful in their plans by the time the site was demolished.

Council houses now lined the parameters of the village and there was no evidence to suggest any Gypsies still lived off the land there. The Gypsies had been forced out of the forest, pushed under the guise of welfare into prefabricated houses and made to assimilate into bricks and mortar.

Some, the council claimed, wanted this shift. Most, however, had no choice but to comply. Centuries of persecution and relentless law-making had made nomadic living an impossibility owing to both systematic discrimination and social marginalisation.

Nomadic living had come to an end in the New Forest as a result of the rehabilitation scheme, and the descendant communities of those moved into council houses face many systemic

ROMANI COMMUNITY ARCHAEOLOGY (2)



inequalities today that are a direct result of the compound system and the rehabilitation centre.

Archaeology and the Romany Gypsies

Dr Stu Eve

Although Romany Gypsies have been an integral part of the UK population for centuries, there have previously been no direct archaeological investigations of Romany sites.

Traditionally nomadic, Romany Gypsy sites could perhaps be considered difficult to find, however, the signs of Romany culture can be seen in the landscape to those who know what to look for: 'Gypsy Lanes', 'Tinkers Woods', 'Gypsy Graves' are marked on Ordnance Survey maps, elaborate headstones found in cemeteries, and the more recent, violent architecture of trees and concrete blocks dragged in front of lanes to prevent stopping.

Traditional nomadic Romany stopping places also have the potential for archaeological investigation. Particular sites and places were often returned to year after year, and horse fairs have taken place in the same locations for centuries.

The site at Thorney Hill was originally a traditional stopping place, before being converted to the Gypsy Rehabilitation Centre, and was eventually abandoned and demolished in the late 1970s. The site was ideal for us to use as a pilot project, having the full history of Romany occupation, as well as the descendants of the original occupants

Above: Archaeology student Katie Whitcher excavates with volunteers Louise Cash and Destiny Cash

Right: The saucer from a child's toy tea set, found while fieldwalking



living in close proximity.

We had always conceived of this project as a community-led project and following an initial picnic with the local community members to ensure their willingness to work with us, we were able to win National Lottery Heritage funding to start work on the site alongside the descendent community.

The archaeological project took place in September 2024 and consisted of the excavation of four small (2x2m) trenches and limited fieldwalking in the local area. Following consultation with Forestry England, New Forest District Council, and the Verderer's Court, the trenches were located according to aerial photographs taken in the hot summer of 2020. Parch marks clearly showed the locations of the prefabricated houses of the Rehabilitation Centre.

Trench 1 was placed over what would turn out to be the remains of a large building to the west of the compound. The aerial imagery showed this to be a slightly different design to the other buildings. A participant named Bronc, whose parents were born in the compound, remembered a community hall once standing where the trench was located, and subsequent research revealed that such a building was constructed a year later than the rest of the site to act as a community centre.

A single line of concrete foundations was uncovered in the trench, at approximately 50cm below the surface, with excavation being halted after the initial clean-up, due to the presence of asbestos tiling (presumably used as roofing or wall-coverings).

Trench 2 was placed over the corner of a suspected building, labelled on the compound plan as a bungalow with an extra bedroom. The excavation revealed both the inside and the outside of the building, although the foundations themselves were grubbed out, with only large concrete fragments remaining. The flooring had been removed, with only the compacted surface beneath the floor present.

A number of finds were recovered from this trench, including a Max Factor lipstick (according to one participant the local girls used to work in the Max Factor factory in Bournemouth); a hat or tie pin; various wires and electronics (perhaps related to the electrics of the building); and ceramic and brick remains.

In addition, a sewer pipe was excavated below the level of the floor – with a riser connection which would have presumably been connected to the main sewage piping of the building. The pipe ran in a southeasterly direction from the corner of the building and disappeared outside the excavated area.

Soil samples were taken from within the pipe, which are currently awaiting analysis for evidence of insect or parasite remains. There are anecdotal stories that parasitic disease was rampant through the compounds and the Rehabilitation Centre, and it is hoped this can be proved through the analysis of these samples.

Trench 3 was originally located in the main central area. However, the vegetation on site was too thick to allow easy excavation of it: Thorney Hill is aptly named for the large amount of thick gorse bushes covering the area.

Therefore, the location was moved 7m directly to the east, located in part by a participant named Chris who was born on the site and remembered his sister's hut being somewhere in the vicinity of the trench. However, excavation of this trench in its new location revealed no archaeological remains and suspected natural soils were encountered approximately 75cm below the surface.

A deeper sondage was excavated over one half of the trench, which confirmed the presence of these natural deposits.

Trench 4 was located over the main road of the compound and was originally placed to hopefully reveal evidence of the original (pre-prefab) compound. The hardcore base for the road surface was encountered bisecting the trench – with natural deposits outside the road area. No other significant finds were recovered from this trench.

Alongside the excavation, field walking was undertaken throughout the area, which yielded many finds. Day-to-day (but no less poignant) objects dating to the 1960s such as cooking pots, milk bottles, fireplace guards, handmade leather shoes, children's toys, number plates, large amounts of ceramic sherds, and even side C/D of the vinyl double album *Wheels of Fire* by Cream were located.

Objects more directly related to Romany Gypsy culture were also recovered. These included metal clippers for trimming the hooves of horses, a bottle of Sloan's liniment used to heal wounds on horses, and the stone wheel from a traditional knife sharpening cart.

Most notably, an original sherd of Imari-ware porcelain produced in Japan in the early 1900s was spotted half-embedded in the forest floor. This artefact is particularly important: It pre-dates a collection created by Royal Crown Derby, a contemporary line inspired by Old Imari patterned porcelain specifically made to target the Romany Gypsy market, which is coveted and collected by Romany Gypsy families to this day.

The discovery of this ceramic type, at a historic Romani site, is of great significance. The discovery of an original Japanese manufactured sherd, made long before the inception of the Royal Crown Derby line, shows a tangible link between the past and the present for an ethnic group that relies heavily on the passing down of stories to preserve our history.

Right: Archaeologist John-Henry Phillips sorts through finds, holding a tool used to trim horse's hooves



ESZTER HALASI



Above: A ceramic chamber pot that was excavated from the site

These traditional Romani artefacts stand as a powerful symbol that, despite the attempts of governing authorities to eradicate Romani culture from the New Forest, which subsequently led to the imposed conditions of the compounds and the Rehabilitation Centre, among the backdrop of wider attempts spanning centuries, that still persist to rid and dehumanise the UK of Romany Gypsies, Romany people still hold tightly onto their culture.

The excavation was undertaken not just to highlight the story of the New Forest Romany Gypsies, or to uncover the past of an ethnic group so often spoken over or not spoken of at all.

It was undertaken to show the prejudice and persecution faced by Romany people in the past and, most importantly, to contextualise how they are targeted today.

The compound system was not the only overt attempt by authorities to forcibly assimilate Romany people. A similar scheme, known as the 'Tinker Experiment', took place in Scotland around the same time, but less tangible

attempts at cultural genocide have taken place consistently for the last 500 years, right up to the *Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act* in 2022, which directly targeted Romany Gypsy culture, and which many view as the final nail in the coffin for ethnic nomadic existence.

By excavating historic Romani sites alongside contemporary Romani communities, we can begin to have difficult conversations that can, with any luck, impact the present, and perhaps even improve the future. ■

An exhibition about the excavation from 24 January – 9 March, from 10am–5pm:

The Close: The Thorney Hill Gypsies 1964–1974 takes place at the New Forest Heritage Centre, Main Carpark, Lyndhurst, SO43 7NY

Or catch the excavation on Digging for Britain Series 12, Episode 6 on BBC iPlayer: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/m0026rl9/digging-for-britain-series-12-6-lost-mansions-and-impaired-prisoners>



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