NO PLACE TO CALL HOME

Inside the Real Lives of Gypsies and Travellers

Katharine Quarmby
A Oneworld Book

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CONTENTS

Prologue vii
Introduction ix
1. ‘Chance of a Lifetime’ 1
2. Neighbours and Nomads 12
3. Never Again 37
4. New Travellers and the Eye of Sauron 61
5. Things Can Only Get Better 75
6. Payback 90
7. ‘We Will Not Leave’ 115
8. Eviction 132
9. Clinging to the Wreckage 152
10. Caught 168
11. Gypsy War in Meriden 187
12. Targeted 209
13. Life on the Margins 227
14. Revival 253
Acknowledgements 288
Further Reading 290
Notes 293
Appendix 321
Index 330
I drove out to Dale Farm on the morning of Wednesday, 19 October 2011, with a sick feeling in my stomach. This, at last, was eviction day for some eighty or so Irish Traveller families, after ten long years of wrangling. There were to be no more phoney wars.

The McCarthys, the Sheridans, the Flynns, the O’Briens and the Slatterys, among others, some of whom I’d first met more than five years earlier, were going to leave their beloved home, Dale Farm, with its scruffy dogs and bumpy tracks, its immaculate gated pitches and tidy caravans and chalets. Back in 2006, there had been little to no press interest in the site, and I had to persuade my editor at *The Economist* that this was a story worth covering. She gave me 850 words.

Now, I had to park at a garden centre a long walk down the lane because there was no room nearer to the site. The world media were there – from Japan, the US, Canada and mainland Europe. I noticed that the air smelt foul. Three helicopters hovered overhead as a plume of smoke drifted upwards from a burning caravan. A few masked protestors shouted obscenities at the police. Many of the Travellers were close to tears, although a few remained defiant. Eviction day was underway.

Mary Ann McCarthy had left the site a few weeks earlier. Grattan Puxon was holed up inside the embattled encampment and wasn’t answering his phone. Finally, two legal observers smuggled me in.

I walked round to the back, where the police and bailiffs had breached the defences at 7 a.m. I almost immediately ran into...
Michelle and Nora Sheridan, who were both near tears. Nora told me: ‘I saw someone being tasered: he fizzed, I tell you,’ as she tried to stop her three boys from going near the police lines. Michelle added: ‘Yes, some of them were throwing stones but it was inhumane. I was running away with a child in my arms. I was terrified.’ Tom, her youngest, who was just eighteen months old, was crying in her arms. Nearby I saw Candy Sheridan, the vice-chairwoman of the Gypsy Council, negotiating with the Bronze Commander to get an ambulance on to the site to evacuate two sick residents.

I looked around at this site that I had visited so many times over the past years. The caravan was still burning, and activists scurried around with little rhyme or reason. A community was being dismantled, real people were losing the only home they’d ever had, yet the scene was unreal, like seeing agit-prop theatre in the round. Dale Farm was a paradox – an iconic symbol of the struggle of nomadic people to find a place to call home – yet in so many ways completely different from life for most Romani Gypsy and Traveller families in the UK. What, in the end, did the battle of Dale Farm signify, and how did it connect to the wider story of the nomads in our midst, and the settled community’s relationship with them? What was this fight really about?

Katharine Quarmby
This book is about some of the last nomadic communities in the UK – called by many names, but generically known to most people as ‘Gypsies’, a contested word that includes, in fact, many separate communities. They include the English and Scotch Romanies, the Welsh Kale Romanies, the Irish Travellers, the British Showpeople and (New) Travellers, as well as their own offshoots, including the Horsedrawns and the Boaters. What unites all of them is their struggle to survive, make homes and hold fast to cultures that often bring them into conflict with the so-called settled community.

I knew, from the moment that I was commissioned to write a book about Britain’s nomadic peoples in the wake of the eviction from Dale Farm, that I had to go much further afield to set that particular location in its rightful context as merely one part of a long and bitter struggle for Traveller sites in this country. Dale Farm was and remains highly significant, but I wanted to visit other trouble spots and interview other nomads – English and Scottish Romani Gypsies and Travellers, and even some of the newly arrived Roma, whose voices also should be heard.

This book, therefore, has its roots in Dale Farm, the first Traveller community I ever visited and of its inhabitants. But it is also the story of another site, Meriden, occupied, like Dale Farm, without planning permission, by Romani Gypsies with roots in Scotland, Wales and England. I also travelled to Glasgow, to interview Slovakian Roma, who had arrived rapidly over a few years, and agencies working with them, and travelled to both the Stow and the Appleby horse fairs to visit Gypsies and
INTRODUCTION

Travellers in trading and holiday mode. I went to Darlington in the North-East to visit the much respected sherar rom, elder Billy Welch, who organises Appleby Fair and has big dreams about getting out the Gypsy and Traveller vote, and to the North-West to talk to the devastated family of Johnny Delaney, a teenager from an Irish Traveller background who was kicked to death for being ‘a Gypsy’ ten years ago. I travelled down to Bristol to talk to veteran New Traveller Tony Thomson about life on the road in the 1980s, and being caught up the vicious policies of the Conservative government at that time. I also journeyed into East Anglia, where New Travellers, Irish Travellers and English Gypsies have made homes, and north of London, to Luton, to meet some of the destitute Romanian Roma who have created a vibrant community in the heart of England with the help of an inspirational Church of England priest named Martin Burrell. I was also invited to a convention in North Yorkshire by the Gypsy evangelical church, Light and Life, which is growing at an exponential rate and whose influence on nomadic cultures in the UK cannot be underestimated.

I could have travelled more – to Rathkeale, where English–Irish Travellers go for weddings, funerals and to have the graves of their ‘dear dead’ blessed once a year, or to Central and Eastern Europe, where most of the world’s Roma population (and the smaller population of Sinti and other nomadic groups) live. But I chose to concentrate on the experience of Gypsies, Roma and Travellers living in the UK – to go deep, rather than wide. But it was striking that many of those I interviewed would phone me from abroad, or from hundreds of miles away from their actual home, completely comfortable having travelled miles to find work – as long as they were with family – or were earning money to keep their family.

I’ve also looked at the resurgent creative life of Britain’s nomads – in poetry, the visual arts, drama and music. I regret not having either the budget or the time to reflect as deeply as I would have liked to on other nomadic British communities – circus and Showpeople as well as the Welsh Kale Gypsies. But their unique experiences deserve books and attention to themselves, rather
than a superficial mention in this one. Of course, any book about Gypsies, Roma and Travellers cannot possibly express the depth and width of the cultures; I just hope that I have given a glimpse into a world that is not as secretive as people claim, but which is understandably private and focused on keeping close family ties alive under enormous stress.

At the heart of this book is the story of families from both Romani Gypsy and Traveller backgrounds caught up in the bitter conflicts at the Dale Farm and Meriden settlements. These families have come to public prominence over the last decade and, over the last six years, all of them have been kind enough to share some of their history with me, for which I am deeply grateful. Between them they have experienced forced eviction, racist crimes, multiple health problems, obstacles in obtaining education and, of course, life on the road, not only in Britain but abroad too. Despite all this, the families I have met have long and proud histories; they are steeped in the traditions and culture of their peoples, which they are rightly anxious and proud to preserve.

I met the Sheridans and the McCarthys in 2006, when I first visited Dale Farm. Mary Ann McCarthy was clearly the matriarch of the Irish Traveller site and, like many journalists, I was taken to see her that April. Her gentle welcome set the tone for my many encounters over the years, and I was sad to see her forced to fight for her home. I met Nora and Michelle Sheridan, who have risen to prominence among the Dale Farm community during the fight over the site clearance, on that same visit. They, like many other families, have been hospitable to me in uncountable ways, sharing their hopes and their worries about what the future holds for British nomads. I met the Townsleys and Burtons at Meriden in 2011. The Townsleys are an old Scottish Gypsy family, mentioned as far back as the time of Bonnie Prince Charlie, and after much travelling around the UK, and even as far away as Canada, put down tentative roots in the Midlands. The well-known English (and Welsh) Gypsy Burton family have traced their line back as far as 1482. The Townsleys and the Burtons are neighbours and close friends.
But these individual stories are only half of the picture. When I set out to write this book, I wanted it to move between the settled community and the nomads with whom we share this island – to give an account of the conflict that has risen between these two ways of life, and other, happier times when we have lived alongside each other in some harmony. I come from a diverse family myself – my family by birth is partly Iranian and partly English; my family by adoption, partly Serbian, Spanish and English. My Iranian birth father sailed the high seas in the Iranian Navy before being jailed after the Iranian Revolution – my birth mother was a white English girl in a seaport. My father comes from a Yorkshire farming family that can trace its roots back hundreds of years. My mother’s family is a hotch-potch of Spanish socialists, artists and Bosnian Serb nationalists, some of whom were jailed for their beliefs. She came to England after the Second World War, not able to speak a word of English. I live in the British settled community but I cherish the fact that, like many, I have roots in more than one community, both here and abroad. I wanted *No Place to Call Home* to speak from that middle point of view.

It has been difficult to encompass both viewpoints, however, because speaking to one side has sometimes meant the other side has sheered away from contact. This was particularly true at Meriden, where contact with the Romani families there meant that those on the other side of the fence, the residents from the settled community, felt that they would not get a fair hearing. My experience encapsulates the problem that we face: neither side feels as though it is being treated fairly. How we get over that – how we play fair with each other – is our challenge, and our necessary goal. Pitting local settled people against nomadic people (who are also often local too) benefits nobody. Both sides in this conflict have inherited a legacy of bitterness, contempt and even, in some cases, hatred between each other. But we do not have to be bound and constrained by that common past. We need to find a way to talk to each other and to move beyond our historical differences.
INTRODUCTION

After all, these divisions are artificial. Since the first Roma, Irish and Scotch Travellers arrived on Britain’s shores, perhaps as long ago as a thousand years, these groups have intermarried with settled people. That practice continues today – ethnic Roma from Central and Eastern Europe are now marrying into English Gypsy and Irish Traveller families, as well as into the settled community. It is estimated that as many as thirty per cent of people in the county of Kent may have Romani blood, and similar estimates hold true in other areas, particularly in the North-East, East Anglia and around London. For all the wish to hold fast to a proud, sometimes separatist culture, DNA testing of some of the oldest Romani Gypsy families appears poised to find that these lines are heavily European, though they may well carry Asian phenotypes in keeping with their origin stories.1

As someone who is myself half Iranian and half English, I find these sorts of discoveries exhilarating rather than worrying. Not everyone feels the same about ethnic diversity, but the truth is that no pure bloodlines divide the settled community from British nomads. We all belong to these shores and may as well learn to live together, or at least alongside each other, better than we do at the moment. Indeed, most of the English and Scotch Gypsies, as well as the Irish Travellers who were born here, are more British, ethnically and culturally, than many of us in the settled community. Visiting the horse fairs where Gypsies and Travellers trade together is a glimpse into two sometimes separate cultures, but it is also a glimpse back into Old England. Once-cherished skills like riding bareback, skinning rabbits, handing down songs in the oral tradition, making pegs, cooking outdoors over campfires and trading horses, for example, are part of our ancient common culture, not skills that set Gypsies and Travellers apart from everyone else.

Despite all the grimness of the Dale Farm eviction, despite the racism that so many nomads confront, despite the contaminated conditions in which so many are forced to live because of the paucity of sites, I am hopeful. I am hopeful that things will change for the better, for all of us. This isn’t wistful optimism,
however. Right back in 2006, on my first visit to Dale Farm, I was struck by the resilience, optimism and kindness of so many of the Travellers I met. More than six years on I can see change and revival at every level. The Pentecostal Life and Light church is for the Gypsy people, led by the community and increasingly self-confident about its identity. Like the black Baptist churches in 1960s America, it is giving Gypsies and Travellers the tools they need to speak out – to serve as witnesses to their condition and as actors to change it. Perhaps a leader in the mould of Martin Luther King Jnr will come from this root. The strong edicts against drunkenness, domestic violence and drugs have something of the early Methodists in them too, with their emphasis on self-reliance and pride. Many Irish Travellers maintain a strong Catholic faith – I don’t think I have ever met as many devout people as I have in getting to know Gypsy and Traveller families over the past few years.

The increasing importance that the communities themselves place on education, particularly among women and children, is heartening. Seeing Gypsy and Irish Traveller women – Candy Sheridan, Maggie Smith-Bendell, Siobhan Spencer and Janie Codona, to name but a few – speaking out about their communities and politics is truly exhilarating. The growing number of self-confident Gypsy and Traveller artists working in the visual arts, poetry, drama and music, and making international connections, has something to teach us all on this insular little island. The push by elders like Billy Welch, and influential men and women in the Irish Traveller community, including Candy Sheridan, Alexander Thomson, Pat Rooney and others to get out the Gypsy and Traveller vote, could give the communities the electoral pressure they so clearly need to push through proper accommodation and respect for their communities.

Lastly, in this book, I have used the words ‘Romani’, ‘Romany’, ‘Romanies’ and ‘Gypsy’ somewhat interchangeably. Some people from that particular community use one to describe themselves, some another. Indeed, artists, activists, academics and community members continue to debate which word they prefer to this day. A
number of internationally renowned artists have now ‘reclaimed’ the word ‘Gypsy’, as they say it describes an international identity better than the words ‘Rom’ or ‘Roma’. This is not for me to judge. I have, in all cases, tried to use the words that the person used to describe themselves in each case. Any insult is inadvertent and should these choices offend anyone, I apologise.
He was waiting outside Wickford station for me, an unassuming, quietly spoken man, wearing a black felt fedora, which was his trademark. The fine April morning suited Essex, particularly this part of the Essex countryside, where the garden centres and the houses start to run out until you turn a corner on a dusty, hole-pocked road and find yourself in view of a Traveller site.

The man in the fedora was Grattan Puxon, who had been campaigning for Traveller sites for over forty years before this trip in 2006 to visit Dale Farm. From the outside, it had all the trappings of a place under siege – the heavy gate made of scaffolding poles barred the way in, though a banner inscribed ‘Save Dale Farm’ fluttered invitingly. Dale Farm, billed by the authorities and the media as the largest encampment of Gypsies and Travellers in Britain, sprawled over several acres and was home to about a thousand people. Some of the pitches had barbed wire running along their perimeters.

Grattan turned right onto the grandly named Camellia Drive and came to a cream-coloured chalet set in an immaculate pitch, which was decked out with flowers in pots, a low red-brick wall and statues of lions proudly sitting on the gateposts – a chalet belonging to Mary Ann McCarthy.

Mary Ann, a softly spoken grandmother of seven with dark, carefully set hair, welcomed us into her spotless chalet. Grattan and I sat down on her cream three-piece suite, covered in plastic to protect the fabric, and were offered cups of strong tea. In the
kitchen, one of Mary Ann’s daughters was hard at work scrubbing out every single cupboard. Most people from the ‘settled community’ have heard that Traveller sites and homes are dirty places – a pernicious myth. The chalet was tidy and clearly cherished, with alcoves built to show off statues of Jesus and the Virgin Mary, alongside Mary Ann’s Crown Derby china and lovingly dusted wax flowers and fruit.

In 2004, she had taken the fateful decision to move to Dale Farm. She was a widow and she needed to find a way to support herself. ‘It was government guidance; they told us that Gypsies and Travellers should provide for themselves, so we did that,’ she explained. ‘We bought the scrap yard: one half of it was already passed for planning permission and our relations were living there.’ Her five daughters and son-in-law lived on the site, and she had grandchildren dashing in and out of her chalet before and after school. She was learning how to read for the first time. She and her grandchildren would pore over the easy readers they would bring back from school, learning together.

‘Dale Farm is the chance of a lifetime. We can get education, start to use computers and all. We won’t have the time to get education if we get moved from post to pillar again,’ Mary Ann told us. ‘We want to live like human beings, not like rats.’ Dale Farm was the epitome of a settled, matronly, Traveller’s life and her chalet was the perfect home – ‘We get smothered living in a house; we feel like we have been put in jail.’ But her wish to be left alone to live with her family in a close-knit community was not to be.

Mary Ann’s neighbours, sisters Nora and Michelle Sheridan, jointly cared for their elderly parents, John and Mary Flynn, who had moved onto the site partly because of health problems. They didn’t want to be on the road again, with police constantly pounding at their caravan door. It was a hard decision to make for a family used to travelling. ‘The Sheridans have always got together in big groups, particularly in seaside towns. I remember them turning up at Great Yarmouth one year with around five hundred trailers, and another big get-together in Rhyl in Wales … Dale Farm was a big compromise, to settle down,’ remembered Grattan.
Nora and Michelle also wanted to give their young children an education. Like Mary Ann, they felt that schooling was a vital part of their children’s hopes to establish a stable way of life. Neither of the Sheridan sisters had gone to school much, and they had both struggled with literacy. A few months before, the local primary school had duly accepted some forty-five Traveller children, but their attendance had thus far been somewhat erratic – and troubled. When they arrived in the schoolroom, all of the non-Traveller children, some three-quarters of the entire intake, had been almost immediately withdrawn from the school. Essex County Council had pledged to keep the school open, though the district council leader questioned this decision: ‘If only a few children turn up each day, shouldn’t our resources be spent elsewhere?’

Mary Ann’s son-in-law Richard Sheridan had spoken out on behalf of the many very young and very old and very sick people who lived at the site, finding comfort in a place where each family could have its own well-kept patch of land. They found that comfort in the sense of community. ‘When Dale Farm was destroyed, they destroyed a community, a village,’ as Candy Sheridan, a member of the Gypsy Council, loosely related to Nora and Michelle Sheridan on her father’s side, would later put it.

But it was a village with just three or four extended Traveller families, living on pitches without planning permission. It was, right from the start, contested land.

Whatever the families wanted, the legal machinations to evict them were gathering pace. Basildon District Council, which was responsible for the site, had voted the year before to evict the people who were living at Dale Farm illegally, at an estimated cost of £1.9 million. Malcolm Buckley, who led the Conservative council at the time, argued that Basildon provided more pitches than most local authorities do. Limited planning permission had been granted to a small number of English Gypsies in the 1990s.
on a site adjoining Dale Farm. Basildon just could not handle more people moving onto Dale Farm.

Around the year 2000, Irish Travellers started to move to Dale Farm. Two Irish Travellers, Patrick Egan and John Sheridan, and a third man, Thomas Anderson, had bought the land at Dale Farm. They acquired it from Ray Bocking, a scrap-yard owner who had recently been bankrupted for breaching green-belt provisions enforced by Basildon Council in 1994.

There was already a cottage on the site, and Patrick Egan moved into it. He named it ‘Dale Farm House’, and he and the other owners set out to divide the remaining land into pitches. They charged up to £20,000 for each pitch – for many of their fellow Irish Traveller families an entire life’s worth of savings. Nonetheless, news spread quickly, and family after family, many loosely related – Egans, Flynns, McCarthys, O’Briens and Sheridans – moved in.

The council and several people living nearby noticed that the number of caravans was increasing sharply. One horrified local resident was Len Gridley. His parents had bought themselves a retirement home, a spacious bungalow called Windy Ridge, in the green belt in 1984. Windy Ridge backed onto Dale Farm. The year they moved in, a handful of English Gypsies from the Saunders and Beany families, had occupied a field in Oak Lane. Len’s family were at first perturbed, as were other residents in the local village of Crays Hill, but the Gypsy families integrated relatively well, with their children mixing in easily at the local primary school. But by 2003, the rateable value of Windy Ridge had been cut in half – due, Len said⁢, to the nature and great number of families occupying Dale Farm.

It wasn’t just Windy Ridge that was down in value; others had seen property prices fall by twenty per cent, according to Len, and it was all due to the Irish Traveller encampment. ‘Say if an elderly couple want to sell up, a young couple wants to come in, they ask, “Where’s the local school?” They go there and find out what the history of the school is – the sale falls through. I mean, who wants to move into a village where you haven’t got a school, you haven’t got the pubs, because these people have ruined it all?’
Len saw clear distinctions between the peaceable English Gypsy families, who kept themselves to themselves, and the Irish ‘clans’, as he called them, who had arrived more recently. Like many other Essex folk, he had known English Gypsies for years. ‘I was brought up with the English Gypsies, they came every year to the bottom field. And I can tell you, when they left every season, that field was left cleaner than they come; they took the attitude we are coming back next year so they don’t leave a mess,’ he said. ‘My sister even married an English Gypsy, and they are still together.

‘It’s all these immigrants, these Irish are immigrants, they have come over here and abused the system,’ explained Len about his views at that time. ‘And if they need alternative sites, they should be limited to ten or twelve caravans. You have to limit the size of the sites and scatter them. It was so big, they took the attitude “in numbers we can have mob rule, intimidate people”; they didn’t get away with it with me, because I fought back.’ Len was sure that others had been intimidated, however. ‘That’s why people won’t speak out against them,’ he said.

The settlement had completely changed the Essex way of life, in Len’s view. ‘The noise, at night-time, you get the tooting and everything else. You couldn’t shut the door and pull the curtains shut and say they weren’t there. When the English [Gypsies] were there, they had a rule: they were living in a community and didn’t want anybody to complain. There was no rubbish in the road … It was when the Irish came that the English left; they didn’t want to be tarred with the same brush.’

It was true that the English Gypsies who were living at Dale Farm mostly sold up and moved on not long after the Irish Travellers arrived. But it’s not clear whether this was in response to the influx of Travellers or the shooting in October 2002 of an English Gypsy, Billy Williams, in what some claim was a land dispute and others say was an issue of mental health. It was these immigrants, these Irish are immigrants, they have come over here and abused the system,’ explained Len about his views at that time. ‘And if they need alternative sites, they should be limited to ten or twelve caravans. You have to limit the size of the sites and scatter them. It was so big, they took the attitude “in numbers we can have mob rule, intimidate people”; they didn’t get away with it with me, because I fought back.’ Len was sure that others had been intimidated, however. ‘That’s why people won’t speak out against them,’ he said.

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saw smuggling there – cigarettes being smuggled in, sofas, three-piece suites,’ he said.

This allegation might well also have had some truth in it, or at least a fair amount of attention to the proceedings of the local courts and newspapers. The affable Richie Sheridan, one of the many Sheridans who had moved to Dale Farm, had been convicted two years earlier for cigarette smuggling. He had allegedly brought the contraband cigarettes into the country in three-piece living room suites that had been manufactured in Poland. In June 2006, just two months after my first visit to Dale Farm with Grattan, Richie pleaded guilty to conspiracy to fraudulently evade excise duty and was sentenced to twelve months in prison.

The stereotypes were settling in along with the residents. Villagers complained of other anti-social behaviour at and around the site: rubbish strewing the road, drunkenness, risky driving. David McPherson-Davis, a local parish councillor, well remembers those early stand-offs. ‘Around 2002 the Irish Travellers started to arrive, and the English Gypsies moved off. We saw the site being bought and divided into chunks – 2002 to 2003 was the worst time for our community. There was a definite trend of Irish Travellers trying to dominate our village; there was sheer confrontation in the shops, and in cars trying to drive us off the road. That was mostly the young men, and it was shocking and appalling.’

Len’s parents were upset by the situation. They couldn’t sell Windy Ridge and move to the Canary Islands, as they had long dreamed of doing. Len spoke with bitterness about how the Irish Travellers had changed their lives. After a number of threats – from both sides – Len was issued with a panic alarm, which he still carries with him at all times. He says his mental health has suffered and he has had to seek psychiatric care.

He felt that the village itself was being shattered. ‘There’s no village community now, no one talks to each other now,’ he said with despair. ‘We tried to get a residents’ association together, but other than a couple of families in this village, I no longer have the time of day with many of them.’
Some of the Travellers had sought out Dale Farm after being evicted from other sites, including one notorious eviction nearby in Borehamwood. In November 2002, after the Conservatives took control of the council and Malcolm Buckley became leader, he and the council decided to take decisive action. They, too, would evict the Travellers.

They were stymied. John Prescott, then Deputy Prime Minister, gave the Travellers two years’ leave to stay. Once a ship’s steward, Prescott had often been the Labour Party’s voice on matters of the working class. ‘The Travellers had moved on there at Dale Farm and ignored the planning requirements,’ Prescott recalled in a rare interview. ‘I didn’t support them living there without planning permission, but the main consideration for me was to give their children the right to go to school, and provide them with time to deal with the problem. I told them, “Come the end of the two years, you will have to go. Accept that you will comply with planning.”’

By 2004 or thereabouts, with this limited leave to remain in place, the community had reached an uneasy truce. For the most part, the Irish Traveller men were away working much of the time, and the women were settling down and sending their children to school. Many were hurt by the persistent hostility they faced, both in the village and in the local media, but they were committed to making something out of Dale Farm. They organised a regular litter pick-up in the lane, clearing the rubbish by hand, even though some of the younger residents throw things out of car windows as they make their way to the site. They wanted to stay put – for the first time in their lives, they had found somewhere that they could call home.

Prescott’s limited permission to remain ran out on 13 May 2005. It was then that court action to clear the site began in earnest.

The next month, on 8 June, the council called a public meeting to decide whether to force the Travellers to leave the site in compliance with green-belt law. Three hundred people crowded into Basildon’s Townsgate Theatre. They included the actor Corin Redgrave, who was running for Parliament on the Peace & Progress party ticket. Redgrave delivered a passionate speech in support
of the Travellers, who he called ‘the most deprived community in the country’. As he made his case, he collapsed. He had suffered a heart attack and nearly died. The meeting was cancelled and the decision to evict was temporarily postponed.8

Not long afterwards, the council passed an order requiring the Travellers to move on. But Basildon officials and local politicians knew there was a fight ahead. The residents at Dale Farm applied for judicial review, pushing off the council’s ability to set a firm date for clearing the site. ‘We have made a reasonable provision. Any alternative site in the district is unacceptable, the site is unsuitable for anyone to live on, and there is a potential issue around contamination,’ Malcolm Buckley explained at the time. ‘We don’t think we should be penalised for our generosity’.

Some in the larger Basildon community felt that generosity was exactly what was needed, most notably a number of parishioners from the Catholic Church of Our Lady of Good Counsel in the nearby parish of Wickford. One was former social worker Ann Kobayashi. ‘I became involved first because … the priest asked me to go up there; I had never been to Dale Farm then,’ she recalled. She was surprised to find the numerous families on the site. They had been all but invisible to her. ‘He asked me to help with a benefits matter, as I had a background in social services. I had never imagined the site was there. Even though I was part of Wickford, I didn’t know it was there.’

During her benefits visits, Ann met Grattan. Soon after, she too became involved in the bigger campaign to save Dale Farm. At that stage, Grattan was playing everything strictly by the book. ‘It started off as “don’t concede, we want to preserve this”.’ As it became more likely that the green-belt argument would win the day, there had to be a back-up plan. They needed to have somewhere to go; they couldn’t assume they would be able to stay. ‘Grattan for years was pursuing the legal route, and then the council homelessness route, in order to demonstrate willingness
and in a sense put pressure on the council to provide culturally appropriate alternatives if Dale Farm had to be conceded,’ Ann said. Grattan wasn’t a committed activist – he was a confirmed advocate. ‘Every week he visited, filled in forms, did legal aid stuff, gave advice, all the other stuff that comes up, that carries on in any group that has literacy difficulties – they have umpteen bits of paper they can’t manage.’

Sean Risdale, then the policy officer for the East of England at the Commission for Racial Equality, was first sent out to Dale Farm around this time. ‘I became aware very quickly that Travellers were probably more discriminated against than any other grouping in society,’ he said. At the time, the office of the Deputy Prime Minister estimated that there were sixteen thousand Traveller caravans across Britain, with only seventy-four per cent of them located on authorised sites. Thirteen per cent camped illegally on other people’s property. The rest – another thirteen per cent – were on sites like Dale Farm, where the travellers own the land but do not have planning permission to live on it. Risdale knew that twenty-five per cent of the 300,000-strong Traveller community lived or regularly passed through the nation’s eastern counties. ‘My immediate reaction was, “What is all the fuss about?” This was a well-ordered set of domestic plots in the middle of a sprawling ex-scrap yard, not a beauty spot violated by unruly incomers … a warm, friendly place to visit, with a very strong sense of community cohesion.’

The judicial review of the council’s eviction order had been expected to come as early as May 2006. The Commission for Racial Equality, then a staunch ally, had intervened in the proceedings to make sure the court took into account the district’s legal obligation to promote good race relations. Risdale was also aware that Prescott’s office had reckoned that another four thousand pitches would need to be found to accommodate Travellers who did not have permission to live on their land. These four thousand pitches had yet to be found.

At the same time, politicians closer to the ground were being lobbied intensively by the residents of Basildon district, who
were urging immediate action – that is, immediate eviction. They needed to lay out a line of arguments to help ensure that the Commission for Racial Equality’s intrusion would not put a halt to their community improvement plan. John Baron, the local MP, was under special pressure from constituents, who were increasingly irked by the lack of progress. Shortly after the temporary leave had expired, in July 2005, Baron had raised the issue in the Commons. ‘In 2003 in essence the government gave the Travellers two years to find alternative sites, during which time no enforcement action could be taken by the council. Yet, during this time, the site quadrupled in size,’ he said. For the record, he had ‘no problem’ with ‘law-abiding Travellers’ but ‘no one can accuse us of discriminating against Travellers or of being intolerant or racist. All that we ask is that everyone obeys the same set of rules, especially if they wish to live in the community. Clearly, that has not happened at the illegal Crays Hill site.’

Separately, Malcolm Buckley called in a firm of bailiffs, Constant and Company, that specialise in removing Travellers, to see if they would take on the job. ‘We have solid expertise going back around five, six years; we go all over the country using common law methods to evict,’ the company’s managing director, Bryan LeCoche, said proudly. ‘The Crays Hill situation, that’s more of a one-off action … I’ve got nothing against Travellers, they are our stock in trade, but what is the contribution made by Travellers to this country?’ he asked. This eviction would go ahead, just like any other. But, rather prophetically, he knew that the aftermath would be different this time – even if the logistics were much the same, the sort of job that wouldn’t ‘faze’ his employees. ‘We have built up a reputation to deal with this very sensitive issue; we are not rent-a-mobs … It is usually fairly cordial – we do respect the fact that these are their homes which are taken into safe storage.’

On the way to Dale Farm, Grattan had taken a detour to Hovefields, which was then under more immediate threat of eviction, to look into charges that Constant and Company’s bailiffs could be violent – which LeCoche refuted. The five families living
at the smaller site expected to be evicted at any time. One of the mothers, her pale face drawn with stress, had been evicted several times before. ‘I was looking at fifty or so police and bailiffs in bullet-proof vests, and I asked them not to block us in, but they did. That was Constant and Co.,’ she said.

If the council managed to get their way, the Irish Travellers who had put down roots at Dale Farm would be on the road again before too long – yet another generation of unwanted nomads.