

Travellers in prison news

Newsletter of the Irish
Chaplaincy in Britain's
Traveller Project

Issue 1
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If you are responsible for your prison's Traveller group and you need advice or resources please get in touch with us.

DALE FARM

Over the past year staff and volunteers of the Irish Chaplaincy have been getting involved in the campaign to save the Dale Farm Irish Traveller site in Basildon, Essex.

Irish Travellers have lived legally at Dale Farm, a former scrap yard, for decades, however in the late 1990's adjoining land was purchased to expand the site beyond its original limits. Planning applications for this extension were refused by the council, which meant that the newer parts of Dale Farm were classed as an unauthorised development.

In March of 2011 after a decade of legal wrangling, Basildon Council voted to evict fifty-four families from the unauthorised section of Dale Farm; an operation that they acknowledged could cost the taxpayer up to £18 million.

VOICES UNHEARD: LAUNCH OF THE TRAVELLERS IN PRISON PROJECT

Welcome to the first edition of Travellers in Prison News, (TIPN). TIPN is the first national newsletter for Travellers in prison. It's designed to provide information, advice and encouragement to Traveller prisoners and to those who work with Travellers.

TIPN comes as a result of a report 'Voices Unheard: A Study of Irish Travellers in Prison' which was recently launched in the Houses of Parliament. One of the main recommendations of 'Voices Unheard' was the need for greater awareness of

Traveller identity in prison and so TIPN is here to meet that need.

TIPN is intended to give a platform to issues affecting Travellers in prison, offering a chance for Travellers in prison to have their voices heard.

So if you are a Traveller or you work with Travellers in prison and you have a comment, a letter, an article, a poem or a drawing please send it (with your contact details) to us at: Irish Chaplaincy in Britain, 50-52 Camden Square, London, NW1 9XB.

SIGN UP!

If you would like to receive future issues of the Travellers in prison e-newsletter please email travellers@irishchaplaincy.org.uk and ask to be put on our mailing list.

The decision to evict has been condemned by the United Nations as well as by religious leaders and organisations such as Amnesty International and the EHRC. Supporters argue that the council has failed in its duty to meet the housing needs of Gypsies and Travellers as set out in the 2004 Housing Act, and that it should have sought out suitable alternative sites before considering a forced eviction. Dale Farm residents claim that they would be happy to move, but that they have nowhere else to go, as all their attempts to get planning permission for alternative sites in the area have been rejected by the council.

Dale Farm is not a unique case; every year up and down the country local authorities spend millions evicting Travellers from unauthorised sites. But with a national shortfall of some 4000 legal pitches, moving Travellers on only leads to a continuous, costly cycle of eviction and further unauthorised development. It is notoriously difficult to get planning permission for new sites with research suggesting that 90% of planning applications from Gypsies and Travellers are rejected, compared to only 20% of applications made by the general population. Many planning applications fail due to local opposition at the consultation stage; opposition which often boils down to cultural misunderstanding and racial prejudice. Trevor Philips, chair of the EHRC has commented that for Gypsies and Travellers: *'Great Britain is still like the*



American Deep South for black people in the 1950s. Extreme levels of public hostility exist in relation to Gypsies and Travellers – fuelled in part by irresponsible media reporting of the kind that would be met with outrage if it was targeted at any other ethnic group'.

On a visit to Dale Farm earlier in the year, Mary Anne McCarthy, a resident whose grandchild were born and raised at Dale Farm spoke to us of her anxiety at being put back out onto the road. The children of Dale Farm have had access to opportunities such as healthcare and education, which her own generation were denied; now she fears that this progress will be lost.

On 20th October after weeks of last minute legal battles and uncertainty Irish Chaplaincy staff were at Dale Farm to witness the residents' last stand. In an unexpected move after 48 hours of tension and clashes with police, Pearl McCarthy asked that all the residents and their supporters

surrender the site. "We have done our best but there is no more to be done," she said, "we might have lost this but we can still walk out of here with dignity. God wants us to walk out of here with a bit of pride in our body. The only way to do this is peacefully and with pride and show the world we are not the monsters they made us out to be, we are respectable people." It was a sad day but a dignified end to the saga. The families who have called this corner of Essex home for more than a decade now face an uncertain future. "This whole sorry episode is utterly senseless and inhumane", Joe Cottrell-Boyce of the Chaplaincy's Travellers Project commented. "Many families are now living on the roadside, with nowhere to legally pull up... Making 300 more Travellers homeless when there is already a dire shortage of Traveller sites nationwide solves nothing and adds to the marginalisation and exclusion of this community."

TOE BY TOE

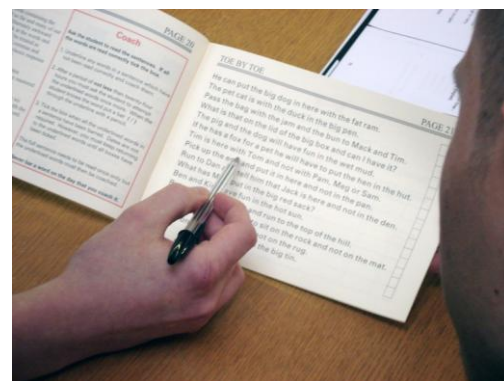
The 'Voices Unheard' study of Irish Travellers in prison reported that 53% of Travellers in prison had serious problems with literacy. Many Travellers, having never had any formal schooling, found that even the most basic literacy classes in prison assumed a level of reading and writing which they did not possess. NOMS' 2008 Race Review found that poor literacy was preventing Gypsy and Traveller prisoners from accessing services and completing offender behaviour programmes.

One reading programme that has enjoyed success amongst Traveller prisoners is the 'Toe by Toe' scheme, run by the Shannon Trust. The Shannon Trust trains prisoner mentors to work with learners on a one-to-one basis for fifteen minutes every day. Learners start with simple phonetics and work through the programme at their own pace.

Stuart, a Toe-by-Toe mentor at a

prison in the West Midlands kindly agreed to describe his work with Traveller prisoners for Travellers in Prison News:

I have been a mentor here since February 2011. The scheme, run by the Shannon Trust, is aimed purely at helping people from all walks of life to learn to, or improve their reading skills. The hardest part as you can imagine, is convincing inmates that the benefits far outweigh any stigma illiteracy attracts. Here myself and my co-mentor have a free hand in organising and running the scheme; it is run by prisoners for prisoners. We have an excellent rapport with the inmates we teach, this is important because they need to be able to trust you to be able to give their best. At the moment we have 13 in the class and six of these are Travellers; almost 50%. The success rate is also very heart-warming. We have one Traveller on the programme who joined us in February after an unsuccessful first attempt due to a clash with a previous mentor. At the time he couldn't read a word, even his phonetics were non-existent. Two weeks ago he finished the Toe by Toe manual and received his gold completion certificate from the area Shannon Trust overseer. This was an incredible achievement made possible by his desire and desperation to read. Another Traveller came to us after his young daughter read to him from a book on a visit; this was the catalyst needed to prompt



him to set an example for his other children. They are now attending school for the first time and you can feel the pride when he talks about this.

All the Travellers we tutor have a positive attitude, they are much maligned here and maybe by the public in general, but getting to know them you see a different side. I for one had a lopsided view before coming to prison, not through any run in with them but purely from media coverage. The one common denominator between them is their loyalty to each other and their families. Now more and more there is a desire to make sure their children have a better start in life, letting their education be the springboard for a better understanding of the Traveller way of life.

I believe that basic reading and writing skills are paramount in rehabilitation. Life is hard enough without the added pressures brought about by everyday form filling for the simplest needs. I for one am passionate about teaching people to read.



NEW PRESIDENT OF IRELAND VISITS TRAVELLERS PROJECT

Michael D. Higgins visited the Irish Chaplaincy in Britain's Travellers Project at their London base in September as part of his presidential campaign. Mr. Higgins who went on to win the presidential election in October spoke about his longstanding work with the Travelling Community in Galway.

The lifelong social justice campaigner praised the work of both ICPO (the Irish Council for Prisoners Overseas) and the Travellers in Prison Project. He said his involvement with marginalised groups again and again showed the connection between opportunities or lack of them, and imprisonment. President Higgins complimented the Travellers in Prison Project's recent publication *Voices Unheard* and said that he hoped that it would lead to a resolution of challenges facing Traveller prisoners.



TOMMY MCCARTHY: A TRAVELLING STAR

For the past couple of years Irish Traveller Tommy McCarthy has been causing quite a stir on the folk music scene. Tommy has been singing since he was a child, picking up songs from relatives while growing up on the Westway Travellers' site in west London and in Birr, County Offaly. It is only since 2008 though, that Tommy has performed to wider audiences beyond his circle of family and friends. In 2010 he recorded his debut album 'Round Top Wagon'.

In a style that is unique to the Irish Traveller tradition, Tommy sings mostly

without instrumental accompaniment, using vocal ornamentation in its place "My mother and grandfather all sang like that." Tommy told the Guardian newspaper earlier in the year, "with a twist in their voice, an up and down. It's always been there." Many of Tommy's songs were unknown or forgotten outside the Traveller community until he began performing them more widely, but had survived within the culture through a strong oral tradition. "I'm going to record for the Irish traditional music archives, songs that they wouldn't have. It's important, I think, me being the last one of my family. Even if Travelling people don't sing our songs, they'll be there for other people and they won't be forgot. People will still sing them."

This year Tommy has been on a school tour, telling Traveller tales and singing songs to children from both the settled and Traveller communities. "We're coming to a time when our way of living is dying," he says. "You need an education to get on. We'll still have our traditions, dealing with horses, our culture, but it's getting harder and harder. You have to think of new ways." Tommy has also expressed an interest in supporting the work of the ICB's Travellers Project, and will hopefully be visiting Traveller groups at prisons around the country to perform his music and talk about the rich culture of the Irish Traveller community.



THE TRAVELLING COMMUNITY AT HMP WYMOTT

*An account of working with Travellers sent in
by a prison chaplain at HMP Wymott*

“To be educated is to travel with a
different view” R.S. Peters

The travelling community at HMP Wymott consists of a very diverse group of people. However, they require no more or no less attention and care than any other group of prisoners. I meet with them as and when it is deemed necessary, I used to meet them as a whole group once a week when we had a significant number in the prison. I now see them individually on a weekly basis because most of them are on the same wing and they usually come to mass on a Sunday.

I am very pleased that all except one of our Travellers can read and write to a reasonable standard and the only one who cannot is being encouraged to attend classes. When we met as a group the Travellers usually set the agenda for the meeting, I found that firstly they wanted to meet and greet and talk with each other about their own personal circumstances. We had many who seemed to be related to each other either by blood or through marriage. We have been in the happy position of being able to help with a lot of resettlement work

for them; we had a wonderful probation officer who had a particular interest in their wellbeing. She would come and explain their license conditions to them before their release.

I noticed over the course of time that there was a real cultural difference between the Irish and English Travellers. We had to work hard to overcome those differences. We had one Romanian gypsy who couldn't speak a word of English when he came. The whole community took him under their wing and managed to help him to communicate to them what his needs were, and they in turn told me and the Officers how we could best meet his needs. That is just one example of how close this kind of community can be. Our Romanian friend soon learned all the necessary English words he needed to communicate and a few extra colourful words I wish they hadn't taught him.

Personally I encourage every Traveller and indeed every prisoner I meet to try to improve their reading and writing skills either by going to education or taking part in the 'toe by toe' programme. I have been utterly amazed at how intelligent and creative our travelling community have been, all they needed in many instances was someone to teach them the basics and then they were up and running on their own. We currently have 2 Travellers who are in the Therapeutic Community wing of the

prison, they are both literate and doing extremely well. The purpose of our Therapeutic Community is to help prisoners who are motivated to give up drugs and change their way of life, the staff on this wing are highly qualified and very supportive of all the prisoners in their endeavour to change. The relationship between prisoners and staff in this wing and in all wings is both challenging and respectful.

The Travellers who leave and get rehoused or relocated to a different prison usually manage to let us know where they are and how they are doing. The Travellers invite me to come and meet their relatives when they visit, this is a great help as it enables me to ascertain how much support and help may be needed in preparation for their resettlement.

We are in the fortunate position here at Wymott of being well supported by Governors', Senior Management Team and all staff who have their best interests at heart.

TRAVELLER TALKS TO THE PROBATION SERVICE ABOUT THE TRAVELLING LIFE

Edward McDonagh, a Travelling man based in London gave a talk to Thames Valley Probation Trust as part of the organisation's Diversity Week. Edward explained the central role that family plays in the life of a Traveller, 'I was away at a course but even for a few days I couldn't stick it. The family's your life.'

Mr McDonagh was speaking alongside Joe Boyce and Conn Mac Gabhann from the Irish Chaplaincy's Travellers Project. Mac Gabhann spoke about the difficulties facing Travellers in prison while Joe Boyce spoke about the experiences of Travellers with HDC (Home Detention Curfew), recall and applications for resettlement on sites.

Mr McDonagh discussed his experiences of Travelling life, in particular, his experiences of prejudice both growing up in Ireland and over here. 'Recently, I saw a sign saying 'No Travellers,' in a bar in Coventry. I just asked the barman 'why?' He didn't know me but he had already judged me.'

'I left school in Ireland because of the prejudice. Leaving school at the age of seven I wasn't able to read. It was when I was 22 that I decided I needed to learn to read and so I taught myself. I realized you couldn't get by without it.'

'Travellers need to get on with education so that they can fight their corner, put forward their opinions. There's all this macho stuff but at the end of the day Travellers need to be able to read and write.'

Mr McDonagh's talk in front of a packed audience of Probation and Prison Service professionals was praised by the organisers for providing a greater understanding of the Travelling Community and its way of life.



IRISH TRAVELLERS ON COURSE FOR LONDON 2012 OLYMPICS

Irish Traveller, John Joe Nevin was, at 19-years-old, the youngest member of the Irish Olympic team in 2008. In 2009, Nevin won a bronze medal at Bantamweight at the World Amateur Championships in Milan. Now in the run up to London 2012, his campaign to be an Olympic Gold Medallist is quickly gaining momentum.

The confidence of his success in Milan coupled with his previous Olympic experience has put Nevin in a great position to make a medal charge at the 2012 London Olympics. Recently, he

gained the necessary qualification standard by getting to the last-16 in the World Championships held in Baku, Azerbaijan.

Nevin along with Darren O'Neill (Middleweight) and Michael Conlan (Flyweight), have secured their places for the London 2012 Olympics. But there is still one last opportunity for Irish boxers to qualify for the 2012 Games by competing in Istanbul, next year.

Cavan bantamweight John Joe Nevin reached his second Olympics after nudging past tough Mongolian Otgondalal Dorjnyambuu on countback after an 18-18 draw. Nevin said: "I'm over the moon to reach my second Games."

But there was heartache for 17-year-old light-heavyweight sensation Traveller, Joe Ward from Moate, Co. Westmeath and team-mates David Oliver Joyce, Roy Sheehan, Con Sheehan and Paddy Barnes who failed to reach the qualifying standards for the Olympics.

Joe Ward agonisingly lost out on a place at the Olympics after being edged out on a countback versus Ehsan Rouzbahani of Iran.

The current European light-heavyweight champion and Rouzbahani were tied at 15-15 at the end of the three rounds but the Iranian got the nod on accepted scores.

However, the outstanding Joe Ward and the rest of his team-mates have one more chance to qualify next year by competing in the final round of Olympic qualifiers in Istanbul.

Speaking recently, Ward vowed to bounce back and learn vital lessons from last week's defeat. "As they say, I'm down but I'm certainly not out," said a defiant Ward.

"I was devastated after last week's fight, but I blame myself, because I didn't fight as well as I should have. I just have to leave it behind me now.

"Of course I was desperate to qualify for the Olympics, and to get it done and dusted last week, but I've to go down a different route now, and I'm confident I can still do it (qualify for the Olympics). I can't get bogged down about last week and just have to move on," he added.

If Ward is to reach the final European qualifier next April, he first needs to retain his national crown. Earlier this year, Ward clinched the Irish title when famously beating Beijing Olympic medallist Kenny Egan, who has since stepped up to the heavyweight division.

A similar effort will be required next January if the Moate Boxing Club-man is to reach the promised land of the Olympics. "I have to concentrate on the nationals in January. I just need to get back to myself. If I'm on form, and

boxing as everyone knows I can, then I'll be confident going into the nationals. I believe nobody in the country can beat me," said Ward.

Next April's Olympic qualifier is due to take place in Turkey, and five light-heavyweight places remain to be filled for the Olympics next summer. "I just have to make sure I'm among those five places. But firstly, I have to win the nationals again," Ward said.

But it won't just be the Irish Team who will have Irish Traveller representatives, 19 year-old Martin Ward, a Traveller based in Romford is tipped for glory in 2012 as a member of British Olympic Team.

So both Ireland and Britain will have a strong Traveller representation at the London 2012 Olympic Games, it just remains to be seen how strong.



STAY IN TOUCH!

We hope you enjoyed our first newsletter and will sign up via email for future editions.

If you:

- Have a question about Travellers in prison.
- Are thinking of starting a Travellers group and would like advice.
- Would like help arranging speakers from the Travelling community.
- Are looking for resources for Traveller Prisoners.

Then please get in touch!

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