

# Folly Lane

When I first 'discovered' Folly Lane, it was like finding a hidden piece of countryside in the middle of town. At the time, I was a new resident in Priory Court which was a densely populated Council estate. We didn't have very much spare cash and with my children I spent as much time as I could in exploring nearby Epping Forest and the River Lea. I used Folly Lane because it was an excellent short cut that brought me out to the River Lea where I could access the towpath. In the early 1970's, my wife and I used to go by motorbike to the Lea Valley car boot sale market at Harbet Road to buy bingo prizes for Priory Court Sunday Social evenings and going this way enabled me to get there in just a few minutes.

## An Ancient Medieval Highway

Folly Lane is a leafy lane that goes between Billet Road and the North Circular Road. In the middle ages it was called Amberland Lane and was part of the dry land route between St Mary Abbey (Better known as Stratford Langthorne Abbey) by the River Lea at Bow and Waltham Abbey and Waltham Holy Cross by the River Lea. It went to Cooks Ferry and Chingford Hall and then along the edge of Chingford Marsh to Sewardstone and Waltham Abbey. The water route was largely used by barges carrying bulk goods. It is ironic that as I write this, I am listening to a news report that tells me that I will be able to travel on the River Lea from Tottenham Lock to the Olympic site on Hackney Marsh for the sum of £95 per person!

## A Traditional Gypsy Traveller Site & Stopping Place

In the 1960's, it was a scruffy, winding narrow leafy lane. Coming from the Billet Road end, toward the bottom of Folly Lane on the right was a traditional Gypsy camp site. Although the route cut off the necessity of travelling to the Billet Roundabout and along the North Circular Road, it was not a well used route and some ignorant local parents actually told their children not to go down the lane, in case the Gypsies kidnapped them! In his reminiscences on this site, *Les Cole* asks: *'How many times did you ride your bike down Folly Lane like a bat out of hell? As kids, we were told that the Gypsies would kidnap us and eat us. And if they wasn't hungry, they'd put a spell on us and turn us in cats or dogs'*

*Rodney Silk*, A regular *Walthamstow Memories* site contributor tells us: *'There was Billy Trigg's car breakers yard, Pettit's selling earthenware and terracotta pots and a Gypsy camp. I remember Folly Lane being like a quiet and remote country lane on the edge of Walthamstow far removed from the rest of the borough'*

*Dave Hagan*, another *Walthamstow Memories* site contributor writes: *'throughout my school days, I remember spending summer days exploring Folly Lane (where the gypsies had their caravans, horses, dogs and the constant smell of burning rubber). We also went down to the River Lea nearby and along the 'New River' which I think must have been an overflow canal. There were some tough old characters around back then: there were the two local gypsy families, the Smiths and the Lights, who seemed to be at loggerheads on various occasions'*

## The Official Traveller Site

The Caravan Act of 1968 required Local Authorities to provide accommodation on caravan sites for Travellers residing in or resorting to their areas. As a result, Waltham Forest was one of a handful of London Boroughs who provided a Traveller site and established a site in Folly Lane for 16 hard standing pitches that originally were all occupied by Romany Gypsies.

The location of the Folly Lane site is on a well documented traditional (Romany) Traveller stopping place. It is in the Higham Hill area, where a number of traditional Gypsy Traveller families have settled in houses and are

an integral part of the local community. I have records from several Census documents that show Traveller families living in Folly Lane

## Gypsy Families in Folly Lane In The 1911 Census



In 1911 there were a five Gypsy Traveller families named Smith living in Gypsy vans at Folly Lane. These included: Christopher & Sophia Smith and their three children aged 10, 8 & 6; the interestingly named Woodlock & Betsy Smith with their 1 year old son; Robert & Sarah Smith and their six children aged 12, 9, 7, 5, 3 & 1; James & Jane Smith and their six children aged 18, 16, 14, 12, 9 with a new born daughter and Charles & Sarah and their nine children aged 18, 17, 14, 12, 10, 8, 5 & 1.

Their occupations are those that we associate with Gypsy traveller families and are listed as: Wire Workers, Chair Maker and Menders, Tin Smiths and Hawkers. In addition to these families there are two other families. These were: Cornelius Miller & Mary Shepard and Mary Shepard's three children aged 5, 3 & 1. The other family was John & Lucy Green and their 2 children aged 4 & 1. Their occupations are as a Gardening & Farm Labourer.

**Note: The above picture shows the kind of caravans that were used by travelling families around 1911**

## Pettit's Pottery



**The above pictures show Pettit's potteries at Folly Lane and are courtesy of members of the Pettit family**

Folly Lane was also the site of Pettit's Pottery. The British History on-line site: <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=42779> tell us us that 'Potteries were set up in Folly Lane, Higham Hill, in 1868 by William Pettit & Son, who produced unglazed pots, saucers, and chimney pots. When the tomato industry developed in the Lea valley, production was switched to flower pots. The business closed about 1944.'

However, according to the Cole family history: <http://www.colepotteries.co.uk/walthamstow.htm> it was John Cole who first started the Pottery at Folly Lane that was later taken over by William Pettit. I also have an image of what appears to be a more modern pottery site that is entitled Wilson's Pottery, Folly Lane.

It is also interesting that at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century there were a number of bricklayers living in Billet Road.

This may suggest that the area was also a brickfield.

## Present Day Folly Lane

There have been a number of changes to Folly Lane in the past 20 years and the the road has been closed off with a gate to prevent driving through from Higham Hill. However, it is a designated pedestrian and cycle area through this part of the Lea Valley Regional Park. At the top of the lane is a bus terminus. Sidney Chaplin secondary school has been replaced by a new William Morris school for 136 children with severe learning difficulties. A well laid out Muslim burial ground is beside the Traveller site at Peacock Close and the area called Cheney Row park is a principal conservation area.

## The Gypsy Evangelist Preacher Born In A Tent In Epping Forest



**“My Mother told me, I never should, play with the gypsies in the wood”**

The words above come from one of the children’s clapping songs that girls used to play and are part of the prejudice that many people have about Gypsy families. However, not only was Folly Lane in Walthamstow a traditional stopping place for Gypsy traveller families, but there is also another area in Walthamstow on the Woodford border in Epping Forest that is a traditional Gypsy stopping place. It is on this site that the most famous Gypsy of all times was born.

### Gypsy (Rodney) Smith (1860-1947)



The most famous Gypsy of all is Rodney Smith who was born in a tent on Mill Plain in Epping Forest near the present day Waterworks Roundabout . He was raised in a Gypsy camp, and never attended a school. His family made a living selling baskets , tinware, and clothes pegs. Sadly, his mother died of small pox in 1865 when he was only five years old. He became a converted Christian in 1876 and the next year was invited by General William Booth to join him in evangelistic work. He served as an officer with the Salvation Army until 1882. He then began ministering as an itinerant evangelist working with a variety of organisations all over the world particularly in Britain and America.

The picture on the left above marks the spot of Rodney Smith’s birthplace.

This following link [http://www.biblebelievers.com/gypsy\\_smith/](http://www.biblebelievers.com/gypsy_smith/) contains an autobiography of Rodney Smith

**Bill Bayliss**

September 2012

## **Appendix**

### **Gypsies, Travellers & The Law**

The recent debacle surrounding the eviction of Irish Traveller families from the unofficial part of the Dale Farm site highlights the appalling stupidity of the legal situation. The Caravan Act of 1968 required Local Authorities to provide accommodation on caravan sites for Travellers residing in or resorting to their areas. As a result Waltham Forest established a site in Folly Lane for 16 hard standing pitches that are all occupied by Romany Gypsies.

A recent report by the **London Gypsy & Traveller Unit** that was commissioned by Waltham Forest Children's Fund Partnership Board entitled '*An Assessment Of The Needs Of Children from Traveller & Gypsy Communities in Waltham Forest*' says that 'The families have been living on a site in this area of Waltham Forest for more than 50 years. They were originally living on a caravan site nearby which was built during the 1960's. This site was deemed unsafe and the families were relocated on the existing site 7 years ago. The site is located in an isolated and inaccessible place, just off the North Circular Road. The nearest shops, schools and public transport are 15 minutes walk through an unlit lane. The families were not consulted on either the location or design of the new site when it was built'

This law was amended by a new Act in 1983 that required Local Authorities to provide sites for Gypsy & Traveller families. In 1994, via the infamous Circular 1/94, the Government repealed this statutory obligation. In 2004, a new Housing Act required Councils to assess and make provision for the needs of Gypsy and Travellers in their areas.

Presently, we have a situation where there are somewhere between 20,000 & 30,000 travellers but only a minority of Local Authorities have provided official licensed Traveller sites and in 2011 there was a total of 4999 pitches of which 4712 were for residential use and 287 for transitory use. In total these provided a capacity of 8,350 caravans. While we don't know how many of the Traveller numbers now live in 'settled' housing it is painfully obvious that there is a huge gap between the accommodation needs of the Travelling community and the provision that is made for them.

Bill Bayliss  
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