



# Traveller culture and history

## Research report

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**NCCA**

An Chomhairle Náisiúnta  
Curraim agus Measúnachta  
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## 01

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Readers' Note

## 02

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1. Introduction

## 04

---

### 2. Traveller History

2.1	Population Profile of Irish Travellers	04
2.2	The Impact of Racism on Irish Travellers	06
2.3	Traveller Ethnicity	08
2.4	Contextualising Traveller History	09
	2.4.1 Conventional Wisdom – 'Drop-Out' Theory	09
	2.4.2 Myths and Conflicting Theories	11
2.5	What Genetic Studies Tell Us About Irish Traveller History	13

## 15

---

### 3. Traveller Culture

3.1	Nomadism	16
	3.1.1 Types of Accommodation	19
3.2	Family Networks/Structure	20
3.3	Marriage Patterns	20
3.4	Traveller Economy	21
	3.4.1 Horse Ownership	22
3.5	Story-telling	24
3.6	Music	24
	3.6.1 Traveller Contributions to Traditional Irish Music	25
3.7	Art	31
	3.7.1 Irish Travellers – Art, Craft and Design	31
	3.7.2 Traveller Artists	34
	3.7.3 The Depiction of Travellers in Irish Art	35
3.8	Religious Expression	36
	3.8.1 Travellers and Religious Belief	36
	3.8.2 Pilgrimages	37
	3.8.3 Blessings	37
	3.8.4 Pledges	37
	3.8.5 Cures and Other Customs	38

# Contents (continued)

---

## 39

---

<b>4. Traveller Language</b>	
4.1 Shelta/Cant/Gammon – Terminology Explained	39
4.1.1 Early Collections of Cant/Gammon	39
4.1.2 How Old is Cant/Gammon?	40
4.1.3 Cant/Gammon Usage Today	42

## 44

---

<b>5. Travellers in Ireland Today</b>	
5.1 Traveller Activism in Ireland	44
5.1.1 Establishment of Traveller Organisations and their Aims	44
5.1.2 Values Underpinning the Work	45
5.1.3 Key Moments – A Timeline For Those Rights	46
5.2 Traveller Role Models	48
5.2.1 Travellers in Further and Higher Education	48
5.2.2 Travellers in Politics	49
5.2.3 Traveller Activists	49
5.2.4 Travellers in Sport	49
5.2.5 Travellers in the Arts	49

## 50

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<b>6. Conclusion</b>	
----------------------	--

## 51

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<b>References</b>	
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# Readers' note

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There are links, throughout the document, to a range of resources that might be helpful to the readers. These links are being provided for convenience and for informational purposes only. Any comments or enquiries regarding the linked websites or their content should be directed to the owners of the other websites.

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# 1. Introduction

In September 2018, the then Minister for Education and Skills, Richard Bruton (TD), requested the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) to undertake an audit of Traveller culture and history in the curriculum. The Minister asked that the audit would consider:

- the place of Traveller culture and history in the existing curriculum, from early childhood to senior cycle
- the current intercultural education guidelines and other resources for schools in relation to Travellers
- the opportunities for teaching about Traveller culture and history and how it is incorporated into existing curricular subjects (Minister's letter, 2018 as cited in NCCA, 2019, p. 4).

The [Traveller culture and history in the curriculum: a curriculum audit \(NCCA, 2019\)](#) set out several considerations in supporting settings'/schools' work on Traveller culture and history, including strengthening opportunities for this as curriculum developments progress.

This Traveller culture and history research report is an important first step in responding to the audit findings (2019) and aims to provide an overview of what is currently known and has been recorded regarding the different aspects of Traveller culture and history. It will be used to inform the review and updating/ redevelopment of curriculum specifications and the development of new specifications as part of ongoing work across sectors. It will also provide a basis for the development of resources and materials for teachers/practitioners, and it will also inform our thinking around intercultural approaches to education more broadly.

There are five sections in this research report. Following this introduction, section two provides a brief overview of the population profile of the Traveller community and outlines the impact of racism on the community. It also discusses the history of Travellers. Section three examines aspects of Traveller culture, such as nomadism, economic activities, marriage patterns, family structure and religious practices. It also details some of the contributions that Travellers have made and continue to make to Irish society through art, music and sport. Section four explores the research on the language of Irish Travellers and its usage in Ireland today. Finally, the fifth section looks at Travellers in Ireland today. It traces their mobilisation and activism and includes details of community members' achievements and other positive developments for the community.



# 2. Traveller History

## 2.1 Population Profile of Irish Travellers

The Equal Status Act (2000, p. 7) defines the Irish Traveller community as:

“ ... the community of people who are commonly called Travellers and who are identified (both by themselves and others) as people with a shared history, culture and traditions, including historically, a nomadic way of life on the island of Ireland.

Data relating to the number of Travellers living in the Republic of Ireland is collected by the CSO and the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, (DHLGH). In 2010, the All-Ireland Traveller Health Study also collected information on Travellers. The table below outlines how many Travellers are estimated to live in Ireland according to these three separate sources.

**Table 1:** Number of Travellers in Republic of Ireland

Year	Data source	Number	Percentage of overall population
2017	CSO	30,987	0.70%
2010	AITHS	36,244	1%
2019	DHLGH	Approximately between 46,695 to 58,925	1%

The figures for the 2022 Census will be available soon on the [CSO website](#).



The CSO estimated figure of Travellers is likely higher for reasons relating to Travellers not wanting to identify as Travellers for fear of repercussions, difficulties encountered filling out census forms because of poor literacy, and/or, in some cases, not receiving forms in the first place. The data for the AITHS was collected by peer researchers and thus it is likely to be more accurate than the Census figures as sometimes Census enumerators did not gather information from Travellers due to a lack of appropriate training. The state has taken measures to address this discrepancy between the figures and Traveller organisations have been working closely with the CSO and its enumerators to try and ensure that Travellers are counted in a more accurate and sensitive manner. The data from the DHLGH is inaccurate as some of the Local Authorities count families while others count households. Additionally, it only includes figures from 27 of Ireland's 31 Local Authorities (Norris, Joyce and Norton, 2019).

According to the census results, Irish Travellers are much younger than the general population. Just over 73% of Travellers are aged 34 or younger while only 7.5% were over 54 (CSO, 2017).

Whilst the majority of Irish Travellers live in Ireland, they also reside in the UK and the USA. It is estimated that 15,000 Irish Travellers are living in Britain (Gavin, 2019). Up until 2011, there was no ethnic category for Travellers in the UK census. While a category has since been added, it includes Gypsies and Irish Travellers, subsuming both very distinct groups into one category.

Further, according to [EPIC: The Irish Emigration Museum](#), there are approximately 10,000 Irish Travellers residing in the USA. Again, this figure is hard to confirm because Irish Travellers are not identified as a category on Census forms in the USA (Egan, 2020). Within the USA, the largest population of Irish Travellers are concentrated in Murphy Village (named after its founder), outside of the town of North Augusta, South Carolina with other communities near Memphis, Tennessee, and smaller communities in Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi.

The Cant (Traveller language) terms for Travellers are Mincéirs and/or Pavees. Some Travellers use the term Mincéiri as opposed to Mincéirs. Travellers are often referred to as 'tinkers', itinerants or settled Travellers and some people still use these terms today. MacGréine (1932) noted that the community preferred to be called 'Travellers'. While all tinkers (tinsmiths) were likely Travellers, not all Travellers were tinkers and so the term did not apply to them all or reflect the diversity that existed within the community.

The Commission on Itinerancy (Government of Ireland, 1963) introduced the substitute term 'itinerant' (Kenny and Binchy, 2009). The term 'Traveller' is used throughout the Report of the Travelling People Review Body (Travelling People Review Body, 1983) in place of the term 'itinerant'. Travellers, who had been involved in developing the 1983 Report, explained to the Commission that they found the term 'itinerant' unacceptable and stated that they preferred to be called 'Travellers' (Equality Authority, 2006). Many Travellers also find the term 'settled Traveller' unacceptable as it can imply that their identity has been diluted and weakened. Traveller ethnicity remains the same even when a Traveller is not practising nomadism. Irish Travellers are often subsumed into the category Gypsies, Roma and Travellers (GRT) even though these are different ethnic groups.

The designated term 'Traveller' is used throughout this resource. Traveller should always be spelled with a capital 'T'. The capitalisation of the 'T' in Traveller was adopted over two decades ago when the Equal Status Bill (1999) was being amended (Equality Authority, 2006). At the Committee Stage, amendments were put down to capitalize the term Traveller and to include an ethnic definition of Travellers. Deputy Higgins noted that:



**It is only a small change, but it is a significant and symbolic one. We are talking about a group which sees itself as a distinct cultural and ethnic group.**  
(*ibid.*, 2006, p. 33).

## 2.2 The Impact of Racism on Irish Travellers

In January 2017, the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) issued a research paper entitled 'A Social Portrait of Travellers in Ireland' (Watson, Kenny and McGinnity, 2017). The research found that, despite the small size of the Traveller population, they remained one of the most marginalised groups in Irish society who were subjected to extreme forms of prejudice and discrimination (*ibid.*).

Racism can have a devastating impact on individuals, families, communities and society (Michael, 2019). While many commentators demonstrate a lack of understanding regarding how the concept of racism is applicable to the situation of Irish Travellers, it is empirically evident and widely accepted within academia that Travellers do indeed experience racism because of their ethnicity. The ESRI study found that Travellers are 22% more likely to experience discrimination (Watson et al. 2017). Drawing on Clébert (1963), Kenny and Binchy (2009, p. 119) assert that racism against nomads might be one of the oldest forms of racism "identifiable even in the Book of Genesis". In 1991, the European Parliament Committee of Enquiry on Racism and Xenophobia found that Travellers faced more discrimination than any other group (*ibid.*).

Travellers' experiences of discrimination lead them to score poorly on every indicator used to measure the social determinants of health (Watson et al. 2017). Consequently, Traveller mortality rates are four times higher than the general population (AITHS, 2010). Traveller men tend to die on average at least 15 years younger than their settled Irish male peers while Traveller women die approximately 11 years younger than their peers (*ibid.*).

The suicide rate in the Traveller community is alarmingly high. 11% of all Traveller deaths are caused by suicide which is almost seven times higher than the general population (Tanner and Doherty, 2021). A review in the Irish Journal of Psychological Medicine found that Traveller males account for 10% of adult male suicide statistics (Quirke, Heinen, Fitzpatrick, McKey, Malone and Kelleher, 2020). Poor educational outcomes, discrimination and poverty contribute to poor mental health and have been implied as factors of poor mental health amongst Travellers (O'Shea, 2011). As pointed out by McKey, Quirke, Fitzpatrick, Kelleher and Malone (2022), this situation is not

unique to Ireland and discrimination is a common thread contributing to high suicide rates amongst other indigenous ethnic minorities globally. For example, the Sami, Maori, Aboriginals and Inuit all experience similar patterns of suicide (ibid.).

The most recent Traveller Community National Survey (O'Mahony, 2017) which measured attitudes towards Travellers in the Republic of Ireland highlighted little change in attitudes towards Travellers from previous studies carried out (cf. MacGréil, 2010). For example, it found that 55% of non-Travellers would not have Travellers as community members, 35% avoided Travellers, 75% would not have Travellers as a co-worker, 78% would not have Travellers as a neighbour, 91% would not have Travellers as a family member and 85% would not have Travellers as a friend (O'Mahony, 2017).

Research about Travellers' experiences in education points to Travellers' apparent lack of engagement in school, problematic relationships with peers and teachers, and a strong sense of not belonging. While there is almost full participation by Traveller children in primary schools and a high transfer rate of Travellers to post-primary education (Hourigan and Campbell, 2010), attendance and retention rates remain poor and evidence shows that Travellers cease their education on average 4.7 years earlier than those in the general population (Watson et al. 2017). Only eight% of Travellers in Ireland had completed their education to Leaving Certificate level in comparison to 73% of the general population (ibid.).

In 2017, only one% of the Traveller community held a third level qualification (CSO, 2017). In a review of the National Access Plan (2015–2019) to widen participation in higher education (HE), it was noted that the target set for Travellers (of 80 Travellers in HE by 2019) had been unmet (HEA, 2018). This resulted in Travellers being a central focus of the extended National Plan (into 2021) (ibid.). In addition to the Action Plan for Increasing Traveller Participation in Higher Education 2019–2021, Simon Harris, Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, doubled the budget to support Travellers' access to further education in 2022 (Barry, 2022).

While underrepresented in further education, Irish Travellers are overrepresented in the prison population. While the Irish prison population is small, with a total of 7,484 people in total (1,081 females and 6,403 males) being incarcerated in 2017 according to the Irish Prison Service (IPS) (Gallagher, 2018), it was estimated that 15% of the male prison population and 22% of the female prison population was made up of Travellers (Lalor, 2017). In a report examining Travellers' experiences of the Irish justice system (Joyce et al. 2022), participants reported being racially profiled. They reported being over policed as perpetrators and under policed as victims of crime by law enforcement (ibid.).

In 2011, 82% of Travellers were unemployed in comparison to 17% of the general population (Watson et al. 2017). This is unsurprising perhaps when we consider that Travellers are 22 times more likely than white settled Irish to experience discrimination in the workplace (ibid.). A study in 2010 found that 41% of employers would not hire a Traveller (MacGreil, 2010) while a 2017 study found that 83% of its participants would not give a Traveller a job (Community Foundation of Ireland, 2017).

All homelessness has severe, negative consequences for physical and mental health and for the education of children. Travellers comprise a disproportionate proportion of the homeless population in Ireland. A report on Travellers and homelessness found that many Travellers are in 'hidden homeless' situations (Harvey, 2021). For example, it found that 39% of Travellers lived with extended family in overcrowded accommodation. According to a national survey by 27 Local Authorities (LAs) (there are 31 LAs nationally), Travellers make up at least 8% of homeless adults staying in emergency accommodation and 12% of homeless children (ibid.). Council officials suggested that these figures were likely to be an underestimate as some Travellers will not identify themselves as Travellers (ibid.).

Furthermore, Harvey (2021) argues that the current definition of homelessness provided by the State excludes many of those Travellers who are living in overcrowded and temporary accommodation. Studies have found that the private rented sector has well-documented problems of discrimination. DKM Economic Consultants (2014) found that 82% of landlords are not prepared to rent to Travellers. SAFE Ireland (2016) also identified discrimination as a factor impacting on Travellers affected by domestic violence who were applying for private rented accommodation.

Like members of the settled community, Travellers in Ireland have experienced growing up or spending time in foster care or in institutions. They recount stories of perceived abuse based on their ethnicity, family status and other grounds.

## 2.3 Traveller Ethnicity

Up until 2017, the Irish state had not recognised or conferred Irish Travellers' ethnic status despite recommendations from international bodies, such as the Convention of the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD), to confer such status. The Irish Government stated that it was "not prepared to include in the report (to CERD) a statement ... that Travellers are ethnically different from the majority of Irish people" (Dáil Debates, 13 October 2003 as cited in Equality Authority, 2006). After decades of campaigning, Irish Travellers were finally granted ethnic status in the Republic of Ireland on 1 March 2017.

While Traveller ethnicity was not recognised in the Republic of Ireland until 2017, in the neighbouring jurisdictions of Northern Ireland and England, Irish Travellers had been recognised as an ethnic group under the 1976 Race Relations Act (Brandt, 2013). In both cases, ethnicity recognition was fought for, not handed down. It was won through the courts who legally defined what Traveller ethnicity was.

It was frustrating for Irish Travellers in the Republic of Ireland to have to engage in a long and drawn-out campaign to be granted the same recognition. For more information on the background of the Traveller ethnicity see the [Equality Authority Report](#).

## 2.4 Contextualising Traveller History

Scholars generally concur that Irish Travellers are an indigenous ethnic group whose presence was first officially recorded in the 12th century (Kenny and Binchy, 2009). Traveller history remained largely undocumented in the past, as successive British administrations did not distinguish between Travellers and the Irish poor (Hayes, 2006). Historically, Travellers did not have the skills required to posit themselves in the history books, which is typical of a nomadic and oral culture.

Traveller history has, therefore, been dependent on the interpretations of settled scholars who often bring with them their own biases and interpretations as well as a lack of insider knowledge (Hayes, 2006). Consequently, there are real limits to what the existing historical records can tell us about the history of Irish Travellers. The records that do exist highlight the relative invisibility of Travellers as a group in Irish society (ibid.). This absence may also be indicative of nomadism being the norm at the time and therefore something which was not deemed worth mentioning.

Any theories about Travellers before the twentieth century are based on snippets of historical evidence and are subject to contestation among historians (Binchy, 2008). Because of these theories, it has been extremely difficult for Travellers to gain cultural legitimacy and separateness from the non-Traveller community (ibid.). Binchy (2008) suggests that the historical records need to be reviewed again considering what we now know about the Traveller community being an indigenous Irish ethnic minority group.

### 2.4.1 Conventional Wisdom – ‘Drop-Out’ Theory

The study of Irish Travellers was of peripheral interest for many Irish scholars until the late 1800s. According to Hayes (2006), the lack of scholarly interest in Travellers that existed in the past, can be linked to the perception that Travellers were simply a group comprising the descendants of ‘drop-outs’ from the settled community. He argues that Travellers were viewed as people who were the victims of the evictions associated with times of famine or displacement that took place during the Cromwellian period (1649 to 1653) (ibid.). Implicit in such versions of Traveller history is a belief that Travellers are ‘failed settled people’ or ‘drop-outs’ as opposed to a distinct ethnic group within Irish society (ibid.).

The ‘drop-out’ theory is rejected by Traveller activists and NGOs and has been disproved by scholars. Studies have provided evidence that Traveller language and culture were firmly established before this early emigration. Many Irish Travellers emigrated to the USA in response to the Famine. Those that did took Shelta (the language spoken by Irish Travellers. See **Section 4** for more detail regarding Irish Traveller language) and other traditions, such as nomadism, consanguineous (consanguineous marriage is a union between cousins. See **Section 3.3** for further discussion) and endogamous (endogamous marriage refers to unions between members of a community) marriage patterns with them (Harper, 1973 as cited in Binchy, 1994). Within the USA, the population of Irish Travellers concentrated in Murphy Village still use Shelta today (Binchy, 1994).

A study, on the DNA of Irish Travellers, provided further evidence that Travellers pre-dated Cromwellian and Famine times (Gilbert, Carmi, Ennis, Wilson, Cavalleri, 2017). The study, which was undertaken by the Royal College of Surgeons, identified a signature of genetic isolation over many centuries, ruling out theories that the community originated in Cromwellian or Famine times (ibid.) The study suggests that Travellers have a shared heritage with settled people but that the two groups separated at some point between 1,000 and 2,000 years ago (ibid).

Rather than recognising Travellers as a distinct ethnic group, the government's policy was to assimilate Travellers into the general community. This was evidenced in the seminal 1963 Report on the Commission of Itinerancy. In his address to the Commission, the then Minister for Justice, Charles Haughey, stated that "there can be no final solution to the problems created by itinerants until they are absorbed into the general community" (Government of Ireland, 1963, p. 111). It specifically noted that all policies aimed at Travellers "should always have as their aim the eventual absorption of the itinerants into the general community" (ibid, p. 106).

The 'settlement programme' which emerged from the 1963 Report on the Commission of Itinerancy, and the thinking which informed it, has been widely criticised for its assimilatory language and tone because it positioned Travellers and their culture as deviant (Fanning, 2002) and as a 'sub-culture' of poverty (Lewis, 1959). The 1963 Report's (p.11) terms of reference were to enquire "into the problem arising from the presence in the country of itinerants" and "to promote their absorption" into the general community. The report showed strong similarities with assimilationist policies used against other indigenous and nomadic peoples including the aboriginal people in Australia, Canada, and other parts of Europe.

Thinking about Travellers as a 'sub-culture' of poverty was not uncommon at the time. In Patricia Mc Carthy's (1972) widely cited unpublished Masters' Thesis, titled 'Itinerancy and Poverty – a study in the Sub-culture of Poverty', she stated:



**It is a basic assumption of this study that the Irish travellers are not gypsies and do not constitute a separate ethnic group with an entirely separate tradition and culture. Poverty is considered to be basic to itinerancy in this study."**

**(As cited in Ní Shuinéar, 1997, p. 44).**

Less than twenty years later, Mc Carthy (1994, p. 121) went on to refute her earlier views and beliefs on Traveller ethnicity and stated that the thinking which informed her thesis was “fashionable” at the time:



**The data for this study were collected by means of participant observation in a Travellers’ site... The data are still valid today and the study is one of the few of Irish Travellers that was based on first-hand knowledge...However the major problem with the study was its theoretical framework. Titled ‘Itinerancy and Poverty – a Study in the Sub-Culture of Poverty,’ it was very much a product of thinking and concepts in sociology at the time. The concept of a culture or sub-culture of poverty was fashionable...the theory was never relevant to Irish Travellers...**

Despite the existing evidence to the contrary, versions of Traveller history incorporating colonial expulsions are still largely the ‘conventional wisdom’ in Ireland today (Hayes, 2006).

## 2.4.2 Myths and Conflicting Theories

Examining the snippets of evidence which do exist has led some scholars to claim that Irish Travellers existed in pre-Christian times (cf. MacNeill, 1937; McMahon, 1971; Gmelch and Gmelch, 1976). It is interesting to note that the Cant word ‘Galyune’, which means ‘God’ or ‘Lord’ is also the name of a Pagan God. Even Travellers with little proficiency in Cant will understand what the word ‘Galyune’ means.

Scholars suggest that Travellers were the descendants of a Celtic tribe who stayed nomadic and who were, over the course of centuries, joined by beggars, farmers, seasonal workers, monastic scholars and other people who were displaced from their land due to some misfortune, such as eviction or famine (Hayes, 2006). While this theory ties in with what has been suggested in the genetic study completed by Gilbert et al. (2017), it reinforces the ‘drop-out’ theory somewhat and feeds into the ‘failed settled’ people narrative discussed above.

Numerous other theories regarding the origins of the Irish Travellers have been suggested, including, Irish Travellers being the royal descendants of Chieftains of the wandering cattle-herding clans (Gmelch and Gmelch, 1976). Gmelch and Gmelch (1976) reproduce a historical record from the fifth century AD, which they use as a testimony to the existence of itinerant groups in Ireland at that time. This source describes Travellers as:



**Itinerant whitesmiths working in bronze, gold and silver [who] travelled the Irish countryside making personal ornaments, weapons and horse trappings in exchange for food and lodging. (ibid., p. 227).**

North, Martin and Crawford (2000) raise doubts about this early connection. They argue that there should be evidence of Travellers being genetically distinct from the Irish settled population if this was the case (ibid.). However, as we now know from the genetic study (Gilbert et al. 2017), Travellers are genetically distinct from the Irish settled community.

Other origins' theories argue that Travellers were descendants of itinerant trades people from pre-Celtic times and/or Druidic poets or dispossessed Irish nobility from the early Middle Ages (Corkery, 1925 as cited in Hayes, 2006). This connection between Druids and Bards and Irish Travellers first came about because some of the words used by the Bards and Druids were like some old Shelta words (ibid.). Leland (1874 as cited in Rieder, 2018) suggested that the language of the Bards (Bearl na filed) consisted of long forgotten words that used similar disguising processes as those used by Shelta speakers (see **Section 4** for a more detailed discussion on Shelta). Furthermore, the common Irish Traveller surname Ward translates to Mac an Bhaire (Son of the Bard/Poet) in Irish.

During the medieval era, there are sporadic references to 'vagabonds', 'vagrants' or 'tinkers' in several historical and literary documents from Ireland and England (Lanters, 2010). Records of Irish Travellers in England appear in the twelfth century as the name 'Tynker' appears in records as referring to those of a particular dialect and social group (Hayes, 2002). As scholars have argued, it would not be unreasonable to assume that there is a link between the tinkers of the twelfth century and Irish Travellers today nor to conclude that Travellers were likely established as a distinct group at the time that they appeared in these records (Hayes, ibid.).

In 1551, laws such as the 'Acte for tynkers and pedlers' were passed against Travellers. This was the first law prohibiting nomadic trading in Ireland (McCann, Ó Síocháin and Ruane, 1994). The term 'tynker' went on to be used as a generic term for Travellers during the eighteenth century and by the nineteenth century it was liberally used to describe all Travellers regardless of their occupations or economic activity (Lanters, 2010). Furthermore, Lanters (2010, p. 24) suggests that the term 'tinker' was used differently prior to the eighteenth century and often "loosely applied to any metal worker".

In Thomas Dekker's 'The Wonderfull Yeaere' (1603), the word 'tinker' is also mentioned (Lanters, 2008). Almost 200 hundred years later, Thompson (1789), a Scottish protagonist, finds himself in the company of 'tinkers' in his tale 'Mammuth; or Human Nature Displayed on a Grand Scale in a Tour with the Tinkers into the Inland Parts of Africa' (Thompson, 1789 cited in Lanters, 2008, p. 22). References to Irish Travellers appear much later in the Irish literature because under colonialism early Irish writers wrote for English publishers about "non-Irish topics" (ibid. p. 22). Irish writer, Maria Edgeworth mentions Gypsies in her short story 'The Limerick Glove' in 1809 (ibid.). The first non-literary hints of 'tinkers' can be found in the records of 'The Commission on the Condition of the Poorer Classes' in 1834 (Gmelch and Gmelch, 1976).

## 2.5 What Genetic Studies Tell Us About Irish Traveller History

There is a small number of genetic studies on Irish Travellers which are primarily concerned with tracing their origins. For example, in 2013, Relethford and Crawford produced a paper on the genetics of Irish Travellers. The paper was based on the analysis of the blood specimens of 119 Travellers which were collected by Crawford in 1970. It has often been suggested that Irish Travellers are a hybrid population between settled Irish and Romani gypsies, due to the similarities in their cultural and nomadic lifestyle (Gilbert et al. 2017). Relethford and Crawford (2013) found that the genetic data points to Irish Travellers being of Irish origin as opposed to being from a Roma background despite sharing some cultural similarities with the Roma and/or North Indian populations. Interestingly, their study concluded that the general Irish population had slightly more in common genetically with different Roma groups than Irish Travellers had (ibid.).

In 2017, a joint study between the Royal College of Surgeons in Dublin and Edinburgh University was carried out on the blood specimens of 50 Irish Travellers, 143 European Roma, 2,232 non-Traveller Irish, 2,039 British and 6,255 other individuals from Europe and other parts of the world (Gilbert et al. 2017). Looking at the case of Travellers, Gilbert et al. (2017) attempt to date when the divergence between Irish Travellers and the settled Irish occurred. Like Relethford and Crawford's (2013) study, they concluded that Travellers were of Irish ancestral origin but that they separated from the sedentary Irish community at least 360 years ago (ibid.). They also suggested that separate groups of Travellers diverged from the settled community at different points in time throughout history and noted that some may have diverged from the settled community before the 1600s, as far back as 1200 years ago (ibid.). Some scholars have suggested that during colonial expulsions and famine times, settled people joined Irish Travellers on the road (Gmelch and Gmelch, 1976). Perhaps the DNA of this group reflects that?

While Gilbert et al. (2017) found that most of the Travellers in their study were from Irish origin, some had mixed ancestry. The research participants explained that this was because they had gypsy ancestry and/or ancestry from the settled Irish population (ibid.). It would be common knowledge within the Traveller community that non endogamous marriages always occurred, to varying degrees, among different Traveller families.

Gilbert et al. (2017) identified four genetic clusters occupied by Irish Travellers only. They concluded that the existence of sole Irish Traveller genetic clusters would suggest that there is some sub-structure within the Irish Traveller community, but they felt that a larger follow up study was required to shed more light on this matter. Interestingly, they found that some of the Travellers studied spoke Cant while others spoke Gammon (ibid.). The paper does not tell us how the researchers determined whether Travellers were speaking Cant or Gammon. It would be interesting to know the basis for this finding.

A study by scientists (Shanahan, Ghosh and O'Toole, 2021) found that Travellers have a gut microbiome that is strikingly different from the gut microbiome found in the non-Traveller community. The gut microbiome, which is the collective term for the bacteria, fungi and viruses that live in and on the human body, helps control digestion and benefits the immune system and other

aspects of health. The study raised concerns about Travellers losing this unique microbiome because of, often enforced, lifestyle changes (Pollack, 2022). The existence of this unique gut microbiome shed further light on the history of Travellers as these microbiomes are found in non-industrialised societies where large families often live together in close quarters with animals (ibid.).

The origins of Irish Travellers are therefore still a matter of debate amongst scholars with no single explanation being widely accepted. What genetic studies seem to have in common is the suggestion that Irish Travellers belonged to the dominant group before a divergence occurred. None of the studies provide any real insights into why such a divergence might have occurred and they tend not to consider that perhaps it was settled Irish that diverged from the Traveller community at some point in time. Geneticists would argue that it is a job for the historians to provide some insights into what happened in the social history of Ireland resulting in the apparent divergence between both groups (Relethford and Crawford, 2013). What such studies do tell us is that Travellers existed before the famine era (1845–1852), and therefore, they are useful in that they provide further evidence for disproving the ‘drop-out’ theory discussed in **Section 2.4.1**.

### 3. Traveller Culture

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Culture typically refers to a group's beliefs, norms and values and their attitudes to work and family. Culture is a defining feature of a person's identity, contributing to how they see themselves and the groups with which they identify. A person's understanding of their own and other's identities develops from birth and is shaped by the values and attitudes prevalent at home and in the surrounding community. When we discuss culture, there is often a tendency to discuss it as if it is static or fixed. It is important to note that culture is not static and that it adapts over time, changing from one generation to the next (Varnum and Grossman, 2017). Brandi (2013) discusses the dangers of focusing on an essentialist idea of what it is to be a Traveller. She warns that in doing so there is a danger of Traveller identity becoming like a national identity (ibid.). Bauman (2004) pointed out how this tendency to fix identities on people, in general, has the potential to limit the ways in which a person could be.

When discussing Traveller culture, it is also important to bear in mind that everyone practices their culture differently and that it does not make anyone any more or less of a Traveller if they are not practising all or any aspects of their culture. A Traveller is born a Traveller and will die a Traveller and what they do or don't do does not determine their ethnic identity.

The status of Traveller culture is often questioned because of the level of shared practices between Traveller culture and non-Traveller settled Irish culture. There are substantial overlaps between both cultures but that does not mean that one is more legitimate



than the other. It just means that two cultures coexisted side by side and were influenced by one another linking Traveller and settled Irish.

### 3.1 Nomadism

Historically, the main cultural difference between Travellers and the settled community was the practice of nomadism (Donahue, McVeigh and Ward, 2005). In Irish, Travellers are called ‘an Lucht Siúil’ (the walking people). While today, Travellers refer to themselves as nomadic in contrast to the rest of the Irish society, nomadism in early and medieval Irish history was much more widespread and existed in various forms in agricultural and urban settings (Bhreathnach, 2007). Citing Samuel (1973), Bhreathnach (2007, p. 33) informs us that:



**There were habitual wanderers who possessed no home base. Second, there were those who spent a large part of the year on country roads, but who kept ‘regular winter quarters in the town’. Thirdly, some were ‘fair weather’ travellers, who travelled only in the summer, but stayed in one place for the remainder of the year. Finally, some travelled frequently on short trips to the country, never travelling far from their home base.**

Traditionally, Travellers practiced nomadism for short or extended periods, for both economic purposes (the Traveller economy will be discussed in more detail in **Section 3.5**) and personal (visiting family and friends) reasons. Historically, Traveller families often followed regular migratory routes and different family names were, and continue to be, associated with certain geographical regions.

According to Irish Traveller, Michael McDonagh (1994), the nomadic mindset continues to be a central aspect of Traveller culture even when Travellers are not practising nomadism. Mc Donagh (1994, p. 95) argues:



**When Travellers speak of travelling, we mean something different from what country people [settled people] usually understand by it... Country people travel to get from A to B but for Travellers, the physical fact of moving is just one aspect of a nomadic mind-set that permeates every aspect of our lives. Nomadism entails a way of looking at the world, a different way of perceiving things, a different attitude to accommodation, to work and to life in general.**

Similarly, the Roma scholar Liégeois (1994, p. 79) argues that:



**Whereas a sedentary person retains a sedentary mind-set even when travelling, gypsies and Travellers, even when not travelling remain nomadic. Even when they stop, they are still Travelling People.**

While a considerable number (18.2%) of Travellers are still living in mobile homes or caravans (AITHS, 2010), most are not mobile. While the Traveller Accommodation Act (1998) obliged Local Authorities to provide Travellers with transient sites (legal temporary stopping places), the lack of overall provision has ensured that Travellers have no real means of practising nomadism. In 1995, the report on the Task Force on the Travelling community recommended that 1,000 transient units of accommodation should be provided to facilitate nomadism. Only 49 transient units have been provided since then. All those units are being used as temporary or emergency accommodation and so therefore there are no transient units available for nomadic Travellers.

The post-2008 austerity measures led to a reduction in funding for Traveller accommodation from €40m a year to approximately €4m a year (Harvey, 2021). Furthermore, from 2008–2018, 34% of the funding allocated to Local Authorities was unspent (ibid.). Local Authorities face no penalties when they fail to meet their obligations to provide Traveller accommodation. A recent report by the European Commission of Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) suggested that, not only should sanctions be imposed on councils for failing to draw down the funds made available to them for Traveller accommodation, but that the responsibility of Traveller accommodation should be taken out of their remit altogether (Holland, 2022). In a speech on homelessness in Ireland, [President Michael D. Higgins](#) was critical of the shortcomings in Traveller accommodation arguing that it was “immoral, wrong and irresponsible to leave people living in the conditions that we have left some of our Travelling people” (Fletcher, 2022).

The slow progress in providing Traveller accommodation has been attributed to local resident opposition (Harvey, 2021). However, as Harvey (2021, p. 15) pointed out:



**Traveller organisations considered that institutional racism in the local authorities played an important part as well, combined with reluctance to fully use their planning powers.**

The Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, [Roderic O’Gorman](#), also attributed the lack of progress in meeting Travellers’ accommodation needs to the institutional racism Travellers faced (Hennessy, 2021).

Laws, such as the Trespass Legislation (2001) and the Housing Miscellaneous Acts (1992, 2002), prohibit Travellers from practicing nomadism because it is a criminal offence to trespass on any land which is private or publicly owned under the legislation (Donnelly-Drummond, 2014). Travellers who break this law risk imprisonment and their homes (caravans) can be impounded (ibid.).

In many places, boulders have been erected by the Local Authorities in what used to be traditional stopping spaces for Travellers (Donahue, McVeigh and Ward, 2005). The 'boulder policy' was borrowed from the Netherlands where the government had implemented the policy to curtail nomadism (ibid.).

Travellers who pursue their cultural right to be nomadic often find that they are forced to live in substandard conditions on official and unofficial halting sites. For example, research has found that most halting sites are situated near environmental hazards such as electricity pylons and dumps or that they are situated on major roads (Treadwell, Shine, Kane and Coates, 2008).

Anti-nomadism is not unique to Irish Travellers. Anti-nomadism is a problem around the world and scholars have argued that it has its roots in colonialism and capitalism (Deleuze and Guattari, 1998). For example, Ellwood (1995, as cited in Donahue et al. 2005, p. 37) argued that:

**“ The desire to control nomads politically and to incorporate them into national (i.e., non-nomadic) culture has always been strong. By their very nature nomads rub nation states up the wrong way. They don't fit neatly into national boundaries, and they tend to look and behave differently from majority populations. In post-colonial states run by bureaucrats wedded to the modernist vision of national progress, nomads are seen as distinctly 'unmodern' – an embarrassment, rather than productive members of society. Whether we're talking about small bands of nomadic hunters in the Amazon Basin, Inuit hunters in the Canadian Arctic or nomadic pastoralists in East Africa, there is strong pressure from governments everywhere to make nomads stay put. The reasons are varied, sometimes benevolent, usually patronizing. They need to be brought together for their own good, government officials claim – so they can be educated, taxed and given proper healthcare, electricity and roads.**

Nomads were and continue to be viewed as a problem because they do not fit neatly into nation state boundaries and acceptable ideological frameworks. Policies to 'settle' and assimilate nomadic people were widespread throughout history. Across Europe, nomadic people were treated with contempt and often treated in a brutal manner (Donahue et al. 2005). Ireland “inherited a legacy of anti-nomadic” policies (ibid., 2005, p. 44) which are still enforced today. As Donahue et al. (2005) point out, the 1824 Vagrancy Act, which outlawed the practice of nomadism under colonialism, remained in place until 1988. The 1824 Act defined itself as:

**“ An Act for the Punishment of idle and disorderly Persons, and Rogues and Vagabond ... Persons committing certain offences shall be deemed rogues and vagabonds and may be imprisoned for three months”**

(as cited in Donahue et al. 2015, p. 42).

After 1988, MacLaughlin argued that the Irish state developed its own anti-nomadic practices (ibid.).

Despite pressures to settle, the practice of Traveller nomadism continues. Donahue et al. (2005, p. 6) argue that the “assertion of the demise of Traveller nomadism is somewhat premature” and that “Traveller nomadism remains a defining feature of many Irish Traveller’s lives” (ibid. p. 8).

### 3.1.1 Types of Accommodation

In the past, Travellers travelled around on [flat carts](#) and set up [bender tents](#) as their sleeping and living quarters. Later, those with the means to do so lived in horse drawn wagons. Modernisation saw them move into what Travellers colloquially refer to as ‘trailers’. A trailer is a caravan and/or mobile home.

In her autobiography, Traveller activist, Nan Joyce (2000, p. 4) informs us that the tents “were made from green covers with hazel branches for wattles” and explains how “in the morning... [Travellers would] roll up the sides, and fold the bedding, [so that] fresh air would get in and the place would be cleaned up spotless”.

Horse-drawn barrel top wagons were also home to the Travellers who could afford them. Some Travellers would burn a wagon when a person died in it, although it is not known how often this occurred as many Travellers would not have been able to afford to replace a wagon, and therefore, burning one would not have been an option. Perhaps wagons were burned if the person who died in it passed away from an illness that was contagious. Only two Travellers, an [elderly couple from Cashel, Co. Tipperary](#), remain living in a barrel top wagon on a permanent basis in Ireland today (Warde, 2022).

Travellers now reside in several types of accommodation including Official Halting Sites, Unofficial Halting sites, Group Housing Schemes, Local Authority Housing, private rented accommodation, and their own private property. Suitable accommodation requires planners to take into consideration aspects of Traveller culture such as nomadism, work practices (for example, scrap collection which requires areas for materials to be stored at the homeplace) and extended families residing together (Harvey, 2021).

**Table 2:** Types of Accommodation Explained

<a href="#">An Official Halting Site</a>	This is a purpose-built facility with access to services such as electricity and water, where Travellers can live in caravans.
<a href="#">An Unofficial Halting Site</a>	This is where Travellers live in caravans, often without access to basic services such as water and electricity.
<a href="#">A Group Housing Scheme</a>	This is a small group of houses that have been built to accommodate Travellers. They are considered culturally appropriate as they take into account that members of the same family prefer to live close together.

## 3.2 Family Networks/Structure

There are many different surnames which are usual amongst the Traveller community. Different surnames are associated with different geographical regions. At one time, Travellers populated mainly rural areas, however, 78.6% of Travellers now live in cities or towns, compared to 62.4% of the general population (CSO, 2017).

Nowadays, many non-Traveller Irish families are nuclear families while the Traveller community family structure is still based on the extended family system, which would have been more common in Ireland in the past. The extended family system is still common in many parts of the world, such as India, where it has been in existence for centuries. While nuclear families typically involve a mother and a father living together with their children, extended families extend beyond the nuclear and tend to include grandparents and other relatives. Traditionally, Travellers would live near their extended family. Where a marriage occurred it was usually the daughter who went to live with her husband's extended family.

## 3.3 Marriage Patterns

Travellers tend to get married much younger than their settled peers, however, some are now opting to getting married older. According to the most recent census figures, over 1 in 3 Travellers aged between 15–29 years were married compared to 1 in 20 of the general population (CSO, 2017). The census figures show that Traveller households have an average of 5.3 people compared to 4.1 for the general population (ibid.). There are many possible reasons for this disparity between Travellers and non-Travellers.

It is not known why Travellers get married so much younger than their 'settled' Irish counterparts. On one hand it may be to avoid scandal while on the other it could be attributed to the fact that Traveller women have lived on the margins throughout history and have not until recent decades had the same opportunities as their settled peers to pursue careers. Travellers tend to leave school early and according to the CSO (2017), only 1% had a third level qualification. Therefore, their life trajectories have been very different to their settled peers. In the past and in the absence of contraception, it may also have been used as a way of protecting their children from having babies outside of marriage and suffering the consequences that would have ensued.

Travellers practice consanguineous and endogamous marriages. Consanguinity is defined as a union between two individuals who are related as second cousins or closer. Endogamous marriages refer to unions between individuals from the same community.

Consanguineous marriages are a cultural norm in many societies worldwide. However, consanguineous marriages are a controversial subject in some Western countries because they can result in increased genetic reproductive risks. For example, in Pakistan and Sudan, 50% of marriages are consanguineous (Barrett, 2016). While consanguinity is most common in predominantly Muslim countries, it is practised by people of all religions (ibid). For example, in Hindu culture marriages are often arranged between the prospective husband's father and

the daughters of paternal aunts or uncles. According to Barrett (2016), there are up to 3,000 consanguineous couples in the Traveller community in Ireland.

While marriages between Travellers and non-Travellers are not uncommon, like all humans Travellers are homophilous by nature and prefer to be with people who they perceive as familiar and feel safe with. Mouw's (2006 as cited in Keane, 2011) theory of homophily refers to the human tendency to 'flock together like birds of a feather' when individuals share perceived similar characteristics. Keane (2011, p. 455) posits that "homophilous groups may serve a self-protective function in providing benefits such as feeling a sense of ease, comfort, support, safety and security".

In all the oldest cultures in the world, arranged marriages are a cultural norm. It is not surprising therefore that they are a feature of Traveller culture. Arranged marriages are not the same as forced marriages whereby the woman has no say in who she marries. In an arranged marriage, both the man and woman have the right to say no to the person chosen for them by their parents and families.

As the Traveller community is made up of a diverse group of individuals, and there is no one way or no right way to be a Traveller, it must be noted that some Travellers do not get married at all. Same-sex marriage is also a new development in the Traveller community, reflecting the changes in Irish society more generally, because of the 2015 Marriage Referendum which allowed for same-sex marriage. The Traveller community is constantly evolving as are their own beliefs about what it is to be a Traveller.

Like most people, when Travellers marry, they expect to remain married for life. Divorce was banned under the Constitution of Ireland, adopted in 1937. In 1995, the people of Ireland voted to end the ban and in 1996 the Divorce Referendum was adopted into law (Kenny, 2021). Over the past two decades since the referendum, divorce in Ireland has become widespread. There is a perception among some people that Travellers remain married for life but like non-Travellers, Travellers also divorce and remarry.

### **3.4 Traveller Economy**

Historically, the majority of Irish Travellers were self-employed in the 'Traveller economy' and therefore they required little assistance from the state for decades (Kenny and Binchy, 2009). While the Traveller economy existed in a symbiotic relationship with the settled rural economy, it was economically self-sufficient (Cooney, 2009). The 'Traveller economy' refers to the traditional economic activities that Travellers engage in, which "is 'outside' dominant or 'mainstream' economic activity that is based on sedentary modes of production" (Donohue, McVeigh and Ward, 2005, p. 13).

Cooney (2009) stated that the Traveller Economy differed from the settled economy because it relied on nomadism and was based on self-sufficiency and flexibility. Both Traveller women and children have always played a huge and necessary role in the Traveller economy. Some may argue that making children work is a form of exploitation, but Travellers do not view children's participation like this. Rather, they value their children's contribution and view it as important to passing down their way of life and making a living.

Traditional forms of employment included craftsmen, tinsmiths, horse traders, entertainers (musicians, singers and storytellers), seasonal labourers and door to door traders (referred to as 'hawking' in Cant) and Tatty Hawkers (seasonal potato pickers). Travellers are also well known for their recycling endeavours through scrap collecting and copper burning.

Traveller tinsmithing consists of a particular skill mastered by Travellers in the making of utensils from tin. The craft requires little soldering and is carried out mainly with the use of small anvils and hammers and rivets. The tinsmithing tradition was formerly passed from father to son. Traveller tinsmiths provided an invaluable service to rural Irish farming life, as they would travel from place to place repairing and producing farm equipment and utensils. It was a highly sought craft, and part of Irish rural life and beyond for centuries. With the introduction and widespread availability of plastics from the 1950s onwards, tinsmithing experienced rapid decline (Gmelch and Gmelch, 1976). Now societies worldwide are being urged to reduce their plastic consumption. It is interesting to note how the old ways of the tinsmith were much more sustainable and environmentally friendly. Tinsmithing has been included on Ireland's first national inventory of intangible heritage. A small, curated collection is available in the National Museum of Ireland, Dublin and the [Museum of Country Life in Foxford, Co. Mayo](#). Sadly, only a handful of tinsmiths still exist today.

Trading, and market trading, were always an important economic activity within the Traveller economy (McCarthy and McCarthy, 1998). Up until the turn of the new millennium, it was estimated that 20% of market traders in Ireland were from a Traveller background (ibid.). The Casual Trading Act of 1995, which provided for the control of casual trading, had an adverse effect on the Traveller community, in particular women, who would have played a huge role in market trading. According to McCarthy and McCarthy (1998), Travellers were not resourced or organised enough to compete with the measures being imposed on them.

Despite changes in society, many Travellers have proved to be adept at adjusting to fluctuations in the market. There are a few very successful enterprises being run by Travellers throughout the country. Travellers are involved in mattress recycling, retrofitting houses and scrapping cars. They are also taking on roles in the waged economy and continuously developing the skills required to do so.

### 3.4.1 Horse Ownership

Horse trading and horse ownership is a very important aspect of Traveller culture (Pavee Point, 2018). Travellers have always kept horses, and many continue to maintain a special and spiritual relationship with them. Traveller participants from a study on horse ownership stated that horses

were a central part of Traveller culture and talked about the deep emotional attachments that they had with horses (ibid.). In 2019, at the launch of the research report, [Traveller Horse Ownership](#), the then Minister for Equality, David Stanton, agreed that horse culture was in the soul of the Traveller community. Travellers and Traveller representatives argue that the keeping of horses is important to Traveller mental health and well-being as their relationship with horses is such an integral part of who they are. Horse ownership is entwined with Traveller identity. While in the past horse ownership had a stronger economic imperative than it does today, horse ownership is still important to Travellers. Horses are a way for Travellers to stay connected to one another through breaking, breeding, buying and selling and talking about horses with one another. Horse fairs in the UK (i.e., Appleby and Betty Hensers horse fairs) and across Ireland (i.e., the Smithfield and Ballinasloe horse fairs) are a huge part of Traveller history and culture.

Horse ownership is seen as a way of filling time productively. The routine and structure that is provided by caring for horses gives many Traveller men something to do that is therapeutic and benefits the well-being of those involved. Many derive a sense of pride that is beneficial to self-esteem and mental health. Traveller horse ownership has traditionally been a private affair, confined to families, where skills are passed on from one generation to the next. Most Traveller horse owners are skilled in the care of horses and the horse's welfare is of paramount importance to them (Pavee Point, 2018).

Travellers also keep horses for recreational purposes. Sulky racing, which is horse racing with a two wheeled cart, is an old sport. Though not unique to Irish Travellers, it is a sport which some Irish Travellers engage in from time to time. Keeping horses for this purpose can be expensive and there are high levels of skills required to care for the horses and to engage in racing. Travellers who keep horses for this purpose tend to be concentrated areas, such as Cork, Donegal and Tipperary. Racing can be highly competitive, and winners are given high levels of respect. Prize money can be quite substantial, and racing is used as a fundraising activity for charitable purposes in some areas (Pavee Point, 2018).

Sulky racing often gains a lot of negative public attention because it is sometimes done on busy roads where it could cause an accident. Travellers and Traveller activists have proposed that safe places could be provided for Travellers to engage in this sport in the same way as safe places are provided for other sports. Sulky racing, which is a form of horse racing, could be better catered for through the provision of off-road sulky racing tracks ensuring the safety of the drivers and the welfare of the horses and people involved.

Currently, there is somewhat of a crisis in Traveller horse ownership in Ireland. While legislation to control the ownership of horses has been introduced, there has been little acknowledgement of the cultural significance of the horse to Travellers. Neither has there been any acknowledgement of the wider health and other consequences of an erosion of the traditional way of life on Travellers. It has been difficult for many Traveller horse owners to comply with the legal requirements relating to horse ownership for several reasons, including costs, no access to land and a lack of culturally appropriate and accessible information (Pavee Point, 2018).

## 3.5 Storytelling

Through stories, the past can be communicated. Like many communities, Irish Travellers have a rich storytelling heritage. The storyteller has worn many faces throughout history. Seanchaí is the Irish word for storyteller and means someone who bears 'old lore' or 'old thoughts'. The storyteller effectively disseminates old values, knowledge and historical traditions through stories. As Maher (1972, p. 68, as cited in O'hAodha, 2009) stated:



**... you must remember that storytelling is our only means of communication with the past... [our deeds...] we do remember them and pass them down faithfully by word of mouth.**

In the past, when Travellers would have travelled from place to place, the storytellers among them would provide a source of entertainment by sharing the stories they had gathered, like treasures, along the way. Harding (2019) talked about how he learned storytelling from country people and Travellers during times when people were slow to talk openly about personal and emotional matters. He acknowledged that through storytelling, people would find meaning and ways to communicate difficult knowledge with others.

Books written by Travellers, such as, Maher's *The Road to God Knows Where* (1972), Nan Joyce's *Traveller* (1985) and Pecker Dunne's *Parley-Poet and Chanter* (2004) generate a unique and creative tension between print and speech (O'hAodha, 2009). Both Maher and Dunne's books are littered with folk-anecdotes, songs and superstitions, which highlight the educational function that the oral tradition occupied within the Traveller community (ibid.). They indicate the high value placed by the Traveller community on the skills of the storyteller.

Through storytellers like Manor Donohue and Thomas McCarthy, Travellers still learn a lot about the past. Facebook was how Manor started putting 'pen to paper' to document his rich heritage. For example, through one story posted on his Facebook page for Travellers, Manor Donohue informs us that Traveller men, such as Nan Joyce's father, John 'Jonty' Donohue, fought in World War 1 and World War 2. Donohue tells us how Nan's father was serving in the army when Nan was born in 1919. Other Travellers would have also served in the army, but they tend to be overlooked in the history books. However, as all Irish people who served in the British army have a complicated story with how they were recorded in the history books, this wouldn't necessarily be an issue for just Irish Travellers.

## 3.6 Music

Irish Travellers have a rich musical tradition. As Thomas McCarthy (2019) put it:



**Singing in the Traveller community has always been strong... You'll find a great singer in every Travelling family. The only difference is that some of them will sing modern songs, and some of them will sing country songs. There's very few now who will sing the old songs.**

Like most musicians, Travellers played music and/or sang songs for several reasons. For example, music provided Travellers with a source of income as they moved from place to place. It also served as a way of networking to find other forms of employment. Travellers also played, and continue to play, music for entertainment and relaxation. Through music, Travellers were able to pass on their cultural heritage both within the Traveller community and the non-Traveller community who they would play for in their homes and with during 'sessions' in public houses.

### 3.6.1 Traveller Contributions to Traditional Irish Music

Under colonialism, Irish musicians, particularly nomadic musicians, were outlawed from as early as the 15th century (O'Boyle, 1976 as cited in Tuohy and O'hAodha, 2008). Consequently, they had to go 'underground' (ibid.). The Traveller music tradition was badly affected by these prohibitions (Tuohy and O'hAodha, 2008). It can be argued that this was the beginning of a centuries-long oppression of Traveller singers and balladeers (ibid.). In *The Irish Song Tradition*, O'Boyle (1976) (as cited in Tuohy and O'hAodha, 2008, p. 8) argued that the desire to curtail nomadism was at the root of these prohibitions:

**“ Just at a time when music in Europe was feeling its way out of modes, Irish music was outlawed because of the part taken by harpers, pipers and poets in the last upsurge of Gaelic Ireland against the English...In 1603 a proclamation was issued by the Lord President of Munster for the extermination by martial law of: “all manner of bards, harpers etc.” and within ten days of it Queen Elizabeth herself ordered Lord Barrymore: “to hang the harpers wherever found”. All through the seventeenth century they were proscribed and banned, hunted and persecuted...Under Cromwell, in 1654, all harpers, pipers, and wandering musicians had to obtain letters from the magistrate of the district they hailed from before being allowed to travel through the country.**

The accuracy of this quote in terms of what Queen Elizabeth I supposedly said has been contested by [Cathcart and Sanger \(2012\)](#).

It has been argued that Travellers “were one of the principal agents through which the [Irish folk music] tradition developed to its present state” (Ní Laodhóg and Collins, 1995, p. 110). Irish traditional music began as an oral tradition, passed on from generation to generation by listening, learning by ear, and without formally writing the tunes on paper. To date, Traveller musicians continue this practice. To date, little research has been undertaken into the musical contributions made by Irish Travellers to traditional Irish music. This dearth of research can be related to several factors including the relatively small size of the Traveller community and difficulties encountered trying to engage with the community because of their nomadic lifestyle. Other factors relate to poverty and the fact that research into areas, such as, Travellers, music, and the arts, more generally, was often under resourced. While it is not within the scope of this resource to include all aspects of Traveller music and song culture, it is important to delineate aspects of the Irish musical tradition known to be unique to the Irish Traveller community. The [Irish Traditional Music Archive](#) (ITMA) is currently undertaking research in this area.

Considering their 'outsider' status within Irish society, Traveller music and song was regarded by many people as simply 'Irish music' (Tuohy and O'hAodha, 2008). Steps have been made to try to recover aspects of Traveller musical traditions, through the work of individuals, such as [Thomas McCarthy](#), [Patrick "Pecker" Dunne](#) and Johnny "Pops" Connors. Johnny "Pops" Connors is a grandson of [John Doran](#), the piper. Johnny "Pops" Connors wrote a lot of songs about his experiences. One such song, *Gum Sha Lack*, has the lines "All the jobs in the world we have done, from making Pharaoh's coffins to building Birmingham" (as cited in Carroll, 1975, p. 31). It is important to note that it is difficult to prove where many old songs originated as they were passed down by word of mouth and there are no written records in many cases.

Travellers are noted for singing ballads. Like how people from the Gaeltacht use song as a way of telling the story of what happened to 'their people', the biographical history of Travellers as a people is a central trope running through their songs (Tuohy and O' hAodha, 2008).

Non-Traveller Irish musicians, such as [Christy Moore](#) and Davy Spillane, have acknowledged the influence that Traveller music and song repertoire had on them as musicians (Tuohy and O'hAodha, 2008). And yet, during the entire 20th century, just one recording of a Traveller singing was produced in Ireland in Tom Munnelly's *Songs of the Irish Travellers: Traditional Ballads and Lyric Songs* (1967-75) (ibid.).

From Puck to Appleby is a superb double CD collection of songs of Irish Travellers in England from field recordings made by Jim Carroll and Pat Mackenzie. The recordings were made between 1973 and 1985 and can be found on the [ITMA website](#).

Traveller singer, balladeer, storyteller, and winner of the Gradam Ceoil (TG4 – singer of the Year – 2019), Thomas McCarthy, said that the key to his singing is knowing the story behind each song because without the story, the song means nothing (McCarthy, 2019). McCarthy has himself released three recordings, *Round Top Wagon* (2010), *Herself and Myself* (2014) and *Jauling and the Green Tober* (2017) with Gypsy singer Viv Legg. The older Traveller songs, which McCarthy (2010) sings himself, relate to eviction, transportation, emigration, and Irish historical battles and heroes. He also has a couple of songs with words from Irish Traveller language Cant/Gammon as has Traveller balladeer, [Jack Delaney](#). Other songs, such as, 'Down That Road', 'The Old Knee Travelling Wagon' and 'The Rambling Man', as sang by many other Traveller ballad-singers, such as the Keenan Sisters from County Clare, are more rooted in Traveller tradition and experience, and the effects of assimilation or "settlement" on the Traveller way of life.

Breaking away from the traditional forms usually employed by the Traveller community at the time, the lesser known but incredibly significant [Patrick Gerald Ward](#), went to Italy in the early 1900s and trained as a tenor.

The link between performance in terms of singing, music, and storytelling (Travellers singing and telling stories to themselves and to members of the “settled community”) is very closely interwoven to Irish Travellers’ sense of a separate and unique cultural tradition and identity. This is true of ‘political’ songs including [‘The Last of the Travelling People’](#) and [‘Wexford Town’](#) which are about discrimination and prejudice and some of the interactions between the Traveller and settled communities. In the song ‘Wexford Town’, for example, Pecker Dunne recounts prejudice against his father because he had married a settled woman:

“ **My family lived in Wexford Town  
Stopped travelling and settled down.  
Though me father kept a horse and car,  
Oh, we lived within a town.  
Some people there misunderstood,  
Oh they did not know our ways,  
So with horse and car back on the road,  
I began my travelling days...**

## **Fiddlers**

Mac Aoidh (1994) highlighted the pivotal role played by Irish Traveller fiddlers and pipers in Donegal who he claimed had an enormous influence on the revival of Irish traditional music between the 1970s and the 1990s. Families, such as, the Dohertys, MacSweeneys and McConnells, had a unique Donegal regional musical style. This style of playing had been adopted in more recent times, by groups as diverse as Clannad and Altan. Irish Traveller fiddlers and pipers would play at fairs, fundraisers, harvest “meitheal’s” dances, house and pub sessions, and other social gatherings. Mac Aoidh (1994, p. 222) explains that:

“ **...the Travelling fiddlers served to distribute elements of musical styles as well as repertoire between what were otherwise remote communities. In Donegal, with few exceptions these players belonged to a single extended family and where active, their impact was substantial.**

Dublin fiddler, [Tommie Potts](#), explained how one musician would integrate or adapt a new musical tune into their repertoire as learned or “borrowed” from another musician or someone with another individual musical style, whether they be a Traveller or non-Traveller. Referring to Potts, Mac Aoidh (1994, p. 17) said that:



**He [Potts] felt that there was a cycle in the music. It started with the player hearing and becoming interested in a tune. The next step in the sequence was to learn it. Thereafter the fiddler would work hard on perfecting a setting for the tune. At this point, the piece was very stable for the musician and could possibly become stale and even boring through a routine approach...When the player was being lulled into disinterest with a tune he or she would, at some unexpected time, hear the same piece played by another player who, by simply altering a note or two completely transfixed the complexion of the tune and the fiddler’s delight with it. This process was an ongoing, Tommie maintained, and he delighted in cautioning that whenever you think you know a tune and may becoming complacent with it, you risk being struck by this pleasurable, unending phenomenon. He described it as ‘the hidden note.**

The Fiddler Dunne, father of the well-known and much loved [Pecker Dunne](#), passed down the skill to his son in the same way that his father had passed it down to him. Indeed, all the Dunne family are accomplished musicians. In an episode of the Late Show, aired in the 1980s, which was dedicated to Irish Travellers, the Fiddler Dunne showed the host Gay Byrne a fiddle which he had made himself. Many Travellers could make their own instruments. The Fiddler Dunne went on to entertain the audience and played music on both his own hand made fiddle and one which had been manufactured by someone else.

Niamh Dunne, a fiddler in Ed Sheeran’s favourite band, Beoga, delved into her rich family history in an episode of Folk Season on RTE Radio 1. The title of the show was [The Road Less Travelled](#) and in it Niamh discussed the unique style of music which the Dunne family had and shed light on how this was influenced by Travellers from other regions over time. It was surprising to hear the Dunne sisters grapple with identity issues and question their own ethnicity in the documentary but many Travellers struggle with similar identity issues, so it was unsurprising.

## The Uilleann Pipes

In early December 2017, at their general assembly in South Korea, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) inscribed uilleann piping in their Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. The uilleann pipes, which were developed in Ireland over several centuries, are the most musically sophisticated form of bagpipe in the world.

Travellers have been acknowledged for their unique style of uilleann piping. Tuohy and O’hAodha’s (2008) book *Postcolonial Artist: Johnny Doran and Irish Traveller Tradition* provided a detailed insight into the unique style of Traveller uilleann piping. This book focuses on the history, background,

musical traditions and techniques of the Doran and Cash families but also other extended Traveller families who are associated with the traditional style of uilleann piping encapsulated in [Johnny Doran's](#) (1908–1950) traditional style and repertoire.

Uilleann piping was predominantly a male preserve. The men played the music while the women tended to be the singers and performed the songs. One of the reasons for this was due to the powerful social constraints as relating to the long-established divisions between both sexes in more traditional and pre-urban cultures. Until very recently, this has continued to be the case across a wide range of cultures in Asia, Europe, and the Arab world but also amongst related traditionally nomadic groups such as the Roma (O'hAodha, 2006).

Like many uilleann pipers, Johnny Doran's style of playing the pipes was highly individualistic but drew on his family's broader style of playing. This distinctive style of piping was transmitted in an informal manner through the medium of a well-developed oral tradition through many generations of the same large extended family. This familial style would have incorporated the influences of influences other musicians from the extended Doran family, other musicians (both Traveller and non-Traveller) and even regional styles of music. The Dorans have always had a particular association with Counties Wicklow and Wexford.

Born in 1832, John Cash was renowned for his uilleann pipe playing. Jack Cash, son of John Cash, was renowned for his ability to play any tune using nothing more than an ivy leaf. Travellers also made Uilleann pipes of the highest quality. Another important service provided by the Travellers was the repair of instruments. Settled musicians, often isolated in a small town, depended on the arrival of the Travellers to bring new songs, techniques, and styles. Travellers down through the years have been passing on their musical expertise and tunes as they went from town to town. They have been both bearers and custodians of culture (Crowley, 1994).

Examining the six documented generations of music in the extended Doran/Cash family (up to the present era), Tuohy and O'hAodha (2004), highlighted how the uilleann piping tradition within the family, was normally passed from father to son, with a strong emphasis on public performance so that one could carve out a living, solely from the playing of music. In addition to providing a platform for the 'showmanship' of the more accomplished players, the session also functioned as a means of encouragement for younger members of the family – in order that they can partake in an inclusive and very natural way.

The musical tradition was passed on by listening to and mimicking other proficient players, without being taught in any formal lesson or setting. As Rice (1994, p. 65) the music is "learned but not taught". The music was absorbed through a process of osmosis. Rice (1994) highlighted the concept of "noodling", which relates to the working and re-working of certain musical motifs to master the intricacies of melody and ornamentation. The novice musician sometimes carried out these practice sessions away from the community – while tending to sheep, for example – and often while listening to an elder or more accomplished musician.

[Paddy Keenan](#), the renowned modern-day uilleann piper, does not teach the pipes in the 'conventional' way. Rather than breaking a tune into its relevant phrases, for example, he plays the

tune repeatedly while his students listen to what he is doing. This form of musical transmission can be seen at the Johnny Doran Weekend (an annual pilgrimage, Mass of Remembrance, and musical gathering in County Wicklow) where one can frequently observe a parent who is involved in a music session, repeatedly urging their reluctant child to join in on tunes that they do not know so that they can pick up the tunes as they go along.

## Irish Traveller Balladeers

Traveller woman, [Margaret Barry](#), was a banjo-player and a ballad singer who played a leading role in breaking down gender stereotypes or categories as relating to traditional roles in Traveller music. A well-known and much-loved figure, Margaret made a huge contribution to both the music and song culture of Travellers and the 'settled community'. A regular staple at the football matches, markets, and fairs of Ireland, she frequently travelled by bicycle and was a common sight in many towns and villages, with her tenor banjo slung across her back.

Margaret was central in putting the Traveller singing tradition on the map and in integrating aspects of Traveller music with a diversity of other traditions, particularly during the 'ballad boom' initiated amongst Irish Traveller and non-Traveller musicians based in London during the early-1960s. An exemplar of this approach, Margaret's distinctively powerful voice was homed in the noise of the fair, the race meeting, or the football crowd. Starting out as a street singer or busker, Margaret rarely failed to command attention and generally accompanied herself on the banjo while singing.

Born in 1917, Margaret came from a family of accomplished Traveller musicians. Her parents were accomplished show people or street balladeers. Her grandfather, Bob Thompson, was a very talented uilleann piper who won the top prize at the Feis Ceoil that was held in Dublin in 1897 and in Belfast the following year. The celebrated song collector, Peter Kennedy, first met Margaret in 1952 in Crossmaglen, County Armagh, where she was then living in a caravan at the village of Cregganbane. He had first heard of Margaret from Alan Lomax who had heard her singing the song *Goodnight Irene* at Dundalk fair in 1951. Kennedy recorded Margaret in 1952.

In the early 1950s, Margaret moved to Camden Town, London where she joined musical forces with County Sligo fiddler Michael Gorman. The duo became a notable part of the thriving London-Irish emigrant music scene, a scene that included such illustrious names as Máirtín Byrnes, Jim Power, Tommy McCarthy, Willie Clancy, and Seamus Ennis, to mention but a few.

Ewan McColl invited Margaret, Michael Gorman and Willie Clancy to his London home in 1955 where they recorded two LPs, *Songs of an Irish Tinker Lady* and *Irish Jigs, Reels and Hornpipes*. During the 1960s, Margaret returned to Ireland with her daughter, setting up home in Laurencetown, County Down. Her performances became rarer from the late 1970s onwards and she died in 1990.

## Contemporary Traveller Musicians

The musical tradition has never died within the Traveller community. Many people will be familiar with the critically acclaimed band [The Furey Brothers \(Finbar, Eddie, Paul and George\) and Davy Arthur](#), who have had huge success both in Ireland and internationally. A well-loved Irish band they

have appeared on national television numerous times over the years. Some of their most famous songs include [Sweet Sixteen](#) and [Red Rose Café](#). [Finbar Furey](#) has performed with many other famous Irish artists, including Aslan's lead singer, [Christy Dignam](#).

Some will remember [Chris Doran](#) who won 'You're a Star' in 2004 and went on to represent Ireland at the Eurovision Song Contest in 2004. [Shayne Warde](#) rose to fame as the winner of the second X Factor show in the UK. Sharon Ward won judges and the audience over in the show Ireland's Got Talent in 2019. Other well-known Traveller artists include Steo Wall and the Keenan family from Clare. [Martin 'Beanz' Warde](#), comedian and journalist, played homage to many of these in an article published in the [Irish Times in 2021](#).

## Show People

The only autobiography written (as-yet) by an Irish Traveller musician, Parley-Poet and Chanter (Dunne, 2004), is written by Pecker Dunne, a leading musician and singer from the Traveller community who played with groups as well-known as *The Dubliners*. Pecker was part of a distinctive group within the Traveller community known as the Fairground People/Travellers or Showpeople. The Showpeople and Fairground Travellers are a long-established group within the Irish, British, and other European Traveller communities. In France, the group is known 'Les Forains' (O' hAodha, 2008). References to these travelling artists and performers are sparse and appear only occasionally in books that describe the history of Irish fairs, markets, circuses, and fairgrounds (ibid.). They are the Travellers who always worked as entertainers at the fairgrounds and in the carnivals and who frequented the patterns, pilgrimages, harvest gatherings or 'meitheals' weddings and sports meetings of Ireland (ibid.).

The Tumbler Barrett was a famous showman, known for his acrobatic skills, in the Mayo region. While his ethnicity is not referred to in the archives, he was a Traveller man. As can be seen from [this child's account](#), it was evident that the Tumbler would cause great excitement when he came to town. The Tumbler's children made their living at the fairs too. While some were entertainers, most of them travelled from place to place with small carnivals (chair-o-planes, swinging boats etc.) and market stalls.

## 3.7 Art

Appreciating art in its many forms can lead to a better understanding of the world we live in. Travellers have always been involved in the arts and continue to have a presence in these arenas today. This section will examine Travellers' contributions to the arts.

### 3.7.1 Irish Travellers – Art, Craft and Design

The traditional crafts of the Travelling community embody various forms of Art, Craft and Design. Past generations of Travellers created numerous objects that had a specific form and function. Some were everyday items such as tinware or vessels for use in the homestead. Others were for

decoration or as mementos of a person or place visited. More were for the purpose of making a modest living. All these objects can now be considered traditional forms of art.

Some of these pieces have survived and remain within families as treasured heirlooms, offering insight into a way of life, now lost, but most certainly not forgotten. These pieces allow us to understand the way in which the Travelling community once lived and survived on the borders and boundaries of many towns and cities in Ireland. They illustrate a simple life, the life of the wandering and the free but also of the artists, the muses, the crafters and the innovators, the menders, repairers, and the recyclers, once more valued in times gone by.

## Tinsmithing

There was a tradition of [tinsmithing](#) (see **section 3.5** for more information) among many Traveller families in Ireland. The skill and craftsmanship was passed down from father to son for many generations. The tinsmith was an important part of Irish life before the mass production of plastic took over and made their sustainable and environmentally friendly products unnecessary.

The tinsmith, commonly known as the 'tinker' or 'tincéir' would make everyday vessels such as 'Pongers' and 'Pandys' otherwise known as pots, pans, jugs, and cups. With little or no soldering, each piece was bent, from basic sheets of tin, then rolled into shape using hammers before being riveted and secured into shape. Such pieces proved to be durable and long lasting and some of these objects were enhanced with decoration. The repoussé method of decorating metals was sometimes used, in which parts of the design are raised in relief from the back or the inside of the article by means of hammers and punches. Definition and detail can then be added from the front by chasing or engraving.

Unfortunately, there are very few Traveller Tinsmiths left in Ireland today and the tradition of passing the skill down has become a thing of the past as the younger generations no longer see the craft as a viable investment.

In more recent years, however, many within the community are trying to revive the craft among the younger generation. In 2019, Traveller tinsmithing was inscribed into Ireland's List of Intangible Cultural Heritage.

[Tom McDonnell and James Collins](#) are two well-known Traveller tinsmiths from Dublin. They do a lot to keep the trade alive and can be found at fairs such as the Ploughman Championships and the Willie Clancy Festival demonstrating their skill and selling their wares. Tinsmith, [Ted Maughan](#) from Mayo, was loyal to the trade up until his death in 2021 and like his tinsmithing peers, he did all he could to keep the trade alive.

[Tin lanterns](#) were an essential item in people's homes and were used to hold candles before people had electricity. The lantern would protect the candle from blowing out in the wind while being carried. They were objects of great beauty and craftsmanship. The lanterns were usually made from good quality tin, when available, and they were decorated by punching holes and slits from inside the lantern to make a design. Travellers say that each tinsmith had their own unique design which makes their work identifiable.

## Paper Flowers

Traveller women would traditionally venture from door-to-door bartering for food and clothes. They would swap or sell bric-a-brac or do jobs around a house in exchange for essential items. Their baskets were often filled with an assortment of rabbits, hares or fish that would have been hunted or caught by Traveller men. They would have also sold small tin wares crafted by the tinsmiths from their camps.

However, what took pride of place in a Travellers woman's basket were her [paper flowers](#). Both Traveller men and women would have crafted the flowers themselves by using found or cheaply bought paper. Using a simple technique to create each of the flowers, they would then have picked some branches from nearby trees and attached the paper flower to the branch with some leave still attached creating a stem for the flower. Selling paper flowers at a time, when only the rich had flowers in their gardens, meant that the Travellers could offer a cheaper, longer lasting and sustainable alternative.

## Beady Pockets

[Beady Pockets](#), otherwise known as horseshoe pockets, were often worn by Traveller women around their waist. They were culturally important traditional items of clothing that acted as a 'pocket' or a flat handbag to hold personal items of value. These might include money, children's birth certificates, holy medals, sewing items such as thread, small scissors and thimbles, or jewellery.

The pieces were handmade and were decorated heavily on the front side with stitching, buttons, trinkets, and relics. As families travelled around the country meeting old and new friends, as well as relatives, the ladies would gift and swap these buttons and relics as a memento of the person they had met or the places they had visited. The pockets were a collection of memories that served as reminders of the roads that they had travelled. The wearing of pockets seems to have generally stopped about 30 years ago.

## Barrel Top Wagons

Prior to the introduction of wagons in the mid-1800s, Irish Travellers travelled around on [flat carts](#) and set up [bender tents](#) as their sleeping and living quarters. [Barrel top wagons](#) were traditionally used to transport goods before being used, by circus people and their families across Europe, as a form of accommodation. Following its introduction to Ireland from Europe during the mid-1800s, the barrel top wagon was adopted by Irish Travellers. There were various types of wagons, such as, the Burton, Brush, Reading, Ledge, Open Lot, and the Barrel Top Wagon which was also referred to as the Bow Top Wagon. The most used by the Irish Travellers was the Barrel Top wagon. This was because it was known to be the lightest form of wagon and the most easily drawn by their horses.

In the early days, the decoration of the wagons was standardized but as the wagons became more popular, they became a symbol of status and pride among the community. Hence their decoration became more and more elaborate. In an article from '[Paint your Wagon](#)', [Traveller Times](#) (2016), Ryalla Duffy gives an indication of the creativity and ingenuity required to achieve this beautiful decoration. She (Traveller Times, 2016) explains how:



**As time moved on the craft evolved into an art in its own right. Whilst every painter has their own style, common themes of decoration that embellished the scrolls and lining, included horses, vine work, fruit, birds, elaborate carvings, and gold leaf as well as triple shading. Underworks and accessories were traditionally painted in a paler yellow or cream, whilst colours for the body favoured maroons, greens, reds and occasionally dark blue. Once the woodwork has been prepared and primed, subsequent layers of gloss are applied before skilled decoration is added. Finally, several coats of exterior varnish help unify the layers, as well as affording protection from the natural elements which all take a toll on the paintwork.**

Families would often commission a wagon to mark a marriage within the family and it would become the home of the newlyweds. In time, several families turned from commissioning the wagons to repairing, making, carving, and painting them. The wagons lasted for about 50 years before becoming outmoded by newer more modern style caravans which could be towed by a van or car.

A small number of families still carry on the tradition of making wagons today and they have become highly sought-after pieces of art. Many pieces have been preserved by Museums across Ireland and the UK. They can often be seen displayed across some of the bigger traditional horse fairs in both Ireland and the UK. As noted in **section 3.3.1**, very few Irish Travellers still live in wagons today.

### 3.7.2 Traveller Artists

There are a few prominent Traveller artists today who focus on representations of their community and the injustices they face. This section will provide some information on some of those artists, including Phein O' Reachtigan, Tom Rhattigan and Leanne McDonagh.

Phein O'Reachtigan is a conceptual artist, and currently lives in England. He is also a playwright and composes music. Following a 10-year battle with the authorities in the UK, an extensive eviction of Traveller families ensued at a site in Essex in 2011. In response to the eviction at Dale Farm, Phein curated [an exhibition](#) at the Tate in London. Inviting 20 fellow artists to exhibit alongside him, he used their participation as an overview piece creating dialogue around homelessness and accommodation. Phein's work investigates and examines various injustices faced by the more vulnerable in society and homeless and human trafficking are themes that frequent his work regularly.

Tom Rhattigan is a bestselling author, songwriter, artist and poet. He had a close call with the notorious Moors Murderers as a child. He wrote two books *A Slice of Bread and Jam* and *Boy Number 26* in the 1960s which give a snapshot into his life growing up and his childhood memories. He is a survivor of child sexual abuse from both the Irish industrial schools' system and the children's homes run by the Catholic church in the UK. Tom's paintings are striking, powerful and moving. His work is filled with anger and pain as he does not hold back in his portrayal of the figures and symbols from his childhood. His work can be viewed as a protest against the church and its treatment of the children once in its care.

Leanne McDonagh is a visual artist born in 1990. She was born in Waterford but moved to Cork with her family as a young girl. Having experienced first-hand prejudice and discrimination, Leanne aims to challenge misconceptions about her community through art. She feels that as a Traveller artist she has a unique opportunity to represent and record her community from within. She creates artwork using a range of processes; however, paint, print, and photography are her main areas of interest.

Leanne is determined to define herself rather than be defined by others. Her work is an expression of herself, and it is vastly influenced by her childhood memories and personal experiences, which are ultimately those of an Irish Traveller. McDonagh (2015) describes her work as a subtle and contemplative representation of contemporary Ireland's Traveller culture from the rarely seen standpoint of an 'insider'.

### 3.7.3 The Depiction of Travellers in Irish Art

Over the past decades, some notable non-Traveller artists have seemed intrigued by Travellers. For example, Jack B Yeats, Louis Le Brocquy, Nano Reid, and Gerard Dillion were intrigued by the mystery and romantic notions of the Travellers' travels, customs and traditions. Through their representations of Travellers, it is evident that they viewed Travellers as figures of freedom unbound by a settled life.

Many of Yeats' prominent figures were in fact Tinkers and Travellers. His painting, [The Two Travellers](#), was purchased by the Tate Gallery in 1946. Louis le Brocquy, an Irish painter, encountered Travellers during the 1940s and became intrigued by them, their language, traditions and their relationship with nature, a theme he revisits throughout the series. Le Brocquy's [Tinker Series](#) captures many daily scenes and interactions as well as Traveller encampments.

In the 1990s, Mick O' Dea, best known for his painting of portraits, was approached to work with members of the Traveller community, who were living and working in Dublin. The collaboration that ensued resulted in what is now known as the Martin Folan Collection. It is a series of portraits of Traveller men and women painted without any attributing symbols of their culture.

There are numerous other artists who have made Travellers a key focus of their work. Travellers have mixed feelings about non-Travellers representing their community. There can be a tendency for artists to exoticise and 'other' Travellers through their representations. Many focus on poverty

as opposed to culture. Very few non-Traveller artists seem interested in capturing the diversity that exists within the community and their representations often reinforce rather than challenge pre-existing stereotypes.

## 3.8 Religious Expression

The All-Ireland Traveller Health Study (AITHS) (2010) reported that 83% of the ROI respondents and 76.8% of the NI respondents said that religion played a very important role in their lives. Like most indigenous Irish people, the vast majority of Irish Travellers are Roman Catholics. However, reflecting the diversity that exists within the community, some Travellers are from different faiths while others are atheist or agnostic.

While religion was seen as important in the AITHS (2010), a growing lack of respect for the church was also noted among Travellers. This was attributed to the emerging Church scandals in Ireland at the time.

There has been very little research carried out on Travellers and religion and therefore it is difficult to ascertain how the community as a whole experience religion. It is probably safe to say, however, that many young Travellers are different to older generations of Travellers in terms of how they express their religious beliefs.

### 3.8.1 Travellers and Religious Belief

Travellers often express their faith by engaging in religious practices and rituals in ways that are often distinct from the non-Traveller community (Griffin, 2012). For them, God is to be found in holy places, people, and in different rituals.

Saints hold a special importance in the lives of many members of the Traveller community. Most will have a special saint, or Saints, that they pray to. The devotion to a particular Saint will often result in the entire family carrying relics (an object or article of religious significance) and holy medals. Saints are viewed by many Travellers as good friends. Many families will travel long distances to visit special relics of Saints or places where they have been.

A visit to a halting site by a priest will almost always end with many of the Travellers living there seeking blessings for holy pictures, statues, medals and other relics. This is very important for Travellers, as they see blessings as being moments when God touches them. To have holy medals, pictures, and statues that have been blessed, gives Travellers a sense of the protection of God.

There are certain people that Travellers consider close to God because of their lifestyle and alleged gifts which they are seen to possess. These men and women may be lay people or nuns or priests. Travellers may travel the length and breadth of the country to meet with a holy person or someone with a 'cure'. In meeting a holy person, and in telling them one's troubles and worries, Travellers are confident that God hears their prayer, and that God will answer in one way or another.

One way in which Travellers will solve disputes between families, or individuals, is to call a priest and have him 'prove' a situation. Travellers believe that in some types of disputes, they can call a priest and that each opposing party would tell him the truth because they believe that if a person told a lie in front of a priest, then something very bad would happen to them or a member of their family. Usually the person, or persons, at fault will back down at the last moment and will not take part in the 'proving'. At the heart of 'proving', is the fundamental stance of honesty before God. This practice, though not as frequent as it was in the past, is still quite common today.

### 3.8.2 Pilgrimages

Pilgrimages are outward expressions of faith; they are prayers in the physical sense of the word. Knock – a place of pilgrimage – is a very important place for Travellers (Brownlee, 2011). In Knock, on the eve of the Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary (15th August), many Travellers begin to walk through the shrine (ibid.). Some will make this journey in their bare feet. Pilgrimage is a time when many Irish Travellers give time to God. It is a journey to a sacred place where the divine presence is more closely felt.

Another place that holds a special place in the hearts of the Travelling Community is Croagh Patrick, Co. Mayo (this mountain is commonly referred to as 'the reek' by Travellers and non-Travellers). As a place of pilgrimage, it is also a place for penance and prayer. Travellers will go to 'the reek' with intentions. They might need prayers for someone who is sick or in trouble, worried or in pain. There is a strong sense within the Travelling community that if you do penance for another it will help that person and give them strength. Many Travellers will also return to 'the reek' to give thanks, and their pilgrimages are occasions of joy. By climbing 'the reek', Travellers believe that they have come physically closer to God.

God is to be found within the journey, and God listens and hears everyone's prayers. The journey itself becomes the prayer for the Travellers. Travellers will try to make the journey three times to make the pilgrimage 'complete'. For example, on a pilgrimage to Lourdes, many Travellers will visit the baths on three occasions during the one visit for fear that they may not have the opportunity to return.

### 3.8.3 Blessings

Blessings are very important to Travellers. For example, when a Traveller woman discovers that she is pregnant, she will seek out a blessing for herself and the unborn child. Further, Travellers will call on God's blessings for vans and cars so that they have the protection of God. A visit to a halting site by a priest can result in every family present looking for blessings of statues, icons, holy pictures, medals, trailers, and other modes of transport. They will often look for blessings for children as well as those who may be ill. They will often ask for prayers for deceased relatives, and friends, as well as prayers for those who find themselves in difficulties or trouble.

### 3.8.4 Pledges

Often, a priest may find themselves in a situation where a Traveller wishes to make a 'pledge'. A pledge in this sense, is a promise to refrain from gambling, or for other activities, believing that if

they make the promise to the priest, in the form of a pledge, then this will help them to overcome any problems that they may have. On the other hand, it would not be uncommon for a priest to be asked to lift the pledge for a day or two or even for a week should it be required. Some Travellers may have taken a pledge not to drink for a period and find themselves in a situation where they may be attending a wedding, or wake, or a funeral, and they would wish to have the pledge lifted.

### **3.8.5 Cures and Other Customs**

Many Travellers hold strong beliefs about the power of traditional healing and cures. Some community members are very knowledgeable about cures for conditions such as warts or thrush. It is not unusual for some Travellers to seek out 'cures' from a healer for a particular condition. As well as believing in the power of prayer, many Travellers also believe strongly in the healing power of the water found in 'holy' wells.

# 4. Traveller Language

## 4.1 Shelta/Cant/Gammon – Terminology Explained

Shelta is the academic term given to the language spoken by Irish Travellers. Gammon and Cant are both dialects of Shelta according to Gilbert et al. (2017). Travellers refer to their language as Cant or Gammon and rarely ever refer to it as Shelta. While many Travellers would likely not be able to distinguish between Cant/Gammon they would probably agree that different families from different geographical regions use different words for the same thing. For example, some Travellers use the word 'jigger' for door while others use 'rudus/rodas'. Some Travellers refer to themselves as 'Pavee' while others use the term 'Minceir'. Ó'hAodha (2002) found that the 'Rathkeale Travellers' felt that the word 'rodas' was from old Shelta and had its roots in the Irish language while 'jigger' was developed at a later stage and had its roots in the English language. As Browne (2002, p. 72) notes "all theories on the origin of Cant are tentative, since records of it are scant and recent".

### 4.1.1 Early Collections of Cant/Gammon

The history of Cant/Gammon was very much in the dark until the early modern period when it was first recorded by English scholars such as Charles Godfrey Leland, John Sampson and Kuno Meyer. Leland first 'discovered' Cant/Gammon in 1874, when he stumbled across a knife grinder on a beach in Bath in the UK, who identified as an Irish Traveller and who spoke a language which Leland was unfamiliar with (O'hAodha, 2002). Leland believed that he had discovered a fifth Celtic language and thought that Cant/Gammon might be the



lost language of the Picts (*ibid.*). Sampson (1891) and Meyer (1909) quickly followed in Leland's footsteps with both publishing papers on Cant/Gammon. Given that there are no written records of Cant/Gammon before the late nineteenth century, any hypotheses and speculations in relation to its origin and early shape rely on Leland's (1874, 1907) and Meyer's (1909) collected words, and Sampson's (1891) folk stories.

As all three of these scholars were English and had no knowledge of the Irish language it is difficult to know if they recorded the words accurately. Pádraig Mac Gréine's (1937) collection was significant in that it was the largest collection of Cant that originated in Ireland and was recorded by someone who had knowledge of the Irish language (Binchy, 2006).

#### 4.1.2 How Old is Cant/Gammon?

Researchers have discussed the question of the age of Shelta since it was first 'discovered' by Leland (1874). There are basically two theories, or two lines of argument put forward in relation to the origins of Cant. The first one is put forward by early researchers such as Leland (1874, 1907), Sampson (1891), Meyer (1909) and Mac Gréine (1931) and later upheld by others, such as, for example, Grant (1994), Binchy (1994, 2006), Browne (2002) and Ni Shuinear (1994, 2002). These scholars suggest that Cant was an ancient language possibly with its own, now lost, grammar, which dates to the Old Irish period or even to Roman times, when next to Old Irish, non-Celtic languages were also spoken in the British Isles.

When examining the word lists collected by Leland and Sampson, three different layers of words are discernible (Ó hAodha, 2002). For example, many words are of Irish origin dividable into the two layers of derivatives from Old Irish and from modern Irish loans (*ibid.*). A second layer consists of words which are of English origin. The third layer consists of a group of vocabulary that is yet from no known origin.

Regarding the large number of words for which no etymology is clear (these account for nearly 500 of the 900 words collected), scholars who argue for the antiquity of the language believe that these words are, what Grant (1994) describes, the genetic component or the oldest part of the language. There is no date for the origin of these words, but it has been suggested that they may be non-Goidelic, non-Celtic and maybe non-Indo European (Ó hAodha, 2002). It is important to note that little is known of the earliest languages which preceded the Celtic language of Indo-European stock, and which formed the oldest form of the Irish language.

Considering these Old Irish links of Cant/Gammon, Meyer (1909) suggests that this carries us back to a period of the Irish language which is anterior to the 11th Century (as cited in O'hAodha, 2002). He found that Cant/Gammon words had a connection with Irish words which had been disguised using complex ancient disguising processes, such as inserting, adding, cutting off syllables, borrowing from Latin or other ancient languages, taking away the end of a word without replacing it, affixation, spelling a word backwards (*ibid.*).

Scholars argue that the processes by which many Cant words have been disguised are identical to the ones used in a monastic manuscript dated back to the 9th century (the eulogy *Amra Choluimb*

Chille). Meyer (1909) argues that the antiquity of these processes could be evidence for the old age of Cant/Gammon (as cited in O'hAodha, 2002). Meyer (1909) suggests that as Irish poets and Scholars (the Druids and the Bards) would have had knowledge of these disguising processes, they were likely the first framers of Cant/Gammon. He goes on to argue that the Cerds (the goldsmiths) and the Saer (stone masons and carpenters) would have been in close contact with the monasteries and that they preserved the 'Bearlagair na Saor' (the language of the Stonemasons) (ibid).

The theory of the Old Irish link of some Cant words has received further, more recent support by some other scholars. Binchy (1994), for example, lists some words that were previously only known from old manuscripts i.e., *cuinne* the word for a priest is an old Irish word for a Druid. Binchy (2002) argues that perhaps at one point that Travellers were trilingual-speaking Old Shelta, Irish and English. The grammar was likely lost because Travellers did not have close contact with each other as for grammar to develop it has to be used daily (ibid.). Travellers only had the opportunity to speak Cant within their families which were located within the wider sedentary population. The small scale of Travellers daily interaction was not enough to ensure that the grammatical structure could survive (Binchy, 2006).

Hancock (1984) also argued that it is still within the bounds of possibility that once Cant existed as a complete language (as cited in Rieder, 2018). To date, there is no sufficient linguistic or historical evidence that can prove or disprove that this was the case. As Binchy (2006) points out, a language spoken by such a group does not need to be as complex, or as extensive in terms of vocabulary, as one spoken by a more disparate group where no assumptions can be made based on shared background knowledge.

Other researchers, such as, for example, Macalister (1937), raise doubts about the antiquity of Cant/Gammon and believe that it was developed at a later stage and was used by Travellers as a secret language. Unlike Sampson and Meyer, he believed that the language was of recent origin and that it had been formed by people who were predominantly English-speaking (O' hAodha, 2002). He suggests that the ancient disguising processes used to alter words were passed on to Travellers during the modern period by monks, who were knowledgeable of such processes and ancient languages (ibid.).

Macalister (1937) agrees with other scholars regarding the grammatical structure that was found in the earliest recordings of Cant, that is that most prepositions, pronouns, numerals and suffixes cannot be identified as English but can be related to Irish. He also agrees that some cannot be assigned to any known source at all. However, he still concludes that this is not sufficient evidence that Cant is an ancient language (ibid.). Macalister (1937) argues that more of the Irish grammatical framework should have existed if Cant/Gammon was developed at an earlier stage.

Referring to the Irish Travellers in the USA, who retained Cant/Gammon even though they left Ireland between 1848 and 1850 and were likely Irish speaking like other Irish immigrants, Binchy (1994) asked why Irish Travellers would need to retain Cant/Gammon as a 'secret code' to use in the presence of Americans when they could have just used Irish. Binchy (2006) also argues that the fact that Shelta seems to have no independent grammar does not mean that it cannot be described

as a language. She contends that the small scale of Travellers' daily interaction with their own group was not enough to maintain the Cant/Gammon grammatical structure.

O'Baoill (1994) and Harper (1969) date the origin of Cant/Gammon to around the middle of the seventeenth century when English was introduced into Ireland (as cited in Ó' hAodha, 2002). They base this claim on the fact that Cant/Gammon is essentially English in its grammatical structure and argue that it must have been formed at a time when its speakers were bilingual in both Irish and English (ibid.). These authors do not include in their deliberations any consideration of the age and origin of the Cant/Gammon vocabulary or entertain that its present-day structure may be the result of convergence with the English language (ibid.).

### 4.1.3 Cant/Gammon Usage Today

Cant/Gammon is spoken by Travellers, to varying degrees, in Ireland, as well as in the UK and in parts of the USA (Binchy, 1994). Mac Gréine (1931, p. 171) found that the occupational group of "the tinker proper, or the tinsmith" were more fluent speakers of 'cant' and richer in their knowledge of folk tales and traditions" than the other groups of nomads he interviewed as part of his research.

Sadly, the use of Cant/Gammon has diminished greatly over the years and lot of Cant/Gammon vocabulary has been lost according to a comparison between Sampson's word collection of 1891 and a more recent collection by Cauley and Ó Aodha in 2006. This is not surprising given the context in which Travellers had to keep the language alive. The history of any language is often affected by the political history in which it was spoken (Binchy, 2000). Under colonialism it was forbidden to speak Irish, to end the linguistic and cultural differences between Ireland and England, which resulted in many Irish people losing the ability to speak their mother tongue.

Reider (2018a) found that there was a diversity of views within the Traveller community regarding the importance of preserving the language with one group described as viewing it as insignificant and a thing of the past while the other group has been described as viewing the language as symbolic and wanting to see it revived. Rieder (2018b) reminds us that this diversity of views is like discourses witnessed in other communities (such as, for example, the Sami in Finland) and contends that such diversity of opinion is often an indication of internal struggles.

Like other oppressed and marginalised groups many Travellers internalised prejudice and felt ashamed about aspects of their culture, such as their language (Ó' hAodha, 2002). Irish people were made feel the same way about the Irish language, a point which is still sore for many today. English was seen as the language of advancement and the use of Irish was actively discouraged by the Church and political leaders by the nineteenth century. Children were beaten if they were caught speaking Irish in school and Irish was on the verge of dying but made a comeback in the latter half of the nineteenth century when a new pride and interest in the language emerged. Cant/Gammon has not yet seen the same level of resurgence although more Travellers have a renewed sense of pride in the language and are starting to take ownership of it and record it themselves (cf. Oein De Bhairduin, 2020).

As Cant/Gammon is portrayed as a 'secret' language, it is often assumed by settled people and Travellers, that Travellers have always been very secretive about it (Ó' hAodha, 2002). Scholars such as Ó' hAodha (2002) and Binchy (2000) question whether Cant/Gammon was always used in 'secret' and many Travellers today would likely be of the same view. As Ó' hAodha (2002) argues, it is probable that the 'secrecy' function of the language emerged in response to increased oppression. Ó' hAodha (2002, p. to be inserted) wonders:



**Whether the designation of Shelta as “secret” owes more of its genesis to the “projections” of the “settled” community and the way Travellers have been defined by “settled” scholars than it does to Travellers themselves? It may be the case that the “settled” community including those scholars who have defined Travellers to date have been culpable in distorting the image of what Shelta is and how it functions. Would it not be a terrible loss to Traveller culture if the gipsilorist emphasis on “secrecy” and their legacy of “exoticism” as applied to Travelling culture functioned to inhibit younger Travellers from developing and preserving their language through all the mediums that are available?**

In 2019, the Irish government agreed to protect, promote and celebrate elements of Traveller culture: tinsmithing and Cant/Gammon (Pavee Point, 2019). Both elements were inscribed on Ireland's National Inventory of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ibid.). An endangered language is one which is not being used or taught to children in a community. Of the thousands of languages in use in the world today, many of them are at risk of dying out. Dialects of Shelta, which are spoken by smaller communities are most at risk of being lost. Linguists estimate that between 50 and 90% of the world's remaining 6,500 languages will be gone by the end of this century (Nuwer, 2014).

The future of Cant/Gammon is in the hands of the Traveller community (Ó' hAodha, 2002). As Ó' hAodha (2002, p. 60) points out:



**They [Travellers] must decide how they want Shelta developed or passed on so that it can continue to be a part of their self-identity. Perhaps the time now is right for Travellers to engage in a more comprehensive debate on the future of their language?**

# 5. Travellers in Ireland Today

## 5.1 Traveller Activism in Ireland

Travellers have been mobilizing since the 1960s and their efforts have led to the formation of a strong Traveller civil rights movement. This section traces some of those [landmark changes](#).

During the 1960s, in the absence of political leadership and legislation to protect Travellers, there was a surge in anti-Traveller campaigns aimed at evicting families from local areas. Vigilante attacks and mass protests against Travellers were carried out nationally. For example, in 1969 vigilantes attacked a camp in Ragoon, Galway. The word '[rahoonery](#)' emerged after this and made its way into the English dictionary. The attack against [Mrs Furey](#) in Galway is also well documented.

Inspired by similar movements across the world, a civil rights movement, dedicated to the promotion of human rights and opposed to anti-Traveller racism, emerged in Ireland. The Traveller Rights Committee was formed in 1982. It was renamed Minceir Misli in 1984. Initially, it was a Traveller only space. Nan Joyce was among its membership.

Nan Joyce went on to be the first Traveller woman to contest a general election in November 1982, in the Dublin South-West constituency. While Nan did not win a seat important milestone was a first step towards building a more politicised human rights movement in Ireland.

### 5.1.1 Establishment of Traveller Organisations and their Aims

In 1984, the Dublin Travellers Education and Development Group (D.T.E.D.G), which most people know as Pavee Point was established. In recent years it renamed itself to [Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre](#). Pavee Point aims to contribute to improvements in the quality of life and living circumstances of Irish Travellers and Roma by working for social justice and building solidarity with others committed to the realization of human rights. Pavee Point undertakes specific programmes with several key targets relating to health, youth, community development, education, violence against women, communications and drug and alcohol.

[The National Traveller Women's Forum \(NTWF\)](#) was established in 1988. NTWF is a National Network of Traveller Women's organisations from throughout Ireland. They recognise the types of oppression faced by Traveller women in Irish society and are working to address it from a human rights and equality-based approach. The NTWF aims to raise awareness of the issues affecting Traveller women, and to work towards ensuring these issues are recognised and reflected in all policy developments.

[The Irish Traveller Movement \(ITM\)](#) was established in 1990. ITM is a national membership organisation representing Travellers and Traveller organisations across Ireland. ITM works collectively to represent the views of Travellers and to develop policies, actions, and innovative programmes to bring about change for Travellers in Ireland.

[Minceirs Whiden](#), which means “Travellers Talking” in Cant, was established in 2008. Minceirs Whiden is a Traveller only forum, open to all Travellers in Ireland, where Travellers can come together as a community to talk about the issues they face and work towards overcoming the exclusion Travellers face in society.

Much of the early work of Traveller activists and Traveller organisations focused on trying to address the inequalities that Travellers were facing accessing education, accommodation, economic support and health care. They also challenged anti-Traveller racism and discrimination. The organisations highlighted the inadequate, unsafe living conditions that Travellers were living in and continue to live in.

Traveller organisations and Traveller activists continue to campaign on those issues, and have developed programmes, initiatives and campaigns addressing other concerns including the rights of Traveller women, gender-based violence, drug and alcohol issues, mental health issues, and the celebration and promotion of Traveller identity, culture and heritage including the diversity within the community.

In addition to the national Traveller organisations there are several regional organisations also. Almost every county in Ireland has a Traveller organisation.

Today, primary funding streams for Traveller NGOs are allocated by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, the Department of Health, the Department of Justice and smaller grants. The entire community development sector, including Traveller organisations were severely impacted by the cutbacks that came about because of austerity in 2008. Funding for Traveller education was reduced by 86.6%, accommodation by 85% and for Traveller organisations, 63.6% (Harvey, 2012). This funding has not yet been fully restored.

### 5.1.2 Values Underpinning the Work

**Human rights** – Traveller organisations have sought to raise awareness among Travellers of their rights across all aspects of life, as well as continuous engagement with national and international human rights frameworks and Treaty Bodies to hold the government to account, where human rights violations have occurred.

This has involved continuous engagement with reporting cycles under examination of Ireland’s human rights duties such as the:

- United Nations (UN) Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD)
- UN Universal Periodic Review Process
- International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights (ESCR)
- The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)
- International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)
- UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC)

At European level, Traveller organization engage with the:

- Council of Europe
- European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI)
- The Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities

National Traveller organisations are informed in their approach by the local context and the lived experiences of Travellers.

High profile examples of this work included the first ever Collective Complaint brought to the Council of Europe for Travellers under the European Social Charter by the European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC) and supported by the Irish Traveller Movement Independent Law Centre. The Committee on Social Rights (ECSR) concluded unanimously that the State had violated Article 16 of the Charter in relation to Traveller Accommodation.

### 5.1.3 Key Moments – A Timeline for Those Rights

#### 1995 – Report of the Task Force on the Travelling Community

One of the early successes was ensuring that Traveller representatives were influential key stakeholders on the [Task Force on the Travelling Community](#). This approach represented a first in the history of the State. It was a significant milestone as the State acknowledged, that without community consultation and engagement, state policies would fail. This laid the foundation for the beginning of a reform of policy and of legislative change in Ireland. Among the Task Force's many recommendations were:

- the establishment of a National Traveller Accommodation Consultative Committee and a Traveller Accommodation Unit in the Department of the Environment and Local Government
- the enactment of the Housing (Traveller Accommodation) Act 1998, which includes a requirement for five-year local authority Traveller accommodation programmes
- the establishment of an Advisory Committee on Traveller Education and the expansion of the visiting teacher service
- the establishment of a Traveller Health Advisory Committee and local Traveller health units in each health board area
- the introduction of anti-discrimination legislation, which will have positive and long-lasting effects on the Traveller community.

#### 1998 Housing (Traveller Accommodation Act)

Following campaigning and advocacy by Traveller organisations and activists and as a response to the recommendation of the Taskforce Report, the [1998 Housing \(Traveller Accommodation Act\)](#) was introduced to make provision for the accommodation of Travellers. This was a hugely significant step towards protecting and improving Travellers' living conditions in Ireland.

The 1998 Housing Act set out a road map to work on validating the community's right to culturally appropriate accommodation and to ensure that this was backed up with a national accommodation policy framework. Prior to 1998 Housing Act, there was no legal requirement for the provision of culturally appropriate Traveller accommodation in Ireland. National and local Traveller organisations have been monitoring the implementation of this legislation since its enactment across all 31 local authorities, continually highlighting where huge shortfalls continue to exist.

## **Equality Legislation 2000 – 2004**

Anti-Traveller racism was, and is, deeply embedded within society, and therefore, legislative and policy reforms were needed. After a lengthy campaign, in solidarity with other civil society groups, the introduction of the [Equality Legislation](#) (including the Employment Equality Act 1998–2015 and 2004 and the Equal Status Acts 2000–2018) marked a key milestone for the Traveller civil rights movement. It made discrimination illegal across nine different grounds and listed membership of the Traveller community as one of the protected grounds.

## **2002 – Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act**

The enactment of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act, 2002, commonly referred to as the Trespass Legislation, was a significant setback for the Traveller community. It gave local authorities the power to criminalise people on public lands and had an adverse impact on Travellers and their nomadic way of life. Traveller organisations advocated strongly against the legislation with support from other human rights-based organisations. The repeal of this legislation remains central to the priorities of the movement today.

## **2015 – The Carrickmines Tragedy**

Poor accommodation has had a detrimental effect on Travellers' mental and physical health, employability and the capacity to avail of educational opportunities. It also poses an immediate and serious threat to their lives. This was never more evident, than in 2015 when 10 Travellers, including five children and one pregnant woman, lost their lives in a fire on a halting site in Carrickmines, Dublin. Traveller organisations and Traveller activists highlighted how the severity of such tragedies could have been avoided and called on the Government to review the safety of sites, in particular unofficial and/or temporary sites. A walkout at a Government Traveller accommodation monitoring conference followed the tragedy. Calls for a national Fire Safety audit resulted in a review of Traveller specific accommodation.

## **2017 – State Recognition of Traveller Ethnicity**

The recognition of Travellers' ethnic minority status was long fought for. National and local Traveller organisations, and other key partners, led a national campaign for the formal recognition of Traveller ethnicity. This collective effort culminated in the [announcement made in March 2017](#). This was a powerful and symbolic moment for Irish Travellers.

## Post Ethnicity

Those campaigning for ethnicity recognition saw it as an important step towards the realisation of equal rights for Travellers. They felt that state recognition of Travellers' ethnic status provided a better opportunity to combat racism and discrimination, enhance integration and inclusion and elevate the community's status both internally and within the State. They also saw its potential for promoting a broader societal understanding and a renewed positive narrative of Irish Travellers.

## 2019 – Traveller Accommodation Expert Review

Traveller organisations contributed significantly to the **Report of the Traveller Accommodation Expert Review**, which was commissioned by the Government. The review sets out 32 recommendations to end the Traveller accommodation crisis. Traveller organisations monitor the implementation of these recommendations. Hopes have been raised by the political motivation shown to make change happen. While some progress has been made, significant challenges remain.

## 5.2 Traveller Role Models

Despite the extreme forms of racism and inequalities experienced by Travellers, many notable figures have emerged from the community. This section details some of these achievements. It is not possible to mention everyone's achievements or to capture the on-going strides being made by members of the community. It is also not possible to capture the achievements of some Travellers, because for one complex reason or another, they may not have been able to identify as Travellers. This section only includes information about those who have chosen to self-identify as Travellers.

### 5.2.1 Travellers in Further and Higher Education

[Dr Sindy Joyce](#) was the first 'out' Traveller to be awarded a PhD in Sociology in 2019. Sindy had worked (and continues to work) as an activist before returning to education to pursue a PhD in 2013. Sindy is also on the anti-racism committee for the National Action Plan Against Racism and in 2019, she was part of the Irish delegation to present evidence to the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination on the treatment of Travellers in Ireland. In 2022, Sindy was appointed as the coordinator of Traveller studies in UL where she continues to contribute to research on Travellers. Dr Joyce will be remembered for her ground-breaking achievements forever more.

In addition to Dr Joyce, Dr Rosaleen McDonagh and Dr Hannagh McGinley were awarded PhDs in 2019 and 2020 respectively. Owen Ward and David Friel are currently pursuing PhDs in NUIG and Sligo IT respectively. Owen is also a qualified post-primary teacher and is the first Traveller elected to a University Governing Authority in Ireland.

Traveller artist and educator, Leanne McDonagh, founded the Traveller Graduate Network which was formerly launched on the 6th of April 2022. This network has brought together many Travellers in third level education to promote, celebrate and support Traveller progression in education. These Travellers are pursuing careers in areas such as social work, journalism, international economics etc.

Many of the Travellers who have progressed through education use the skills and expertise gained to bring about positive change for their community.

### 5.2.2 Travellers in Politics

In June 2020, [Senator Eileen Flynn](#) (Irish: Eileen Ní Fhloinn) became the first Traveller to ever sit in the Houses of the Oireachtas after being nominated by the Taoiseach, Micheál Martin. Eileen is an independent politician. Her background is in community development and activism on behalf of Irish Travellers.

### 5.2.3 Traveller Activists

While many Traveller activists have been mentioned above in the section on Travellers in education, there are several other activists who have worked tirelessly to pave the way for them. These include Mary Moriarty, [Nan Joyce](#), [Michael McDonagh](#), [Martin Collins](#), [Mags Casey](#), Bridgie Casey, Bernard Joyce, [Brigid Quilligan](#), Oein DeBharduin, Tomas McCann and Catherine Joyce.

### 5.2.4 Travellers in Sport

Travellers are proud Irish citizens, and many have represented their counties and country through sport at both national and international levels. Some of the most notable figures are Francis Barrett (Olympic boxer), Andy Lee (professional boxer), John Joe Nevin (Olympic boxer), Savannah McCarthy (Galway United and Irish Women's team footballer), Mikey Kelly (handball champion) and David McCarthy (soccer player). The story of Francis Barrett was told in the documentary 'Southpaw' by Liam McGrath.

### 5.2.5 Travellers in the Arts

One of the most well-known Traveller actors in perhaps Michael Collins who has been on Irish television screens since the 80s when he first appeared as 'Blackie' in Glenroe. Michael has appeared in many movies since and is an accomplished playwright. John Connors is another well-known Traveller actor.

Dr Rosaleen Mc Donagh and Martin 'Beanz' Warde are also heavily involved in the arts and have made and continue to make contributions to that field. Oein De Bharduin's first book Why the Moon Travels has also been very successful and well received.

## 6. Conclusion

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This research report was developed for teachers, practitioners and young people to facilitate teaching and learning about Traveller culture and history in the curriculum. As stated at the outset, it does not set out to cover every aspect of Traveller culture and history.

To capture what the Traveller community identifies as being key aspects of their culture and history and important from a curriculum perspective, this research report was developed in collaboration with members of the Traveller community and Traveller representatives.

The research report presents what is known about the history of the Irish Traveller community and dispels common myths about their origins. It provides details about various aspects of Traveller culture such as religious beliefs, marriage patterns and nomadism. It also outlines the contributions that Travellers have made, and continue to make, to Irish society through music, art and sport. Finally, the research report highlights Traveller activism from the 1960s onwards and identifies a number of role models from the community.



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