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Interviewee: Mike Johns (speaker, male)
Interviewer: Marsha O'Mahony (speaker, female)
Camera & Sound: Richard Goldsmith (male)
Producer: Julia Goldsmith
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Transcript:

This accordion was left to me by my dad, it's 61 years old, same age as me. He could play it right to the mark and the favourite song he used to play was a Bill Bell poker, which a lot of gypsies would know. And they would cherish it, yeah.

Me name is Mike Johns, I'm from Ledbury at the moment. Our family has always been with the hops, with Paskes at Bromyard, we've always travelled with other travellers, like the Smiths, Blackie Smith, Herbert Smith, Alfie Smith, the Butlers, the Butler family, which was a very very good family, they looked after us really really good. We all lived together. But we wouldn't actually have the caravans by one another. Me dad always used to be on his own. So we used to have the campfires at night time. Used to go down into Bromyard, we used to buy the belts, with the studded belts, what you could buy at that time. Me and my brother, we used to go down there, used to come back up, was only very small. But we used to come back, used to do our hair, our hair used to be black, well a bit different like now, we used to come it back up, like Elvis Presley type, which is where we get the Elvis Presley thing from, but not now.

I were born at Rudge Pitch out from Ross-on-Wye as you go from Drybrook. We used to have the wagon down there. Square tent used to be our kitchen and everybody, I should say, the gorjas, used to be down there, and we used to say, 'ja John' used to say there's a ??? down the road. And we used to go down there and the people used to come to our mum used to have the washing out and they used to talk about how clean the washing was, how white it was and how she used to look after us, and that was that.

My dad didn't used to sell them, he used to make the barrel top wagons on the side of the road. He didn't make the Red Indian wagon. The barrel top, or it used to be the vardo or the open lot, we used to make on the side of the road or if he went out to a sale or whatever with other travellers they'd have a deal between themselves for one wagon for the other and that would be that. It would be like the horses. The horses, you would be buying and selling all the time. And we'd have good horses, and me dad used to know a good horse. And even my auntie and everything, and my brother-in-law, they used to go through the make of a horse. If you went to a sale, if it was an old horse and they wanted to sell it, they used to put black boot polish on there to cover up the ??? so's they could sell it on. If you wanted to sell a horse and it was probably, I don't know, 20

years old, your horse would look good and it was still fit, but they grey him up, they black him up.

The only horse sales we used to go to was the one like at Leominster or at Ross-on-Wye, but that's going back now, that's not in the sixties, that's back in the seventies, so my dad wouldn't have anything to do with them. So once he finished with them that was it, that was the end of it. So once he finished with them that was it. That was the end of it

At Newtown pub, I can remember it really really clear. We used to have a dray, used to pull on the side of the road on by the Newtown, mum and dad used to go in with all the rest of the other travellers. They used to laugh and drunk, you could hear the music going, all singing and dancing. I'd be sat on the side of the dray and mum and dad used to come out, or dad used to come out with a bottle of pop or a bag of crisps. Used to be Smiths crisps then with a little packet of salt? And then I used to sit there, and time was getting on alright, half past ten was closing time then I think or ten o'clock and I used to say, 'right, you ready?' And I used to sit there with the reigns and the horse was called Rosie and once I turned her I said to my dad once I turn her we're going and they used to sit, they'd come out and have flagons of cider, of the old flagons of cider. And they'd sit on the back for that singing with a squeeze box all the way up the road, going up towards Leominster. And they'd be singing and dancing like that and I'd just drop the reigns like that and she'd, because she was only just cantering and then all of a sudden, she'd do a bit of a trot and she'd be lovely.

What we used to do was just one thing, it was just hops. We used to do just hop picking and the seasons of the year like. So we'd all probably get together. When we finished the hops at the end of the season, we used to come back to the Oak at Staplow, and before that we go from the Oak at Staplow to travel to Paskes, that would be the first farm, and when we travelled back we would be back at the Oak at Staplow and that's where everybody had a drink then. So, it's always been hops really. Well, when you say hops, we used to do all the sugar beet pulling, there used to be mangle pulling, swede pulling. We used to do it right through the year, especially coming up to Christmas time with the sugar beet because the farmer we used to live for was down at the Lea, we used to, on Christmas Eve, we had to go out, pull the sugar beet, put it in lines, take it in two lines and then we had to top it, put it into tumps me and my brother used to be the tumper up, so we'd have it in little mountains all the way up the rows, and we'd have to do probably 20 tonnes of that for Christmas Eve ready to go off.

I would be sat on the side of the crib picking off or I would be picking the leaves out, and obviously my mum would be doing exactly the same, me dad would be doing exactly the same. But if

you had to go like pulling the bines or cutting the bines then he'd go and do that. Depends on what we were doing. He used to work down the rows, you'd have the cribs going down the rows. You'd have one family down there, used to cut the rows over, then he'd have another family and he'd just keep moving down. Then he'd have the bushler coming around with the basket, big round basket? He'd tip in and he'd go, 'bushel them up!' so you put them in there. And once I used to have a little black and white dog and he used to sit on the side with me and the dog fell into the hops and of course when the bushler come around he bushelled him up as well. But he was alright so we got him back. Yeah, so that's what we used to do. At Burley Gate, just as you goes over the crossroads used to be, the farm on the left-hand side, that's where my granddad and gran lived in their caravans. So we used to travel from Newtown to Burley Gate and actually be at the little farm and the oak tree is still actually there and he said, 'come on, you can get some wood for that now'. So I had to go round the hedgerows gather up all the dry wood to come back to the camp fire and put all the wood back by the fire. And then he'd come back round and smack you round the earhole then for being so naughty! He did honestly.

Mr Paske at Bromyard he looked after all the gypsy families. I can always remember there was a big bull, which used to be the proper Hereford bull with the proper horns. The one field we couldn't go into and the one field I went into, which I shouldn't have went into, that we walked around, and the bull used to actually follow me, but he wouldn't even touch me or anything like that. But then somebody else went in there, one of these other travelling boys, he used to walk around and he used to take after him. And I said to Mr Paske, 'why is it that bull didn't chase me?' And he said probably he likes ya but he didn't like him. And that's the truth. And Mr Paske and his wife, I don't know if they are still alive now or not, I doubt it but I hope they are, but they was very very good to the gypsy families and to all of them, everything, they was very very helpful. And he was actually, really really good. If you wanted food or anything like that they would bring it to you. He wouldn't let you go out without anything. They'd always come round and say, well, is everything ok, have you got enough food? Because we used to travel from one hop yard, as I remember it used to be an old Morris green lorry and we used to have the steps going up into the back of it and all the travellers used to climb up to the top and back in. I think we used to go to a different hop yard as well, so probably it might have been up the road. So yeah he was really good. Wish they could all have been like that.

This is the tea jug. Obviously, it doesn't have the top to it now, but this is what used to come round in the hop yard with a jug of tea. The farmer would come around, or the farmer's daughter actually, which, in our words, rattley. The rattley would job around and she'd come round and go, tea for anyone?

And that's what they used to bring around that one. So that's that one. This one is going back a long long time, probably back more than the sixties. As you can see it's where the kettle iron goes onto it, which I got out there, what matches it. This would be either rabbit stew or chicken, chicken stew and that's what we used to cook in, all through the years. Every time you used that it would be either me or my brother or me sister would have to clean that, which I can say nothing much about that at the moment. But yeah, that's that. And that wouldn't be on no stoves or anything, that would be open fire all the time. You'd have open fire outside, you'd be sat round the open fire, and once the stew was made then probably you'd go back up into the wagon then. This one's a bit newer. You're probably looking back 65, 67, but it's still being used, it's still being used through the years and what can I say, it's served its time I'll tell ya. But the other one we had was the proper black kettle, that was the proper one and they'd put the tea in that and it used to be handfulls of tea, you'd tip it in. then you'd stir it up and that would be that then. They used to put a little net over the end to catch the tea leaves.

The bath what I used to bath in, my sister used to bath in it, my brother used to bath in it and probably mum and dad, but yeah, this is what we used to bath in and it goes back a long long time. And it's been very hard through the years.

Right this one here is the smallest pan and that belonged to my gran. That's the lady who I was saying to you earlier on, my aunty.....I've had many a pork chops or home cured bacon through the years through that. This one is getting on a fair bit now. That's what we used to cook on, my mum and dad. Now if you look in the photograph what I showed you you'll see that hanging on the fire, or by the fire and that's what we used to use in the hop fields all the years round.

When me mum'd out she'd have like Bramley apples to start with, which I do cook meself so we'd throw them into these pans and just fill it up and we'd just have bread and butter with Bramley apple in-between it. And it's fantastic you will want to try it. And then she'd go out and pick fresh nettles, young nettles, and then she'd do different things with that, soup or whatever. Different mushrooms, we'd have the field mushrooms, we'd have the horse mushrooms, we'd go through all that, fantastic, that's all about living how you are to live.

Gypsy words, dog is jockle, cat mascee, mort you, ratley girl, chavvy boy, Kitchener pub. Whenever I go to horse fair, Stow fair or if I go to Appleby or wherever, it's different things travellers can communicate with one another. We get what we call you, the gorjas, hope you don't mind me saying that. The farmer was the rye.

The old times that will never come back, which sometimes they

try to get the old hop yards going which is really really good and sometimes and you can go into the old hop yard, the old proper string hop yard, which is really really nice, I love to see it. They should bring it back. If you go from that to now it's just zero there's nothing happening. You know people not learning anything. Everyone my age or whatever, they've learnt but the young ones today, they'll never learn anything, they won't even know what's going on.

Hops, the smell of them, the smell of hops brings everything back to the family it brings back the gypsy community family. They'd say the same. They'd say the same as what I'm saying now, that they'd love to go back to that.

Hop poles, yes. The shed I've built is actually all built with hop poles. Well the up rights, as you can see, are all tarred, they will never rot. It's hops, isn't it. It's what I like. The change going back I'll say from the sixties through to the 70s and 80s, everything changes as you go through. We've always sat by the fire, when mum and dad were alive, when we were in the house and we've always talked about the old days, always talked like back in the fifties, when mum and dad was married or dad would always talk about different things like that. And he carried on, more or less til the time they passed away. But we always used to sit by the fire at night time when we was in the house and he would go right through different stories and he'd tell you really good stories as well. Frightening ones, good ones. Yeah, definitely. When we used to have our shed, we used to have the caravan up on the bank, this shed used to be our kitchen and we used to have the stove and dad came back from the pub at night time and we'd all sit in the shed like that and he used to have a blue crystal ball sort of thing, and he'd put it on the side like that and he used to say to my mate, 'you watch this. I'll make this move now.' And he put his hand over the top and my mate was fascinated by it. It was his hand so he was watching that instead of the stove. Yeah, that's some of the good memories. But I have got a lot of good memories of my mum and dad, really have.

It is very important I think because it is going to show the younger generation, what is actually happening years ago like to the younger travelling boys as well. I'm speaking for them and the who want to do things like this. You know it's a good thing. You know if they go to a war farm?? People like to see things like that. Like going from the hop farm to the ways travellers used to live and eat, drink and enjoy themselves and it's good for younger generation to show them what it was like because they will never get the chance to do it.