

# ***The Bowdon Sheaf***

A BOWDON HISTORY SOCIETY PUBLICATION

No. 51 October 2012

£1.50

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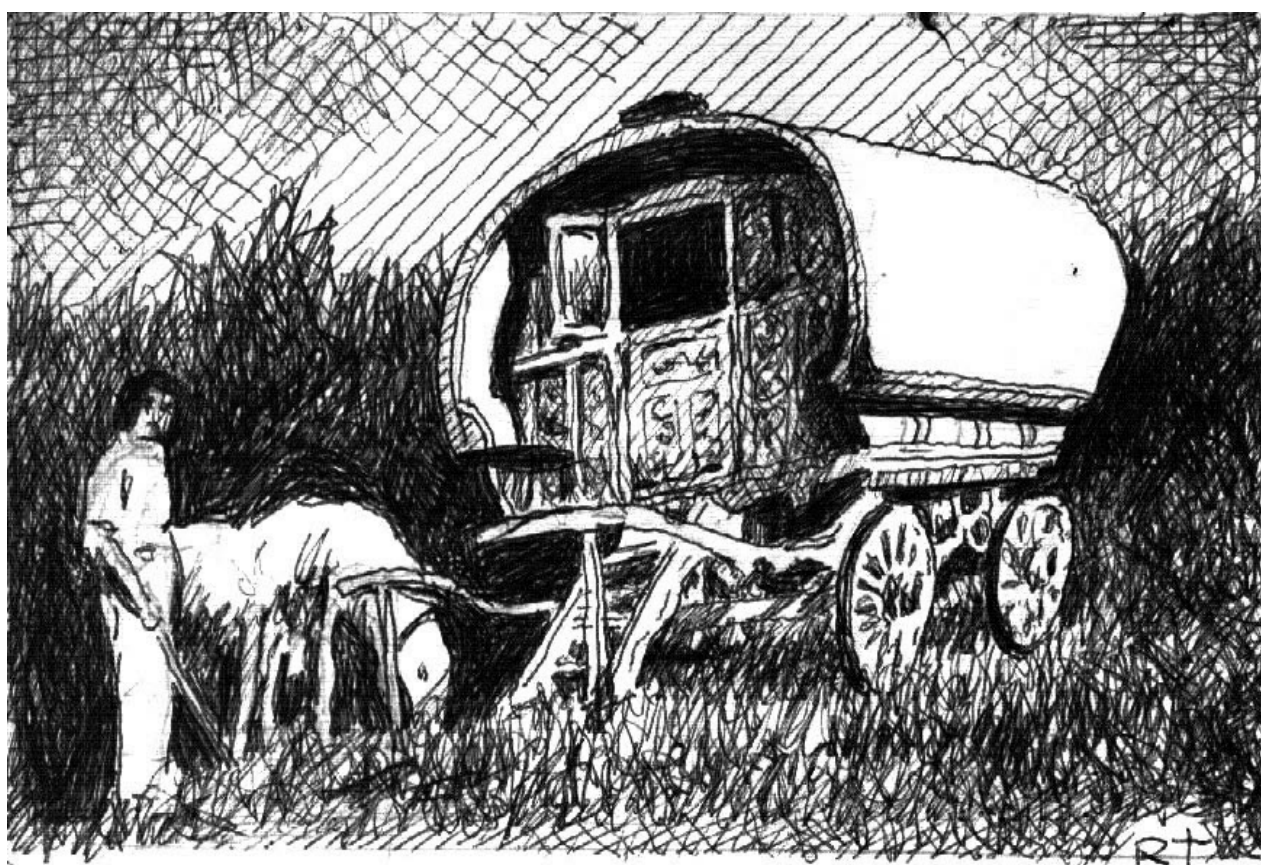
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BOWTOP CARAVAN

ISSN-0265-816X

# Gypsies in Bow Green

by Ronald Trenbath

In September 1958 Gypsies, in a Bow Top caravan, encamped with lurchers on waste land in Bow Green Road. Tethering the horse by a long halter to a post in the hedge, leaving ample room for him to graze on the grass supplemented by further food in a nosebag, the children gathered wood and other fuel from the hedge rows, while the father lit a fire prior to searching the fields and woods for edible fruit, herbs, vegetables and wildlife from which the mother prepared a meal in a large iron pot suspended from a tripod over the fire.

Settling around the fire the family enjoyed the evening eating and talking until dusk when the children were put to bed in thick woollen blankets under the caravan into which the parents retired after dark. Examination of the ground later indicated that hedgehogs had formed part of their diet.

The following day the father cycled around local farms undertaking any work available, while the children roamed the urban areas selling home-made clothes pegs and mother carried out the family washing with water brought from Bow Lodge, the nearest house.

The father, a tall, dark, swarthy and well-built man was dressed in normal male dress, common at that time, rather than the more colourful attire with bright head and shoulder scarves and gold earrings worn by his father.

Max Chester, of West Bank Farm, remembered a family of gypsies who visited them every year before the war, to assist with the harvest, commencing with hay in May and finishing with potatoes in November. Dominated by an elderly matriarch, they lived in immaculately clean and highly-decorated caravans with cut-glass mirrors, lace, canaries in gilt cages and fine porcelain bought during stops in the Potteries. Max recorded that they were completely honest and trustworthy because they were true Romanys and not rough van dwellers with whom they were often mistaken.

Romanys, or Gypsies as they were called locally from the ancient belief that they were Egyptians, lived by their own very distinctive culture. A matriarchal society, they upheld their ancient rituals involving marriage, virginity outside marriage, the funereal burning of caravans and possessions, penalties for offences against their moral codes, and many other customs

unknown to the uninitiated. They also left secret signs on walls and in hedges to notify their brethren of matters of common interest or concern.

Many people considered that Gypsies possessed mystical powers enabling them to cast a spell to either cure or curse as well as forecast the future, a myth often exploited by a few unscrupulous Gypsies and many other van dwellers such as travellers and Irish tinkers.

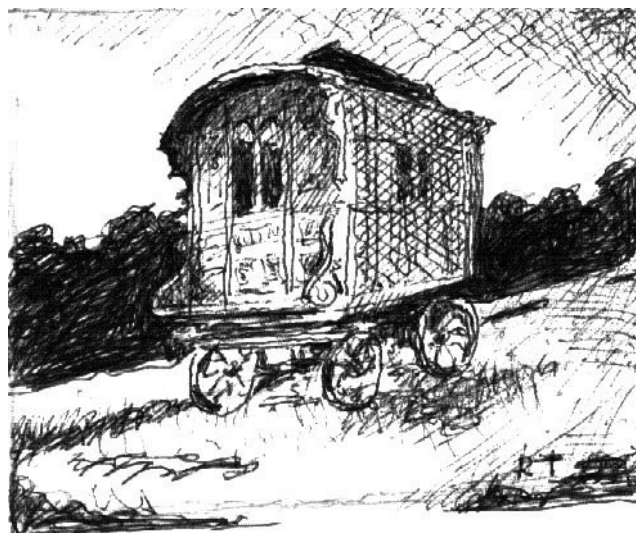
The different and distinctive lifestyle caused great suspicion with the general public, particularly in the suburbs, and they were often blamed for the offences of others. Noted for their love of children, they were regularly accused of kidnapping when children disappeared, and when one missing boy at Appleby Horse Fair was discovered with a Gypsy family suspicion of kidnap arose, but in fact the boy had wandered away from his parent and was lost until the Gypsies found him and took him into their care.

Adult Gypsy women sold brooms and brushes or more often baskets which they made from split willow, with handles of ash or hazel, as well as smaller items such as clothes pegs and lace. Knowledgeable in country lore, the male Gypsy was expert in tracking and trapping birds and animals with the aid of home-bred lurchers, and selecting flora for food or herb cures. He was often accused of poaching although many took the precaution of obtaining permission from landowners and gamekeepers before undertaking their practices.

As accomplished equestrians, they usually traded in horses, purchasing discarded or sickly beasts which they doctored and sometimes doped to resell at horse fairs. Max's grandfather saw one such dealer driving a herd of colts up Bow Green Road and fancying one of them made an offer. Well satisfied with the price, he obtained a fine beast with which he started a very lucrative milk delivery round.

Locally the Gypsies travelled singly but often they moved together in convoy between fairs and shows where they parked in circles around fires entertaining themselves, often playing violins. These convoys were regularly seen travelling on the Chester Road to Knutsford for the Royal May Fair and on one occasion a black mobile chapel was seen in the procession.

Gypsy caravans or vardos have been used in this country for at least 250 years, reaching their peak in Victorian times until superseded by petrol-driven horseless carriages. There were two main types of wagon: the large and heavy Showman and the lighter type known as the Bowtop. This was more commonly used by Romanys while the Showman was often associated with non-Gypsy horse dealers, traders, showmen and wealthy travellers who had them specially built to suit their taste with mahogany interiors and cut-glass mirrors.



SHOWMAN WAGON

The major framework was made of hardwood with ash or oak wheels and ash axles, clad at the sides and roofed in pine, the weather boarding and underwork being half clad, with a distinctive barrel-shaped canvas roof with decorated sides, front and back. Both types of caravan were brightly decorated in the baroque folk-art tradition common in this country in previous centuries to be seen on caravans, canal barges, wagons, farm implements and carts, Punch-and-Judy theatres, circuses and fairgrounds, with primitive but colourful decorations inspired by the very much-more-sophisticated work found in stately homes, together with horses brasses designed in the same genre.

This colourful folk art was discouraged by the drab Victorians as vulgar but it lingered on into the twentieth century when the Arts and Crafts Movement realized the impending loss but did very little about it, although Gertrude Jekyll in her excellent book *Old English Household Life* did register mild concern and protest. More recently the value of the caravans has been realized and the renovation and rebuilding of them is now taking place at exorbitant prices to decorate gardens of expensive houses. Folk art is being re-invented with the graffiti decorations on boring bare walls in areas of deprivation and studied and catered for as an ingredient to, hopefully, help heal our sick society following the first decade of the twenty-first century.

# Haigh Lawn Hospital

by David Miller

Haigh Lawn on St. Margaret's Road, Altrincham, was built in 1869 as a mansion for George Hodgkinson, a cotton manufacturer. However, during the First World War it served as a hospital when it was lent by the then owner Richard W Shiers as an annexe to Altrincham General Hospital for the treatment of injured officers from Britain and the Colonies. It opened on 14 February 1915 with 40 beds, which increased that summer to 58 with a tent in the garden to provide four more beds for septic cases. Bowdon Assembly Rooms on the Firs was also leased for a yearly rent of £60. It opened on 27 October 1915 with 48 extra beds, making total of 106.



Auxiliary military hospitals such as Haigh Lawn were operated by Voluntary Aid Detachments (VADs) recruited mainly by the British Red Cross and organised on a county basis. The vice president of the Cheshire branch was Lady Penelope Stamford of Dunham Hall. VAD Cheshire/82 in the Altrincham

Division was registered on 25 January 1915 to staff Haigh Lawn under Commandant Mary Hewlett Johnson, the wife the Rev. Hewlett Johnson vicar of St Margaret's Church, later the famous 'Red Dean' of Canterbury Cathedral. Hewlett Johnson opposed the war, but agreed to be the chaplain to the prisoner-of-war camp at Sinderland. The Quarter Master at Haigh Lawn was Mrs Fleming Spence and the Medical Officer in charge, Dr Brian Melland.

The British Red Cross Branch Handbook for 1915 has a description of VAD Cheshire/82 as on 6 March 1915. There were about 70 members in the Altrincham Detachment, of whom 30 were nurses. The rest were cooks and helpers in the housework. 17 nurses and 12 helpers were on duty over a 24-hour period. One member of the detachment was on special service at a military hospital in Stockport.

Auxiliary hospitals rarely treated serious injuries and so the cases at Haigh Lawn were those suffering from rheumatism, gas and frostbite. Their requirements were especially warmth, newspapers and gramophone records. Electric light and gas were supplied at a reduced rate, and water free of charge. In addition many gifts of beds and equipment were received, including 20 beds and lockers from the staff of Oldham Road goods depot of the Lancashire & Yorkshire Railway, and beds and bedding from friends in Ancoats.

The hospital was liberally supported by subscriptions and donations from individuals, and the War Office gave a grant of two shillings per man per day. In 1915 the actual cost per man per day was two shillings and nine pence halfpenny. In the same year the treasurer of the hospital reported that the total income had been £2648. Expenditure consisted of food £982, equipment £280, medical £126, coal & light £151, stationery £23, laundry £69, wages £232, repairs £35, rent £12, and sundries £58 – a total of £1870 giving a surplus of £680.

The club house at Bowdon Croquet Club was used to house nurses staffing the Haigh Lawn Hospital, and wounded soldiers were allowed the use of one of the lawns. However, because of the demands of the war on resources the club could not maintain the greens. In 1917 one solution was to let sheep graze on the lawns but they were replaced by goats and their milk sold to the Haigh Lawn Hospital for the benefit of ‘delicate soldiers’. There was also a ‘fowl house’ on the terrace. The nearby Devisdale was also used for recreation.

Mary Johnson’s name is among those listed in the *Manchester Guardian* in 1917 and 1919 as being awarded Red Cross Honours. There is also a plaque and a flag in St. Margaret’s Church commemorating the work of VAD Cheshire/82 at Haigh Lawn and its annexe between 14 February 1915 and 31 May 1919. When Mary died in 1931 the *Manchester Guardian* of 17 January



reported in her obituary that: “*Under her leadership the Cheshire BRCS offered an auxiliary Red Cross hospital in 1915 at Haigh Lawn, initially 64 beds rising to 194 after several extensions and annexes at the Assembly Rooms and the Congregational Hall [presumably at Bowdon Downs Church] Mrs Hewlett Johnson was the commandant, livewire, and the inspiration of the hospital. A large contingency of Canadians and New Zealanders came under her care. Some said that Haigh Lawn was a reminder of home.*”

Inside the porch at the entrance to the main building of Haigh Lawn today there is a plaque which commemorates its use during the First World War. The inscription reads: “*Haigh Lawn was originally built by Mr George Hodgkinson on land acquired from the Earl of Stamford in 1872. In 1915 the second owner Mr Richard Shiers lent the house to the Red Cross for use as a Military Hospital. A complete internal reconstruction was carried out to create these apartments by the Newcombe Estate Company Ltd in 1983.*” The present mansion and outbuildings now house 22 apartments.

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## **Captain Edward Kinder Bradbury, VC**

by David Miller

Edward Kinder Bradbury (one of two Altrincham VCs) was born at Parkfield, Groby Place, Altrincham, on 16th August 1881 the son of Judge J K Bradbury who practised on the Bury-Bolton circuit. Edward was awarded the VC, the highest award for bravery, for his heroism under fire in a battle in Northern France during WWI. He was educated at Marlborough College and passed out of the Royal Military Academy at Woolwich entering the Royal Artillery in May 1900. He was promoted to lieutenant in April 1901 and

from January to October 1902 he was employed with the Imperial Yeomanry for service in the Cape Colony during the latter stages of the Boer War. He received the medal for South Africa with two clasps. From February 1905 to March 1907 he was employed with the King's African Rifles, and promoted to captain on 4th February 1910. Captain Bradbury was a respected man among his fellow officers. Whilst on leave he was a keen fisherman and rider. He hunted with the hounds in County Cork, Ireland, and on a very wet day at Punchtown Races in Ireland he won the 'Soldiers Race' on his own horse named 'Sloppy Weather'.

On the outbreak of the Great War Captain Bradbury was second-in-command of 'L' Battery, Royal Horse Artillery with the British Expeditionary Force which, after being faced by an enemy far superior in number to our own, was retreating from Mons in Belgium on 1 September 1914. His award of the Victoria Cross was gazetted on 2 November 1914. Néry – a remote, ancient village northeast of Paris – lay on the path of the retreat.

'L' Battery was attached to the first Brigade of Cavalry and provided firepower to the cavalry with their six quick-firing thirteen-pounder guns. They were the last to arrive in Néry late in the afternoon of August 31st. It had been a very hot day and they had stopped on the way to water their horses. They had to bivouac in an open field at the extreme south end of the village and therefore well to the rear.

They moved right out in the open in order to lay down good horse lines. Orders had been given overnight for the units of the Brigade to be saddled up and ready to march at dawn but a dense mist delayed any start. At 5.45 am high explosive shells began to fall on the village from twelve German guns situated on high ground less than a thousand yards away.

The German guns concentrated their fire on the horse lines of 'L' Battery and the Queen's bays next to them. The unit soon became a shambles as 150 horses were blown to pieces and many men had been killed or wounded. Major Sclater-Booth, the Battery Commander, was at the Brigade Headquarters to find the latest news.

Captain Bradbury raced forward, calling out for volunteers. When the men heard his rallying call "Come on! Who's for the guns?" They all responded "I am." Bradbury's rallying call is famous all over the world. Today at the assembly of the US Army Reserve Blue Devils Horse Platoon, who represent



the US Army and the US Army Reserve as a mounted ceremonial and equestrian sport unit, the call is made to the platoon “Who's for the guns?” and the answer by each member is “I am.” They say it is “In honour of the Kings Troop Royal Horse Artillery” but in fact, to be more precise, they pay tribute to Captain E K Bradbury, VC.

A number of men responded to Bradbury and they succeeded in manhandling three guns against the enemy to return fire. Two of these guns were soon hit and put out of action leaving only ‘F’ sub section under Captain Bradbury acting as layer and Sergeant David Nelson, acting as range setter. Sergeant Nelson found the range at 750 yards but he was soon wounded, and to add to that problem the ammunition wagons were 20 yards away. Battery Sergeant Major George Dorrell then arrived to assist and Captain Bradbury ordered Sergeant Nelson to seek medical attention, but he refused, stating that he couldn’t move anyway.

BSM Dorrell then relieved Captain Bradbury instead, and the captain ran across to the ammunition wagon under intense enemy fire and was hit by a shell which blew off his leg. Despite this crippling wound he managed to support himself on the other leg and continued to direct the fire of the gun until he was hit again. Captain Bradbury died later. Twelve German guns were eventually captured.

Captain Bradbury was buried at the Néry Communal Cemetery in France. His Victoria Cross was presented to his mother by King George V at Buckingham Palace (his father had died in 1913). RSM Dorrell and Sergeant Nelson were also awarded the V.C. The three Néry Victoria Crosses are now in the possession of ‘L’ (Néry) Battery Royal Horse Artillery at Woolwich, along with the ‘Néry Gun’. At dawn on 1st September each year the action is remembered by ‘L’ Battery who present a thirteen-pounder field gun and a single shot.

Captain Bradbury died on 1st September 1914 and Altrincham Higher Elementary School was renamed Bradbury Central School in his honour. The ‘L’ ( Néry Battery) Members’ Association intend to visit the village of Néry in 2014 to commemorate the centenary of the action at Néry.).

## Peter Kemp

Peter John Kemp, who died on 17 July 2012, was a founder member of the Bowdon History Society. Born in the South of England, he moved with his family to the North West when his father, a World War One aerial combat pilot, was transferred in his job.

Educated at Altrincham Grammar School for Boys, Peter was a prize-winning pupil, gaining very high marks in the Civil Service Entrance Examinations. After the outbreak of war he enlisted in the RAF and was sent to America for training. He was promoted to the rank of Flight Lieutenant and, instead of returning to Britain, was retained in America to train both British and American airmen. When he returned to this country he continued as an instructor, always regretting not participating in active service.

After the war Peter rejoined the Civil Service in which he served for 30 years with a distinguished management career, during which time he met his wife Edwina, to whom he was married for 60 years, raising two sons and a grandson.

Peter's interest in local history was awakened when he moved to Downs Villa, 14 Higher Downs, the former home of Juliana Ewing the Victorian writer of children's stories, and next door to the home of twentieth-century author Alison Uttley. He researched the history of the Higher Downs, giving lectures and publishing a booklet. He went on to assist, as co-author, with a book on *Bowdon Hall and Its People* and a short history of *Bowdon and Dunham Massey*, as well as many other publications on the subject and also contributed to the *Bowdon Sheaf* many times.

As a member of Family History Societies in Essex and Cheshire, Peter was keenly interested in all aspects of family and local history, playing an important role in the formation and directing of the Bowdon History Society.

Peter was honoured to be elected a Liveryman of the Worshipful Company of Coopers and a Freeman of the City of London.

RT 2012.



Does anyone recognise this cottage? It is similar to one which used to be at the bottom of The Downs on the corner of Ashley Road but this has been discounted.

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