

TRAVELLING HOME III

Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen, thank you so much for coming here to our wonderful church on this lovely summer day. Doesn't it look lovely – inside and out – and I hope you can all see why we are so incredibly proud of it and of those who come here.
SLIDES 2 TO 6

More importantly, we are proud of what this church represents and that's what the theme of this year's 'Travelling Home' is all about.

For those who don't know me, my name is Terry Doe, I was born and raised in Horton, and I am one of the 12 million or so Romani people scattered throughout the world.

This is the third year of 'Travelling Home' and from an idea we had to celebrate the journey of the Romani people, from their roots in the soil of East India, through a global trek that took in Asia, Europe and the Americas, and for many of the people here today, that great journey ended in Horton and the surrounding areas.

In previous Travelling Home services I've detailed that journey, although if I've learned anything in my years of researching the history of my lot, it's that spouting any sort of information as absolute fact, can get a chap into ALL sorts of trouble.

The fact is, very few accounts of Romani history remain undisputed and pretty much everything is up for interpretation and by people with far more authority than I'll ever have.

For this reason, and to keep things fresh, I had to come up with a different theme this year, so I went with the easy option and decided to stay closer to home and concentrate on local accounts.

This was actually a theme that was staring me in the face, because the simple fact is, Horton and this church has been an outstanding example of what the Travelling Home service is all about.

You see, for well over 120 years, Horton has been a living, breathing, developing example of Romani and non-Romani people living and working together, to create a community.

According to the ever-reliable Carolyn, our official church archivist, the first records of Romani children being christened here go back at least to 1899. For some reason, the vicar at the time noted when the children being christened were Romani, although there may have been Romani christenings before that which went unspecified, of course.

Anyway, thanks to Carolyn, we know for sure that Romani people have been part of Horton and the surrounding areas, and a part of this church, for well over 120 years.

Like any growing family, we've had our disputes over the years, but again, to use the family analogy, the more we grow together, the more we tend to look after each other, and that can only be a good thing.

So, for this Travelling Home service, I'm going to bring you three feel-good stories involving people in this church today. Some of those people will be mortally embarrassed to be in the spotlight, but I'll carry on regardless because good things happening to good people and good deeds being done should always be celebrated – and what better time to do so than in front of hundreds of people ... in a church ... with everybody looking at you.

Before I tell those happy tales, we have a tradition to observe. So, as we've done for the past two years, we're all going to learn how to count to 10 in Romani.

Here's where I hold up the numbers, and we shout them out like we used to do in school before such things were deemed not suitable for the modern learning environment. Please cast aside your dignity and shout after me as loudly as you can.

Ready? Good. Here we go: *yek* [1], *duy* [2], *trin* [3], *shtar* [4], *panj* [5], *shov* [6], *efta* [7], *oxto* [8], *en'a* [9], and *desh* [10]. Brilliant!

Right, that's cleared a few lungs and now we've got this party started, let's carry on. By the way, there are copies of the first Travelling Home talk available – right next to the collection plate by pure coincidence – so if you want to know more about how Romanis travelled the world to get here, and a bit about what happened when they arrived, please grab a copy on your way out – and don't worry about appearing over-generous with your donation, we're all friends here.

STORIES

I said, I was going to major on local stuff and I'd like to tell three little stories, all of which involve the Romani community, which I think you'll find interesting and in their own way, uplifting.

The first involves a gentleman by the name of John Collenette Evans. John was a Flight Lieutenant in the Reserve of Air Force Officers, and he lived down the road a few miles at Old Slade Lane in Iver.

On the 27th of November, after the second World War ended in May of 1945, he was carrying out his duties as a test pilot, flying a Fairey Firefly MK1, a carrier-borne fighter and anti-submarine aircraft of the Fleet Air Arm, out of Heston aerodrome.

PHOTOS 7 AND 8

During that flight, at an altitude of around 7000 feet, in a position almost above us here, the aircraft's cockpit canopy somehow became distorted, then detached itself from the latches which held it in place.

The canopy eventually flew back and struck Flight Lieutenant Evans in the head, knocking him unconscious, and he crashed at Hythe End in Wraysbury, dying instantly. He was just 35 years of age.

Flight Lieutenant Evans came to our attention last year during one of our churchyard work parties, and his grave was in a sorry state, indeed. PHOTOS 9 & 10

During the summer months, the volunteers who keep this churchyard looking so splendid really do have their work cut out for them just to keep the grass down, the ivy on the walls at a manageable level, and the weeds strimmed.

And yet, even the briefest consideration of what Flight Lieutenant Evans and his kind had sacrificed for our freedom meant we had to do something about his grave, but time and workload was against us. Then the girls took an executive decision.

The girls in question are Vicky and Maria, and as predicted they're blushing furiously and wishing I would leave them alone, but I'm not going to do that. I'm not going to do that at all, so buckle up girls, this could get seriously embarrassing.

Vicky and Maria had a think about things and decided that they could handle the majority of the gravestone restoration project on their own, without diverting the rest of us from our general duties.

Armed only with a bottle of bleach, some sturdy brushes, and a degree of determination that borders on the scary, Vicky and Maria became the Bleach Babes and started work. PHOTO 11

They didn't stop that work until every bit of grime, discolouration, mould and lichen had been removed, and the headstone, kerbs and footstone of Flight Lieutenant Evans' monument sparkled in the summer sun – and reeked strongly of bleach – as did Vicky and Maria for some days afterward.

Their hard work and dedication turned THIS - PHOTO 12 and THIS –PHOTO 13, into something as clean as THIS – PHOTO 14. When the sun catches it right, you can even see a bit of sparkle in the granite now, which pleased the girls – they do like a bit of sparkle. It's a remarkable transformation, ladies and gentlemen, but more was to come.

With the rest of the monument looking so great, the centre section was crying out for attention, and once again everything we needed, from materials to man hours – and woman hours - was donated freely and in gratitude for what Flight Lieutenant Evans and his comrades had done for us.

Kathy's brother, Bill, gave us several sacks of pea shingle, and after clearing out decades of clutter from the grave's centre, we anointed the bare earth with some eco-friendly weedkiller that my dad's had in the back of his shed for about 40 years, put down a membrane, and poured in the shingle.

PHOTO 15 As you can see, the grave already looked fantastic, especially compared to how it was, but the girls thought we could do a little bit better.

You see, by now, we considered Flight Lieutenant Evans as one of the family and it didn't seem right that he didn't have any flowers like the rest of ours have, so we got him a vase, in keeping with the style of his gravestone. PHOTO 16

The flowers may be a little bold, and they do have a bit of sparkle on them to match the revitalised granite of the stone, but the girls think they look great and so do I.

Remember, what began as THIS – PHOTO 17, now looks like THIS – PHOTO 18, thanks to the efforts of two of our own who turned respect into a tribute worthy of a hero.

Stand up, you two. There are some wonderful people with us here, and plenty more looking down on us today, who are proud of what you've done in the name of all of us. Ladies and gentlemen, Vicky and Maria. (APPLAUSE)

Thank you, ladies and gentlemen. They'll kill me for this.

Now, that brave young airman is remembered every time those graves are tended, and as most of you know, they're tended very regularly. Flight Lieutenant John Collenette Evans is deeply respected as an individual, but he also represents his comrades in the armed services, without whom the Romani people of Horton, Europe and much of the world, simply wouldn't exist.

The restoration work goes on, too, and our next project is somewhat larger. PHOTO 19 Thanks again to Carolyn, we were shown the graves of two families caught up in the horror of the Second World War, right here in Horton.

In all, six people lost their lives when a bomb struck a house in Park Lane just a few hundred yards away from where we are now. PHOTO 20

Two evacuee children and four members of the family that was looking after them were buried in adjacent graves, which are now badly in need of restoration. Well, the news is, we're on it. PHOTO 21

The Bleach Babes are once again about to work their magic, and we hope the whole project will be completed within a month or two.

What we do here in this churchyard, in appreciation of Flight Lieutenant Evans, his comrades, and those who went through wars in this country, is the tiniest of gestures, but it keeps alive something none of us, Romani or otherwise, should ever forget.

HORSES

Next, we have a simple account of some people doing something for a great cause, and some other people extending a simple kindness.

A month ago, a horse drive was arranged to raise funds for the medical treatment of a young man called Alfie. It was a tremendous success and its organiser, John Smith, and the participants got together and managed to raise a significant amount of money, that will make a real difference to Alfie's treatment and his life. PHOTO 22

The route of the drive took in Windsor, Datchet and Horton, where the fundraisers stopped for refreshments at the Crown. – PHOTO 23 Two of our St Michael's posse, Stuart and Angela, live close to the Crown, and when Stuart saw the horses, who had certainly done their bit toward the fundraising efforts, he asked their owners if the horses needed a drink.

Cue our Stuart with his hosepipe and buckets, doing his bit to help some very grateful horses and their owners. PHOTO 24 Now, Stuart is a keen gardener, and I don't want anyone thinking he was even slightly motivated by any sort of horsey by-product, although one photo does catch Stuart in a slightly ... expectant pose. PHOTO 25

Anyway, one good turn really does deserve another, and after the horses had moved on, Stuart found another use for his buckets, this time in conjunction with a shovel. Wonderful effort, everyone and all the best to Alfie.

BILL

Our final story concerns an 18 year-old Romani lad by the name of William Loveridge, who in 1941 was called up to the British Army. After training, Private Loveridge was sent out to fight for his country in the Italian campaign. PHOTO 26

During a close-quarters battle, Private Loveridge was in the process of helping to take a number of enemy soldiers prisoner when the tables were turned and he found himself captured. PHOTO 27

Eventually, Private Loveridge was interned and nothing was heard from him, by either his family or the British Government.

Finally, like so many of those back in Britain, anxiously awaiting news of their loved ones fighting abroad, Bill's family was informed by letter that he was missing, presumed dead. As you can imagine, Bill's family was devastated by this news, but again, like millions the world over, they had to do their best to deal with their loss and carry on as best they could.

Four years after Bill's family had been given that terrible news, the war was finally over and they were staying at a disused gravel works in Shepperton. At the site was an old office that the family used for carrying out domestic tasks and in this office was a telephone.

One day, that phone began to ring and Bill's younger sister, Triphena, known as Pheen, decided to answer it.

She said 'hello' and the voice on the other end of the line said, 'Hello Pheen, this is your brother Bill.' The War Office had lost track of him after he was captured, but he was alive and well.

Pheen ran to find her family and tell them the good news, and as you can imagine, there was quite a party that night.

As for Bill, - PHOTO 28 here he is soon after he came home, with his mum and dad and his brother Dickie. He would go on to live to the ripe old age of 86, and become the much-loved father of three children, Linda, David and Triphena, named after Bill's sister, and known to most of us as ... Queenie.

Yes, Private William Loveridge was Queenie's dad. Queenie's here today, along with her aunt Pheen, who took the call from a brother she believed was gone forever.

I suppose the message here is, 'never give up' and 'where there's life, there's hope'. I just think it's a wonderful story, with just about the happiest ending possible, and it needed to be told. It was worth telling it, just to see Queenie blushing.

She's a much-loved member of this community, and if, like so many brave young men, her dad hadn't come home from serving his country in that terrible war, Queenie wouldn't be part of this community and it would be the poorer for that.

If Flight Lieutenant Evans and the victims of that awful bombing at Park Lane had lived, who knows what their contribution to their own communities may have been.

That's why days like this that celebrate what we've all built here are so important, and that's why we're here in this church today.

Well, it's not the only reason. We've got a lovely bit of grub to enjoy over at the Champney Hall, lovingly prepared by our priceless team of volunteers. Here, you'll find our traditional Romani favourites, bacon pudding, Joe Grey, meat pudding, and rabbit stew, among others, and by popular demand we've once again asked our friend and favourite Essex girl, Rosie Barham, to cook us up a fine batch of squirrel pasties.

Yes folks, that's pasties with bits of squirrel in them – and fine things they are too.

PHOTO 29 - Here's one especially made for young John Rawlings, who wanted to make sure he didn't miss out on them this year. There you go, John. When we promise something, we deliver, mate.

PHOTO 30

Also over at the Champney Hall, you'll find our wonderful Community Police Officer, Les, and his able assistants, serving soup with a smile, and it's through Les that I can bring you a bonus bit of good news.

Ladies and gentlemen, thanks to Les bringing what we're doing here to the attention of his colleagues in the Thames Valley Police, we've been given a substantial donation. This is all about bringing our communities together, and the value of that has been recognised.

It's a substantial gesture and will really help what we're trying to do here, today and in the future, and it deserves our thanks and a round of applause.

So there you have it, ladies and gentlemen. Did any of us ever think we'd live to see the day when a church full of Romanis would give a round of applause to the police.

Thank you all so much, and unlimited thanks again to every one of you who has helped us make today such a fantastic event.

We've come a long way, everyone, and we should all be so proud of where we are today. May we all, Romani and non-Romani alike, do our best to keep our wonderful community travelling home together.

Thank you.